ISDM | DataShakti

Development Management in Practice

Volume 1

EDITORS

Dr. PREM S. VASHISHTHA

SATENDER RANA

SIDDHARTH DHOTE

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This book brings together a rich collection of empirical insights and analyses from practitioners, researchers, and development professionals engaged in strengthening the social sector in India. The volume illuminates how theory and practice intersect across three thematic pillars, Talent Management for Inclusive Development, Empowering the Marginalised through Intervention Management, and Organisational Efficiency in Sociological and Technological Dimensions, to advance the field of development management.

Part I explores how talent and learning ecosystems shape inclusive development outcomes. Through studies on developmental strategies for employee performance, skill-building in the North-East, vocational education in Haryana, and education in low-resource contexts, it highlights the centrality of human capital and learning culture in sustainable development.

Part II turns to the lived realities of marginalised communities, presenting field-based interventions that challenge structural inequities. From gender integration in livelihoods and digital empowerment of artisans to urban collectivisation and family-strengthening models, these chapters offer insights into approaches to community resilience and empowerment.

Part III engages with the internal dynamics of social purpose organisations (SPOs), examining how sociological understanding, process documentation, and technology-driven systems enhance organisational capacity and adaptability. The contributions demonstrate the evolving interplay between human behaviour, institutional learning, and digital innovation in the pursuit of social change.

Each chapter in this volume is written as an accessible yet rigorous introduction to its respective theme, equipping students, practitioners, and development professionals with the analytical tools and applied

knowledge required to drive performance improvement ethically and effectively across diverse contexts.

Together, the chapters in this volume embody development management in practice, where evidence, empathy, and experimentation converge to reimagine how organisations and communities can co-create inclusive and sustainable impact.

By bridging theory and praxis, the volume situates development management as a dynamic field grounded in contextual realities and adaptive methodologies. It contributes to the growing body of scholarship that views development not merely as an outcome, but as a continuous process of co-creation among individuals, institutions, and communities.

The chapters in this book were either presented or submitted in the Research Paper Presentation session during the Dialogues on Development Management (DoDM) 2024 organised by Indian School of Development Management (ISDM) in New Delhi.

Editors

Dr. Prem S. Vashishtha is Former Director, Agricultural Economics Research Centre University of Delhi, and National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), New Delhi. Following his retirement, he held visiting positions at IHD and ISID, and later served as Professor and founding Dean at both Sharda University and Galgotias University. He also worked as Senior Consultant at NCAER and as Professor Emeritus at Sharda University. Dr. Vashishtha holds an MA in Economics from the University of Allahabad and a PhD from the University of Delhi. He has taught at Delhi University, Boston University, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and has been a Visiting Fellow at IDS Sussex, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Rand Corporation. His research spans agricultural and rural economics, health economics, public policy, applied econometrics, and social sector development. The focus of recent research of Dr. Vashishtha is on 'Pandemic, Poverty and Inequality'. He has published in leading economic journals, including the Journal of Political Economy, Journal of Income and Wealth, and Economic and Political Weekly, and has authored two books. He has served on the Common Review Missions of both the Ministry of Rural Development (2016) and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2017), and has consulted with international organisations such as the IFAD, ILO, World Bank and UNDP. The Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand Economic Association (UPUEA) honoured him with the Kautalya Award in 2021.

Satender Rana is a PMP® certified project management professional with over 14 years of experience in social science research, developing MEL frameworks, and building data platforms for NGOs, CSR initiatives, and development programmes. His work spans impact evaluation, mixed-methods research, responsible AI, and data governance. At ISDM, he leads DataShakti—an AI-enabled data platform—and research on data

maturity, talent management, and digital public goods. He has worked with international and multilateral organisations such as IRRI, UNDP Bangladesh, and the World Bank, as well as corporate clients including JSW, JK Paper, ACC, NTPC, and Epsilon Carbon. He holds a Master's in Development Management with specialism in Applied Development Economics from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and has received advanced training in Data Science from the Indian Institute of Management Lucknow (IIML). He has published widely in peer-reviewed publications (*EPW, ICCLJ*), mainstream and sectoral media.

Siddharth Dhote is a researcher specialising in data-driven analysis of social and economic issues in India, with a focus on social justice, poverty, inequality, employment, and labour markets. He holds a Master's in Development Studies from the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague. He is the co-author of the Springer volume *Predicting Inequality of Opportunity and Poverty in India Using Machine Learning* and has contributed to leading journals, including *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, *Social Indicators Research*, *Journal of Nutrition*, and the *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*.

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LIST OF AUTHORS

Aditi Gupta is Associate Director, People & Culture at the Leadership for Skilled Education Foundation (LFE). With 14.5 years of experience, she specialises in designing evidence-informed people systems that strengthen organisational performance and learning cultures. A Mechanical Engineering (B.E.) graduate, she brings an analytical, systems-driven approach to HR, with expertise in performance management, capacity building, employee engagement, and strategic talent practices in mission-driven organisations.

Amrapali Mukherjee leads the Research function under the MEAL vertical at Apnalaya. With nearly 10 years of experience, she specialises in mixed-method research, M&E systems, and data analysis to strengthen strategy and impact in Mumbai's informal settlements. She has worked across education, health, livelihoods, and civic entitlements. Amrapali is pursuing a Ph.D. at the Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata, examining how menstrual-related cultural beliefs shape adolescent girls' health outcomes.

Andrea Vincent is a Research Consultant at VOICE 4 with eight years of experience in the development and social impact sector. She holds a Ph.D. and specialises in monitoring and evaluation, social impact assessment, and research design and implementation. Her work supports evidence-based decision-making, strengthens impact measurement systems, and generates actionable insights. She also translates complex research into accessible knowledge products for diverse programme and policy stakeholders.

Anish Ramachandran is the Founder of Saranam India, bringing leadership experience from previous roles as Vice President at Intel Corporation and CEO and Board Member at OBLF. He holds an MBA from XLRI, Jamshedpur, and is an alumnus of the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. His expertise spans public health, organisational management, HR, leadership, and education, with a focus on strengthening institutions and advancing social impact.

Anoushka Gupta is a Research Associate (Health and Human Development) at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP). With six years of experience, she specialises in research design and qualitative methodologies across health, education, and social policy. Formerly Research Lead at Project DEFY, she led multi-country studies on non-formal learning and livelihoods. She holds an MA in Development Studies (Distinction) from International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam, and a BA (Honours) in History from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi.

Bhavna Jaisingh is a public policy professional with over two decades of experience across macroeconomics, financial sector policy, development programming, and impact evaluation. Her work focuses on women's empowerment, youth employment, and labour market transitions, with expertise in rigorous M&E frameworks and large-scale data analysis. She has worked with multilateral agencies, government, financial institutions, and nonprofits. Bhavna holds a Master of Public Policy (MPP) from the University of Chicago, USA.

Damini Mainkar is the COO and Co-founder of the Leadership for Skilled Education Foundation (LFE), with 15 years of experience in public education system strengthening. She holds an M.A. in Sociology and works at the intersection of institutional reform, leadership development, and social change. Her expertise spans teacher professional development, organisational strategy, and institutional capability building, partnering with government systems to embed sustainable, evidence-based instructional and leadership practices.

Divya R. Momin is a development professional with three years of experience, specialising in stakeholder engagement, community relations, and group facilitation. She previously served as a Subject Matter Expert (Self-Designed Learning) at the Chief Minister's Youth Centre (CMYC) for Project DEFY, supporting programme design and community-led interventions. She holds an MA in Ecology, Environment and Sustainable Development from TISS Guwahati and is currently in a career transition phase, committed to participatory development practice.

Faiza Ruksar Arif is an Independent Gender Consultant with over seven years of experience in gender analysis, monitoring and evaluation, and LGBT+/Queer studies. She specialises in integrating gender perspectives into programme design, research, and impact assessment across development

sectors. Her work focuses on strengthening gender-responsive frameworks and advancing equity for marginalised communities. Faiza holds a Master's degree in Gender Studies from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS).

Gaurav Majumdar is the Technical Lead for Skill Development and Livelihoods at HCL Foundation, bringing over 12 years of experience across national and international development organisations. He specialises in livelihood promotion, programme design, product development, and public–private partnerships. He leads My E-Haat, a flagship initiative strengthening India's arts and crafts value chain. Gaurav holds an MBA in Rural Management from KIIT University and an MPA from the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago.

Gullaiah Gari Kuna Divya Jyothi is a Research Associate (Consultant) with two years of experience, specialising in research methodologies, M&E frameworks, and MEAL systems. She has worked on qualitative and quantitative studies, programme evaluations, capacity-building initiatives, and process documentation. Her collaborations with multiple NGOs have supported evidence-based decision-making across social development projects. Divya Jyothi holds an MBA and brings strong analytical and tool-development expertise to her research practice.

Jayashree G holds a Master's in Public Health (MPH) from Sri Ramachandra Institute of Higher Education and Research. She has strong experience in designing and implementing research projects using quantitative and qualitative methods, with specialisation in life skills education, SRHR, and mental health. Skilled in Zotero, Excel, and SPSS, she supports NGOs with needs assessments, strategic planning, and M&E frameworks, and has expertise in developing scientific manuscripts for publication.

Kamakshi Balasubramanian is Project In-Charge, Advocacy at Apnalaya, with over seven years of experience in government programme implementation, urban health systems, and community-based advocacy. She leads policy engagement on maternal and adolescent health, nutrition, sanitation, and community action. Previously, she managed the urban health portfolio at LEHS | WISH Foundation and served as Policy Associate with the Government of Delhi. Her work integrates research, monitoring, strategy, and rights-based public system strengthening.

Komal Sharma is a Senior Project Manager in Research & Advisory at Gartner with eight years of experience in impact evaluation, research operations, survey design, data analysis, and project management. She has worked with nonprofits, government agencies, and global research teams. Known for translating complex problems into human-centred solutions, Komal brings clarity and empathy to her work. She holds an MA in Psychology from the University of Delhi.

Maryam Raza is the Assistant Vice President, Data & Impact at Medha, with 9.5 years of experience at the intersection of data strategy, data management, compliance, and impact systems. She has played a key role in shaping Medha's data ecosystem by establishing governance processes, streamlining systems, overseeing donor reporting, and leading development of the organisation's central MIS. Maryam holds an MBA and a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science Engineering.

Mohil Joshi is the Senior Manager of Analytics at Medha, bringing over 17 years of experience across engineering and the social sector. An MBA graduate from IIIT Lucknow, he specialises in converting scattered data into meaningful insights that enhance organisational impact. At Medha, he leads work on strengthening indicators, dashboards, and research for youth programs, integrating analytics, AI, and thoughtful design to ensure insights are practical and actionable.

Murali Mohan Reddy is the Founder and CEO of coGuide, with over a decade of experience mentoring quantitative, qualitative, and evidence-synthesis research across diverse domains. An alumnus of PGIMER Chandigarh and the University of London, he has supported academic institutions in strengthening research ecosystems and accreditation performance. He specialises in designing MEAL systems and impact assessments for NGOs and multiple sectors, and has led coGuide's growth through innovative technology solutions and global collaborations.

N.R. Sunadini is an Independent Educationalist with over fifteen years of experience working with primary and early learners. She specialises in teacher training, curriculum design, and pedagogy. Her work focuses on strengthening instructional practices and supporting foundational learning. Sunadini holds a B.Ed from Bangalore Central University (2021) and brings deep classroom and training experience to her efforts to enhance teaching quality in early education settings.

Richa Tyagi leads Program Design & Development at Miracle Foundation India, overseeing knowledge creation, curriculum development, training, quality assurance, and thought leadership in family strengthening, family-based alternative care, and child protection. With 20 years of experience, she has led research, evaluations, due diligence, and strategic programme design across multiple organisations. Richa holds an M.Phil in Planning & Development from IIT Bombay and is an Atlas Corps Fellow from the Grameen Foundation, Washington, DC.

Sanskriti Sharma is a Program Lead at Medha with eight years of experience across classrooms, communities, start-ups, and government systems. A Teach For India alumna, she holds a PGP in Development Management from ISDM. Her work connects grassroots realities with thoughtful programme and policy design. At Medha, she has strengthened the vocational education ecosystem by improving work-based learning opportunities, bringing systems thinking and a strong commitment to equity and responsive youth development.

Satabdi Roy is a development professional with nearly eight years of experience in the social sector, with expertise in programme management and strategic partnerships. She has previously worked with academic and research institutions, as well as a range of NGOs and CSR initiatives. Currently, she is associated with HCLFoundation, where she manages skill development and livelihood & My E-Haat projects. Her work focuses on scaling opportunities through active participation in art and craft sector discourses across diverse platforms. Satabdi holds a Master's in Development Studies from NIT Rourkela and a Development Management certificate from ISDM, Noida.

Shachi Phadke is Director for the MEAL vertical at Apnalaya, with over sixteen years of experience in development sector. She specializes in research, social policy analysis, human rights advocacy, participatory evaluations and community-centred programme design. Drawing from extensive field experience, she integrates practitioners' research strategies with a deep understanding of grassroots context to advance equity and drive sustainable, systemic change.

Subroto Chatterjee is a seasoned development professional with over two decades of experience in child protection, family strengthening, and alternative care reform. He holds a Master's in Social Work (Child Rights) from TISS Mumbai. Subroto has led multi-country child-rights initiatives, designed

data-driven programme strategies, and strengthened protection systems with governments and NGOs. At Miracle Foundation India, he advances evidence-based, family-centred care through programme management, MEAL frameworks, partnerships, and policy advocacy.

Vikas Dargan is the Lead for My E-Haat at HCL Foundation, with over seven years of experience in the crafts and cultural sector. He has previously worked with INTACH and Cultural Conservation Consultants, contributing to craft revival, cultural management, heritage restoration, and craft research. A trained architect, Vikas holds postgraduate diplomas in Built Environment (Anant National University) and Cultural Management (IGNCA), and an Executive Master's in Business Analytics from IIM Indore.

Yash Singh Sisodiya is a Social Research Manager and Development Consultant with over six years of experience in programme management, monitoring and evaluation, and gender and health interventions. He holds a Master's degree in Sociology and previously worked with the Urban Health Resource Centre. Yash also serves as Journal Manager at Twisting Memoirs Publication. His expertise spans qualitative and quantitative research, policy analysis, stakeholder coordination, capacity building, and applying sociological perspectives to behavioural change

FOREWORD

This book explores solutions to the challenges social sector managers face in India's diverse and complex ecosystem. It covers a wide range of locations and sectors (rural, urban, metros, slums, etc.) and geographies across Indian states.

Almost two-thirds of the articles focus on the unorganised sector, and the rest examine the organised sector. The articles do not necessarily focus on providing scalable solutions. Instead, they offer an in-depth analysis of problems at the grassroots level in some cases, and at the organisational level, in other cases.

The main issues are presented in three sections of the book, each under a different theme.

The common perception is that management approaches for social issues vary across themes but remain broadly uniform within a single theme. But this book questions this perception, demonstrating that significant diversity exists even within a theme regarding the nature of interventions required to manage the social issues. For example, Section 1 analyses Talent Management in contrasting ways: Learning and Development (L&D) in the organised sector and Self-Designed Learning (SDL) in the unorganised sector. While in the former (Gupta and Mainkar), the top-down approach is adopted in profession specific training; in the latter case (Gupta and Momin), a bottom-up approach is followed for holistic learning, with the involvement of the community in the remote areas of Meghalaya.

In another example, empowering the marginalised (Section 2), the approaches shift depending on the context. Roy et al. show how Chikankari artisans of Lucknow, predominantly women, organised themselves to benefit from the digital market (HCL E-Haat). This happened through a strategic collaboration between an SPO and an HCL CSR initiative. This highlights that talent without market and supply chain has limited tangible value, even with the support of a competent external agency.

Faiza Arif's paper offers an interesting insight on women's empowerment: –that empowerment is not a singular or linear process. It is a multi-faceted journey. Along with financial empowerment, gender awareness (women health issues, realisation of gender-based violence, etc.) is absolutely necessary for a sustainable change in community outlook.

In contrast, Mukherjee et al. present a case of empowerment of urban slum dwellers of M-East Ward of Mumbai, who are a highly fragmented and voiceless society of migrants from different parts of the country. With the help of their NGO, Apanalaya, the authors educate local leadership

about administrative procedures and sustained civic engagement. They use governance structures and tailored grassroots mobilisation to ensure civic services are delivered.

Even more complex is the issue of prevention of child separation from parents or family, as presented by Chatterjee and Tyagi. Interventions for each child cover a large domain: physical and mental status, education level, family and social relationships, household economy and general living conditions. The Miracle Foundation trains the child protection workforce to make decisions consistent with the relevant provisions of the Juvenile Justice Act. The effect of these interventions on each sample child chosen on the basis of the degree of risk faced by her as measured by NCPCR's tool of vulnerability mapping, is assessed based on two criteria :(i) the level of well-being score generated by Thrive Scale; and (ii) its conformity with the Juvenile Justice Act.

Thus, a typical characteristic of the first two sections is the diversity of interventions not only across themes, but also within a given theme. In spite of this diversity, the actions of NGOs offer crucial insights for successful public policy interventions.

Section 3 (Organisational Efficiency: Navigating Sociological and Technological Dimensions) presents a theme entirely different from the first two sections.

The context of raising organisational efficiency varies across articles, which leads to the adoption of different approaches to achieve the same major goal.

Sisodiya, who examines the Swacch Bharat Mission (SBM) in Indore (Madhya Pradesh), argues that public policy (such as a cleanliness campaign with waste management) alone cannot sustain the gains of SBM. It needs to be accompanied by behavioural change, through community-driven programs that harness pride in local identity.

Vincent et al. address an important issue–SPOs/NGOs generate a lot of information, but are often not able to use data analysis to gain actionable insights. They advocate for integration of digital technology (ICT) and process documentation (assessment needs of NGOs, digitalisation process, etc.) with MEAL (monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning). This will provide a framework to obtain actionable points, often using certain digital platforms. A highlight of this model is that it generates data from **'pilot projects'** (learning laboratories) instead of using the usual **'blueprint'** approach.

In addition to offering practical insights into the management of various social sector issues, this book also provides a hands-on guide on the research methodology appropriate to a set of complex situations. Most situations in Section 1 and Section 2 utilised the mixed methods approach. This is suitably complemented by focus group discussions (FGD) and participatory methods when necessary.

Obtaining feedback from employees (Gupta and Mainkar) as well as from participants (Gupta and Momin) is an important part of data collection.

In some cases, a multi-method approach (qualitative, quantitative, FGD, MIS, and participant observation) is required (Mukherjee et al.).

Some studies also incorporate elements of action research (Anoushka Gupta; Sisodiya). An important question often raised in survey research is whether the research design permits scalability and/or generalisation of inferences drawn. Only a few articles included in the book follow a methodology that permits scalability (Gupta and Mainkar; Sisodiya). This is because the main focus of these articles is to gain in-depth knowledge of the grassroots/micro level reality to be useful to the management of human resources and public policy, rather than focusing on generalisations per se.

We are confident this book will help improve our understanding of the management of social sector issues, and clearly highlight the significant contribution of SPOs/NGOs and CSR foundations as catalysts for empowering marginalised sections of society.

As a mini compendium on the social sector, it is useful to policymakers for designing interventions under diverse conditions, and also to undergraduate students of research methodology in management and social sciences. It also reminds us that social sector research, especially when related to behavioural change, must not be conducted in static silos.

Dr. Prem S. Vashishtha
Former Director, Agricultural Economics Research Centre
University of Delhi, and
Former Director, National Council
of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), New Delhi

PREFACE

It gives me immense pleasure to present this compilation of research papers and case studies curated under Dialogues on Development Management (DoDM)– an endeavour that reflects ISDM's ongoing commitment to strengthening the discourse and practice of development management in India and beyond.

The Research Paper Presentation (RPP) track, a key part of the 2024 edition of DoDM, served as a platform for scholars and practitioners to come together, share evidence-based insights, and reflect on the evolving contours of development practice. The papers and cases featured in this volume capture a wide spectrum of themes ranging from education, livelihoods, and collectivisation, to digital transformation, capacity building, and gender equity.

This body of work is the result of rigorous effort and thoughtful curation. We offer our deepest gratitude to **Dr. Prem S. Vashishtha**, Chair of the RPP Track. He led the entire review process with exceptional academic rigour and unmatched generosity of spirit.

We also thank the **esteemed panel of expert reviewers** who dedicated their time and insights to uphold the quality of this volume:

Dr. Avik Sarkar, Faculty, Indian School of Business (ISB), **Dr. K. K. Upadhyay**, Professor (Adjunct), Birla Institute of Management Technology (BIMTECH), **Raghwesh Ranjan**, Senior Director, IPE Global, **Dr. Shahana Chattaraj**, Former Director of Research Data and Innovation, WRI India, **Dr. Shashi Bala Rai**, Assistant Professor, Panipat Institute of Engineering & Technology (PIET), **Prof. Saloni Sinha**, Assistant Professor, BIMTECH, **Prof. Anand Srinivasa Rao**, Heinz College of Information Systems and Public Policy, Carnegie Mellon University, Carnegie Mellon University, and **Dr. Jai Pawar**, Director, Deepak Foundation.

A special thanks to our internal reviewers – **Ashwini Rajkumar, LS Murty, Maitrayee Mukerji, Naghma Abidi, Priti Dargad, Priyanka Chhaparia, Priyanshi Chauhan**, and **Sanchita Mukherjee** – for their meticulous feedback and support the review process.

A special note of thanks to **Siddharth Dhote**, **Mallika Luthra**, and **Ayush Choudhary**, who graciously took on the critical task of reviewing submissions for this book. Without them this book would not have been completed soon. Their dedication, eye for detail, and commitment to upholding the quality of this compilation ensured that every contribution was reviewed thoughtfully and with the rigour it deserved.

The RPP team successfully operationalised this vision. We acknowledge the exceptional coordination work by **Garima Sharma**, **Geeta Tiwari**, and **Tenzin Chorran**. I would like to particularly acknowledge

the dedicated and persistent efforts of **Komal Bhadana** in managing the operational processes for the book. Her diligent coordination with the authors, reviewers, and editors ensured the smooth and timely submission, review, and finalisation of the papers, contributing significantly to the successful completion of this publication.

I would like to especially appreciate **Satender Rana** for his steadfast leadership and stewardship; he anchored the entire process with calm, clarity, and deep commitment. His ability to bring together and guide a diverse team with thoughtfulness and quiet resolve was foundational to the success of RPP track.

Finally, we owe deep gratitude to **all the individuals who submitted their research papers and case studies**. Their work, rooted in real-world practice, critical thinking, and contextual relevance, brings essential depth to this volume.

At the Global Knowledge Hub at ISDM, we view knowledge not as a static entity, but as a dynamic, participatory process. This book is an invitation to engage – to learn, question, and contribute. We hope it serves as a valuable resource for researchers, practitioners, and students committed to building a just and equitable world.

Trisha Varma
Director (Operations), Global Knowledge Hub (GKH)
Indian School of Development Management (ISDM)

PART 1

Talent Management for Inclusive Development

1 Cultivating a Culture of Learning: Exploring the Impact of Developmental Strategies on Employee Performance and Retention

Aditi Gupta and Damini Mainkar

Abstract

This organisational case study examines the impact of fostering a culture of continuous learning and development on employee performance and retention. Employing a mixed-methods approach, it integrates statistical analysis of three years of internal and external survey data with qualitative insights from in-depth staff interviews. A strong positive correlation (0.94) between learning and development opportunities and employee performance was observed; the percentage of employees benefiting from learning and development (L&D) opportunities increased from 73% in 2021-22 to 80% in 2023-24, aligning with a rise in average annual performance from 53.99% to 62.22%. Employee performance at Leadership For Equity is measured annually through quantitative evaluation of set KRAs (Key Result Areas). Leadership development showed a weak negative correlation (-0.27) with attrition rates; attrition declined from 29.59% in 2022-23 to 22.11% in 2023-24. Additionally, conversations discussing an individual's progress towards goals exhibited a moderate negative correlation (-0.63) with promotions, suggesting potential mediating factors affecting career advancement. Qualitative themes such as the building of a culture centred on learning, transparency, and the prioritisation of employee growth by the organisation's leadership substantiate these findings. The study highlights the importance of positioning L&D as a cultural imperative rather than a functional component, offering actionable insights into improving employee engagement, retention and performance.

Keywords: Learning-Oriented Organisational Culture, Talent Development in the Social Sector, Employee Retention in Public Education NGOs, Structured Feedback and Performance Improvement, Leadership Pipeline Development in Non-Profits, Human Capital Development in Mission-Driven Teams, People & Culture Practices in Indian NGOs

1.1 Introduction

Employee retention is a significant challenge for development organisations, particularly for those aiming for sustainable, long-term impact. In the development sector, retaining dedicated and skilled staff is essential due to the specialised knowledge and deep community engagement required for success.

This case study examines employee retention strategies within Leadership For Equity, an NGO in the Indian education sector. In 2017,

Leadership For Equity started with a team of eight founding members. Over a mere span of four years, the organisation grew seven times in strength, and over its seven years of operations, it has grown into a team of over 100 members. Leadership For Equity's operations have expanded from 2 districts in Maharashtra to multiple districts and municipal corporations across Maharashtra, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh, where its operations are executed.

This case study research paper focuses on the following specific objectives:

1. **Investigating the influence of a culture that prioritises learning:** The study aims to explore how fostering a culture of continuous learning and development impacts key metrics such as employee performance and retention. By analysing the effects of learning opportunities on staff motivation, productivity, and career progressions, the research will demonstrate the role of professional growth in reducing turnover.
2. **Examining the link between L&D, leadership, and turnover:** The research seeks to understand the relationship between learning and development (L&D) opportunities, leadership development initiatives, and regular feedback with attrition rates. This will help determine how these strategies effectively address employee turnover by empowering staff and creating growth pathways.
3. **Explore the role of feedback and leadership Programs:** Finally, the study will investigate how structured feedback and leadership development programs contribute to employee satisfaction and engagement. By assessing the influence of these practices on staff morale and loyalty, the study aims to identify best practices that drive retention in a resource-constrained sector.

Through this analysis, the case study intends to provide insights into creating supportive work environments that prioritise staff growth and well-being in the development sector.

1.2 Methodology

This paper is presented as an organisational case study through a mixed-method approach. It combines statistical findings from data collected over three years on internally and externally conducted organisational surveys (like Great Place To Work), juxtaposed with insights from selected in-depth interviews of approximately 10 staff members who have been with the organisation for more than four years. This is the best-suited approach to validate the vision for staff learning and development adopted by the organisation, and to additionally contribute anecdotal and statistical insights on indicators of key talent management metrics.

Staff members, the leadership team, and external consultants, along with the People & Culture team, were involved at various stages and played a crucial role throughout the study. They contributed to the design of survey questions, identified key areas for staff development, and engaged in the interview process. Their input ensured that the research addressed relevant organisational concerns and aligned with the goals for employee learning and development, making the findings more relevant and increasing the likelihood of successful implementation.

The study's mixed-method approach provided a comprehensive understanding by integrating quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative component involved analysing survey data collected over three years to capture trends in employee engagement, satisfaction with development opportunities, and retention rates. The qualitative component included conducting in-depth interviews with selected long-tenured staff members (of over four years) to explore how their experiences and perceptions of the organisation's culture of learning have evolved. This combination allowed for the validation of the statistical data with qualitative insights, resulting in a more holistic view of the organisation's practices.

Data collection involved administering surveys to all employees on an annual basis (46 employees in AY (Academic Year) 2021-22, 74 employees each in AY 2022-23 & AY 2023-24), focusing on employee engagement, satisfaction with learning and development programs, and career growth. Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select interview participants (ten employees with more than five years of experience within the organisation), ensuring diverse representation across departments and roles. These interviews added depth to the quantitative findings by providing nuanced insights into the effectiveness of development programs and the organisational culture.

The seamless integration of employee feedback, quantitative analysis, and qualitative insights created a balanced perspective on the organisation's talent management practices and informed actionable recommendations for improving employee retention and performance.

1.3 Findings

With the changes in the workforce brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, leadership at the organisation had to fight on two ends— ensuring their work stayed relevant, and that the team was rapidly up-skilled and re-skilled as per organisational needs. With less than three to four weeks of learning time, employees had to support stakeholders online, learn to operate remotely and create a safe space for themselves (if away from home). This resulted in employees feeling lonely, and the distance reduced their feelings of belonging towards the organisation. The alarming attrition rate of 67% coupled with the Employee Engagement Survey 2020-21 results showing

that about 50% of employees had highlighted the lack of opportunities to learn and grow, forced the organisation to prioritise establishing a culture of continuous learning and development.

The developmental strategies designed with a long-term goal of 5 years included a variety of initiatives designed to support employee growth and improve organisational performance (Table 1.1). Leadership at the organisation defined a key strategic priority to build an organisation with high endurance and adaptability. One of the key organisational goals to be achieved by 2027 reads, "LFE will be a credible, trusted and aspirational brand for strengthening public education systems, thus attracting high-quality talent, investments & partnerships within the social sector of India."

Table 1.1: LFE's strategic approach towards building an enduring institution

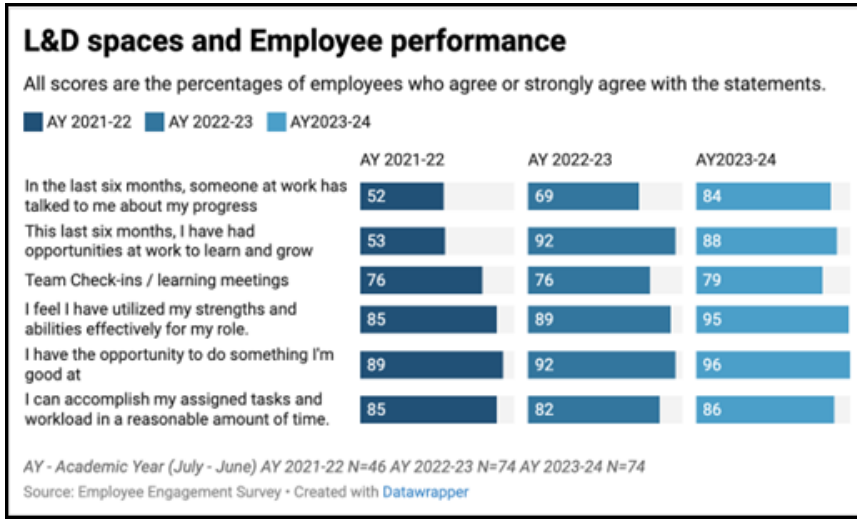
Priority areas	Aligned areas of work
LFE's resilient and agile team members will achieve the set benchmarks and program/project goals	KRA / PMS Process Learning & Development (L&D) Recruitment Process Employee Onboarding Process
LFE will have an effective 2nd and 3rd line of leadership in the organisation, operating as intrapreneurs	
LFE will be a safe, inclusive and people-oriented workplace that will inspire other organisations	L&D - Support and Knowledge HR Policies and Processes

These priority areas were further broken down into the following key components:

1. **Establishing learning and development structures for employees:** Setting up structures to establish a combination of learning and development for employees was a critical step to account for the changing dynamics of the educational landscape due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was also critical as the talent pool in the sector did not completely meet the needs of the varied demands coming from the beneficiaries. Key structures ranging from individual participation to organisational participation laid out various opportunities for the upskilling and reskilling of existing talent, and addressing skill gaps effectively. (Smith, 2022)
2. **Holding open forums for regular feedback from employees:** Building platforms for employee voices holds great value for employers, and also helps individuals feel heard. The creation of such a space serves as an opportunity for all staff to share positives, concerns, challenges and ideas that can help build the organisation's culture, tackle challenges at an early stage, and hold decision-making accountable. Employees asked questions about organisational plans for expansion, recruitment strategies, organisational strategy for learning and development support (since the team members have been on the job since Day 1), etc. These open spaces evolved with employee strength and hierarchies. The

People & Culture team organised individual catch-ups every quarter in the first year, which then evolved to holding open time for any employee to join every month. These spaces allowed the People & Culture team to explore understanding, role clarity and perceived support for all the new joiners. The cadence of once-a-year CXOs to hold open spaces with managers helped in gauging the challenges across landscapes. Crucial topics like expansion opportunities and employee suggestions were heard and discussed, leading to increased transparency. Figure 1.1 below showcases how personal growth and development for employees have been crucial in meeting the requirements for their roles and the organisation's success.

Figure 1.1: Average rating by employees in the annual employee engagement survey across 3 years



3. **Creating a competency framework for employee growth:** With growing organisations and the changing of titles in an organisational hierarchy, individual visions regarding roles become subjective. This establishes a need to set explicit expectations from the varied roles, in terms of skills and knowledge needed to be successful/effective. Leadership for Equity drafted a comprehensive competency framework across Associate to Associate Director positions to enhance the understan ding of roles across teams and employees. The framework, by design, also laid out a growth path for individuals at any given level to build skills/knowledge for professional growth (Figure 1.2).
4. **Regularised coaching and feedback for individual growth and development:** Leadership for Equity's dispersed team across three states, and proximity to the government, brings a high need for individual support and regular coaching regarding adaptability at work. Structures

Table 1.1: A section of the competency framework defining competencies under the theme of stakeholder management, and showcasing the differences in roles, from an Associate to an Associate Director

Themes	Competencies	Definitions	Associate	Senior Associate	Manager	Senior Manager/ Associate Director
Stakeholder Management	**Building Relationships and Investing in Others**	Ability to seek the views and concerns of stakeholders and influencers through formal and informal channels. Build consensus through dialouge, persuasion, reconciliation of diverse views/interests and trusting relationships	I am able to build long lasting relatioships with stakeholders by being approachable and upholding LFE's philosophy (way of workinh) that aid the project and the vision of LFE	I am able to build long lasting relationships with stakeholders by being approachable and upholding LFE's philosophy (way of working) that aid the project and the vision of LFE. I am able to build trust amongst the stakeholders for self and LFE as an organization. The stakeholders are reaching out to me directly to discuss suggestions and feedback instead of reaching out to my manager.	I am able to build long lasting relationships with stakeholders and programmatic partners that aid the project, its expansion and the vision of LFE. I am able to build trust amongst the stakeholders for self and LFE as an organization. The stakeholders are reaching out to me directly to discuss suggestions and feedback instead of reaching out to my manager.	I am able to build long lasting relationships with stakeholders, programmatic partners, and the funders that aid the project, its expansion and the vision of LFE. I am able to cultivate evangelists through these reactions
	Mentor and Coach	Ability to engage, energize, and enable the stakeholders to excel	I am able to mentor and coach the stakeholders I am working with in planning and executing interventions that are aligned with the current needs of their jurisdiction and LFE's project	I am able to mentor and coach the stakeholders I am working with in planning and executing interventions that are aligned with the current needs of their jurisdiction and LFE's project	I am able to mentor and coach the stakeholders I am working with in planning and executing interventions that are aligned with the current needs of their jurisdiction and LFE's project	I am able to mentor and coach the stakeholders I am working with in planning and executing interventions that are aligned with the current needs of their jurisdiction and LFE's project

like individual check-ins, led by the managers, focused on individual growth, building a space for brainstorming, personal development and regular observation-led feedback. These have been set as one of the mandatory spaces to be facilitated by all managers across the organisation. Furthermore, the Individual Development Plan (IDP) was introduced in AY 2023 to document an individual's learning path and also focus on an individual's ownership of their own development (Figure 1.3). The IDP allows an individual to identify and work upon

developing two competencies critical to their role, and hence directly affect their efficiency at work. This structure is designed to support documentation of an individual's learning journey and serves as an artifact for the individual as well as the organisation. (Garvey, 2018). Self-owned development plans, observation-led feedback and consistent

Table 1.2: Example of a Monthly IDP review format to capture the progress

Competency to Grow on (refer to the Competency Framework Tab)	Current Status	Activities I did	Challenges I Faced	Next Steps for upcoming months
Facilitation	Some Proficiency	Conducted TRM. HM call and HR open hour and PLT ppt	1. Starting Problem, sometimes worried about my confidence 2. Bit worried about the silent gaps during the session	1. Scripting of the session 2. Learn from a few expert team members 3. Dry run with timers
Designing Content	Some Proficiency	TISS recruitment presentation slides made by my own by exploring various new things	1. I was initially not very carefull about the fonts I was using, but now I am making an effort to be consistent across all slides. 2. Creating concise and focused slides. I always considered that if someone asks me to send the presentation, all the information should be included in the slides	1. Use of graphs and infographics 2. Identify how to prioritise releveant content-learn from the content team (Anand, Kajal, Saiksha, Harshita) 3. Spend enough time on session planning before presentation creation

spaces to reflect on the efforts and outcomes achieved increase an employee's investment and motivation towards self-development (see results of Great Place to Work survey in Table 1.2)

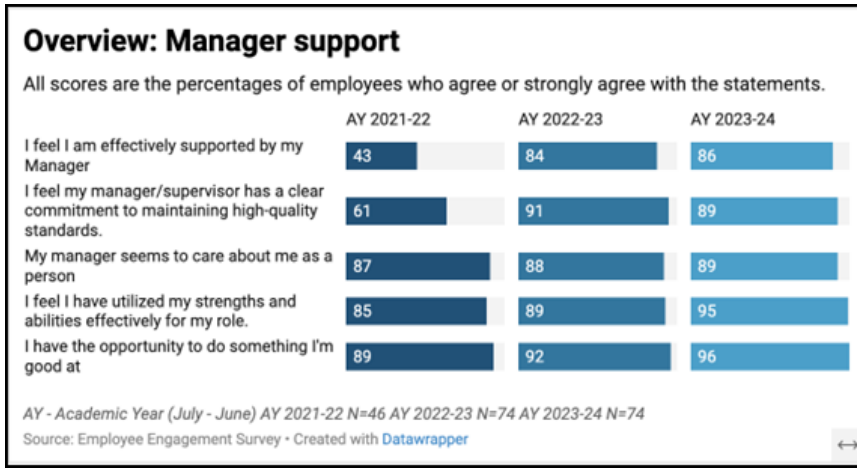
Table 1.3: Great Place to Work survey results indicating shifts seen in employee ratings across the last 3 years

Domain	Statements	2021-22		2022-23		2023-24	
		LFE	Sector	LFE	Sector	LFE	Sector
Support	I am offered training or development to further myself professionally.	73%	82%	75%	80%	80%	78%
	I am given the resources and equipment to do my job.	80%	86%	83%	86%	85%	86%
	Management recognises honest mistakes as part of doing business.	80%	78%	86%	78%	82%	78%
	We celebrate people who try new and better ways of doing things, regardless of the outcome.	67%	83%	73%	82%	79%	82%

Statements	2021-22		2022-23		2023-24	
	LFE	Sector	LFE	Sector	LFE	Sector
Management does a good job of developing managers for leadership positions.	71%	79%	73%	79%	79%	78%
People here understand how their role contributes to the organisation's goals.	78%	85%	81%	84%	72%	84%
There are opportunities here for my career growth.	79%	79%	81%	78%	76%	79%
The performance of employees here is fairly evaluated.	79%	77%	85%	77%	78%	76%
Management takes action on feedback gathered from employees.	77%	78%	79%	79%		

5. **Investing in the People & Culture vertical as part of the organisation's development:** In the incubation stage, LFE, as a young organisation, focused on sharpening program offerings and strategy. As the organisation grew in size, the leadership decided to invest in resources to lead the People & Culture vertical. The goal of this vertical was to enhance the various internal policies for development, talent management and retention with a strong focus on internal communications. This vertical grew from one member across the People & Culture team, and Finance and Admin departments to a nine-member in-house team located across two state offices. Dedicated resources focused on developing L&D strategy and leading the execution of these spaces and structures helped ensure the consistency, effectiveness and relevance of these initiatives.
6. **Building external coaching & exposure opportunities for employees:** Senior leadership team members mentor newer employees, guiding them through project management, stakeholder engagement, and policy advocacy specific to the education sector; however, this is not enough. The organisation invited external experts to hold targeted learning sessions for a small group of managerial members. This ensured focused skill development with respect to project and people Management for potential team members, thus building a third line of leadership within the organisation. A plan will also unfold in the coming years, where a few members will be given the opportunity for external coaching and share sectoral learning opportunities for employees on performance. This will foster networking opportunities for employees to grow across the sector. Figure 1.2 below highlights the impact of investment in the skill development of managers on employee engagement at the organisation.

Figure 1.2: Manager support and employee engagement at LFE from AY 2021-22 to AY 2023-24



1.4 Limitations of the study

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of learning and development (L&D) strategies on employee engagement, retention, and performance, certain limitations should be noted:

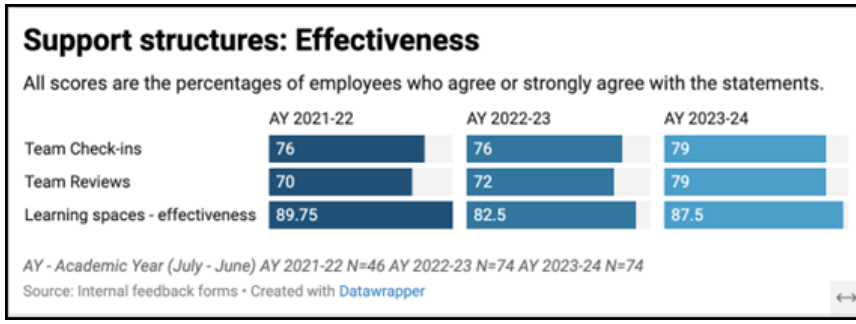
1. **The data is self-reported:** The study heavily relies on self-reported survey responses, which may introduce response bias. The subjective perceptions of employees might not always reflect objective outcomes, particularly in areas like engagement and satisfaction.
2. **The findings lack generalisability due to the sampling procedure:** The research focuses on a single organisation, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other industries or organisations with different cultures or operational contexts.
3. **The study is cross-sectional:** The study uses a three-year cross-sectional dataset. While trends are analysed, causation cannot be conclusively established. Longitudinal studies would provide deeper insight into the long-term impact of L&D initiatives.
4. **There are potentially confounding variables:** Factors such as external economic conditions, organisational restructuring, or leadership changes might also have influenced employee performance and retention, but these were not explicitly controlled in the analysis.
5. **There is a geographical variability in team sizes:** The organisation's operations across different states feature varying team sizes, making it impossible to draw geographic inferences or analyse the effects of state-specific characteristics on L&D strategies and outcomes.
6. **There is limited qualitative depth:** Although in-depth interviews were conducted, the qualitative data is limited to a small subset of employees, which may not fully capture diverse perspectives across the organisation.

1.5 Discussion on the findings

A key element of these strategies was to prioritise listening to employee voices and feedback. Consistent feedback structures, along with internal and external surveys over the years, allowed for a thorough understanding of people's experiences and their evolving needs. Quarterly reviews with the senior leadership team created a space to analyse qualitative data, along with quantitative data, leading to refinements in programs and structures. The data revealed the effectiveness of various support structures over the past three years (Figure 1.3).

While the quantitative data allowed us a chance to understand the usefulness of the spaces and structures, it was the qualitative inputs and conversations with the team members that shed a better light on the immediate as well as long-term needs with respect to learning and development. Consistent spaces to learn and develop role-specific skills, combined with consistent reflection spaces at the team level and one-on-

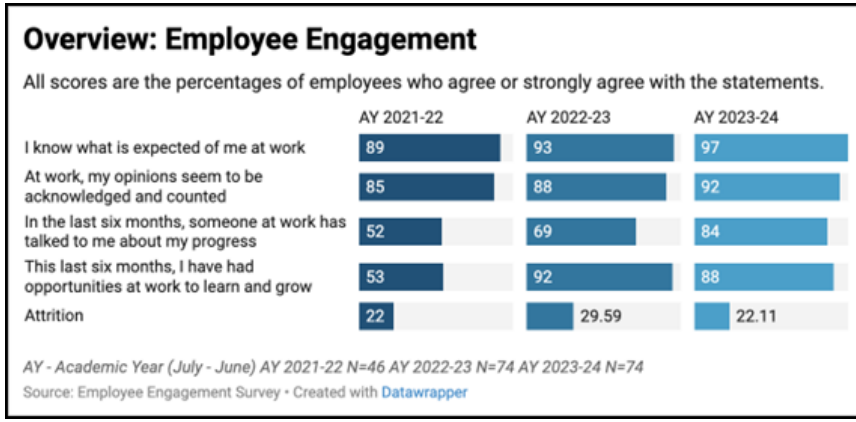
Figure 1.3: Effectiveness of support structures at LFE from AY 2021-22 to AY 2023-24



one with the manager, allowed each individual to reflect and redirect their inputs in alignment with the KRAs set to evaluate their annual performance. Figure 1.4 showcases the relationship between increased role clarity and employee engagement.

These data sets, combined with the employee feedback through interviews, allowed us to investigate the gaps, their root causes, team members' expectations and the learning needs of different roles. Feedback was not only incorporated at regular intervals, but these changes were

Figure 1.4: Employee engagement and attrition trend at LFE from AY 2021-22 to AY 2023-24



also communicated consistently to the employees, thus strengthening the employer-employee relationship by establishing transparency, along with strengthening the structures and processes. This was reflected in the three-year consecutive Great Place To Work Certification, further validating the positive impact of a culture centred on learning and development (Box 1.1).

Box 1.1: Great Place To Work Survey, Qualitative Comments, Jan 2024

"There are a couple of things I've found to be great about working here. There is a great of transparency and preference for learning and growth. Every month, there is a whole day dedicated to learning spaces and open spaces with the leadership team. The culture here is very open and friendly. Every lunch at office is where everyone sits down and eats, talks and laughs together."

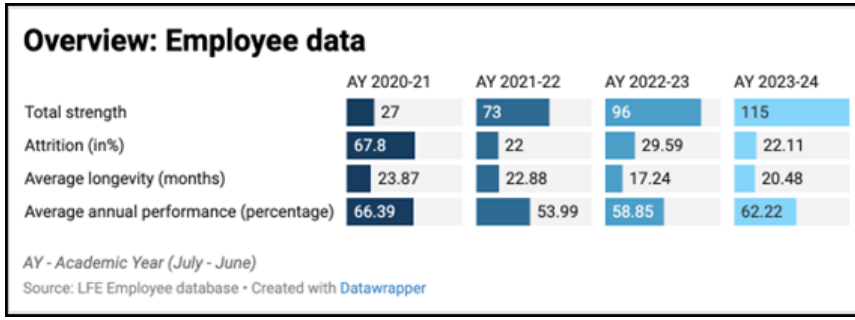
- Employee, Leadership For Equity

"What sets this organization apart and makes it an exceptional workplace is its unwavering commitment to employee growth and well-being. The company goes beyond conventional benefits, offering unique initiatives that foster a positive work environment. For instance, the introduction of personalized professional development plans empowers employees to map out their career trajectories with the support of tailored learning opportunities."

-Employee, Leadership For Equity

The data on employee strength and attrition trends indicated that a learning-oriented culture contributed positively to employee engagement, retention and performance (Figure 1.5).

Figure 1.5: Employee strength and attrition trend at LFE from AY 2020-21 to AY 2023-24



The following key correlations further highlight important trends:

1. **Learning and Development Opportunities & Performance:** There is a strong positive correlation (0.94), suggesting that as L&D opportunities increase, employee performance improves. This underscores the importance of providing robust learning opportunities to enhance overall employee effectiveness. This aligns with the Human Capital Theory, which posits that investments in employee education and training yield improved productivity by augmenting their skills and knowledge (Becker, 1993). Similarly, it resonates with the Skill Acquisition Theory, emphasising that systematic training enables employees to progress from novice to expert levels, fostering improved job performance and organisational outcomes (Anderson, 1982). The Deloitte Insights (2022) report supports this view, emphasising that skill-based organisational models significantly

enhance employee productivity by aligning roles with capabilities, highlighting the transformative potential of structured L&D programs.

2. **Leadership Development & Attrition:** A weak negative correlation (-0.27) suggests that while leadership development contributes slightly to reducing attrition, the effect is low, highlighting the need for additional factors to drive retention. It reflects the Leadership Development Framework, which emphasises that the effectiveness of leadership development programs depends on their ability to address broader organisational dynamics and employee needs (Day, 2000). Furthermore, factors such as organisational culture, compensation, work-life balance, and career growth opportunities have been shown to play significant roles in influencing attrition, suggesting a multifaceted approach to retention (Holtom et al., 2008). Additionally, The Bridgespan Group (2017 & 2021) highlights the leadership development gap within Indian NGOs, noting that underinvestment in the leadership pipelines exacerbates retention challenges, reinforcing the need for a more comprehensive approach to address attrition
3. **Regular structured feedback & Promotions:** A moderate negative correlation (-0.63) indicates that more frequent feedback and growth discussions may not directly lead to more promotions. This relationship might reflect the influence of other mediating factors like the availability of senior roles, performance thresholds or the nature of the feedback itself. This aligns with the Goal-Setting Theory, which posits that feedback can guide employee performance improvement but requires alignment with organisational opportunities for advancement (Locke & Latham, 2002). Additionally, the Equity Theory of Motivation highlights that employees may perceive promotion as a function of both individual achievement and structural factors within the organisation (Adams, 1965). Smith (2022) further emphasises that while structured learning and development are essential, promotions are often constrained by organisational hierarchies and resource limitations, especially in sectors like non-profits where senior roles are limited.

As we grapple with the larger sectoral challenges like a shortage of the right talent and compensation benchmarking, it becomes crucial to implement strategies that foster employee development, engagement, and retention to stay competitive and resilient.

1.6 Conclusion

The findings show that investing in a learning-oriented culture, where Learning & Development structures are balanced with consistent and structured feedback, leads to improved employee engagement and retention. Some key recommendations based on this case study and its findings are:

1. **Strengthen leadership development programs**: Encourage a focus on structured leadership development to prepare future leaders and enhance the organisation's capability to adapt to changes. This can further reduce turnover by providing clear career growth paths.
2. **Expand L&D opportunities beyond the current scope:** While the data shows improvements, offering more diverse and personalised learning opportunities could cater to individual development needs, promoting long-term engagement and retention.
3. **Invest in regular feedback mechanisms:** Continue the practice of incorporating employee feedback, and explore ways to make the process even more dynamic. Frequent and informal feedback sessions can identify issues early and adapt learning programs quickly.
4. **Leverage qualitative data to tailor development initiatives**: Given the significance of qualitative feedback in understanding employee needs, future development programs should integrate these insights to create more customised and impactful learning experiences.
5. **Increase external exposure opportunities:** Expand the external coaching, mentorship, and networking programs to include more employees. This can help in building a strong network within the sector, contributing to the organisation's resilience.
6. **Benchmark against sector trends for continuous improvement:** Regularly compare organisational practices and performance metrics with sector trends to ensure that the development strategies remain relevant and impactful.
7. **Investigate future research directions:** Suggest conducting longitudinal studies to assess the impact of L&D programs on long-term organisational resilience and talent development, which could validate the sustainability of these strategies.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of cultivating a culture of learning within organisations, particularly in the social sector. Our findings reveal that a learning-oriented culture not only enhances the overall employee experience but also significantly boosts engagement and retention. By framing learning and development (L&D) as a cultural priority rather than just a functional offering, organisations can drive meaningful change and foster a more resilient workforce. The qualitative insights gathered here highlight best practices and actionable recommendations for improving employee retention and cutting hiring costs. Future research should examine the long-term impact of these strategies on organisational resilience and talent development, further solidifying the role of a learning-focused culture in sustaining growth and stability.

Disclaimer: In preparing this manuscript, we have not used any AI tools for whatsoever purpose. We take full responsibility for the content.

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2 Co-creating Pathways to Transform Communities in Rural Meghalaya, India: learnings from the Chief Minister's Youth Centre (CMYC) and lessons for skill development in North-East India

Anoushka Gupta and Divya R. Momin

Abstract

Drawing on a participatory research study, we discuss the contribution of the Chief Minister's Youth Centre (CMYC) in addressing challenges and aspirations in communities in rural Meghalaya, North-East India. CMYCs sought to enhance opportunities across Meghalaya through holistic community-based learning and skill development. Three years into the CMYC program, this study focuses on the following research questions: How has the CMYC positioned itself in relation to aspirations and challenges in rural Meghalaya from the perspective of the learners and community members? In what ways can the CMYC program address the challenges and aspirations of the community in the future? CMYCs have been able to create a sense of hope and build a safe space where learners find comfort in expressing themselves beyond immediate project-related considerations. Learners and community members express a common desire to expand their learnings from the CMYC to create businesses and begin entrepreneurial ventures, highlighting an increasing recognition of the viability of such a pathway. They articulate aspirations around boosting the village economy through utilising local resources in creating products of day-to-day use, or opening workshops or bakeries (drawing on skills learnt at the centre) in the village, indicating a desire for self-resilience and a potential for regeneration of rural areas in Meghalaya.

Keywords: Community development, Urban-rural divide, Youth agency, Participatory Research, Co-creation

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 Understanding Meghalaya's Unique Context and Challenges

Nestled in India's North Eastern Region (NER), the state of Meghalaya was carved out of Assam in 1972. Following India's independence in 1947, the region remained deprived of financial resources, and was embroiled in political and identity-based turmoil. NER's historical isolation vis-a-vis 'mainland India[1]' has been attributed to being "smaller in size, having hilly terrains, and consequently lower population density" (Rajeev and Nagendran, 2016, p25). While this historical neglect has begun to fade through initiatives such as the 'Look East Policy' and the more recent 'Act

East Policy', both intended to acknowledge NER's growing strategic and geopolitical relevance (Observer Research Foundation, 2020), scholars argue that making sense of the development of the region requires going beyond regional generalisations and "geographical denotations" to appreciate the heterogeneity that stems from cultural, religious, and socio-economic variations within the NER (Sharma, 2021).

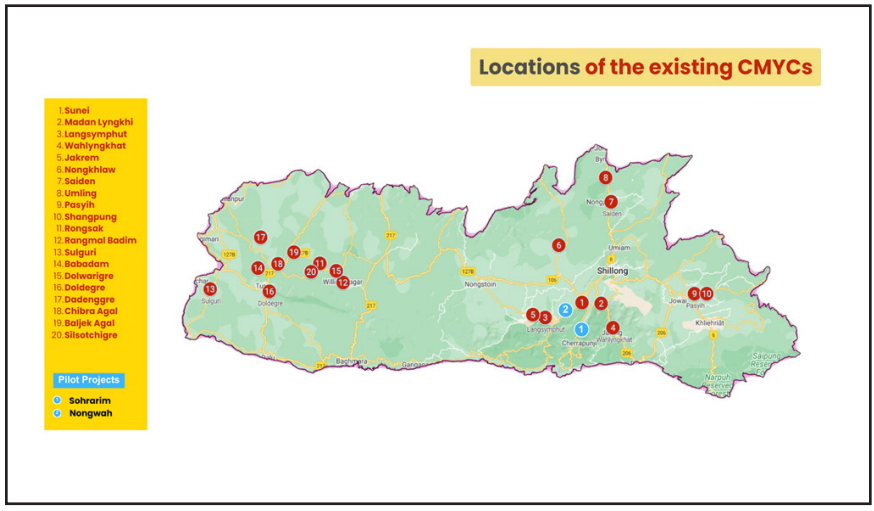
The focus of this paper is on Meghalaya, a state exhibiting this very heterogeneity with different tribes[2], food, topography, and variations in development trajectories within the state itself. A recent report by The Institute for Human Development (2023) puts population estimates of Meghalaya (as of 2021–22) at approximately 3.3 million, an increase of 11% from the 2011 Population Census (where it was 2.9 million). These figures, however, hide differences in urban-rural population distribution and further correlate to availability of resources and opportunities. The report notes that Meghalaya is predominantly rural, with approximately 15–20% in urban areas and 75–80% in rural areas as per the 2011 Census.

In what has become symptomatic of patterns of rapid urbanisation in developing countries, challenges stemming from the 'urban-rural divide' have translated to concentration of resources in the more developed urban areas of Shillong (the state capital in East Khasi Hills) and Tura (one of the largest cities in Meghalaya in the West Garo Hills). In terms of educational opportunities, this manifests through "the distribution of Secondary and Higher Secondary Schools and Colleges being highly skewed in favour of Shillong and to a certain extent, of Tura" (Department of Education, Government of Meghalaya (GoM), 2018, p9), exacerbating educational disparities between rural and urban youth. With regards to outcomes of school-based education in rural areas, the ASER 2022 Survey assessed foundational learning in six districts in rural Meghalaya and found that overall, 60.3% children in Standards 6–8 could read a Standard 2 level text. This average does not account for significant variations—with the highest figure at 89.1% in East Khasi Hills and the lowest in West Garo Hills at 40.7% (ASER, 2023). The hope of quality education and more opportunities in urban centres drives migration of education and employment-seeking youth. This correlates with migration patterns—between 2001 and 2011, "in Khasi Hills (now split into West and East), there was a huge rise of over 50%, while in East Garo Hills and Jaintia Hills, the population had actually fallen … [implying a] considerable intra-district migration" (The Institute for Human Development, 2023, pp.18–19). The urban-rural disparity is echoed in the increasingly ubiquitous digital sphere with 14.7% of Meghalaya's rural population being able to operate a computer, in comparison to 52.5% of the urban population, as reported in the 75th round of the National Sample Survey, (NSS) 2017–18.

2.1.2 Bridging Meghalaya's Urban-rural Divide: Introducing Chief Minister's Youth Centres

Recognising the urban-rural divide within Meghalaya in terms of limited access to quality learning and skilling for the youth, in 2021, the Government of Meghalaya partnered with the Smart Village Movement, Sauramandala Foundation and Project DEFY[3] (Project DEFY, n.d.) to pilot an initial iteration of what would evolve into the CMYC. The pilot sought to "improve the resilience and economic potential of underserved rural communities, by creating spaces for learning and self-improvement. Additionally, it aimed to bridge the rural-urban educational and digital divide through sustainable technology-driven interventions, and introduce practical and exciting learning" (Bradbury et al., 2023, p5). The success of the initial pilot, reiterated in an evaluation highlighting key challenges and opportunities, led to the scale-up of CMYCs in 22 centres (the first two pilot centres and 20 new centres) across 13 blocks in eight districts [(ibid.) *Figure 2.1 below*].

Figure 2.1: Distribution of CMYCs in Meghalaya



Source: Sauramandala Foundation, n.d.

CMYCs are composed of three main components—a community-based learning space based on principles of self-designed learning (SDL) called the 'Nook', a concept developed by Project DEFY, a library and a sports component (different sports have been introduced, from football to frisbee and recently, chess). The centre physically accommodates all three components under its roof and is open to any member of the community, irrespective of their age, gender, educational level, or socio-economic background[4]. Nooks are driven by the idea of 'self-designed-learning', a concept where "learners—from a young age—decide what to learn based on their own interests and passions, how they want to learn it, how long they want to learn about it, and how and in which ways they are using and

applying their learning" (Neusiedl, 2021, p50). They operate on a cycle-based structure, lasting approximately six to eight months where learners can take up projects based on their interests, develop their ideas further, and eventually present it at an event known as the 'exhibition' which marks the culmination of each cycle[5].

At the beginning of each CMYC set-up process, village representatives such as the village head and any other member nominated from the village enter into a 'social agreement' with the implementing partners of the project to ensure the former's support in the smooth functioning of each centre. These agreements, renewed every two years, serve as a critical link between the project and the community, and ensure that the CMYC is seen as a community resource from inception. Moreover, in light of the objectives under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution introduced in 1951 in North-Eastern states of India, the importance of local self-governance and management of tribal affairs through Autonomous District Councils percolates to villages and confers immense power to local village representatives. In the context of CMYCs, the role of village heads and village executive members has been critical in cementing the position and spreading awareness of the centre within the community.

2.1.3 Literature Review and Problem Statement

A recent trend in the region has been the increased focus of governments on skill development initiatives to "meet the aspirations of youth through training, to enhance employability and employment" (Rajendran and Paul, 2020, p195). Although limited, a number of studies have been conducted to ascertain the success and challenges of skilling initiatives in Meghalaya (both formal, that is, implemented and financed by the government and non-formal, that is, self-supported initiatives that are more fragmented and localised in nature).

Kurbah and Rao 2020 look at blacksmithing and manufacturing of bows and arrows in two villages in the East Khasi Hills (within a 50 km radius of Shillong). While the selected respondents did not participate in any formal skilling initiative and lacked formal educational qualifications, they were able to find "great demand for their products, which is met and sufficient income earned to pay the workers and also sustain their livelihood" (Kurbah and Rao, 2020, p374). Yet, certain challenges that are highlighted include limited financing, specialised training, and lack of role models in the village who have established themselves as successful entrepreneurs.

Das's study of rural tribal women highlights many of the challenges faced by this group while seeking formal skill development. She notes that rural tribal women in Meghalaya predominantly engage in "farm forestry, beekeeping, sewing, cooking, weaving, bamboo production, cane work and so on" (Das, 2017, p16). The challenges identified mainly relate to a lack of motivation, and dominance of traditional belief systems that place majority of domestic chores on women, leaving them with little time to

engage in skill training, and certain cultural norms which limit extended travel outside the village. Yet, a different study on skill development among rural women in Meghalaya finds that "engagement in SHGs [Self-Help-Groups] has in one way or the other helped women develop their skills in personal, economic, social and domestic matters" (Lyngkhoi and Elizabeth, 2019, 369), pointing to the benefits of a strong presence of local groups in promoting skill development in rural areas.

A number of studies also focus on the state capital, Shillong and the realities of education to employment transitions in the context of highly urbanised areas. Hynniwera (2021) in her study of youth with graduate education in the ages 20–34 in Shillong, she finds that "skill mis-match with labour market requirements is also further ascertained as majority of the respondents do not agree to a close relationship between their education and their current or previous jobs." She further highlights how aspirations of these youth continue to be heavily tilted towards government jobs, with their promise of stability and retirement benefits, which has led to disillusionment, given the paucity of available positions. This trend, prevalent in many regions of India, has pushed governments to focus more on expanding skill development and encouraging entrepreneurship as an alternative livelihood option.

This paper responds to the gap in understanding of how learners, and particularly youth in rural Meghalaya, formulate pathways towards skill development through interest and curiosity-driven learning. Given the challenges pointed out in the literature around motivation, preference for government jobs, and skill mis-match, this paper further contributes to the evidence around how CMYCs have approached these barriers. Moreover, Rajendran and Paul (2020) highlight, "there is a strong need to bring scale to the skill development agenda in the North-Eastern region of India while creating a way-forward plan keeping in mind the local rural skills." With CMYCs as a state-wide initiative in Meghalaya, evidence and research on this initiative can support learnings for similar programs in the region that are looking to expand.

2.1.4 A Review of Skill Development Programs in Meghalaya

Meghalaya's 'Mission 10' puts forth a roadmap to a 10-billion-dollar economy by 2028 (Department of Planning, Investment Promotion and Sustainable Development, GoM, 2024). Mission 10 notes 10 opportunities and guarantees each. The 'opportunity', "engaging and employing youth to leverage Meghalaya's demographic dividend for growth" and the 'guarantee', "joyful and quality learning at all levels" (ibid.) further align with the objectives of the CMYCs.

Other initiatives in Meghalaya have sought to enhance these objectives as well. One such program is 'Aspire Meghalaya' which focuses on youth development in partnership with different educational institutions across the state. So far, they have enrolled 13,291 students across all 12

districts of Meghalaya, in various soft skills training and personal growth interventions. This program mainly focuses on educational institutions where the emotional wellbeing, self-worth and confidence, communication skills, recognising potential, identity and culture and funnelling skills, are some of the key elements which helped address the gaps in youth across Meghalaya (Aspire Meghalaya, n.d.).

Another program is YESS Meghalaya which caters to the empowerment of youth clubs, not-for-profit organisations, societies and cooperations and many such local initiatives or clubs, where they get access to financial support through subsidies or grants initiated by the GoM (Department of Sports and Youth Affairs, GoM, 2023). Such initiatives allow communities across Meghalaya to form independent societies, clubs, or organisations which can promote grassroots interventions in different areas—education, health, tourism, among others.

Building on the burgeoning entrepreneurial ecosystem in Meghalaya[6], PRIME Meghalaya (PRIME Meghalaya, 2022) was established in 2019 with different programs that offer interventions such as incubation, mentorship and training, funding access and networking opportunities[7]. PRIME stemmed from a similar gap of concentration for entrepreneurs in urban areas, and an allied initiative, the Prime Sauramandala Rural Entrepreneurship Fellowship (PSREF) came into existence to cater to various rural entrepreneurs in different blocks of Meghalaya. The CMYCs have linked with the PSREF ecosystem, where fellows from PSREF have helped in various interventions for learners at the centres who needed support to start their business ventures.

MSSDS notes, "as the state's economy does not afford enough opportunities for narrow and linear skills for want of sufficient scale, it will also be necessary to pursue the approach of multiple skill formation among youth, both for prudential reasons (should a sector not generate opportunities for any reason) as also, to widen the scope for employability" (MSSDS, 2022).

While programs like YESS and ASPIRE have supported youth skill development in Meghalaya, the key factor that differentiates CMYCs is that the latter is not tied to an institutional setting or registered entity. CMYCs are community learning centres and are age-agnostic, that is, there is no 'eligibility' criteria to come to the CMYC and the space is designed to be accessible to all members of the community. Through self-designed learning, learners are not required to enrol in courses offering specific skill-sets. Rather, the approach enables learners to discover their interests and provides support to build these further free of cost. Importantly, CMYCs aim to empower learners to "be engaged as problem-solvers in their communities by using available resources to address some practical challenges their communities face" (Smart Village Movement, 2022). Beyond skill development or income-generation, learners are encouraged to develop curiosity and a deep love for learning, ultimately encouraging MSSDS' goal of multiple skill formation to widen scope for future prospects.

Figure 2.2 summarises these different programs that come together to constitute Meghalaya's youth empowerment and skill development ecosystem and shows how each covers different areas, partnership models, target audience and covers varying geographies within the state.

Figure 2.2: Meghalaya's youth empowerment and skill development ecosystem

Source: Authors' work, 2024

2.1.5 Objectives of This Study and Research Questions

Three years into the CMYC program, plans for a further scale-up are taking shape[8]. It is imperative at this juncture to reflect critically on how the program has fared along its intended objectives and responded to challenges in rural Meghalaya described in the previous sections. Two studies in particular have been conducted to ascertain the centre's impact—the first, Bradbury et al. (2023)'s Trailblazer Lab Impact Report, an impact study led by Berkeley Haas, of the first two pilot centres in Sohrarim and Nongwah; and second, an internal evaluation study by the program team of 12 CMYCs around the themes of learners' experience and relationship with the space, and community engagement. In previous studies discussing community perceptions, a common finding was that communities and learners ascribed 'value' to the presence of the CMYC. Building on this, this study attempts to decode the term to uncover the current (and potential) form of value CMYCs hold in two different locations. Unlike traditional methods used in research and impact studies, it is intended that this exercise will serve as a roadmap to collectively

understand and chart pathways for the future with communities and learners. To further this collective understanding, the study takes a participatory approach to research, described in detail in the next section.

The study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How has the CMYC positioned itself in relation to aspirations and challenges in rural Meghalaya from the perspective of learners and community members?
2. In what ways can the CMYC program address challenges and aspirations in the community in the future?

2.2 Methodology

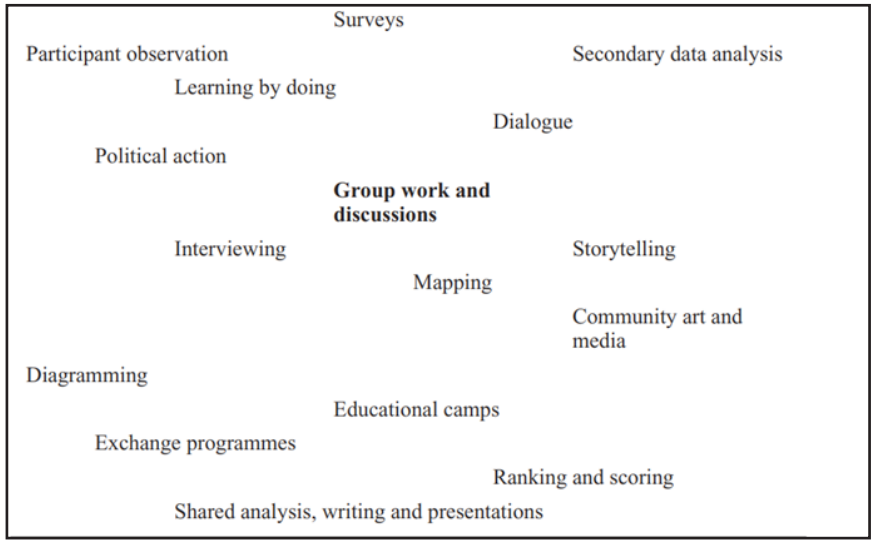
> *"The term research has often carried with it a set of assumptions linking a relatively small population of trained professionals from universities and professional research institutions with the privilege of being able to contribute to the production of knowledge"*
> (Cammarota, 2011, cited in Sosnowski et al., 2022, p20).

Drawing on critiques of dominant forms of social science research that are largely extractive and exhibit a strong power asymmetry between the 'researcher' and the 'researched', this study utilised principles of participatory action research (PAR). Defined simply, PAR entails a mix of "research, education and action" (Hall, 1981). While definitions have changed over time (see Kindon et al., 2007 for the history of PAR approaches), the approach is bound by a set of guiding principles. This entails researchers working with participants to define and refine the objectives of the study under question to counteract hierarchies involved in more traditional research. This collaborative approach is central to the research process envisioned under RAGE. PAR helps centre the lived experiences of participants, ensuring that "the benefits of research accrue more directly to the communities involved" (Kindon et al., 2007, p1). Further, it has challenged the long-standing "assumption that knowledge arises from research outcomes [which] has been expanded in recent years to include the possibility that knowledge may also be created from the process of engaging in research" (Lind, 2008, p221).

2.2.1 Research Design

Drawing inspiration from PAR approaches described in Kindon et al. (2007), the study utilises methods combining visualisation techniques such as mapping, community art and media, diagramming, and action-research elements of dialogue, learning by doing, ranking and scoring (see figure 2.3 below). These methods were adapted to facilitate engagement of community members and learners in co-creating actionable insights around the community's context and address aspirations through the CMYC.

Figure 2.3: Common Methods in Participatory Action Research



Source: Kindon et al., 2007, p17

The study was conducted in two CMYCs—CMYC Pasyih in West Jaintia hills and CMYC Rongsak Songma in East Garo hills, over five days in each location. Each day had a specific agenda, tied together to the overall objectives of the study. Day 1 and 2 were designed to build the 'context', Day 3 and 4 focused on understanding the 'value' of the CMYC through the lens of learners and community members and introduced the 'action research element'. The final day showcased the results of the previous day's activities (see figure 2.4 below). Before the research study, fellows were briefed on the 5-day plan over a series of calls to ensure a strong grasp on the distribution of activities and how they tied into the research agenda.

The first day of research began with conversations with the village head to seek their support and invite them to participate in research activities involving community members. This was followed by introducing learners to the purpose of the study, seeking written consent, spending the day getting to know them, and finally dividing them into three different groups. Each group had tasks assigned to them for the following day. The second day began with groups assembling and going around the village based on the tasks assigned.

1. Group 1 was responsible for mapping the village. This entailed going around the village and drawing a rough map demarcating the boundaries, key landmarks, distribution of assets and natural resources. This activity was inspired by Akbar et al. (2021)'s study titled, 'The Role of Participatory Village Maps in Strengthening Public Participation Practice', where authors discuss the role of village maps in social learning, knowledge sharing, and influence on policy (see figure 2.5 below).

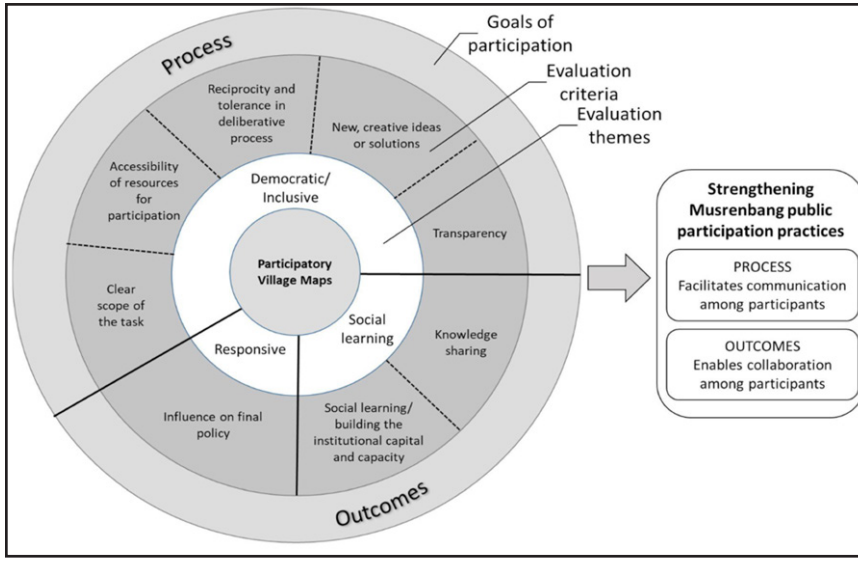
Figure 2.4: Tying the Research Agenda Together through Three Sub-components

Source: Authors' work, 2024

2. Group 2 was tasked with photography. This entailed photo documentation of landmarks, resources and facilities on smartphones. This team also collected memorabilia from different parts of the village to showcase the available local resources.
3. Group 3 conducted a survey based on a format where they observed the presence of specific basic facilities, economic assets, and natural resources in the village and ticked 'yes' or 'no' depending on availability and made a note on its functionality (for services and facilities like primary health care centres, banks).

The groups conducted the three activities parallelly and were spread out in the village in different directions. This took approximately 1–2 hours, given that both Pasyih and Rongsak Songma recorded a population of 2339 and 586 respectively as per the 2011 Census. Once each team returned to the CMYC, they began drawing the outline of the village map, marking the landmarks, boundaries and creating a chart with resources and memorabilia collected from different parts of the village. The final outcome of this activity was a map of the village with different resources, facilities and assets [marked] and was intended to begin looking at the village's 'context' from the lens of the learners (see figure 2.6 for the map created by learners in Pasyih).

Figure 2.5: Participatory Village Maps

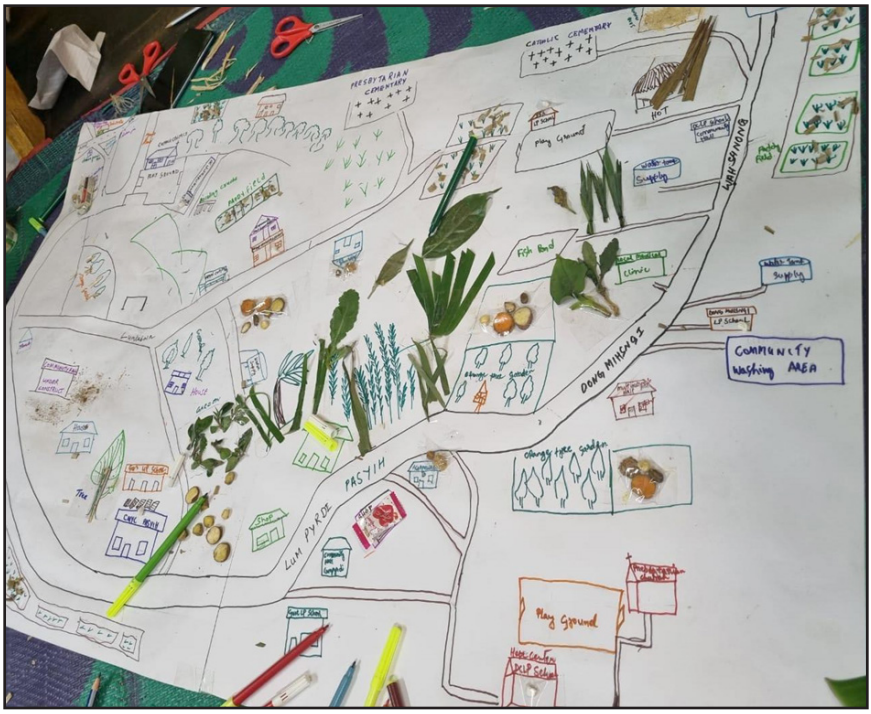


Source: Akbar et al., 2021, p3

The third and fourth day focused on dialogue, ranking and scoring, consensus building and diagramming. The objective of both these days was to break down the current and future value of the CMYC in the community. On the third day, learners were introduced to the diagramming activity of discussing and writing [down] the value the CMYC holds in their lives through Venn diagramming methods. The first circle was a reflection of the current value, followed by a second circle (overlapping with the first) to put down what they wanted to achieve through the CMYC in the future. This was not limited to the material resources available in the CMYC, and included ideas of what the centre can become in the future to address aspirations and challenges facing the community. After teams shared their ideas around the current and future value of the CMYC, the overlapping part of the two circles was an 'action pathway'—a bridge between the current and future values learners had come up with (see figure 2.7 below). This action pathway entailed prioritising (using ranking methods) the top 3–5 areas—steps or a roadmap to achieve future goals by utilising aspects uncovered in the current value of the CMYC.

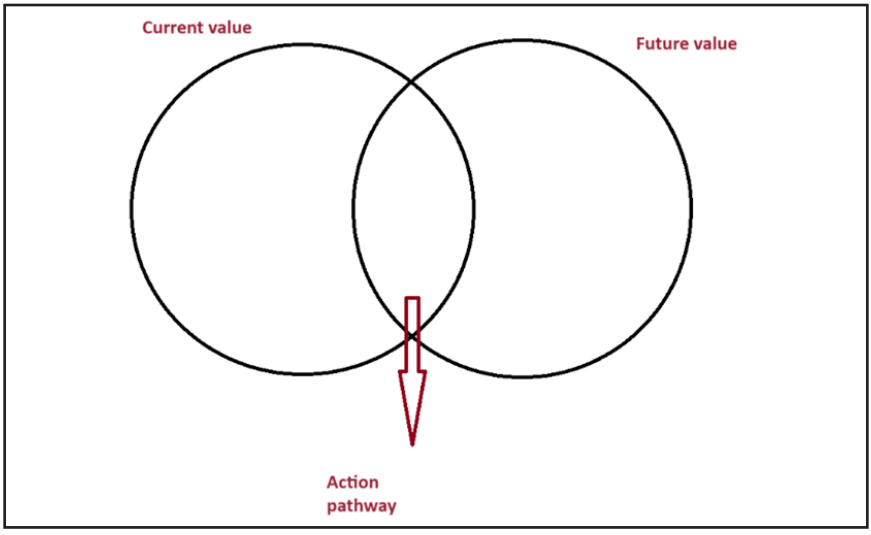
The fourth day, entailed a similar flow as the third. However, learners and community members were grouped on this day to identify community perceptions around the current and future value of the CMYC. Community members were familiarised with previous days' work, including the village map, local resources, and the diagramming activity [completed] by the learners. The result was an 'action pathway' combining the ideas of the learners and community members and how they can achieve these through the centre.

Figure 2.6: A Map of the Pasyih Village Made by Learners on Day 2



Source: Fieldwork in Pasyih, 2024

Figure 2.7: Venn Diagramming Activity and the 'Action Pathway'



Source: Authors' work, 2024

The fifth and final day of the study concluded with learners, community members and fellows showcasing findings of the previous days' activities conducted in an event called the 'research exhibition'. There was wider community participation in this event and study participants were able to not only present their work over the week, but also seek inputs on how to involve the community in achieving many of the goals identified in the 'action pathway.' This day saw different community members, village representatives, Self-Help Group (SHG) members, Anganwadi workers, Village Executive Committee members as well as local groups participate in the event.

2.2.2 Sampling

The selection of CMYCs in this study was based on two key criteria. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the focus was not on scale and representativeness, but depth within a smaller sample. The first consideration was selecting centres based in two different geographical regions in Meghalaya. Accordingly, the first centre was located in Pasyih (West Jaintia hills) and the second centre in Rongsak Songma (East Garo hills). Geographic variation was used as a criterion to assess whether differences in participant responses emerged based on the context. Ideally, at least one centre from all sub-regions or districts of the state would have fulfilled the first criteria. Yet, given restrictions on time and resources, two centres were finalised as the study locations based on a 5-day fieldwork plan in each location. The second selection criteria involved snowball sampling where participants were selected based on availability, operational viability and interest expressed by the participants at the centre.

Research participants over the five days included a wide range of individuals—from active learners who are doing projects in the current learning cycle, to community members involved in various livelihood activities—from daily wage work to school teachers to SHG members. The first half of the research activities saw an overall participation of 24 and 26 learners and community members in Pasyih and Rongsak respectively. The last day of the research activity (the research exhibition) saw the participation of 40 learners and community members in Pasyih and 30 learners and community members in Rongsak.

2.2.3 Ethical Considerations

PAR, like other methods, is not without its limitations. The authors note some drawbacks given the particularities of the present research study itself. Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures (TESF), a UK-government funded initiative with 67 projects guided by a co-created knowledge approach, released a methodological sourcebook detailing many of the challenges and opportunities in engaging in this form of research. They note, "the most common challenge identified across projects was related

to time … many of the challenges [we faced] are common features of engaged research processes where relationships, trust and responsiveness are more important than pre-planned frameworks" (TESF Collective, 2023, pp.55-56). This particular challenge is critical, in light of PAR, where breaking down hierarchies of researchers and participants requires establishing trust-based relationships, factors that are severely constrained by resources, time and bandwidth.

A second limitation relates to the difference in engagement between participants. Ensuring similar levels of participation has proved to be a challenge in other studies as well. For instance, Wattar et al. (2012) examined the challenges within the 'Paamiut Youth Voice Research Project' in Greenland and observed varying levels [of participation] among the participants based on self-esteem, group dynamics and social norms. Group dynamics and social norms are relevant to the present study as well, given the socio-cultural context where age signifies respect, and therefore it was observed that younger participants felt more inhibited to come forward in the presence of elders. Despite these limitations, PAR was chosen for fieldwork given the values it espouses in relation to breaking research hierarchies and co-creating knowledge. Moreover, the authors felt that modifying elements of the research design would be helpful in mitigating some of these challenges, while parallelly centring participation and more equitable research partnerships.

In the methodological approach adopted by the research team at Project DEFY, PAR is taken a step further post completion of the research study for learners and communities to collect insights and feedback on the paper. This is part of the research engagement process and is a key step in iterative design. An example of documentation of these insights drawn from a previous research paper demonstrates this approach (see 'Perspectives and Feedback on the Paper 'Challenging Narrow Conceptualisations of Education through the Nook Model in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, India and Bangladesh''[9]).

2.2.4 Confidentiality and Data Security

Given the mixed age composition of the study which included children below the age of 18, additional care was given to receiving written consent from adult caretakers in this scenario. For all other participants above the age of 18, informed and written consent was sought. The consent process involved explaining the purpose of the study, where and in what form information will be used, as well as an option to opt out of the study at any point. Identities of all research participants were stored with utmost confidentiality which involved assigning codes to each respondent and ensuring the data was stored in a secure digital environment with access only to researchers involved in this project. Finally, all personal identifiers of respondents have been omitted from this study to protect the anonymity and privacy of the participants.

2.3 Findings

2.3.1 Themes Uncovered Through the Exercise Around Situating the Current Value of the CMYC.

1. **Skill-based Learning at CMYCs:** Across both locations, skill-based learning emerged as a strongly attributed value of the centre. Common skills cited by learners in both locations included soap making, tailoring, carpentry, and baking. These align with the current learning areas being taken up in Cycle 2 of both CMYCs and indicate similar levels of access to common machinery to pursue these areas (sewing machines, tools for carpentry, fridges, and storage for baking). In both locations, these areas were 'new' in the community, and learners mentioned the lack of other spaces in their vicinity to experiment with such ideas.Expressed separately from 'technical' skills, communication in English was similarly pointed out in both locations. Learners valued developing their English language skills at the centre. In Rongsak, for example, using projects as an avenue to develop this further, learners mentioned taking up an "English language project which helped us learn the language. First, we wrote the story in Garo, then got a dictionary from Garo to English to help with translation."
2. **Specific characteristics of CMYCs—accessibility, resource availability and flexible timings:** A common link in both locations was the presence of learners of all ages and genders. The diversity of age groups is reflected in the average age of learners doing projects—26 years in Pasyih (range between 15 and 53 years) and 19.8 years in Rongsak (range between 14 and 38 years). A learner in Rongsak stated, "Age and gender are not a barrier here—males do macrame and jewellery, whereas females do welding." The male to female ratio within projects was evidently more equal in Rongsak (19:20) compared to Pasyih (5:13). Free access to the CMYC and availability of various resources—from laptops, a wifi connection, the Internet, resources to undertake projects, solar-powered electricity—was strongly voiced by community members and reiterated by learners. Emphasis on the lack of fees to undertake learning was voiced in relation to other fee-paying institutes that offer specific skills in a course-based structure. Solar-powered energy was similarly discussed against the backdrop of regular power outages specially during the rainy season. Beyond material resources, the expanse of options available within sports were highlighted by learners. In both locations, chess and frisbee were new sports that learners could dabble in. A learner in Rongsak mentioned, "Frisbee is a new sport in our village so we learnt a new game. Usually, we play football, cricket, volleyball. Through sports, we not only make friends but learn discipline." Given the context of several learners being simultaneously involved

either in formal educational avenues (primary and secondary schooling was most common) or livelihood activities (businesses, daily wage work through NREGA), flexible timings of the CMYC, depending on one's availability was assigned high priority by learners and community members alike.

3. **Emphasising Different Components of Self-Designed-Learning (SDL) and Supportive Ecosystems for Learning:** The value of SDL was voiced most strongly through the usage of the words, 'learning' and 'skills' in both locations. However, without explicitly referring to SDL, learners in Rongsak and Pasyih pointed to different aspects of the learning approach envisioned through SDL that they valued. Learners in Rongsak pointed to three specific aspects that underlie SDL—working with minimal support and figuring out steps required to undertake a project, the expanse of learning possibilities within the centre to experiment with, and improving the depth of a particular skill. Pasyih learners, on the other hand, emphasised personal development-related aspects. The most common value ascribed was around a reduced feeling of inhibition and shyness after coming to the CMYC and gaining confidence. The link to supportive ecosystems where learners felt safe and [experienced] a sense of bonding were highlighted by learners through the following statements, "getting support from peers with projects, the openness to ask for help from each other, and making friends at the centre." In Pasyih, community members who had seen the space develop from afar, separately pointed out how they sensed a collective identity, "Whenever I see the Nook, it comes across as a family. There is so much love. I see confidence in the children. They get a platform to display their talents." The value of socialisation and friendship, in and outside projects, is therefore seen by learners and community members as an experience associated with the CMYC in Pasyih.
4. **Community-specific Value of CMYCs:** Due to differences in community outreach across CMYCs, community members naturally associate value depending on the activities each centre has carried out. In turn, this provides an indication of the frequency and depth of community engagement. Pasyih community members recalled, "Learners did an awareness drive about plastic recycling in the village and how to use alternatives," pointing to the value of the space in relation to village development and addressing the problem of rampant plastic pollution. In Rongsak, community members expressed value from the lens of opportunities for the youth and pointed out, "Many youth are getting better at things. Before the centre opened, youth wouldn't stay in the village. They now don't need to go out. They can stay here to learn things including music and make use of other facilities."

Across the four themes, this sub-section aimed to highlight similarities and differences in the current value of the CMYC for learners and community

members. It is evident that while there are commonly cited areas related to learning specific skills, or accessing free resources, the differences are a function of the level of exposure to the CMYC's activities, how one makes use of various resources, and the differing importance attributed to personal benefits which range from valuing peer support to socialising at the centre.

2.3.2 Themes Uncovered Through the Exercise Around Building the Future Value of the CMYC in the Community

Three common themes were identified across both centres, albeit with variations in specific future goals (discussed below).

1. **Entrepreneurial Ambitions:** In both centres, there was an interest in starting various businesses, such as opening welding shops, bakeries or selling organic soaps. These were typically aligned to learning areas they had already undertaken in the learning cycle. Yet, there was a common articulation of wanting to move a step beyond completing a learning cycle to monetise the skill further in their respective villages. In both cases, entrepreneurial ambitions related to the paucity of a particular product or service in the village and wanting to fill the gap. For example, referring to opening a bakery, Rongsak learners mentioned, "People have earlier learnt baking for personal consumption. Now we can open a bakery in the village since we normally [only] get cakes from outside." In Pasyih, community members mentioned opening workshops for jewellery making and soap manufacturing units. The emphasis on monetising skills, however varied—in Pasyih, community members stressed this more strongly than learners, whereas in Rongsak, learners themselves harboured these ambitions. Taking this a step further beyond the boundaries of their village, Rongsak learners pointed to a future where they could "sell products from the CMYC online in platforms like Amazon and Flipkart."
2. **Leveraging Local Resources to Create Different Products Within the CMYC:** Referring to the visualisation of local resources on Day 2 of the research study, learners and community members came up with a plethora of possibilities for utilising these resources to create products of daily use. Most of the products fell under the umbrella of food items, clothing, and decorative pieces. In Pasyih, these included making cake from tapioca, biscuits or soap from ginger, hats and crafts from bamboo, medicine from Radoh and Tynkhieh[10], biogas from cow manure. Similarly, in Rongsak, these included ginger powder from ginger, making cloth from threads extracted from banana stems, pickles from gooseberry and jackfruit, and bamboo baskets from bamboo. Community members in Rongsak added, "Creating disposable plates from betel nut leaves[11]."
3. **Knowledge Sharing Between Learners and Community Members:** Learners in both centres mentioned wanting to share the skill they acquired at the CMYC beyond the space, specifically within the community. Learners in Rongsak who were working on the resin terrarium

table under the carpentry project wanted to share their skills in resin design with community members.

Differences in themes related to future goals emerged on Day 4 of the research activities with learners and community members in Pasyih. Together, this group additionally added two new areas of future interest—the first was around social awareness which included "planting more trees to promote afforestation." They also pointed out that "child marriage and alcohol abuse are issues in the village. We can bring more awareness to such issues through this space." The second area was related to making agriculture more sustainable. The challenge they identified was around labour-intensive agricultural practices and posed a question of how to modernise agriculture. Additionally, the group identified quick expiration of fermented soybean as a challenge and wanted to collectively understand how to introduce preservation techniques.

Across these themes related to the future value of the CMYC, while there were differences in the type of products depending on local availability, participants in both centres expressed a future ambition of using local resources to create different products for day-to-day usage and building entrepreneurial avenues through skills acquired at the centre.

Based on this mapping of current and future values of the centre, the 'action pathway' described in the Research Design section, led to the following areas that were prioritised as actionable which could be pursued through the CMYC (*see table 1 below*).

2.4 Discussion

Through this study, we sought to understand how the CMYC has been perceived so far in terms of its value to learners and communities in rural Meghalaya, and collectively build an understanding of the possible future of the space in bridging gaps in aspirations or addressing challenges. The study revealed key insights that can be further corroborated with programmatic objectives to adapt or build processes that respond to these needs. While Appendix 2C lists wider program recommendations based on our study, this section sheds light on the research questions in relation to insights drawn from the exercise in Pasyih and Rongsak.

On the first research question about the CMYC's contribution to addressing challenges and aspirations of learners and community members so far, we note that the frequency and emphasis on particular aspects signals the current association with the space. From this lens, we find that learners and community members strongly value the accessibility and flexibility of the CMYC—in terms of free access, resource availability and timings, but also from a learning perspective. The latter was expressed through getting to choose one's learning areas and the sense of freedom that comes with experimenting on different projects, without

Table 2.1: Action Pathway Results—Bridging the Current and Future Value of the CMYC

	Future Goal	Role of CMYC in achieving the goal
Rongsak	Creating brands and expanding to areas beyond Rongsak in Garo and even beyond Meghalaya. Examples: soap, tailoring	Utilise the free resources in CMYC to build the business
	Creating bamboo-made products. Example: carpentry work with bamboo	Since bamboo is not utilised properly outside, one can use facilities in CMYC to make the bamboo products and improve skills in this area.
	Open a bakery or factory for biscuits, cookies etc.	Biscuits and cookies are usually brought from outside. We can start our own bakery in Rongsak by learning skills at the CMYC.
	Expanding the skills and learnings to the entire community	In this village, CMYC is the only space where everyone can learn irrespective of age and gender. Here, gender does not matter for selecting projects. Examples: Males—jewellery, Females—welding
Pasyih	Learning English	Book with Khasi/Pnar and English simultaneously
	Local production of Turmeric	Procure machinery required for the production
	Beautification of the village	Waste segregation project at the CMYC: learners bring waste to the centre and use vermicompost in the village (which is currently underutilised)
	Production of different items in the village	Learning the skills at the centre to produce items from bamboo (paper)

having to consider gendered or culturally-informed notions of what one should be doing. Moreover, the ease and comfort learners spoke about when they came to the centre signalled the value of supportive ecosystems for learning and experimentation. References to trying out 'new' areas that were previously not common in the village points to the introduction of new ways of learning and expanding options available to them, both of which are key objectives of the CMYC program. We can compare these insights from learners to avenues such as vocational training institutes, where the major difference is that the design of such spaces discounts the flexibility to experiment across domains through their emphasis on a specific predefined learning area and a rigid training module. CMYCs are designed as free and open spaces for creativity to flourish without restricting domain areas. As learners point out, this design is key in enabling experimentation—from learning new skills to imagining livelihood generation.

The CMYCs have been able to create a sense of hope (in terms of experimentation and new learning areas) and build a safe space where learners find comfort in expressing themselves beyond immediate project-related considerations. The latter was articulated through a reduced feeling of inhibition and shyness after coming to the CMYC and increase in confidence. Yet, there is a need to critically evaluate whether, despite an emphasis on interest-based learning envisioned in SDL, the replication of a set of learning areas across CMYCs (tailoring, bakery, soap-making, carpentry) has reached a stage where there is limited experimentation in new fields.

While the current value of the space signals commonly associated aspects of the CMYC, the second research question focused on aspirations through a collective understanding of the future value of the space in the community. The common articulation of learners and community members alike around the desire to expand their learnings from the CMYC to create businesses and begin entrepreneurial ventures highlights an increasing recognition of the viability of such a pathway. This can be seen against the backdrop of the specific contexts where the study was conducted. In both locations, the livelihood base is largely agricultural and one of the largest sources of non-agricultural employment is through daily wage work under the NREGA scheme. Pursuing higher education or alternate livelihood opportunities had previously meant migrating to urban centres. While learners have not yet begun taking up entrepreneurial ventures in the study locations, the articulation of this goal points to a sense of hope they see through their association with the space and how it can potentially contribute to a more aspirational future.

Moreover, strong emphasis on boosting the village economy through utilising local resources in creating products of day-to-day use, or opening workshops or bakeries (drawing on skills learnt at the centre) in the village indicates a desire for self-resilience and holds potential for regeneration of rural areas in Meghalaya. Further, learners identify the role of the CMYC (as seen through the 'action pathway') in helping achieve these goals, pointing to increasing recognition of the CMYC, not just as a space for learning, but as a community resource that can contribute to the development of the village.

2.4.1 Implications for Scale and Policy Recommendations Based on the Study

As the CMYC project prepares to scale further in Meghalaya under MPOWER, we reflect on how the identified themes can inform the design and implementation of future iterations of the program. We also look at challenges that can possibly be encountered in this process and actionable recommendations for stakeholders beyond this project, including policymakers and educators in the region.

The identified themes highlight how CMYCs have made significant advances in skill-based learning particularly in a community setting, and

that future aspirations revolve around expanding the skill-sets further, and building sustainable entrepreneurial ventures utilising local resources in many instances. Going forward, the strengths of the program such as its flexibility, curiosity-driven nature of identifying learning areas, and community ethos must be retained to ensure emphasis on the psycho-social aspects of the learning process. This aligns with several studies that note the benefits of focusing on community support and mental health in educational initiatives in order to sustain gains. Based on our study, the areas that must be strengthened in the future include ecosystem-level support and linkages with market opportunities, to ensure learning translates to sustainable livelihoods for youth in rural areas. Balancing self-driven learning with adequate support and mentorship, therefore requires highly skilled facilitation and must be accompanied by regular capacity strengthening for the CMYC Fellows who oversee daily operations at each centre.

With scale, we foresee certain challenges related to data management, community engagement and financing, and propose strategies to address these. First, large-scale data monitoring and regular tracking of metrics can support the program teams to ensure that learning objectives are met across CMYCs. Given the existing disparities between districts in Meghalaya, based on education and employment opportunities, more emphasis must be given to minimise variability of performance between the centres. In the Garo region for instance, extra efforts may be required to find market linkages for entrepreneurial ideas due to comparatively poor infrastructure and digital connectivity. In these cases, last-mile support for learners must be ensured to achieve equitable distribution of resources and opportunities across the state. Second, community engagement efforts must be systemised and tracked in a large-scale initiative to retain the community ethos of the centre. As specified in Annexure 3: Program Recommendations, the wider network of local groups within villages such as SHGs, VOs and community leadership can be mobilised to regularly engage with learning opportunities and entrepreneurship at CMYCs. Lastly, challenges related to financing are pertinent to address and have wider implications across the region. While government and NGOs increasingly support projects to empower youth and promote skill development, our findings show that bottom-up financing of initiatives and self-sustainability of projects can be achieved after an initial push. In essence, while resources, financing and linkages from an external source are required in regions that have had limited access to opportunities in the past, as these resources seep into the community, the ripple effect of successful entrepreneurial ventures and opportunities to re-plug resources back into the CMYC becomes increasingly likely. Our findings point to a strong desire to regenerate local economies using available resources, thereby allowing for the sustainability of the initiative in the future.

2.4.2 Recommendations for Policymakers and Educators

- **Encouraging bottom-up processes of learning and self-management can support long-term sustainability of skilling initiatives:** While formal skill-based training has increased the number of people competent in particular skill-sets, the literature notes how gains are often fragmented and preference for government jobs continue to exist. By facilitating bottom-up processes of learning, which allow youth to identify skill-sets in which they excel, the CMYCs have enabled a resurgence of hope and aspiration away from traditional employment pathways.
- **Holistic Learning and Skilling as Opposed to Siloed Approaches:** While the present paper focuses on the learning aspects of the CMYC, the two other components— sports and library—parallelly build a holistic environment for learning in the community. During field visits, the linkages between these areas can be seen, with learners engaging in sports such as volleyball or football. Thus, in similar initiatives, efforts to diversify learning and integrate related components that support overall child and youth development must be made.
- **Enhancing Awareness of Opportunities in Rural Areas:** While digital connectivity has improved drastically in erstwhile disconnected areas, our experiences continue to show that technology is often unreliable, particularly in the face of torrential rains in rural Meghalaya. Given the future of work in an increasingly digital age, information and opportunities must reach the most disconnected regions, in order to ensure that gains are present equally across urban and rural areas. Thus, in some cases, publicising opportunities for youth through physical campaigns or SMS messages (that do not rely necessarily on high-speed Internet) can be included.
- **Market Opportunities in Diverse Industries:** While CMYCs have enabled learners to think beyond traditional employment, the examples of peers or community members engaging in diverse professions is often lacking, which leads to a demoralising effect in the long run. To ensure broadening of skill-sets and reliance not only on a few professions, incentives for non-traditional skill-sets and creative industries must be encouraged to allow for alternate aspirational values to organically develop.

2.5 Conclusion

While introducing this paper, we spoke of Meghalaya's diversity and the challenges the state faces in terms of urban-rural disparity and inequalities stemming from concentration of resources and opportunities. The CMYC program was envisioned as an initiative to address this gap and introduce new forms of alternative learning to rural parts of Meghalaya. Relating this objective to the study, we find that the program has introduced learners to an expanse of learning opportunities in the space, which further led to familiarisation with flexible learning environments and also creating supportive ecosystems. This

has been a notable achievement given the long-term exposure of learners to school-based education where learning is approached very differently. Yet, the next set of aspirations relate to translating these learnings at the centre to building entrepreneurial ventures, or receiving further guidance to improve particular skills. Fulfilling these emerging aspirations would require the program to pause, reflect, and perhaps adapt before the next phase of scale-up. While this reflection can be beneficial for the future of the program, our findings suggest that there is a resurgence of hope and possibility through the exposure provided in the CMYCs.

The methodological approach in the study shows the significance of participation of learners and communities in articulating future goals and identifying pathways to achieve them. This ties back to Lind (2008)'s observation that "knowledge may also be created by engaging in the process of research" and is a marked departure from traditional social science research, where the insights or analysis derived from fieldwork is typically the sole domain of the researcher. Co-creating these insights ensures relevance to the contexts in which participants navigate their lives. For instance, while learners were mapping the village, many pointed out that they had never gone around the entire village, and were unfamiliar themselves with resources available in their vicinity. Similarly, the debilitated state of health services in the village were discovered through such an exercise. In conclusion, our learnings through this study have reiterated our belief that moving away from extractive forms of research hold immense power to come up with actionable insights that are relevant, contextual, and co-created with learners and communities.

Disclaimer: In preparing this manuscript, we have not used any AI tools for whatsoever purpose. We take full responsibility for the content.

Endnotes

1. While the dichotomy of 'mainland' and periphery in relation to the NER has been critiqued for reinforcing the region's historical isolation, it helps situate the neglect in terms of financial resources the region has faced and suppression of identity-based movements in the decades following independence.
2. The three major indigenous communities in the state are the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos. The Khasis and Jaintias primarily inhabit the central and eastern parts of the state, whereas the Garos reside in the western regions. To know more about the history of the tribes of Meghalaya, see 'Intangible Heritage in All Forms: A Study of Khasi and Pnar Tribe' and Role of A Gate in Garo Society, Meghalaya
3. To know more about individual partners, see: Smart Village Movement, Sauramandala Foundation, Project DEFY.
4. Find more information on the CMYC program here https://www.sauramandala.org/cmyc
5. For details on the breakdown of the Nook cycle structure, read pages 10–13 in a previous paper by Project DEFY — 'Challenging narrow conceptualisations of

'education' through the Nook model in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, India, and Bangladesh.' Available at: https://projectdefy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/RAGE-Working-Paper-Series-1.pdf)

6. "Meghalaya was ranked the top performer in developing startup ecosystems for entrepreneurship in 2021 according to the ranking of states by the Centre's Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade" (Times News Network, 2022).

7. For more on PRIME, see 'PRIME Startup Hub Yearly Report' available here PRIME-One-Year-Journey-Final-Printout-Booklet_compressed-1.pdf (primemeghalaya.com)

8. Currently, CMYCs are located in 13 blocks across 7 districts in Meghalaya. Over the next 6 years, the CMYC project is expanding under MPOWER. These will be in the form of new youth centres in each Block of Meghalaya (tentatively 55 Blocks), which will operate as Block Level Youth Hubs. The MPOWER project is funded by the World Bank.

9. Available here https://projectdefy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RAGE-Engagement-Paper.pdf

10. Radoh or fish mint (chameleon plant) and Tynkhieh (Indian pennywort) are common herbal plants found in and around Meghalaya, also used for different medicinal purposes.

11. Betel nut leaves are consumed throughout but commonly cultivated in warmer parts of Meghalaya, and used most often as a component of 'paan', betel leaf blended with lime.

12. "For the last decade, India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA, 2005) has been the world's largest public works programme. This legal entitlement provided employment to 28 per cent of rural Indian households in 2019–2020" (Narayan, 2022, p779).

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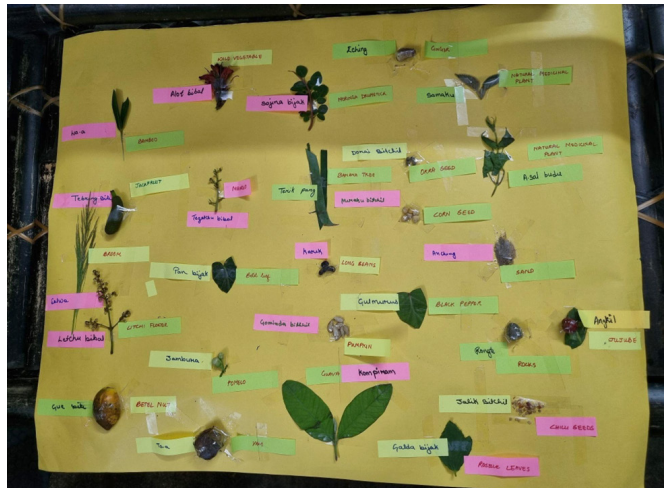
Appendix for Chapter 2

Appendix 2A: Visualisation of Local Resources by Learners

2A.1 Pasyih

2A.2 Rongsak Songma



Appendix 2B: Study Location Profiles: Pasyih and Rongsak Songma

In line with the study's approach of participatory research, learners participated in the process of understanding local contexts through activities described in Day 2 of Research Design. The 'study location profiles' (Table 2B.1) are primarily drawn from these activities and supplemented with secondary data.

Table 2B.1: Study Location Profiles

	Area	Pasyih	Rongsak Songma
1	**District**	West Jaintia hills	East Garo Hills
2	**Major towns/cities nearby**	Jowai (12.1 KM)	Williamnagar (26.8 KM)
3	**Major tribes**	Pnar	Garo
4	**Languages spoken**	Pnar, Khasi	Garo
5	**Basic facilities in the village**		
5.1	**Electricity connection**	Both villages have electricity. However, during bad weather (especially during the rainy season) there are frequent and lengthy power outages. During this time community members gather at the CMYC to charge their phones (CMYCs run on solar energy).	
5.2	**Mobile tower in the village**	Jio works well in both locations. During bad weather conditions, the network has a tendency to get disrupted.	
5.3	**Bank in the village**	No bank in the village. Nearest bank is in Jowai (12 km away).	No bank in the village. Nearest bank is in Samanda (25.9 km away)
6	**Economic profile of the village**		
6.1	**Self-Help-Groups (SHG) in the village**	Pasyih has two Village Organisations (VO). Of these, one group received funds to build a creche (still under construction).	Rongsak has 8 SHGs. They conduct activities like making pickles and fermented dry fish. Some SHG members are also learners at the CMYC.
6.2	**Local market for selling items**	The main occupation for many locals is to sell goods at the local market.	There are grocery shops, medical shops and locals sell their home-grown vegetables seasonally. There is also a weekly market.

6.3	**Presence of non-agricultural occupations**	Primarily agriculture dependent. Other common occupations include taking up Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA[12]) daily wage work.	Some common occupations include carpentry, driver, woodcutter, shopkeeper, businessman, mechanic and taking up NREGA daily wage work.
7	**Local resources in the village**	Silver berry, Bayberry, Turmeric, Ginger, Sweet potato, Pumpkin, Corn, Bamboo, soybean (see Appendix 2A.1 for visualisation of local resources by learners)	Moringa drumstick, ginger, Okra, Jackfruit, bamboo, Betel nut, pomelo, pumpkin, guava, Chilli seed, sponge gourd, turmeric, blood fruit, papaya, gooseberry, sichuan leaf, tapioca, melon, pineapple (see Appendix 2A.2 for visualisation of local resources by learners)
8	**Is there a pond/ lake/river within 5 km of the village?**	There are some man-made ponds. Rivers are a bit far from the main village, so sourcing water is difficult for locals.	The Simsang river flows parallel to the village. A protected fish sanctuary has been set up near the village as well.
9	**CMYC-specific areas (information updated as of March 2024)**		
9.1	**Learning areas covered in projects in the most recent cycle** ***note: for both centres, cycles were underway at the stage of data collection and hence, final projects and number of learners completing the cycle may differ**	Baking (traditional cake with rice flour, cakes, cookies, muffin, bread, and buns), Cooking (fast food), Jewellery making and facial make-up, Soap making, Welding cum electrical work, Carpentry (making wooden waterfall fountain), Miniature bamboo craft, Crocheting, Tailoring (jam-suit, girl frock, handbag and pouch)	Baking (Cookie making), Macrame Bag, Tailoring (Making tops), Traditional turban, Soap making, Carpentry (Resin Terrarium Table), Welding (Flower Stand)
9.2	**Male to female ratio in project groups**	5:13	19:20
9.3	**Total learners doing projects**	18	39
9.4	**Average age group of learners doing projects**	26 years	19.8 years

Appendix 2C: Program Recommendations Based on the Study

The research study revealed several insights which can be further analysed to assess program outcomes, and understand where the gaps and opportunities may be potentially addressed. We make note of some recommendations for the future of the CMYC program, drawing on our findings from the study.

Some caveats to consider in our recommendations are that given the sample of the stu dy, there could be different factors that inform the articulation of value in other centres. Some of these factors may include footfall of the centre, the existing relationship with the village headman and community members, learners' regularity and interest in centre activities, among others. Accordingly, while we have drafted recommendations keeping in mind broader implications for the program, we suggest conducting this research exercise across centres to understand how the articulations of value and aspirations may differ.

Current Learning Areas and Expanding Options

1. Both centres were in their second cycles and we observed that experimentation into new learning areas was limited. Certain areas like tailoring, baking, carpentry, and soap making were being repeated across cycles. Given the essence of the learning envisioned through SDL, it is critical to retain a sense of the expanse of possibilities within learning, and provide further exposure to new areas. Connecting and collaborating in different areas of learning every cycle will help in changing the frequency of usual skills learners are familiar with. This will require a substantive push to move beyond the familiar and initiate experimentation. At the same time, the study did not parallelly consider the nature of learning areas covered in the 'exploration' phase (facilitated by fellows) and project learning areas, which may inform the latter. We suggest viewing this recommendation against this shortcoming and consider the two criteria together for future monitoring.
2. In our study, we found learners put forward several ideas around enhancing the value of local resources (by this we mean, adding value to raw materials leading to a raise in the cost price of the refined material as opposed to selling the material in its original form). This thought process was observed in learners while mapping the future value of the CMYC. Several examples emerged such as turning ginger into ginger powder, tapioca into cake, Radoh into medicine, and others. Therefore, we find that ideation and creativity beyond immediate learning areas is already present among the learners and can be helpful in project brainstorming in subsequent cycles.
3. A social platform for learners where they are connected to one another across the state and beyond (to the other Nooks in India and Africa) can help with exposure to different contexts and new project ideas. This can potentially inspire learners to experiment with unfamiliar domains.

Supporting Learners Beyond the Project Cycle

1. Learners from both centres have taken autonomy for their own learning journey by identifying their interests and setting goals. However, learners still feel the need for further guidance and support. A feedback loop with timely feedback and direction when required must be initiated to ensure learners feel well supported. Moreover, initiatives like workshops and upskilling in learners' interest areas can help deepen skills.
2. Post-cycle plans for learners through feedback and assessments will help learners understand if jobs, entrepreneurship, or upskilling will help them reach their respective goals or if they have other aspirations. Similar to the above recommendation, mentoring learners will ensure that they feel well supported.
3. Overall, we recommend initiating a process of 'opportunity mapping.' To take skills and a learner's passion forward, the team can initiate post-cycle plans of sorting and aggregating information about what and where a learner can go to either skill-up or who can help them start their entrepreneurial journey, or excel further in a particular craft.

Initiating Strong Community—CMYC Linkages

1. While community members held positive notions of the CMYC, the overwhelming value of the centre was expressed through the lens of the resources it offers or as a space where people can take up projects. For the CMYC to become embedded as a community resource and tackle contextual challenges facing the village, the community must be made more aware of its potential to bring in initiatives beyond the scope of individual projects. Connecting more with community members through well-defined community engagement activities will help bridge the centre with the community members.
2. In this study, we observed that mapping of resources helped learners and community members in understanding their community better and contextualise the study to their immediate surroundings. The village headman of Rongsak pointed out in the Research Exhibition on Day 5, "*The learners did the mapping very well. It is very important to do it and it is the first time such a mapping has happened in this village. More community members should see this work. We can put the map somewhere where a larger community audience can see it. This kind of exercise helps build the knowledge of learners and community members. Even though I am the headman of this village, I belong to a different village originally. Through this exercise I learnt more about this village.*" Doing such exercises in each CMYC can immensely help connect learners and community members with the centre, collectively visualise their own contexts, and understand how the centre can be a platform to maximise village resources.
3. In the exercise mapping local assets and facilities, we found an abundance of resources that may be leveraged further within village contexts to

provide further guidance to learners. For instance, in both centres, SHGs and the Village Executive Committee were fairly active and regularly engaged in some areas of overlapping interest with learners (examples: pickle making in SHGs). Initiating linkages between local entities and learner projects can additionally support a robust village economy rather than relying solely on external resources for guidance.

Supporting Community Aspirations

1. In Rongsak Songma, community members appreciate the current projects but were keen to expand horizons and try something like a CMYC Cooperative in the future which included Bamboo Merchandising and more. There are several avenues to support such aspirations. For instance, learners can experiment and prototype various techniques through projects. The CMYC, in collaboration with the newly formed position of the 'Entrepreneurship Manager', can further contribute to building small market ecosystems in the village to encourage cooperatives.
2. In Pasyih, the survey learners conducted on the second day of research activities revealed the state of functionality of various facilities and resources in the village. Beyond mapping the future value of the CMYC, learners identified several gaps in village resources that they wanted to address. For instance, they mentioned, "In the health centre, we want facilities and availability of medicine and injections." They also discussed how the village has one sub-centre with nurses who cater mostly to infants or minor medical needs. For any serious health issue, they have to travel outside the village towards Jowai and these challenges affect the quality of health and life in the village. Action-oriented discussions with village representatives on how to resolve gaps in health services with CMYC learners can further strengthen local action through the CMYC.

3 The Dual System of Training in Haryana: A Comparative Evaluation

Bhavna Jaisingh, Komal Sharma, Mohil Joshi, Maryam Raza and Sanskriti Sharma

Abstract

This case study examines the role of Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) in preparing youth for employment in Haryana, focusing on the Dual System of Training (DST) model that combines theoretical instruction with practical on-the-job training (OJT). It compares the career readiness and progression outcomes of DST and non-DST students and explores the effectiveness of Medha interventions in improving career support services in DST ITIs. The findings show that the DST model positively influences students' career outcomes, with DST students who complete OJT demonstrating higher confidence in interviews, more pre-placement offers, and longer employment durations than non-DST students. The program also aims to address low female participation in the workforce by engaging more women in vocational training and job placements. Interviews with Junior Apprenticeship and Placement Officers (JAPOs) highlight Medha's critical role in supporting improved career outcomes through structured services and post-placement engagement, emphasizing DST's effectiveness in bridging education and employability gaps.

Keywords: Skill Development & Employability, Industry-Institute Partnerships, Work-Based Learning Outcomes, Youth Employability Metrics, Vocational Education Reform

3.1 Introduction

The vocational education system in India is experiencing several systemic problems. Despite an increase in enrolment in vocational programs to 15.6 lakhs from 1.8 lakhs in 2015-16 (Press Information Bureau, 2024a) employability outcomes have declined. Haryana's unemployment rates have fluctuated over the years, with significant challenges in providing stable and sustainable employment, particularly for youth. According to recent estimates, Haryana's unemployment rate was above 6% (Press Information Bureau, 2024b) as of early 2024, which is relatively high compared to the national average.

Several factors contribute to this issue:

a. **Scattered Industrial Distribution:** Haryana's economy has a solid industrial base, especially in sectors like automotives, textiles, and agriculture. However, many of these industries are concentrated in

districts like Panipat, Faridabad, and Gurugram, while other districts have limited industrial reach. This uneven distribution leads to employment opportunities only in specific regions, leaving others with little scope.

b. **Skill Mismatch:** A significant cause of unemployment in Haryana and across India is the gap between the skills taught in educational institutions and job market requirements. Many graduates lack practical skills despite vocational training intended to produce a skilled labour force.
c. **Limited Scope for Women:** Haryana had one of the lowest female labour force participation rates in the country, at 16.2% from April to June 2024 (Press Information Bureau, 2024c), due to strong social and cultural norms that limit women's involvement in the workforce. This contributes to a high unemployment rate, especially in rural areas where job opportunities for women are even more scarce.

Germany and Switzerland are well-known for their dual vocational education and training (VET) systems, which blend hands-on workplace experience with classroom learning in vocational schools. In Germany, more than two-thirds of young people take this route, leading to smoother entry into the job market and consistently lower youth unemployment compared to the European average. Switzerland follows a similar approach, with strong partnerships between employers and schools, and sees some of the lowest youth unemployment rates in Europe. Studies show that this practical, employer-driven model helps reduce skill gaps and makes young people more employable. It is often held up as a best-practice example for countries aiming to improve youth employment (Euler, 2013; Hoffman & Schwartz, 2015).

The study focuses on interventions carried out in Haryana. Medha's intervention in Haryana revolves around the DST government scheme, which combines theoretical knowledge at the ITI level with practical OJT in industries. The program's goal is to develop a cadre of skilled and job-ready youth who can gain meaningful employment. The core of the DST program is its structured OJT, where students spend 36 months in the industry, learning practical skills that complement their theoretical knowledge.

Medha has worked closely with Haryana's Skill Development and Industrial Training Department to build the following systems for the ecosystem:

- **Industry Engagement:** Medha engaged with 200+ industries (including Tata Motors, Exide, and Escorts Kubota) to sign MOUs, increasing the number of DST units from 274 in 2020-2021 to 377 in 2022-2023, and 458 in 2023-2024. (Each unit has 20 students).
- **Improved Employability:** Medha's intervention has enabled over 4,500 students to gain hands-on technical knowledge through workplace exposure, with 40% of industries expressing willingness to provide pre-placement offers to DST students.

- **Increased Job Retention:** Medha worked on implementing and ensuring compliance with DST on the ground, enhancing students' OJT experiences.
- **Capacity Building:** Medha trained 531 faculty members on various DST and OJT-related processes, such as preparing effective academic calendars, providing career preparation before students start OJT, conducting placement drives, and implementing Industry 4.0 practices, leading to better industry-academia collaboration.

3.1.1 Goals of the Intervention

The goal of the intervention is to improve the employability of ITI students and bridge the gap between education and employment by strengthening industry relationships. Specific goals include:

- Increase the number of students receiving pre-placement offers and long-term employment by incorporating industry-based training into the curriculum.
- Engage more industries in on-site support, sign more MOUs, and conduct effective placement drives, focusing on improving the quality of apprenticeships.
- Address the lack of institutional support by aligning program objectives with the expectations of ITIs and industries.
- Increase the female labour force participation rate (LFPR), which remains low in the region.

3.1.2 Objectives of the DST-Non-DST Comparative Study

The DST versus non-DST comparative study has three primary objectives:

- Identify the unique aspects of the DST in Haryana concerning students' career readiness and progression outcomes.
- Investigate the impact of DST and Non-DST approaches in providing career assistance to students.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of Medha's interventions in enhancing the capacity of DST ITIs to provide career support services to their students.

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Description of Methods and Processes Used

The study employed comparative design, collecting qualitative and quantitative data through student surveys and interviews with JAPOs. This study adopted a comparative research design to examine the outcomes of Dual System of Training (DST) students in Haryana against those of their non-DST counterparts. The sample included 2,324 students from 64 Government ITIs across all 22 districts of Haryana, covering 28 trades, selected to ensure broad representation.

A mixed-methods approach was used, combining quantitative surveys administered to students with qualitative interviews conducted with 9 Junior Apprenticeship and Placement Officers (JAPOs). The survey focused on three areas: career readiness (e.g., resume writing, interview skills), career progression (e.g., sustained employment, average salary, access to formal sector jobs), and career support services (e.g., pre-placement training, opportunity matching). Quantitative data was analysed to compare DST and non-DST outcomes, while qualitative data from JAPOs were thematically analysed to capture system-level insights. Career progression outcomes were evaluated primarily for the 2022 graduating cohort, as placement support for the 2023 batch was still ongoing. This approach has been widely used in vocational education research across countries and systems.

Pilz and Wiemann (2021) conducted a study involving 149 expert interviews in China, Mexico, and India to examine how the German dual vocational training system adapts to different cultural and industrial contexts. The study highlights that determining program effectiveness requires considering the perspectives of employers, institutions, and students.

The University of Glasgow (2022) conducted a comparative study titled "*Can Dual Apprenticeships Create Better and More Equitable Social and Economic Outcomes for Young People?*" across India and Mexico, evaluating how dual vocational training models influenced youth employment and equity. Using a mixed-methods approach that included stakeholder interviews and apprentice surveys, the study successfully captured not only employment results but also the institutional and contextual elements influencing those outcomes. Its methodology, which was based on realist assessment, showed how comparative analysis across systems and regions can provide important information about the efficacy of programs, difficulties in implementing them, and opportunities for adaptation. This is consistent with our approach, which uses both quantitative and qualitative techniques to compare DST and non-DST pathways throughout Haryana, highlighting the importance of comparative frameworks in comprehending vocational education reform.

3.2.2 Data Collection Techniques

1. Quantitative data was collected through a structured student survey covering career readiness, OJT experiences, and career progression.
2. Qualitative data was gathered through one-on-one interviews with JAPOs, focusing on their perspectives on Medha's support services and the unique aspects of the DST model.

3.2.3 Research Population and Sample

The DST and non-DST campuses are spread across 22 districts of Haryana and enrol over 46,000 students. For this study, we surveyed students from 64

ITI campuses spread across 22 districts. In all, 28 trades were covered. Our sampling strategy employed proportional sampling, wherein sample sizes were determined based on the relative proportions of trained and untrained students in each district (Table 3.1). Further, recognising the significance of the trained group, and despite its relative size of 7%, we employed an oversampling technique to ensure a more robust representation. By allocating 70% of our desired sample to the trained group (2324), we enhanced our ability to capture valuable insights from this segment. This approach addressed the specific needs of the trained population and enhanced the validity of our findings.

Table 3.1: Research Population and Sample

	Population	Sample
Dual System Training ITI	3,453	1,664
Non-Dual System Training ITI	46,043	660

3.2.4 Research Design

The research design evaluates career readiness and career advancement outcomes for students enrolled in DST and non-DST ITIs. Key measurements include the percentage of students completing OJT, reporting improved career readiness, and developing essential interview skills (Table 3.2). The evaluation also considers enrolment of students in campus placement drives or the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS) and their career transition after obtaining their diplomas. Career advancement is measured by examining the percentage of students who remain in income-generating activities for over 10 months per year, those employed in the formal sector with access to benefits like provident fund (PF), paid leave, and medical insurance, and the percentage of students retained in campus placement jobs for more than 12 months. Additionally, average salaries and salary hikes are tracked to provide insights into the economic benefits for students.

The review of JAPOs is critical in assessing career support services and the pre-placement support, opportunity matching, and alignment processes involved in placement drives. Post-placement support is also examined, focusing on opportunity uptake and student retention in employment. Data for these indicators were collected through student surveys and Training and Placement Officer (TPO) interviews, offering a holistic view of the students' career journeys and the role of Medha's interventions in improving career readiness and progression outcomes.

Table 3.2: Research Design

Parameter	Key measurements	Tools
Career Readiness and Placement Outcomes	% of students completing on-the-job training % of students reporting improved career readiness after on-the-job training % of students reporting improved interview skills % of students enrolled in the campus placement drive and/or the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS) % of students starting their careers after completion of a diploma	Student Survey Tool
Career Advancement Outcomes[1]	% of students who do not opt for higher education, training, or employment after ITI % of students engaged in income generation activities for more than 10 months in a year % of students engaged in full-time formal sector employment (availing paid leaves, medical insurance, provident fund, etc.) % of students retained in campus placement jobs for >12 months Average salary of employed students Average salary hike in a year	
Career Support Services in Medha-supported DST batches	JAPOs' Review of: Pre-placement support, including career preparation training for students. Opportunity matching and alignment processes for placement drives. Post-placement support for driving uptake of opportunities and retention.	JAPO Interview

3.3 Evaluation of the DST-non-DST Comparative Case Study

3.3.1 Components and Criteria

The evaluation focused on three key areas:

1. **Career Readiness Outcomes:** This included assessing students' confidence in resume writing, interview skills, job search, and applying for jobs/apprenticeships.
2. **Career Progression Outcomes:** This involved evaluating pre-placement offers, full-time employment, salaries, employee benefits, and sustained employment.
3. **Career Support Services:** This focused on the effectiveness of Medha's interventions in pre-placement support, opportunity matching, and post-placement support.

3.3.2 Evaluation

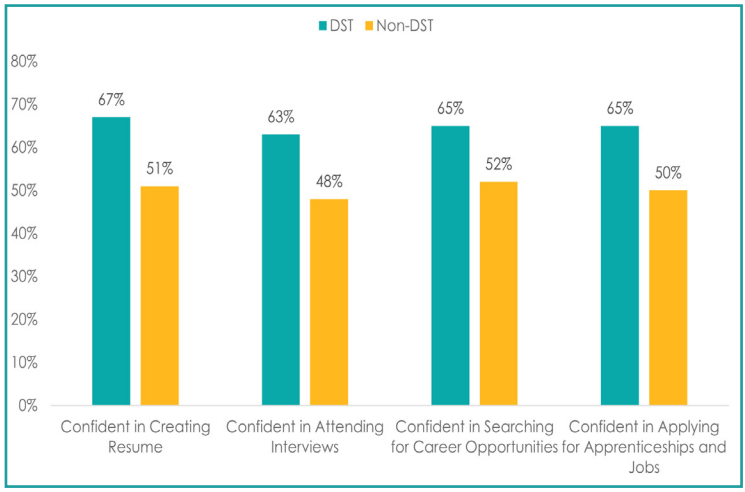
The findings from our comparative study reveal that the structured on-the-job training provided in the DST model plays a critical role in enhancing students' skills and their ability to transition smoothly into the workforce. DST students reported a higher rate of pre-placement offers, longer employment durations, and increased access to employee benefits compared to non-DST students. Qualitative feedback from TPOs indicated positive impacts of Medha's interventions, including improved academic calendars, better industry connections, and enhanced student understanding of the DST model. Through Medha's intervention, DST students receive better support in career preparation, ultimately contributing to stronger employment outcomes than their non-DST counterparts.

Career Readiness

The DST program effectively improves career readiness outcomes. DST students demonstrate significantly higher confidence levels in essential job search skills compared to non-DST students. Significant variations exist in the four critical career readiness skills between DST and non-DST students. Regarding writing resumes, 67% of DST participants said they felt confident, a 15-percentage point difference from the 51% of non-DST participants who expressed the same confidence level. In a similar vein, the DST group leads with 63% confidence in interview attendance, while the non-DST group trails with 48%, indicating a 15-percentage point difference. Regarding employment opportunity searches, the difference in confidence levels is narrower; 52% of non-DST respondents and 65% of DST respondents expressed confidence. Lastly, there is a further 15-percentage point difference in the confidence of DST students to apply for jobs and apprenticeships, with 65% of them compared to 50% of non-DST students.

Students in the DST program generally show increased confidence in all domains, highlighting the program's beneficial effects on career ready abilities (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 : DST students who complete OJT are more confident than non-DST students in attending interviews and applying for jobs.

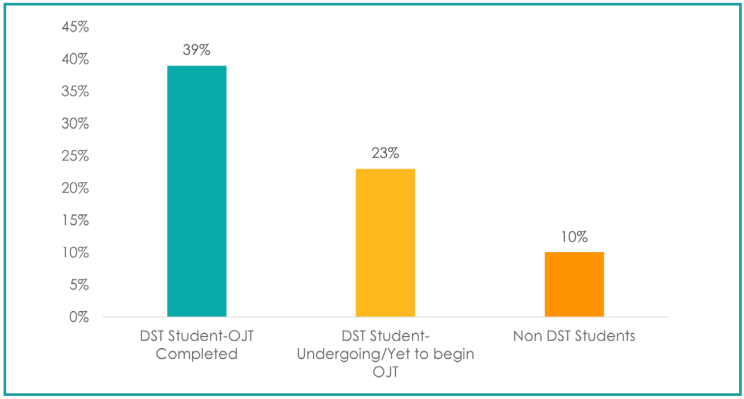


Source: DST study

Career Progression

Even though the DST program can improve career advancement outcomes, some areas need more focus. Compared to non-DST students, DST students who complete OJT are 29% more likely to obtain pre-placement offers (Figure 3.2).

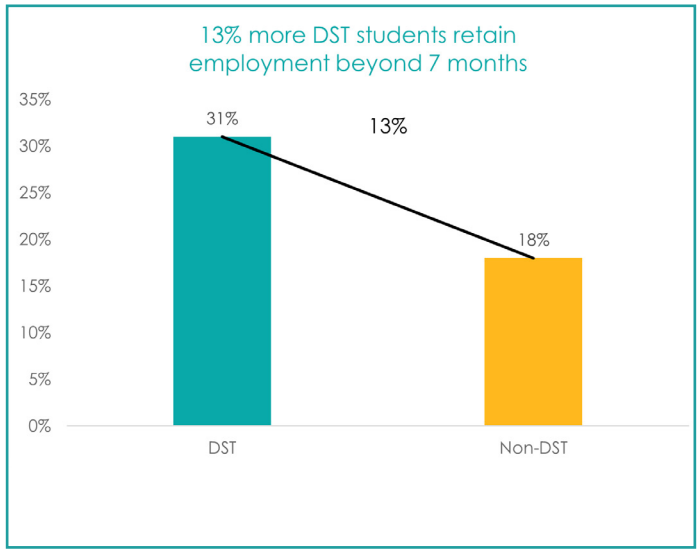
Figure 3.2: Structured OJT prepares students for more promising career outcomes.



Note: Data pertains to 2022-23 year of graduation, which has 52% DST students who have done OJT. The duration of On-the-Job Training for DST students typically spans 3-9 months, whereas for non-DST students, it lasts approximately one month.
Source: DST study

Furthermore, better-sustained employment results are indicated by the 13% higher retention rate of DST students after seven months of work (Figure 3.3).

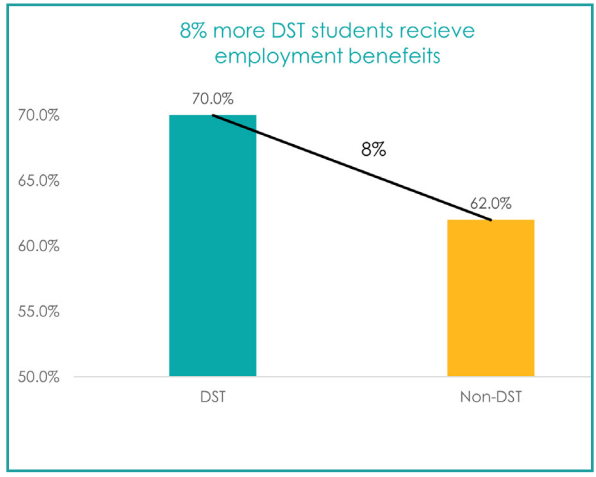
Figure 3.3: Students remain part of the workforce for longer duration.



Source: DST study

Compared to non-DST students 8% more DST students obtain work perks such paid time off, health insurance, and provident fund payments (Figure 3.4).

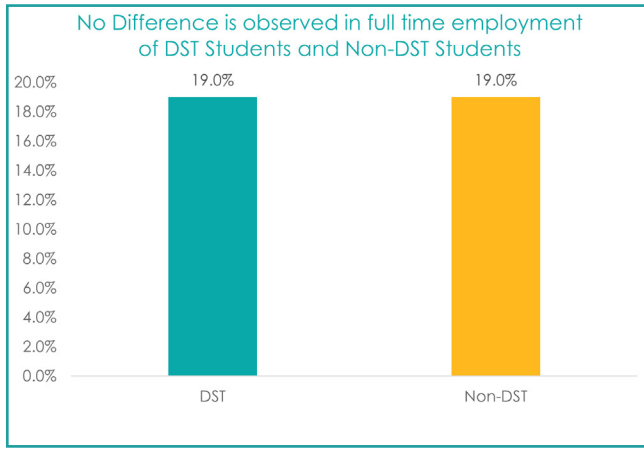
Figure 3.4: More DST students receive employee benefits. Percentage calculated for both DST and non-DST if either of the three facilities are provided by the employer—paid leave, medical insurance, and PF.



Source: DST study

This demonstrates that DST students have a higher chance of landing a job with perks in the formal sector. However, the average incomes of DST and non-DST students is comparable, indicating that more research is needed to determine how the program affects income levels. Additionally, there is no discernible difference in full-time employment outcomes between DST and non-DST students, suggesting that the program may have had little impact on students' ability to secure full-time employment (Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5: Full-time employment outcomes are similar for both DST and non-DST students. The average salaries (₹12,100) for both DST and non-DST students are similar. However, the findings on career progression outcomes are limited, as 50% of the sample represents the most recent cohort.



Source: DST study

Medha's Career Support Services

One-on-one interviews with Junior Apprenticeship and Placement Officers revealed that Medha's interventions have had a significant positive impact on both students and industries. JAPOs appreciated Medha for building academic calendars and managing placement drives. They also acknowledged Medha's role in connecting ITIs to relevant industries, with JAPOs reporting enhanced industry cooperation and student preparedness. In particular, the unique aspects of the DST model experiential learning, enhanced work preparedness, and a better grasp of industry concepts were highlighted as significant benefits for students. JAPOs noted that DST students came across as more aware of careers, confident, and more acquainted with how to present themselves professionally and dress for interviews. They also found Medha's tools efficacious in contributing to this success. These tools included the Industry Need Analysis approach, effective pitching techniques, and processes for matching students with industry opportunities. The aggregate feedback resonates with Medha's

impact in anchoring education to the needs of industry and teaching students how to thrive in a real-world environment.

3.4 Conclusion

3.4.1 Interpretation of results

The findings indicate that the DST model, with its emphasis on OJT and comprehensive career support services, leads to better career outcomes for ITI students in Haryana. Medha's interventions have had a significant positive impact on both students and industries. JAPOs appreciated Medha for building academic calendars and managing placement drives. They also acknowledged Medha's role in connecting ITIs to relevant industries, with JAPOs reporting enhanced industry cooperation and student preparedness. In particular, the unique aspects of the DST model experiential learning, enhanced work preparedness, and a better grasp of industry concepts were highlighted as significant benefits for students. JAPOs noted that DST students came across as more confident, aware of careers, and more acquainted with how to present themselves professionally and dress for interviews. JAPOs also found Medha's tools efficacious in contributing to this success.

3.4.2 Implications

Investing in OJTs and career support services can significantly enhance the employability and career prospects of ITI graduates, contributing to a reduction in youth unemployment and improved job quality.

3.4.3 Key Takeaways

1. **Collaborate with Industries for Enhanced OJT Workshops:** To further enhance the effectiveness of OJT, it is recommended that career preparation and pre-OJT orientation workshops be co-created in collaboration with industry partners. Involving industries in developing these workshops can ensure that students are better prepared for the realities of the workplace. This collaboration will also address key challenges such as absenteeism, discipline, and workplace etiquette, ultimately increasing OJT completion rates and job acceptance.
2. **Strengthen Industry Linkages for Higher-Quality OJT Opportunities:** Refining the criteria for industry engagement will help strengthen linkages with industries that offer high-quality, well-paid OJT opportunities. This can lead to better alignment between the skills ITI students gain and the demands of the job market, increasing their chances of securing higher-paying positions post-OJT. Building these strong connections can also elevate the reputation of the ITIs and attract more committed industry partners.

3. **Structure Trainee Onboarding for Enhanced Learning and Placements:** A structured trainee onboarding process should be implemented within industries to provide a clearer learning path for students. This will enhance the OJT learning experience and ensure that more students successfully complete their training. A well-organised onboarding process can also facilitate the transition from trainee to full-time employee, leading to improved placement rates and long-term retention of graduates in the workforce.
4. **Advocate for State-Supported Student Incentives to Improve OJT Completion:** To further improve the completion rates of OJT programs, it is essential to pursue state support for additional enablers such as stipends, DST certificates, insurance, and transport subsidies. These incentives would reduce financial barriers for students, making it more feasible for them to complete their OJTs. Government backing in this area could also enhance the overall attractiveness of the OJT model, encouraging higher participation and successful job placements.
5. **Focus on Continuous Feedback and Innovation in Program Delivery:** Incorporating a feedback loop that gathers insights from both students and industry partners after OJT completion will allow for continuous improvement of the program. This will ensure that the DST model remains relevant, innovative, and responsive to changes in the job market, further improving student outcomes and program sustainability over time.
6. **Measuring the Impact and Effectiveness of DST:** Despite the DST program being operational in Haryana for two years, its overall success remains to be determined. This stems from the lack of a robust and feasible monitoring system that will enable the system actors to record, monitor, and analyse the data. The current monitoring system is complex and not streamlined, limiting the ability to assess the true impact of the DST program.

Disclaimer: In preparing this manuscript, we have not used any AI tools for whatsoever purpose. We take full responsibility for the content.

Endnotes

1. Career advancement outcomes can only be measured for the 2022 cohort, as the placement and post-placement support for the 2023 batch is underway.

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4 Enhancing Literacy and Livelihoods: A Practical Framework for Primary Education in Resource-Constrained Settings

Faiza Ruksar Arif, N.R. Sunadini and Anish Ramachandran

Abstract

This study evaluates the effectiveness of the para-teacher model implemented by the One Billion Literates Foundation (OBLF) in enhancing teacher development and improving student outcomes in resource-constrained settings. By employing rural women as para-teachers and providing them with rigorous training in English proficiency, pedagogy, and student-centred teaching methods, the program aims to address educational deficits in under-resourced schools. Data collected from the study demonstrates significant improvements in student proficiency, particularly in speaking and writing, with para-teacher-led classrooms consistently outperforming non-intervention schools. Additionally, the program empowers women by fostering financial independence and challenging traditional gender norms within their communities. The findings highlight the success of bilingual and interactive pedagogies in promoting student engagement and critical thinking. The study concludes with recommendations for scaling the model, emphasising the importance of continuous teacher training, technology integration, and community involvement to sustain and expand the program's impact.

Keywords: Foundational Literacy, Para-teacher, Primary Education, Rural Women's Skilling, Education, Women's Livelihoods

4.1 Introduction

In India, education in resource-constrained and rural settings face significant challenges that hinder access to quality learning opportunities. Despite the government's efforts to improve educational infrastructure and increase enrolment rates, many rural schools struggle with inadequate resources, poorly trained teachers, and high dropout rates. These challenges are compounded by socio-economic factors, such as poverty and cultural norms, which can limit educational aspirations, especially for girls. In such contexts, innovative models like the para-teacher framework have emerged as effective solutions to bridge the educational gap.

4.2 Literature Review

4.2.1 Teacher Shortages and Innovative Approaches to Addressing Them

The issue of teacher shortages, particularly in rural and underserved regions of India, has long been a critical barrier to achieving universal primary education. In response, innovative models such as the para-teacher scheme have emerged, aiming to address the dual challenges of inadequate staffing and constrained financial resources. According to Pandey (2006), initiatives like the Shiksha Karmi Project and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) were instrumental in embedding the para-teacher model within the national education framework. These programs provided a framework through which local, under-qualified individuals could be recruited and trained to take on teaching roles, thereby expanding the education workforce and improving pupil-teacher ratios (PTRs) in remote areas. States like Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh were early adopters of the model under programs such as Shiksha Mitra, which specifically aimed to improve staffing ratios in regions where the dearth of formally trained teachers was most severe (Snehi & Nath, 2004).

The para-teacher model, however, was not only a response to teacher shortages but also a solution that was largely driven by cost-effectiveness. Kingdon and Sipahimalani-Rao (2010) argued that one of the principal advantages of the para-teacher system was its ability to maintain PTRs while minimising costs. By employing individuals on contractual terms at significantly lower wages than regular teachers, the government was able to reduce financial pressure on the system while continuing to provide access to education across vast and underserved rural landscapes. This strategy allowed for an affordable expansion of the teaching workforce, a critical consideration for states operating within limited budgets.

However, while the cost-efficiency of the para-teacher model has been lauded, it has also sparked significant debates around educational quality. Critics, including Kingdon and Sipahimalani-Rao (2010), point out that many para-teachers, recruited from within local communities, lack the formal qualifications or comprehensive training typically required for primary educators. This disparity has raised concerns about whether para-teachers are equipped to deliver the same quality of education as their fully trained counterparts. These concerns are particularly relevant in subject areas like mathematics and science, where weaker teaching foundations can have a lasting impact on student achievement. As the para-teacher model continues to evolve, the tension between cost-effectiveness and educational quality remains at the forefront of policy discussions.

4.2.2 Quality Primary Education and the Role of Para-Teachers

While para-teachers have contributed to improved student enrolment and reduced absenteeism, their expanding role has raised concerns

about educational quality. A key issue is their limited professional training. Although effective in boosting engagement, many lack the pedagogical foundation needed to manage classrooms or implement sound instructional strategies—particularly in multigrade settings where innovation is essential. As Pandey (2006) notes, their effectiveness is constrained by the absence of both pre-service education and continuous professional development.

These challenges are exacerbated by difficult working conditions, including low wages, job insecurity, and limited access to teaching materials. Such constraints dampen morale and restrict the ability of para-teachers to improve and practice, even when highly motivated. Without adequate support and resources, the drive to expand access is not always matched by a commitment to ensure instructional quality—a gap that risks undermining the long-term promise of the model.

The para-teacher model is highly relevant to the linguistic and cultural diversity of rural India. In many regions, students speak local dialects not represented in formal instruction, creating barriers to learning (Sridhar, 1996). By recruiting local educators fluent in these dialects, the model bridges the language gap, making education more accessible and relatable for first-generation learners. Beyond language, para-teachers' deep cultural familiarity enables them to connect meaningfully with students and families. They adapt curriculum to local contexts, fostering inclusive, engaging classrooms that improve retention and promote community involvement.

The model is also cost-effective. Para-teachers are hired on contractual terms at lower salaries, allowing states to expand the workforce without overburdening public finances (Alderman et al., 2001).

This affordability is critical for sustaining access in low-resource settings. Crucially, para-teachers act as community connectors, building trust and ownership around local schools. Their presence strengthens parental engagement and helps create a supportive learning environment. While the model's accessibility and affordability are clear strengths, ensuring quality education and ongoing professional development remains essential to fully realise its potential in transforming rural education.

4.2.3 Impact of Para-Teachers on Student Outcomes

The relationship between para-teachers and student outcomes remains complex and contested. On the one hand, para-teachers have contributed significantly to reducing teacher absenteeism and increasing student attendance, particularly in remote areas where regular teachers are often unwilling or unable to serve. However, questions persist about whether these gains translate into improved academic performance. Kingdon and Sipahimalani-Rao (2010) highlight concerns about lower achievement levels in classrooms led by para-teachers, particularly in subjects like mathematics, where foundational understanding is crucial for long-term student success.

In many cases, the instructional methods used by para-teachers are heavily reliant on textbook-based teaching, which tends to be more passive and less engaging for students. As Pandey (2006) points out, such methods fail to incorporate the activity-based, interactive learning approaches that are increasingly recognised as essential for effective teaching and learning. This lack of learner-centred methodologies not only limits student participation but also affects their ability to grasp and retain key concepts.

Despite these challenges, there are avenues through which the performance of para-teachers can be improved. Raval et al. (2010) propose that embedding on the job learning opportunities, such as continuous lesson planning, reflection, and peer mentoring, could significantly enhance the pedagogical skills of para-teachers and improve student outcomes. By incorporating professional development into their daily routine , it is possible to create a cycle of reflection and improvement, which could help mitigate the weaknesses associated with limited formal training. This cyclical model of development encourages para-teachers to assess their classroom performance, adjust their teaching strategies accordingly, and develop more interactive and engaging lesson plans.

4.2.4 Women's Livelihood and Empowerment through Educational Roles

In addition to its role in addressing teacher shortages, the para-teacher model offers significant benefits in terms of economic empowerment for marginalised women, particularly in rural areas. Integration of education with livelihood has been shown to not only improve access to education but also provide a means of economic resilience for women who are typically excluded from formal employment opportunities. Reddy and Rao (2003a) emphasise that programs like the para-teacher model have been instrumental in improving household incomes, as they allow women to contribute financially to their families while simultaneously fulfilling vital roles in their communities. This dual focus on education and livelihood has proven to be a powerful tool in fostering economic stability in some of India's most impoverished regions.

Moreover, the para-teacher model also offers women a platform to gain financial independence, which in turn elevates their social standing within traditionally patriarchal communities. As women take on the role of educators, they are increasingly seen as contributors to the intellectual and economic fabric of their communities, which helps to shift gender norms. For many women, the para-teacher role represents a break from the traditional expectations placed upon them, providing opportunities for professional growth and personal agency that were previously inaccessible.

Khare (2002) argues that by offering women the chance to become para-teachers, these programs actively challenge traditional gender roles. Women who step into these positions not only serve as educators but also as role models for the next generation, particularly young girls.

The visibility of women in these roles creates a ripple effect, inspiring girls to pursue education and view themselves as capable of participating in the workforce. By disrupting the narrative that confines women to domestic roles, the para-teacher model facilitates a broader societal transformation, positioning women as agents of change within their communities.

This aspect of the para-teacher model highlights the intersecti onal benefits of integrating education with women's empowerment. Not only does the model address immediate educational needs in underser ved regions, but it also promotes long-term social change by chall enging the gendered division of labour and fostering female leadership. As women gain experience and respect in their roles as para-teachers, their influence extends beyond the classroom, contributing to community development an d altering perceptions of women's capabilities in the public sphere.

4.2.5 Teacher Professional Development for Non-Specialists

A persistent challenge associated with the para-teacher model is the lack of adequate professional training provided to these educators. Unlike formally trained teachers, para-teachers often enter the classroom with minimal pre-service preparation, which limits their capacity to manage complex educational environments effectively. As highlighted by Snehi and Nath (2004), and Pandey (2006), para-teachers in most states receive limited pre-service training, typically ranging from 7 to 37 days depending on the region. This training is often insufficient to equip them with the skills needed to handle multi-grade classrooms—a common feature in rural and remote areas where para-teachers are primarily employed.

The lack of comprehensive training has significant implications for the ability of para-teachers to adopt and implement innovative teaching techniques that go beyond traditional, textbook-driven approaches. Without the necessary pedagogical foundation, para-teachers may struggle to engage students in interactive and learner-centred activities, which are critical for fostering deeper understanding and critical thinking among primary school children. As a result, classrooms led by para-teachers may lag behind in terms of educational quality, despite the improvements they bring to enrolment and attendance rates.

However, there are potential solutions to mitigate the challenges posed by insufficient training. Raval et al. (2010) propose a cyclical model for professional development, which integrates on-the-job learning into the daily routines of para-teachers. This model emphasises continuous lesson planning, teaching, and reflection, allowing para-teachers to progressively refine their teaching practices over time. By embedding professional development into their day-to-day activities, para-teachers are given the opportunity to reflect on their performance, receive feedback from peers or supervisors, and make adjustments to their teaching strategies based on real-world classroom experiences.

This approach aligns with the broader understanding of adult learning theory, which suggests that professionals learn best when they can apply new skills and knowledge directly within their work environment. The cyclical nature of planning, reflection, and adjustment fosters a culture of ongoing professional growth, where para-teachers continuously improve their pedagogical competencies without relying solely on formal training sessions. Additionally, this model helps to address the challenges of multi-grade teaching by encouraging para-teachers to develop adaptive strategies that respond to the diverse needs of their students.

By focusing on continuous professional development rather than limited pre-service training, this model offers a practical solution for improving classroom outcomes in contexts where para-teachers are a vital component of the educational workforce. It highlights the importance of creating structured opportunities for reflective practice and peer collaboration, which can support para-teachers in becoming more effective educators, even in resource-constrained settings.

4.2.6 Research Gap

While the para-teacher model has shown promise in addressing teacher shortages, improving access, and empowering marginalised women, key gaps remain in both literature and implementation. First, despite strong evidence of the model's cost-effectiveness and contextual relevance (Kingdon & Sipahimalani-Rao, 2010; Pandey, 2006), concerns persist around instructional quality. There is limited research on how targeted training interventions and context-specific professional development could improve para-teachers' effectiveness, especially in core subjects like mathematics. Second, although the model has contributed to the economic empowerment of women (Reddy & Rao, 2003b; Khare, 2002), there is insufficient exploration of its long-term impact on gender norms, household dynamics, and community leadership. Most studies focus on immediate financial gain, with little attention on how these roles affect decision-making power, mobility, or potential for career progression beyond contractual para-teaching. Third, the potential of technology-enhanced instruction remains underexplored. While para-teachers often rely on traditional methods, there is a lack of research on how digital tools and blended learning models could be adapted for use without extensive training or added resource burdens. Finally, while the cyclical professional development model proposed by Raval et al. (2010) offers a promising framework for ongoing teacher support, there is limited empirical evidence on its scalability and impact on retention or student achievement across varied contexts. Addressing these gaps is critical to strengthening the para-teacher model and realizing its full potential in transforming education and gender equity in resource-constrained settings.

4.4.1 Research Question

The general objective of this study is to evaluate whether the teaching deficit in semi-urban and rural government schools can be addressed through innovative approaches, including para-teacher models, edtech-based classrooms, and gamified curricula to build teacher capacity among non-specialist, semi-educated para-teachers. The study seeks to address the following key questions:

1. Can locally hired para-teachers, without formal teaching credentials, become effective educators in rural government schools when supported by continuous professional development and contextualised training?
2. How effective is the Teacher Professional Development (TPD) model designed for non-specialist para-teachers in improving both student outcomes and teaching quality in resource-constrained settings?
3. What is the impact of the para-teacher model on the socio-economic empowerment of marginally-educated rural women, particularly regarding their financial independence, household income, and their agency and influence within their communities?

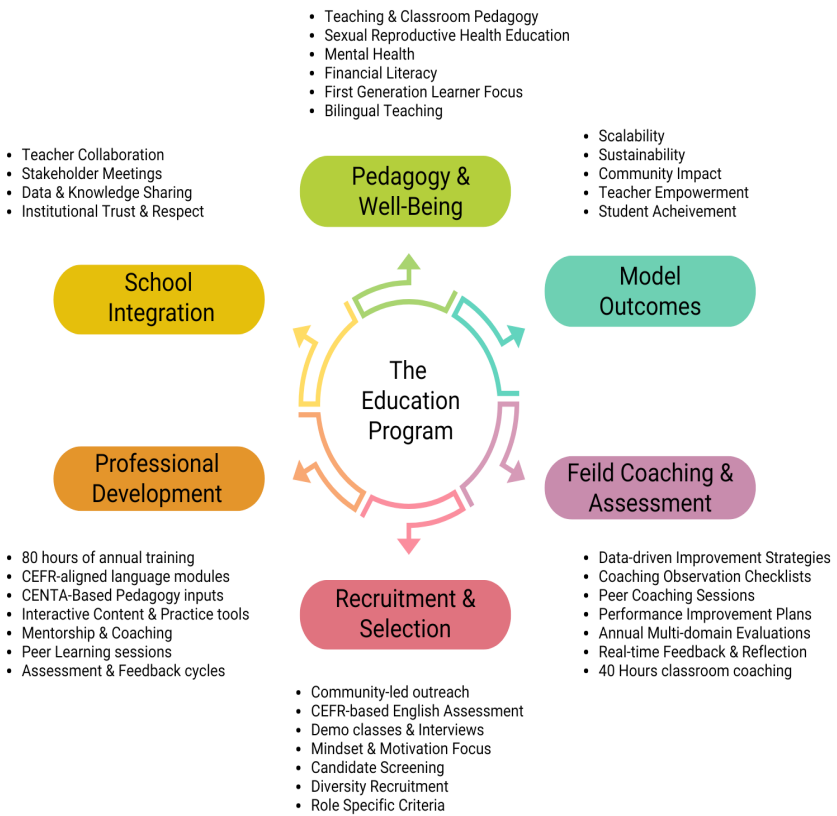
The hypothesis for the study is that One Billion Literates Foundation's para-teacher model, which emphasises continuous professional development, an integrated state curriculum that is activity-based, and pedagogical capacity building, leads to significantly better English language proficiency and foundational literacy among learners in primary rural government schools.

4.3 The OBLF Para-Teacher Model: A Program Overview

The OBLF para-teacher model is a holistic approach designed to enhance foundational literacy while empowering rural women as educators (Figure 4.1). The model integrates a rigorous recruitment process, ongoing professional development, classroom coaching, and structured performance management to support para-teachers in resource-constrained government schools. The program framework seeks to build an educational ecosystem covering recruitment and selection of teachers, their training, professional development, on-field coaching, to their integration as a core component within the educational institutions.

- **Recruitment and Selection:** Candidates—primarily semi-educated rural women—are recruited through community-led campaigns and assessed on English proficiency [benchmarked to Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)], teaching mindset, and growth potential. This ensures that para-teachers, while non-specialists, possess the motivation and aptitude for development.

Figure 4.1: Program Framework



Source: Authors' work, 2024

- **Professional Development:** Para-teachers receive up to 80 hours of annual training in English language skills, pedagogy, and curriculum implementation, guided by CEFR levels and Centre for Teacher Accreditation (CENTA) Teacher Standards. Most begin at CEFR A1 and are supported to progress to B2 through interactive instruction and continuous practice.
- **Pedagogical Training and Well-being:** Training spans four core domains: classroom culture, instructional planning, execution, and leadership. A focus on learner-centred, bilingual education prepares teachers to work with first-generation learners. The program also addresses teacher well-being, including financial literacy, mental health, and reproductive health.
- **On-Field Coaching and Feedback:** Each para-teacher receives 40 hours of annual field coaching, with regular classroom observations, feedback sessions, and reflection dialogues. Assessments span three domains—language, pedagogy, and curriculum—and feed into growth reports or Performance Improvement Plans (PIPs) when needed.
- **Integration with School Ecosystem:** Recognising the challenges of working alongside formally trained teachers, OBLF builds school-level support through regular stakeholder meetings and data-sharing, fostering collaboration and respect for para-teachers' training and contributions.

The OBLF model equips rural women to become effective educators by combining accessible entry points with intensive, ongoing support. It offers a scalable, cost-effective framework for enhancing learning outcomes while advancing women's leadership in education.

4.4 Methodology

4.4.1 Study Design

This study employs a longitudinal mixed-methods design, leveraging the extended operational history of the para-teacher model at the One Billion Literates Foundation, which has been in place since 2010. By examining the program over a prolonged period, this research provides insights into the long-term impacts of the intervention on both literacy outcomes among students and the socio-economic empowerment of community women employed as para-teachers. The longitudinal approach allows the study to capture the evolution of the skills, professional development, and empowerment of the para-teachers over time, as well as track changes in student performance across multiple years. The extended duration of the program enables a comparison between early cohorts of para-teachers and more recent participants, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the program's sustained effects.

4.4.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Anekal Taluk, a peri-urban area located on the outskirts of Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. Anekal spans approximately 530 square kilometres and comprises over 227 villages, with a diverse population of over 850,000 people. The area is characterised by a mix of rural, agricultural, and migrant communities, making it a strategic location for assessing the impact of educational interventions aimed at marginalised populations. The study locale is further limited to 120 rural government primary schools where OBLF's education program, Elevate, is deployed using a para-teacher model.

The One Billion Literates Foundation has been operational in Anekal since 2010, focusing on uplifting marginalised communities through educational programs. OBLF's literacy initiative centres around empowering semi-educated rural women by providing them with continuous training in English language skills and pedagogical methods, enabling them to work as para-teachers in local government schools.

4.4.3 Sampling and Participant Details

This study draws on two distinct samples: one assessing student learning outcomes and the other evaluating social transformation among women para-teachers.

- Para-Teacher Sample: A purposive criterion-based sample of 120 women currently employed by OBLF was selected. All participants completed OBLF's Kickstart skilling program and were actively working as para-teachers. The sample includes women from marginalised communities—primarily Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST)—aged between 21 and 55 years, most of whom come from low-income or below-poverty-line households. Before joining OBLF, many were unemployed, engaged in agriculture, or running small businesses. Their association with OBLF ranges from 2 to 13 years, offering a rich spread of experience. Many joined the program with the initial goal of learning English, which they perceived as a gateway to better livelihoods. Today, all 120 serve as para-teachers, allowing the study to examine both their educational contributions and transformational experiences.
- Student Sample: A random sampling strategy was used within OBLF-partner government schools. From a pool of 5,300 students, 4,486 were selected based on matched baseline and endline English proficiency assessments. The sample includes:
  Grades 1–3: 1,788 students (40%)
  Grades 4–5: 1,540 students (36%)
  Grades 6–8: 1,158 students (24%)
  Two assessments were conducted:
  (1) A longitudinal study measuring learning gains over time;

(2) A treatment vs. comparison group study evaluating the impact of the para-teacher model.

For the second study, a comparison group of 358 students from non-OBLF schools was matched against a treatment group of 323 students from OBLF schools where the program had been implemented for at least one year. The design followed a 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error, ensuring statistically significant findings. This enabled a robust analysis of whether students in OBLF-led classrooms outperformed those in non-intervention settings.

4.4.4 Data Collection

The study draws on four major points of data collection—two conducted internally and two externally by Socioven, a Bangalore-based research organisation. These mixed-method evaluations combine quantitative and qualitative tools to assess both measurable outcomes and lived experiences.

Quantitative data included:

(1) A baseline-endline student assessment (2023–2024), aligned with the CEFR framework, covering listening, reading, writing, and speaking, along with a review of ed-tech-based learning;
(2) A treatment vs. comparison group study (2022–2023), using CEFR and state-aligned tools to evaluate student outcomes in OBLF and non-OBLF schools;
(3) A para-teacher assessment measuring English proficiency, pedagogical skills, and curriculum understanding; and
(4) A survey on women's empowerment, capturing financial data (income, independence, sources), decision-making power, family structure, and occupational history.

Qualitative data was collected through seven FGDs and 25 in-depth interviews with para-teachers, exploring changes in agency, professional growth, and community perception. Additional interviews with a trainer, headmistress, and OBLF's Director of Academics offered institutional insight.

Data analysis employed SPSS for quantitative data (descriptive and inferential statistics) and NVivo for qualitative transcripts. Deductive coding was used to analyse themes such as teacher development, pedagogy, curriculum mastery, and student performance. Thematic maps were developed to visualise change over time. This mixed-methods design enabled triangulation, capturing both outcome improvements and broader social transformation.

4.4.5 Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

Ethical safeguards were maintained throughout the study. Verbal informed consent was obtained from adult participants, with pseudonyms used to protect identities, especially given varying literacy levels. Students

participated only after securing written consent from schools and parents, with a teacher present during all interactions. To reduce power dynamics, interviews were conducted in private settings by unaffiliated researchers. The research team acknowledged its positionality and mitigated bias by involving external investigators to ensure authenticity in participant narratives. However, the study has limitations. Time constraints limited the capture of long-term outcomes, and purposive sampling may restrict broader representation. The findings, based in Anekal Taluk, may not be fully generalisable, and longitudinal data on sustained student progress and women's empowerment is limited. Nonetheless, the study offers a strong foundation for scaling teacher capacity-building models in similar low-resource contexts.

4.5 Findings

The findings are divided into three sections. Section 1 looks at how this model has defined the teacher role, built capacity and developed para-teachers into well-rounded educators. The second section explores the impact of this model on student performance, learning and building foundation literacy. The third and final section looks at the impact of this model on generating livelihood and empowering community women.

4.5.1 Teacher Role, Capacity Building and Development

Evolving role of the 'teacher'

The OBLF para-teachers have undergone a transformative shift in how they perceive their roles as educators, largely influenced by the interactive and student-centred approach embedded in the program. This evolution marks a departure from traditional, rigid teaching methods toward more engaging and inclusive pedagogical practices. For many para-teachers, the role of teaching has transitioned from merely delivering content to becoming mentors and facilitators of learning. One participant articulated this change:

> *"I used to think being a teacher meant giving answers and making students memorise them, but now I see my role as helping them ask the right questions and discover the answers on their own." This perspective highlights the increasing recognition of inquiry-based learning, where teachers cultivate curiosity and critical thinking rather than simply imparting knowledge. Central to this redefined role are the respectful and trust-based relationships para-teachers build with their students. As one para-teacher explained, "I've learned that the more I listen to my students, the more they feel comfortable expressing themselves. It's not just about teaching them; it's about making them feel valued in the classroom."*

This student-first approach reinforces the idea that education is a collaborative process, where students actively contribute to their own learning journey. The interactive techniques taught in the OBLF program have not only enhanced academic outcomes but also empowered para-teachers to see themselves as agents of change in their students' lives. One participant noted,

> *"When I see my students becoming more confident, speaking up more, and asking questions, I feel like I'm doing more than teaching—I'm shaping their future."*

This sense of responsibility extends beyond academics; para-teachers recognise their influence on the personal growth of students, empowering them to become more self-assured individuals. Moreover, the shift toward inclusive education has prompted many para-teachers to reflect on their role in creating supportive environments for all students, especially those from their own communities. One teacher reflected,

> *"In our schools, [there are] many children from my village. I have seen them grow up and know their families. I feel like it's my job not just to teach them English but to give them a space where they feel safe and understood."*

This narrative underscores how the role of para-teachers has expanded to encompass a holistic approach to education that prioritises emotional and social well-being alongside academic success.

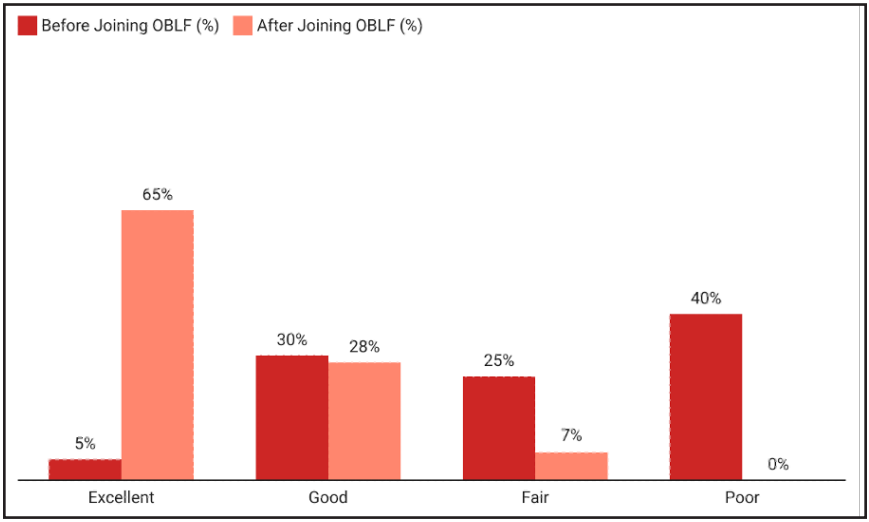
As a result of these changes in teaching practices and relationships with students, para-teachers now view their role with greater purpose and pride. They no longer see themselves merely as facilitators of academic content but as mentors, role models, and advocates for their overall development of their students. One para-teacher encapsulated this sentiment by saying,

> *"Being a teacher now means more than just lessons; it means being a guide in every sense—someone who helps students grow, not just in knowledge but in character."*

Assessing English Language Proficiency and Pedagogical Skills

The OBLF para-teacher program has led to significant improvements in both English proficiency and pedagogical skills among its participants (Figure 4.2). Before joining the program, 40% of the teachers rated their English proficiency as "poor," while only 5% rated their skills as "excellent" and 30% considered them "good." Following the comprehensive training, these figures changed dramatically: 65% of teachers now rate their English proficiency as "excellent," and no teacher reports their skills as "poor." This striking improvement highlights the effectiveness of the program in elevating English language skills, particularly among those who entered with limited proficiency.

Figure 4.2: English Proficiency – Before and After Joining OBLF



Source: Author's Calculations from Program Data

Several teachers have shared how their improved language skills have benefited not only their students but also their families. Many have begun teaching English to their children at home, demonstrating the broader impact of the program. One participant shared,

> *"My daughter, who studied at one of the OBLF schools, not only helped me learn English but also urged me to join the OBLF program as a teacher."*

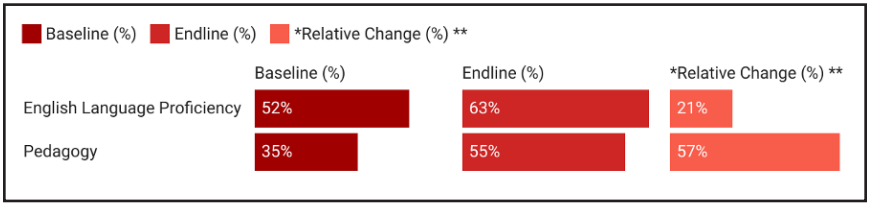
This example underscores how the para-teacher model enriches both teachers and their families.

Teachers in the OBLF program have achieved various levels of English proficiency as assessed by the CEFR scale. The overall improvement in the teacher cohort for 2023–2024 shows a 21% relative increase in proficiency, with all para-teachers advancing by at least one level on the CEFR scale. Currently, 63% of the teachers are at CEFR B1, while 5% have reached CEFR B2 (the highest two proficiency levels). In the Pre-A1 category, teachers scored an average of 50%. For those at the A1 level, the average score was 61%, while teachers at A2 scored 63%. Similarly, teachers at the B1 level also scored an average of 63%. The highest proficiency level, B2, saw teachers scoring an impressive 81%. These results highlight the diverse proficiency levels within the cohort, with many teachers demonstrating significant progress in mastering the English language.

In addition to language proficiency, para-teachers have also shown notable improvement in pedagogy (Figure 4.3). Throughout the year, teachers received targeted training on two core concepts: Classroom Culture and Instructional Planning. Their progress was tracked using a rubric, and by the end of the year, teachers had achieved a 57% relative

improvement in their pedagogical understanding. This development has allowed them to create supportive and engaging classroom environments, fostering better relationships with students and improving overall classroom participation. Training in instructional planning has equipped teachers with the skills to design rigorous, research-based lesson plans that cater to diverse learning needs. As a result, teachers are now more confident and capable of executing lessons that are both effective and inclusive, ensuring that all students are allowed to succeed.

Figure 4.3: Shifts in Teacher Proficiency (2023-2024)



Source: Author's Calculations from Program Data

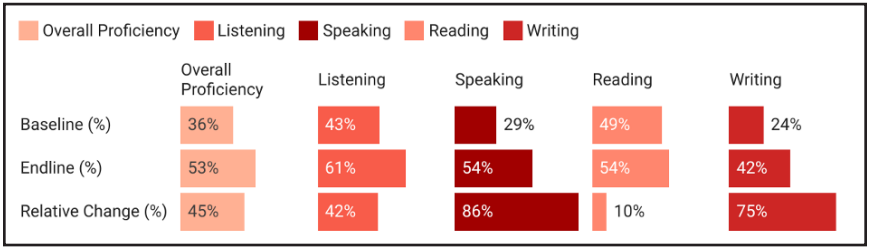
**Note:* Percentage improvement denotes relative change from baseline

4.5.2 Student Proficiency, Performance and Foundational Literacy

Building English Language Proficiency

The findings from this study strongly affirm the hypothesis that a combination of learner-centric curriculum models and significant investment in teacher proficiency results in substantial improvements in student performance (Figure 4.4). The overall student proficiency increased by 44.5%, with scores rising from a baseline of 36.4% to an endline of 52.6%. This significant improvement reflects the effectiveness of a comprehensive approach to education that includes targeted curriculum revisions and teacher training. Notably, the structured, learner-focused environment has fostered improved outcomes across all language skills, with the most considerable gains observed in speaking and writing.

Figure 4.4: Shifts in Student English Language Proficiency (2023-2024)



Source: Author's Calculations from Program Data

**Note:* Percentage improvement denotes relative change from baseline

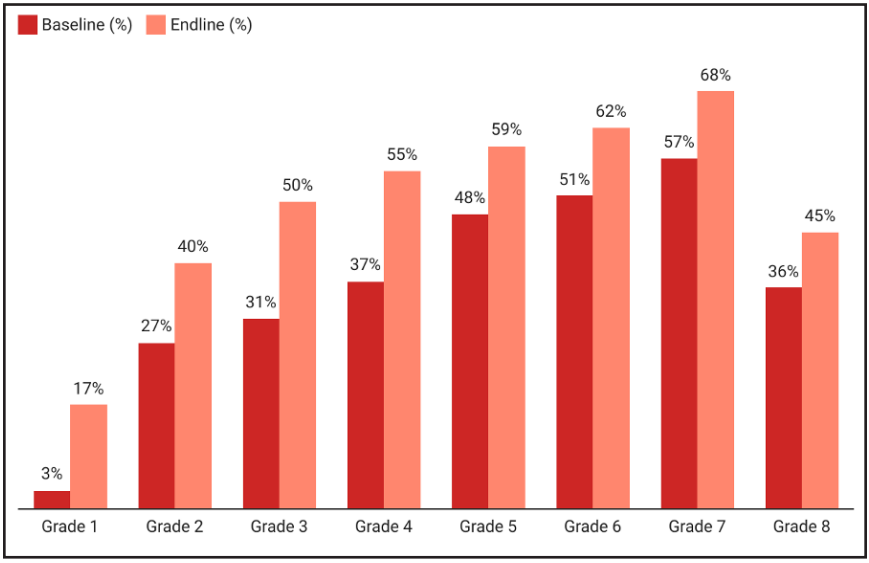
The proficiency increase across language skills showcases the success of this model in enhancing core areas of language acquisition. The proficiency gains across language skills highlight the effectiveness of the model in strengthening foundational English. Speaking skills saw the highest improvement at 86.2%, followed by writing at 75%, listening at 41.9%, and reading at 10.2%. Together, these results reflect a well-rounded enhancement in students' language acquisition across core competencies.

A critical factor in these outcomes is the substantial impact of para-teachers, who play an essential role in delivering an innovative and engaging curriculum. Selected from local communities, these para-teachers undergo rigorous training in English language pedagogy. Their approach is enhanced by the strategic use of both English and Kannada, allowing them to bridge linguistic gaps effectively and ensure that students feel comfortable and confident in their learning. This bilingual method aids comprehension and fosters an inclusive environment where students can transition smoothly between languages as they build their English proficiency.

One of the most effective elements of this program is how para-teachers contextualise the curriculum, utilising local examples and references that resonate with students. This relevance makes lessons more engaging, helping students connect classroom learning to real-life experiences. The curriculum is entirely activity-based, emphasising hands-on learning and interactive engagement. This approach facilitates a dynamic learning experience where students are actively involved rather than passive recipients of information. Para-teachers employ a diverse array of instructional tools, including ICT-based materials such as worksheets, flashcards, and audio files, to reinforce learning and enable students to practice and apply language skills across multiple formats. In addition to traditional tools, para-teachers integrate visual storytelling techniques—such as puppets, skits, and role-playing—to bring language to life and make abstract concepts more concrete. These methods effectively engage younger students and those who may struggle with conventional teaching approaches. The use of books, audio files, and visual aids accommodates various learning styles, supporting a more inclusive educational environment.

Moreover, para-teachers follow an integrated curriculum that emphasises daily lesson planning, bringing structure and rigor to the classroom. This meticulous planning ensures that lessons are carefully scaffolded, building on prior knowledge while introducing new material coherently. The rigorous preparation of lesson plans, combined with activity-based learning, guarantees that each class is well-organised and engaging, fostering a deeper connection between students and the material. The continuous professional development of para-teachers equips them with the skills necessary to execute these activity-based lessons effectively. Their ability to engage students through diverse instructional methods—including audio-visual tools and storytelling, has significantly contributed to improvements in student proficiency, particularly in speaking and reading.

Figure 4.5: Grade-Wise Student Performance (2023-2024)



Source: Author's Calculations from Program Data

By blending local context, bilingual instruction, and engaging activities, para-teachers have created a learning environment that is both rigorous and enjoyable, resulting in substantial improvement in student outcomes across all key areas of language acquisition.

The data from the student baseline–endline assessment of 2023–2024 indicate that over 80% of the student population is concentrated in Grades 1 and 2, highlighting a critical need to strengthen foundational literacy at these early stages (Figure 4.5). Students in these grades require increased attention to basic literacy skills, including phonics, pre-writing exercises, and other early pedagogies that establish the groundwork for language acquisition. This underscores the necessity for targeted training interventions with para-teachers that address the unique developmental needs of younger learners in this formative phase.

Across the sample, there is a relatively even distribution of students across higher grades, with a minimum of 400 students per grade. As students advance through the grades, there is a steady increase in both baseline and endline scores, suggesting that proficiency improves progressively with grade level. For instance, Grade 3 students' scores improved from 31% to 50%, while Grade 4 students improved from 37% to 55%, and Grade 5 students from 48% to 59%. This trend indicates that higher grades tend to begin with stronger baselines, reflecting the cumulative effects of prior learning.

Despite these baseline differences, the relative improvement remains fairly consistent, generally ranging from 20% to 60% across most grades. This indicates that OBLF's learning interventions are effectively designed to

ensure that students at varying proficiency levels benefit equitably from the program, regardless of their starting point.

An important observation is that students in Grades 4 and 5, who received additional support through specialised ed-tech interventions, demonstrated greater proportional gains compared to other grades. This suggests that targeted support at these transition points—combined with deeper engagement and structured learning modules—can significantly accelerate language acquisition and overall student outcomes. The gradual improvement across grades reinforces the effectiveness of OBLF's integrated model in ensuring consistent learning gains and equitable growth as students progress through their academic journey.

Accelerating Learning through Ed-tech Investment

As part of this assessment, we also examined the students who received ed-tech support through a weekly, in-classroom English language session conducted on a tablet. In these sessions, students played interactive games designed to help them practice key language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These students, who had sustained access to this gamified curriculum in addition to their daily OBLF English classes, were part of the program for at least two years. A sample size of 1343 students was selected based on their participation in this intervention.

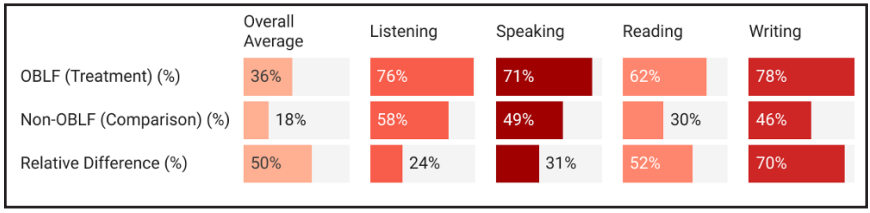
The results show that students who participated in the tablet-based English language sessions demonstrated a 44% improvement in overall proficiency, compared to the 30% improvement among those in OBLF's program who did not receive the ed-tech support. These findings underscore the positive impact of integrating technology-based learning tools with regular classroom instruction.

The interactive games played during the tablet sessions were designed to reinforce critical language skills through real-time feedback and engaging exercises, making learning more immersive and dynamic. This method has contributed to significant improvements in speaking, reading, and writing skills. Of particular note is the 77% increase in speaking skills, highlighting the effectiveness of using interactive, gamified learning tools to enhance the language proficiency of students, especially in areas that are more challenging to develop through traditional classroom methods alone. This approach not only complements regular teaching but also accelerates the learning process, demonstrating the value of technology-driven interventions in fostering greater student outcomes.

Testing Model Efficacy through Student Literacy

In the 2022–2023 external evaluation study of OBLF's model, the research aimed to validate the hypothesis that learners exposed to OBLF's CEFR-aligned syllabus and instructional framework would perform significantly better in English proficiency than those in non-OBLF schools. Two groups—a treatment

Figure 4.6: Treatment & Comparison between OBLF and Non-OBLF Students



Source: Author's Calculations from Program Data

group (OBLF learners) and a comparison group(non-OBLF learners)—were assessed using the same standardized English test(Figure 4.6). The results confirmed this hypothesis: learners from OBLF partner schools scored an average of 36.4%, compared to 18.3% in non-intervention schools. This means that OBLF learners performed nearly twice as well, achieving a 49.8% higher proficiency level relative to their peers. In other words, for every unit of proficiency gained by non-OBLF students, OBLF students demonstrated roughly one-and-a-half times more learning progress, underscoring the strong impact of OBLF's structured, level-based teaching model.

In particular, students in OBLF partner schools outperformed their non-intervention peers across all components of English language proficiency, with the most significant gains in speaking and writing, two of the most challenging aspects of language acquisition. The success of the OBLF model is largely attributable to the contextualised and student-centred approach employed by para-teachers, who integrate the local language (Kannada) alongside English to facilitate better understanding and engagement. Additionally, the continuous professional development provided to para-teachers has empowered them to effectively address key learning challenges, particularly in fostering speaking and writing skills, where OBLF students demonstrated the largest proficiency gains.

Figure 4.7: Treatment & Comparison between OBLF and Non-OBLF Students

#	English Language Skills	Average % difference between Treatment Group and Comparison Group	
		Grades 1-3	Grades 4-7
1	Listening	16.05%	34.16%
2	Speaking	18.55%	46.45%
3	Reading	50.97%	54.49%
4	Writing	65.81%	75.97%
5	Overall	43.16%	57.98%

Source: Author's Calculations from Program Data

As exposure to the OBLF program increases, the gap in English proficiency between learners in the OBLF intervention and those in non-

intervention schools widens. The longer students participate in the OBLF program, the greater their proficiency gains, particularly in writing and speaking. OBLF learners consistently outperform their non-OBLF counterparts, demonstrating cumulative benefits in language acquisition (Figure 4.7).

In both assessed levels, the writing and speaking performance of OBLF learners is significantly higher than that of students in non-intervention schools. These findings highlight the effectiveness of the OBLF model in enhancing language production skills, largely due to the efforts of para-teachers trained to emphasise these critical aspects of language learning. As students remain in the program, the integrated instruction provided by para-teachers continues to drive progress, ensuring that the proficiency gap between OBLF and non-OBLF students expands with each year of exposure.

The findings of this student evaluation provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the OBLF program on English language proficiency among learners. First, students in OBLF partner schools demonstrate significantly higher levels of English proficiency compared to their peers in non-OBLF schools. This advantage grows with the duration of participation in the program; as learners remain in OBLF, their language skills improve, resulting in an increasingly pronounced gap between OBLF and non-OBLF learners. Notably, proficiency in productive skills—specifically speaking and writing—is markedly higher among OBLF students, suggesting that these areas benefit most from the program's focus. In contrast, listening and reading skills do not show the same level of improvement. Furthermore, the results validate OBLF's strategic approach and curriculum design, which emphasise functional and productive English components. This deliberate focus aligns with OBLF's transition to CEFR methodology three years ago, reinforcing the effectiveness of its instructional framework in fostering language acquisition. Overall, these findings underscore the program's success in enhancing English language skills among its participants.

4.5.3 Livelihood and Transformation of Rural Women

Income and Agency through Livelihoods

The OBLF para-teacher program has significantly transformed livelihood opportunities for the women involved. Before joining the program, 58.3% of participants reported having no source of income and relied on their spouses or guardians for daily expenses. The transition to financial independence has been pivotal, allowing these women to take control of their economic futures and contribute meaningfully to their households. A remarkable 83.3% of participants reported an increase in income since becoming para-teachers. Among them, 25% had held jobs before joining OBLF, yet even these individuals experienced a notable rise in earnings. The average income before joining OBLF was Rs. 3,975, while their current average income has surged to Rs. 10,985, representing a 176.4% increase. This substantial rise in income has

greatly enhanced their financial stability and fostered a stronger sense of self-sufficiency. One participant shared,

> *"Before joining OBLF, I didn't know how I could ever support my family financially. Now, not only do I bring home an income, but I've also learned how to manage our expenses and even save for the future."*

Another added,

> *"I never thought I'd be able to contribute to my household this way. My husband respects my decisions more now because I earn and manage things independently."*

The ripple effects of this financial empowerment are evident in other areas of participants lives. For instance, 11.7% of the women run additional side ventures such as tailoring, working as National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) officials, offering home tuition, and selling bangles, with an average income from these activities of Rs. 6,000. However, their primary source of income remains their teaching role with OBLF, which provides a monthly salary of Rs. 10,985. This secure income not only grants them financial independence but also earns them newfound respect within their communities. One participant remarked,

> *"I used to feel invisible in my village. But now, people come to me for advice; I'm known as a teacher and a role model. It feels empowering to be recognised for my work."*

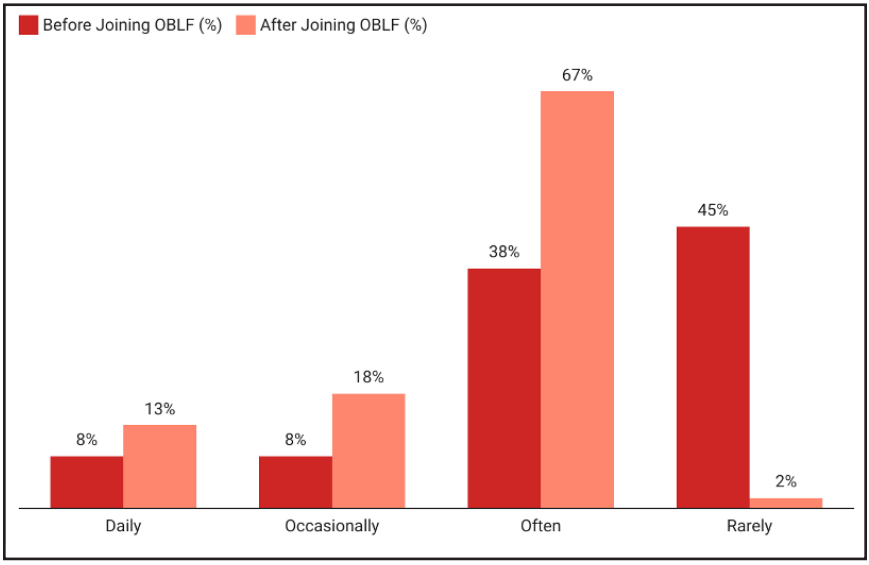
Moreover, the positive social impact is reflected within their households. Many participants noted how their financial status has shifted power dynamics at home. One woman explained,

> *"I used to feel like my opinions didn't matter, but since I started earning, I have a voice in family decisions." Another participant added, "Being able to provide for my children has been life-changing. I can now afford to send them to better schools and buy things we couldn't even dream of before."*

Financial Independence and Literacy

The OBLF para-teacher program has not only provided stable income opportunities for rural women but also significantly improved their financial literacy and promoted greater economic independence (Figure 4.8). Survey results indicate that 98% of participants have a bank account in their name, a crucial step toward financial autonomy. However, many women did not actively engage with their accounts before joining OBLF. Specifically, 45% reported rarely using their accounts before the program, but this figure dropped dramatically afterwards, with only one participant continuing to report limited usage. This shift reflects how participation in the

Figure 4.8: Operating Bank Account: Pre-and Post Joining OBLF



** The X-axis represents the frequency at which women access their bank accounts*
Source: Author's Calculations from Program Data

program has encouraged regular and informed financial engagement. One participant noted,

> *"I never used to visit the bank, but now I go regularly to check my balance and make transactions. It gives me a sense of control over my own earnings."*

Since joining the program, 66% of participants reported frequent usage of their bank accounts, while 18% stated they now use them occasionally. This increase in financial engagement is particularly notable when compared to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) state figure, where 88.7% of women have bank accounts but may not actively use them. Thus, the OBLF program has significantly contributed to improving the financial habits of its participants. In terms of financial planning, 73.3% confirmed they have implemented some form of household budgeting. However, 50–60% revealed they have not yet established short-term or long-term financial plans, indicating an area where further financial education could be beneficial. While the program has encouraged women to take control of daily financial activities, there is still room for growth in future planning. One participant shared,

> *"I can now manage my household budget better, but I still don't know how to plan for the long term. Saving for emergencies is something I need to learn more about."*

Additionally, 67% of participants were unaware of flagship government programs aimed at supporting the underprivileged, such as financial inclusion schemes. Nevertheless, some participants mentioned they had started saving under the Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana scheme, which provides savings options for the education and marriage of girl children. This suggests that while awareness of broader financial programs remains limited, some participants are beginning to explore government-backed initiatives.

The survey also revealed that participants are now better able to manage household finances. Their earnings from OBLF are being used to cover small but essential expenses like electricity and mobile phone bills. For some, OBLF income has enabled them to pay EMIs on two-wheelers, enhancing both mobility and financial management. One participant remarked,

> *"Before, we were always behind on our bills, but now I can pay them on time, and we've even managed to buy a scooter, which I'm paying off with my earnings."*

This newfound capability showcases how the program instils practical financial skills that extend beyond basic literacy into everyday decision-making.

Enhanced Capability and Mobility

The women's skilling survey data underscores the significant impact of OBLF's para-teacher training program in upskilling rural women, empowering them to take on more capable roles within their communities. Among the participants surveyed, 60% reported receiving training in formal classroom settings, while 28.3% noted that their training occurred in both learning centres and classrooms. This structured approach has provided women with conducive learning environments that enhance their skill development and boost their overall confidence. The widespread use of digital devices during training was notable, with 98.3% of respondents affirming the use of tools such as computers, laptops, projectors, mobile phones, and tablets. This incorporation of technology not only facilitated a modern learning experience but also equipped the women with essential digital literacy skills for today's educational landscape. Interestingly, 66.7% identified mobile phones as their preferred mode of learning, reflecting the flexibility and accessibility that digital platforms offer. Confidence emerged as a key outcome of the program, with 98.3% of the teachers reporting feeling "very confident" in their professional abilities. Many attributed this newfound confidence to the positive results stemming from OBLF's comprehensive training. One teacher shared her personal growth:

> *"I felt left out among other qualified women and wanted to be more qualified,"*

highlighting how the program motivated her to pursue further education. Beyond professional skills, the program also facilitated the acquisition of practical life skills that positively impacted the teachers' personal and social lives. A commonly highlighted skill was learning to drive a scooter, which not only improved their ability to travel between schools but also became a symbol of independence and societal respect. As one teacher noted,

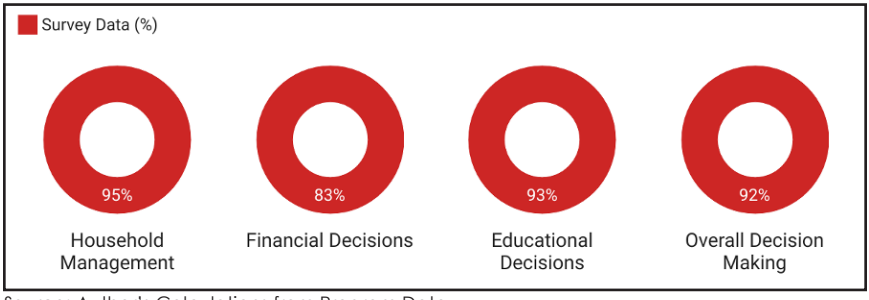
> *"Learning to drive a scooter not only eased conveyance to different schools but also is a symbol of success and respect in society."*

This skill illustrates how the training has broadened empowerment for these women, enhancing their mobility and status within their communities.

Increased Autonomy and Decision-Making Power

The OBLF para-teacher program has significantly enhanced the autonomy and decision-making power of the women involved. According to NFHS-5 data, 82.7% of married women in Karnataka participate in household decision-making, with the national figure for rural women at 87%. In contrast, survey results from OBLF participants indicate an even higher level of engagement, with 93.4% stating they are actively involved in decisions related to their children's education—either independently (31.7%) or in collaboration with their spouse (61.7%) (Figure 4.9). This increased participation reflects their growing confidence and autonomy.

Figure 4.9: Participation of Women in Household Decision Making



Source: Author's Calculations from Program Data

One participant shared how this newfound autonomy has enabled her to manage her children's schooling more effectively:

> *"I can visit my children's school regularly and speak with the teachers, something I never had the confidence to do before. Now, I can actively contribute to decisions about their education."*

This proactive role empowers her to shape her children's academic futures. The data also reveals positive trends in decision-making regarding household expenses and management, with 26.7% and 33.3% of participants respectively reporting that they make these decisions independently. This marks a significant improvement in their financial and operational

control within their households. One participant expressed her newfound independence:

> *"While earlier I had to beg in front of my husband, now that I earn on my own, I can manage things."*

Her sentiment reflects a broader trend among participants who feel more confident in contributing to their families' welfare, leading to increased self-esteem.

Perhaps the most significant finding is that 91.7% of participants reported feeling "very confident" about making key financial decisions independently. This confidence is a testament to the empowerment provided by the OBLF program, which equips these women with the skills and financial autonomy necessary to take charge of vital aspects of their lives. As one participant noted,

> *"Having control over the money I earn has changed how I think about myself. I feel stronger and more capable of handling my family's needs."*

This shift in mindset, coupled with their financial independence, reflects the far-reaching impact of the program on both personal and familial levels.

Increased Awareness of Social Issues and Enhanced Community Engagement

The OBLF para-teacher program has significantly improved participants' knowledge about critical social issues, including **gender equality and safety**. Survey results show that 83.3% of participants reported a substantial increase in their understanding of these topics after undergoing training. This newfound knowledge has positioned them as influential sources of information within their villages, as they help raise awareness on issues that were previously overlooked or misunderstood. As one participant shared,

> *"My mother-in-law was earlier sceptical about me working, but now she shares with our neighbours how proud she feels that I am working as a teacher."*

This shift in attitudes illustrates a broader societal change, where women's roles and contributions are being increasingly recognised and valued.

Moreover, the program has empowered women to navigate their responsibilities more effectively, particularly in households where **traditional gender** roles often dictate domestic duties. Many participants have had to adjust their lifestyles to balance work and home responsibilities, demonstrating their adaptability and commitment to both spheres. For instance, some participants mentioned making adjustments like waking up earlier to complete household chores before heading to work. This shift reflects their ability to manage multiple roles, highlighting the program's success in fostering resilience and capability in both professional and domestic settings.

Overall, the impact of the OBLF program extends well beyond the empowerment of individual participants; it fosters a culture of awareness and engagement around important social issues. Participants narrated incidents of how they questioned and challenged cultural norms within their households and communities. Many participants reported that the training has given them the confidence to speak out against long-standing traditions and practices that they now view as restrictive or harmful. For example, several women shared that they are now actively advocating for their children's right to pursue higher education, regardless of gender, which contrasts with earlier expectations of early marriage or limited schooling, particularly for daughters. As one participant explained,

> *"I've made it clear that my daughter will finish her education before we even think about marriage. She deserves to choose her own path."*

In addition to prioritising education, many participants are beginning to insist on marriage with consent and choice for their children, challenging the norm of arranged marriages without the input of those directly involved. The training has also empowered some women to speak up against domestic violence and assert their right to live in safe, respectful environments. One woman noted how the discussions around gender equality in the program gave her the strength to stand up against verbal and physical abuse, adding,

> *"Before, I thought it was just something I had to tolerate, but now I know I have the right to say no."*

Another significant shift has been in the area of self-care—an often overlooked aspect in traditional rural households where women are expected to prioritise family over themselves. Several participants mentioned that they now feel more comfortable taking time for their own personal growth and well-being, which they believe is equally important to fulfilling their roles as mothers and wives. One participant shared,

> *"I've started setting aside time for myself, whether it's reading or just taking a walk. It's important for me to recharge so I can be there for my family in a healthier way."*

4.6 Discussion

The success of the para-teacher model lies in its integrated approach: rigorous selection, comprehensive training, and ongoing coaching. These elements have led to significant gains in English proficiency, which in turn have transformed teaching practices. Para-teachers have shifted from rote methods to interactive, student-centred pedagogy, promoting critical thinking and active engagement. As one teacher reflected,

"I now guide students in discovering answers rather than just delivering information."

This professional transformation also redefined para-teachers' roles as facilitators, mentors, and trusted community educators. Beyond the classroom, the model has had a profound impact on women's economic and social empowerment. With 83% of participants reporting increased income, many para-teachers have gained financial independence and greater say in household decision-making. One participant shared,

"Before, I had to ask my husband for everything. Now I manage the household bills on my own."

This autonomy has sparked wider social transformation. Para-teachers are now advocates for education and gender equity, rejecting early marriage for their daughters and championing continued schooling—especially for girls. Their growing influence in both households and communities reflects a shift in social norms, where rural women, once excluded from public roles, are now recognised as educators, leaders, and change agents. In sum, the OBLF model not only strengthens teacher capacity and student outcomes, but also catalyses intergenerational change by positioning para-teachers as drivers of equity within their families and communities.

Recommendations for Scaling the Para-Teacher Model

To replicate the success of the para-teacher model, it is essential to implement a comprehensive teacher development framework that focuses on continuous professional growth. This framework should include rigorous selection criteria for para-teachers, ensuring that those chosen have the potential to benefit from intensive training and mentorship. The development framework should prioritise ongoing training in areas such as English proficiency, pedagogy, and curriculum mastery, with at least 80 hours of annual training. Alongside this, real-time in-classroom coaching and mentorship programs will help para-teachers refine their skills and confidence. Additionally, bilingual teaching methods and interactive, student-centred pedagogies should be a core part of the framework, making the model adaptable to local contexts and improving learning outcomes.

Community engagement is another critical area for scaling the model. Strengthening the involvement of the local community will enhance the program's effectiveness by fostering a supportive environment for both para-teachers and students. Community campaigns should be implemented to raise awareness about the value of education and encourage more women to participate in the program. These campaigns can also highlight the benefits of financial independence and professional growth, motivating more women to pursue teaching as a viable career. Regular stakeholder meetings, involving school leaders, government officials, and community

members, should be held to build awareness of the positive outcomes the program brings and ensure continued community support.

Expanding the use of technology is also essential for enhancing both teaching methodologies and student engagement. Ed-tech tools, such as tablet-based learning, interactive games, and digital instructional resources, have already demonstrated their effectiveness in improving student proficiency, particularly in speaking and writing. Scaling the model should involve providing para-teachers with access to these digital resources and training them in their use, enabling them to implement innovative teaching strategies that cater to diverse learning needs. Personalised learning through these tools will allow students to practice language skills independently, leading to better learning outcomes and accelerated progress.

A key aspect of scaling the para-teacher model is the emphasis on foundational literacy, particularly in the early grades. Students in Grades 1 and 2 require targeted interventions in areas such as phonics, pre-writing, and early reading comprehension to build the foundational skills necessary for long-term academic success. Prioritising early literacy will set students on the path to greater proficiency in later grades, ensuring that they have the skills to succeed academically. The model should continue to emphasise these early interventions as a critical factor in sustaining positive educational outcomes.

To further support the financial independence of para-teachers, financial literacy training should remain a central component of the program. Equipping para-teachers with the skills to manage their earnings effectively will not only foster their economic stability but also empower them to make informed decisions for their families and communities. The program should offer additional financial mentoring, helping para-teachers with short-term and long-term financial planning, budgeting, and saving for future investments. This will ensure that the economic empowerment gained through the program is sustainable and long-lasting.

Additionally, gender awareness training is crucial for the broader social impact of the para-teacher model. Integrating gender awareness into the curriculum will empower para-teachers to challenge traditional norms and advocate for social change within their communities. By becoming leaders in promoting educational equity and gender rights, these women can act as role models for others, inspiring more women to pursue education and break away from restrictive gender roles. This focus on empowerment will enable the para-teacher model to drive cultural transformation beyond the classroom, fostering greater gender equality and educational opportunities.

Finally, the establishment of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms is essential for scaling the para-teacher model effectively. By implementing regular feedback systems from teachers, students, and community members, the program can continuously assess its impact and make adjustments where necessary. Monitoring systems should focus on tracking student outcomes, teacher development, and the broader

social impact of the program. This data will provide valuable insights into the program's effectiveness and ensure that it remains responsive to the evolving needs of the community, ultimately sustaining its success in improving education and empowering women.

4.7 Conclusion

The para-teacher model at OBLF has demonstrated a transformative impact on both educators and students in resource-constrained settings. By equipping rural women with the necessary skills, confidence, and pedagogical tools, the program has not only enhanced their professional and personal lives but also significantly improved student proficiency, particularly in critical areas such as speaking and writing. The integration of interactive, bilingual teaching methods and ongoing professional development has shifted classroom dynamics, fostering greater student engagement and participation. Moreover, the program's success in challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for financial independence underscores its broader social implications. These findings reinforce the value of scalable, community-driven education models that combine comprehensive teacher development frameworks with innovative, learner-centred approaches to address educational deficits and empower marginalised communities.

Disclaimer: In preparing this manuscript, we have used ChatGPT, Perplexity and Turboscribe version (open-access version) to translate participant interviews, prepare transcripts and frame relevant quotes. We have marked and described specific content generated by the AI technologies/tools, and the details can be requested for review purposes. We take full responsibility for the content.

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PART 2

Empowering the Marginalised through Intervention Management

5 Breaking the Invisible Hold of Gender: Integrating Gender into Livelihood programs to drive sustainable community change

Faiza Ruksar Arif

Abstract

Rural women in India are often offered livelihood opportunities without the tools to question the gendered structures that govern their lives. This study asks: What happens when they are given both? Drawing on a two-year intervention in Anekal Taluk, Karnataka, this research examines the impact of an integrated program combining skilling with gender education. Through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant insights with 20 women from marginalized communities, the study explores how consciousness-raising, alongside employment, transforms not just income, but also identity. Findings reveal that while financial independence alone rarely disrupts patriarchal control, sustained gender awareness fosters critical shifts in self-perception, negotiation power, and collective action. Participants began to reclaim decision-making, challenge domestic violence, articulate mental health needs, and redefine motherhood and marriage on their own terms. Yet, systemic barriers — such as caste hierarchies, caregiving burdens, and cultural expectations of silence — persist. This research contributes to development theory by proposing a model where gender consciousness and economic empowerment are mutually reinforcing. It advocates for a reimagined GAD approach—one that embeds gender sensitisation into the structure of skilling programs, enabling rural women to move from passive recipients of aid to active agents of social transformation.

Keywords: Gender and Development (GAD), Rural Women, Gender Awareness, Livelihoods, Intersectionality, Skilling Programs.

5.1. Introduction

Rural women in India encounter a distinct set of socio-economic challenges, primarily characterised by limited access to education, formal employment, and financial independence. Recognising the importance of economic empowerment, the Indian government and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have long advocated for employment and skilling programs as essential tools for enhancing the livelihoods and overall well-being of these women (Ramachandran et al., 2008; Sundari, 2005).

Many rural women are confined to informal and underpaid work, lacking both stable employment and the necessary skills to pursue more lucrative opportunities. In the realm of education, rural government schools

face persistent issues such as teacher shortages and high turnover rates, exacerbated by geographical constraints and inadequate infrastructure. To address these challenges, the model of para-teachers—contract-based educators often sourced from local communities—has emerged as a cost-effective solution. Ramachandran et al. (2008) note that while this initiative has provided many rural women with employment, their positions remain precarious, characterised by lower wages and limited access to training and professional development.

Similarly, the employment of women as frontline health workers, such as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), has been promoted to enhance rural health services while simultaneously empowering women economically (Ramachandran et al., 2005). Despite these initiatives contributing to the financial well-being of rural women, studies like Sundari (2005) on migration as a livelihood strategy indicate that financial independence does not automatically equate to enhanced agency or decision-making capabilities. Employment opportunities in informal or low-paying sectors often fail to challenge deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that restrict women's roles and autonomy within their communities.

5.1.1 Patriarchal Structures and Gender Norms

The persistence of patriarchal structures remains a significant barrier to the empowerment of rural women in India. These entrenched norms dictate gender roles that restrict women's mobility, agency, and decision-making capabilities within both the household and the broader community. In many rural contexts, women are often relegated to roles that reinforce their dependence on male family members, thereby hindering their participation in economic activities and limiting their access to education and healthcare services (Stromquist, 1990).

The Gender and Development (GAD) approach, which emerged in the 1980s, critiques earlier Women in Development (WID) models that focused solely on integrating women into existing development frameworks without addressing the root causes of gender inequality. Zwart (1992) argues that the GAD approach shifts attention from women as isolated subjects to the social construction of gender and power relations, aiming to transform the structures that perpetuate women's subordination. By addressing underlying power dynamics, the Gender and Development (GAD) framework facilitates women's inclusion in economic development and empowers them to challenge patriarchal norms and assert their agency. This approach underscores a critical reality: skilling programs that fail to confront patriarchal structures risk perpetuating existing gender hierarchies instead of dismantling them. As Zwart (1992) argues, meaningful empowerment requires interventions that challenge systemic barriers limiting women's participation in public life, ensuring that economic initiatives align with broader gender equity goals.

5.1.2 Link Between Skilling and Agency

Integrating gender awareness into skilling programs can significantly transform women's roles and identities. Programs that focus on financial independence alongside consciousness-raising, such as the Mahila Samakhya Program studied by Subramaniam (2003), demonstrate that collective action and gender awareness can enhance women's agency. By creating spaces for discussion and reflection, these programs enable women to challenge the social norms that restrict them, contributing to more meaningful and sustained empowerment. Kabeer (2018) emphasises that true empowerment occurs when women can make strategic life choices—decisions about mobility, health, and education for themselves and their families—rather than merely fulfilling roles as caregivers or contributors to household income. Thus, combining economic empowerment with gender awareness interventions creates a comprehensive model that addresses both financial well-being and the social structures perpetuating inequality.

5.1.3 Gendered Barriers to Agency and Decision-Making

Rural women in India encounter a complex web of gendered barriers that restrict their ability to exercise agency beyond their roles as mothers and caregivers. Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms dictate that women's primary responsibilities revolve around household duties, caregiving, and reproduction. These expectations limit their access to economic opportunities and diminish their capacity to make decisions beyond the domestic sphere. Rietveld et al. (2020) highlight how these gender norms curtail rural women's livelihood pathways, perpetuating a cycle of dependence and subordination. Women are often discouraged from engaging in commercial or entrepreneurial ventures, while existing opportunities in the informal sector or low-wage jobs fail to provide the agency necessary for broader empowerment.

The concept of "opportunity space," as outlined by Rietveld et al. (2020), is crucial for understanding how gendered norms confine women to specific roles and responsibilities. Opportunity space refers to the socially constructed boundaries within which individuals can operate based on gender, class, and other social markers. For rural women, this space is significantly narrower than for men, as patriarchal norms restrict mobility, education, and access to resources. This constrained environment limits their ability to explore livelihood strategies that could offer economic security and greater autonomy in decision-making.

Stromquist (1990) underscores the power of patriarchal norms in sustaining women's subordination. These norms are reinforced through socialisation processes that begin early, teaching girls to prioritise family responsibilities over personal ambition or economic independence. Consequently, women's participation in economic activities is often framed as supplementary to male income, reinforcing their dependence on male relatives and hindering full participation in both the economy and public sphere.

5.1.4 Intersection of Gender, Class, and Caste

In rural India, the intersectionality of gender, class, and caste complicates women's struggles for agency and decision-making power. The interplay of these social markers creates multiple layers of disadvantage, particularly for women from marginalised castes, such as Dalits. Subramaniam (2003) provides a compelling analysis of how caste and class dynamics intersect with gender to exacerbate the oppression faced by Dalit women. The Mahila Samakhya Program focuses on empowering women from marginalized communities through collective action and consciousness-raising efforts to combat both gender-based oppression and caste-based discrimination.

Dalit women's experiences are significantly shaped by their position at the bottom of both gender and caste hierarchies. As Subramaniam (2003) points out, Dalit, tribal, and severely marginalised women face exclusion from economic opportunities as well as social and political life. They are often denied access to land, education, and public resources essential for improving their livelihoods and achieving autonomy. In the context of the Mahila Samakhya Program, Dalit women have organised into collectives or sanghas to share experiences, build solidarity, and challenge both gender and caste hierarchies. These collective spaces exemplify how gender awareness combined with economic skills can empower women doubly marginalised by caste and gender. Through collective action, Dalit women assert their rights, access resources, and participate in decision-making processes previously inaccessible to them.

Understanding the integration of class and caste is crucial for analysing women's empowerment. Women from higher castes may access certain economic opportunities denied to lower-caste women within the same rural communities. Additionally, wealthier women often enjoy greater freedom in decisions regarding employment and mobility, while poorer women remain constrained by economic necessity and social expectations. By addressing these intersecting inequalities, the integrated gender and livelihoods model offers a nuanced approach to empowering rural women. Combining skilling with gender awareness provides a pathway not only to financial independence but also to challenging systemic forces that limit agency based on gender, caste, and class.

5.1.5 Gender Awareness as a Catalyst for Change

Integrating gender awareness into skilling programs is essential for addressing the deeply rooted patriarchal norms that inhibit rural women's empowerment. While employment and financial independence are important, they alone cannot dismantle the systemic inequalities women face. As Primo (1997) argues, gender awareness is crucial for fostering the socio-cognitive shifts necessary for women to recognise and challenge the social norms governing their roles within households and communities. These shifts enable women to view themselves not just as economic contributors but as agents capable of making decisions affecting all aspects of their lives.

Gender awareness programs equip women with tools to critically analyse their social environments and question the status quo. Primo (1997) emphasises that women must develop a critical understanding of how patriarchy shapes their lives. This understanding can lead to significant changes in self-perception and societal roles, allowing women to negotiate better terms for themselves within families and communities. Thus, integrating gender awareness into skilling programs acts as a catalyst for broader social change, empowering women to challenge traditional norms that have historically limited their decision-making power.

Matiwana (2004) supports this argument by demonstrating that gender empowerment programs help women transcend traditional roles. These initiatives not only provide economic tools but also foster leadership skills, enabling active participation in public and political life. When combined with economic empowerment, gender awareness equips women with the confidence and skills necessary to assume leadership roles within community groups, local governance structures, and their households.

5.1.6 Empowerment through Collectives and Networks

The power of collective action and networks is well-documented in the literature on women's empowerment. Self-help groups (SHGs) and community-led models have emerged as effective tools for empowering women, particularly in rural contexts. A notable example is the Self-Help Group-Based Intervention for Combating Violence Against Women (SHGIVAW) in Rajasthan, which combines economic empowerment with gender awareness training. Raghavendra et al. (2018) describe how the SHGIVAW model mobilises women not only as economic actors but also as community leaders who actively challenge gender-based violence. This model illustrates the effectiveness of combining financial independence with gender consciousness, enabling women to overcome both economic and social barriers to full participation in community life.

Subramaniam (2003) analyses the Mahila Samakhya Program, highlighting how the formation of women's collectives, or sanghas, is critical for enabling women to confront structural inequalities. These collectives provide safe spaces for women to share experiences, support one another, and engage in consciousness-raising activities. Through collective action, women gain the confidence and solidarity necessary to tackle social, economic, and political barriers that restrict their agency. In rural contexts, where isolation can exacerbate feelings of powerlessness, joining a collective allows women to pool resources—both material and emotional—to advocate for their rights and challenge oppressive systems. Subramaniam (2003) emphasises that the sanghas not only equip women with skills for income-generating activities but also foster solidarity that empowers them to confront gender- and caste-based discrimination.

Matiwana (2004) argues that collective empowerment is key to overcoming individual and structural barriers. When women are

empowered as a group, they are more likely to challenge the status quo and demand systemic change. Collectives thus become vital mechanisms for sustaining empowerment, providing spaces for reflection, discussion, and action where women can navigate the complexities of gender, class, and caste discrimination. By integrating gender awareness with collective action, skilling programs can transcend mere economic goals and become powerful tools for social change. Women involved in these collectives are more likely to gain the confidence and knowledge needed to make strategic life choices, engage in community leadership, and challenge patriarchal systems that have historically marginalised them.

5.1.7 Sustainability of Empowerment Models

A key concern in the literature is that short-term interventions often lose momentum once funding or external engagement is withdrawn. Nolte (1997) argues that for gender equality initiatives to be sustainable, they must be integrated into broader policy frameworks that ensure continuous support. This requires governments and NGOs to embed gender awareness and empowerment programs within long-term development strategies, rather than treating them as isolated interventions. Sustainability also depends on institutionalising these programs within existing governance and development structures.

Nolte (1997) emphasises the importance of building local capacity to ensure the sustainability of gender empowerment initiatives. Programs reliant solely on external interventions are unlikely to achieve lasting change unless they foster local leadership and governance structures. In the Mahila Samakhya Program, the creation of sanghas allowed women to take ownership of the empowerment process, developing skills and networks necessary to sustain their efforts beyond initial interventions. Similarly, the success of SHGIVAW in mobilising women to challenge gender-based violence was rooted in local leadership and community engagement.

5.2 Literature Review

5.2.1 Research gaps in the literature

A significant gap in the existing literature is the lack of cohesive models that integrate both financial empowerment and gender awareness for rural women's empowerment. While many studies emphasise the importance of skilling programs that provide income-generating opportunities, these efforts often overlook the socio-cultural barriers limiting women's agency. Conversely, programs focused on gender awareness and consciousness-raising frequently neglect the economic dimensions of empowerment, leaving women financially dependent on male family members despite gaining insights into gender-based inequalities. Much of the research on economic empowerment highlights the employment of rural women,

stressing access to income-generating activities. However, gender awareness interventions foster critical consciousness, enabling women to question the social structures perpetuating their subordination. The absence of a financial empowerment component in these interventions means that women may still lack the economic independence necessary to exercise full agency in their personal and public lives.

5.2.2 Theoretical Contribution: Expanding the GAD Approach

This study extends the Gender and Development (GAD) approach by emphasising the need for interventions that not only address gender roles but also actively seek to transform them. While the GAD framework has been instrumental in highlighting the importance of gender awareness and addressing patriarchal norms, much of the literature focuses on these issues in isolation from economic empowerment. This study proposes a multifaceted intervention that addresses both economic and social empowerment simultaneously. Kabeer (2018) emphasises that true empowerment occurs when women can make strategic life choices previously denied to them, spanning both economic and social realms. By integrating skilling with gender awareness, this study aims to enhance women's financial capabilities and their ability to negotiate and challenge patriarchal structures.

The proposed dual-threaded model aligns with the core principles of the GAD approach but expands it by operationalising empowerment through structured interventions targeting both economic and social dimensions. The theoretical contribution lies in recognising that economic independence and social empowerment are mutually reinforcing. Women who achieve financial independence are more likely to assert their agency in other areas, while those empowered to challenge gender norms are more likely to succeed in economic activities requiring negotiation and decision-making. Furthermore, this study contributes empirical evidence on how integrated skilling and gender awareness programs can produce sustainable forms of empowerment. By combining these two components, it moves beyond models focusing on one dimension at the expense of the other. This integrated approach offers a comprehensive solution to the challenges rural women face, addressing both immediate economic needs and long-term goals of transforming gender relations.

5.2.3 Research Objectives and Questions

This study explores the impact of integrating livelihood opportunities with gender awareness training on rural women's empowerment. Conducted over two years across Anekal Taluk, Bangalore, Karnataka, the research evaluates the effectiveness of this dual-threaded model in addressing entrenched patriarchal norms and fostering holistic empowerment.

The research is guided by the following objectives:

- To understand the lived experiences of semi-educated rural women participating in skilling and gender awareness programs.
- To explore how combining financial empowerment with gender awareness contributes to women's agency, mobility, and ability to confront patriarchal norms.

The study seeks to answer three critical questions:

1. What are the barriers to enhancing women's agency and mobility within patriarchal community settings?
2. How effective is the dual-threaded model in fostering socio-cognitive shifts related to critical gender issues, such as health, safety, and rights?
3. How can gender awareness be effectively integrated into livelihood programs to ensure sustainable and holistic empowerment for women in rural India?

5.3 Method

5.3.1 Research Design

This exploratory study employs a qualitative, cross-sectional design to investigate shifts in **knowledge, attitudes, and practices** (KAP) among rural women participating in livelihood and gender awareness programs. The study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of these interventions.

Quantitative methods were used to capture measurable changes in participants' financial independence, decision-making capabilities, and resource utilisation. In contrast, qualitative methods explored nuanced transformations in attitudes, perceptions, and lived experiences.

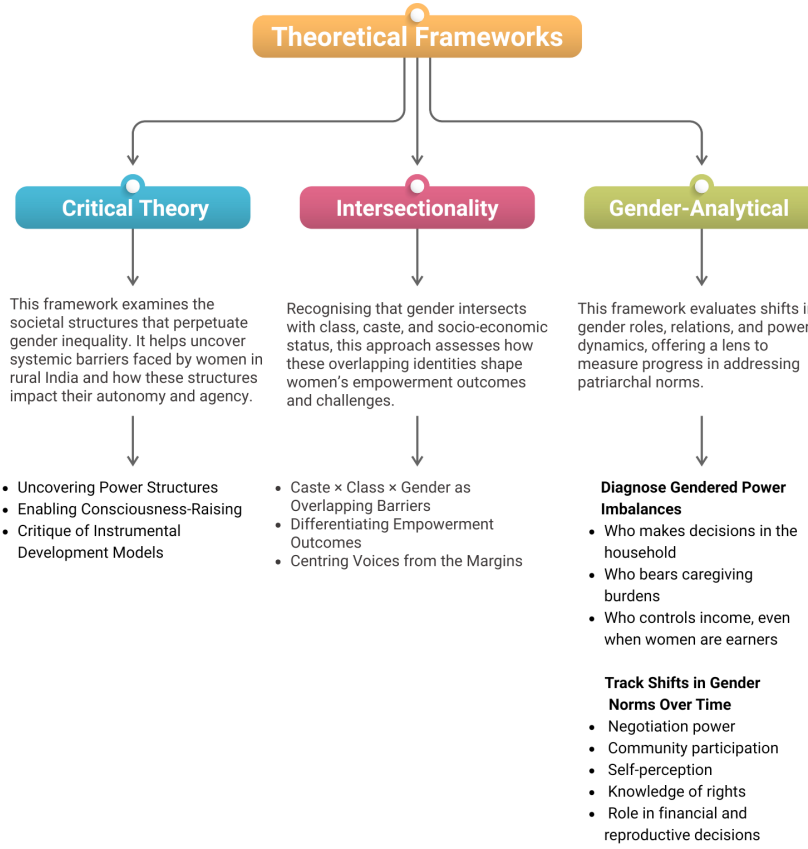
5.3.2 Theoretical Frameworks

The study draws on three key theoretical frameworks to analyse systemic factors influencing empowerment (Figure 5.1).

5.3.3 About the Gender Program

Structured around four pillars—Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM), Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRHR), Mental Health (MH), and Gender Concepts and Identities—the program employed interactive, activity-based monthly workshops over nine months to encourage reflection and engagement. Covering topics such as reproductive health, menstruation, mental well-being, gender roles, stereotypes, and leadership, the program aimed to challenge traditional norms and foster both individual and collective agency. By integrating personal, relational, and systemic perspectives, it sought to cultivate gender consciousness and empower women to navigate societal challenges with confidence and autonomy.

Figure 5.1: Theoretical Frameworks



5.3.4 Indicators for Social Empowerment

To evaluate the effectiveness of integrating gender awareness into livelihood programs, the study identified specific indicators for social empowerment (Table 5.1). These indicators were chosen to capture the multidimensional nature of gender empowerment, encompassing both individual and community-level transformations. They reflect critical areas where systemic barriers limit women's participation and agency.

5.3.5 Locale

Anekal Taluk, located on the outskirts of Bangalore in Karnataka, India, serves as the research locale for this study. Covering approximately 530 square kilometres and encompassing over 227 villages, Anekal has a diverse population exceeding 850,000, characterised by a mix of rural, agricultural, migrant, and peri-urban communities.

Table 5.1: Indicators for Social Empowerment

Sno	Indicator	Description
1	Decision-Making Autonomy	Frequency and type of decisions participants make independently or jointly within the household. Ability to negotiate within familial and community contexts.
2	Community Participation	Level of involvement in community activities, meetings, or leadership roles. Recognition and respect gained within the community.
3	Self-Perception and Confidence	Changes in participants' perceptions of their roles and identities beyond traditional norms. Confidence in expressing opinions in both private and public spheres.
4	Knowledge of Rights and Access to Resources	Awareness of legal rights, social services, and government schemes. Active use of resources for health, education, and financial well-being.
5	Gender Role Attitudes	Shifts in perceptions regarding traditional gender roles and norms. Ability to challenge patriarchal structures in households and communities.
6	Peer Support and Solidarity	Formation of networks or collectives for mutual support and advocacy. Willingness to assist and mentor others facing similar barriers.
7	Health and Well-Being Awareness	Improved understanding and practices related to sexual and reproductive health, mental health, and hygiene. Comfort in addressing taboo topics, such as menstruation and consent.
8	Negotiation & Advocacy	Skills to handle disputes or conflicts at home or in the community. Instances of standing up for oneself or others in oppressive situations.

This study was conducted in partnership with One Billion Literates Foundation (OBLF), a community-based organisation (CBO) that has been operational in Anekal since 2010, focusing on uplifting marginalised communities through education and health initiatives. OBLF offers a comprehensive skilling program to rural women, providing them with livelihood opportunities as Community Teachers in government schools and as frontline health workers in their public health programs. These initiatives aim to enhance educational outcomes for children in underserved areas and address community healthcare needs while fostering economic independence and empowerment among semi-educated rural women.

5.3.6 Sampling & Participant Details

The study employs purposive criterion-based sampling to select 120 women currently engaged with the One Billion Literates Foundation (OBLF) in Anekal Taluk, Karnataka. Participants were selected based on their involvement in the OBLF Kickstart women's skilling program and their roles as Community

Teachers or frontline health workers. All participants had received gender awareness training for at least two years alongside their engagement in skilling and livelihood initiatives. Their duration of association with OBLF ranges from 2 to 13 years, reflecting varied levels of experience and depth of program exposure.

The sample includes women from diverse social backgrounds: 25 belong to the Scheduled Castes (SC), 32 to the Scheduled Tribes (ST), and the remaining 63 to Other Backwards Classes (OBC). Most participants come from low-income or below-poverty-line households. Their educational and occupational histories are varied — many were previously unemployed or engaged in agriculture, some were pursuing their Pre-University Course (PUC or 12th grade), while others had experience running small businesses, either independently or with family support. This diversity offers a nuanced understanding of how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape women's access to empowerment pathways.

5.3.7 Data Collection

The study employs a qualitative approach using triangulation through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews, and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to investigate the impact of skilling and gender awareness programs on women's empowerment.

- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Seven FGDs were conducted across stratified locations — Lakshmisagar, Sarjapura, and Anekal — to explore community-level perspectives on gender roles, empowerment, and the influence of skilling and gender awareness programs. Each group comprised 10 to 15 participants, covering a total of approximately 80 women. These discussions provided insights into collective experiences, cultural barriers, and shifts in attitudes associated with the interventions.
- **In-Depth Interviews:** Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with women participating in the skilling and gender awareness programs. These interviews captured detailed personal narratives, focusing on transformations in agency, mobility, and decision-making capabilities resulting from their involvement in the programs.
- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Six KIIs were conducted with trainers, supervisors, and key stakeholders to examine the structural and operational aspects of the skilling and gender awareness programs, including implementation challenges and strategies for fostering empowerment.

Triangulating these methods provided a comprehensive understanding of the individual, community, and organisational dimensions of the skilling and gender awareness programs.

5.3.8 Data Analysis

The study employed a combination of narrative and thematic analysis to interpret the qualitative data collected from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and in-depth interviews. These methods provided a comprehensive understanding of participants' lived experiences and the impact of skilling and gender awareness programs on their empowerment.

Narrative analysis focused on examining personal and collective stories shared by participants, particularly regarding changes in gender roles, agency, and decision-making. This approach highlighted how participants interpreted their experiences and how these interpretations shaped their behaviours and interactions within patriarchal structures.

Thematic analysis was conducted using ATLASTi. This involved systematic coding and the development of themes (Table 5.2). Deductive coding was applied against the eight social determinants of empowerment criteria established in the study. Thematic maps were developed to illustrate relationships between these criteria, highlighting shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) related to gender and health, as well as how the programs interacted with the socio-cultural context of rural Anekal (Figure 5.2).

Table 5.2: Thematic Indicators Emerging through Participant Narratives

Theme	Description
Persistent Patriarchal Authority Despite Income	Women's financial contributions did not shift decision-making power, which remained in the hands of male family members.
Gendered Policing by Older Women	Older women, including mothers-in-law, enforced patriarchal norms by urging silence, adjustment, and sacrifice.
Dual Burden of Labour	Participants managed both paid work and full domestic responsibilities, leading to exhaustion and emotional strain.
Motherhood as the Core of Womanhood	Regardless of income, women were still judged by their caregiving and maternal performance.
Emotional and Mental Health Suppression	Mental health struggles were common but rarely acknowledged due to cultural expectations of silent endurance.
Gendered Devaluation of Women's Income	Women's earnings were considered supplementary, causing tension when men perceived a threat to their authority.
Alcoholism and Gendered Violence	Alcohol abuse by male partners often led to increased domestic violence, especially when women asserted independence.
Bodily Autonomy and Reproductive Control	Women lacked control over family planning and reproductive choices, with husbands or in-laws dictating decisions.

Cultural Silence Around Menstruation and Sexual Health	Stigma around menstruation and sexual health kept women silent, misinformed, and reluctant to seek help.
Emergence of Selfhood and Personal Identity	Participants developed a sense of identity beyond roles like wife, mother, or daughter-in-law for the first time.
Formation of Collective Consciousness and Sisterhood	Women built strong peer networks based on shared struggles, creating emotional and practical support systems.
Increased Awareness of Consent and Bodily Rights	Interactive activities helped women understand bodily autonomy, consent, and their right to set boundaries.
Negotiation Power in Household Dynamics	Women began asserting themselves in family finances and domestic conversations, often for the first time.
Recognition of Gender-Based Violence as Structural	Gender-based violence was reframed as systemic rather than personal, prompting naming and resistance.
Shifting Relationship to Sexuality and Pleasure	Sexuality was redefined from duty to agency, as women learned about pleasure and sexual rights.
Prioritisation of Self-Care and Emotional Well-being	Women began to see self-care and rest as necessary and valid, not indulgent or selfish.
Intergenerational Impact of Empowerment	Empowered women began advocating for their daughters' education and delaying child marriage, reshaping generational norms.
Program Structure as a Safe Learning Space	The program's safe, reflective, and participatory design was key to unlocking emotional honesty and transformation.
Discomfort and Resistance to Change	Some participants felt guilt or fear when asserting agency, highlighting the emotional complexity of empowerment.
Limits of Empowerment Without Structural Change	Without structural reforms in healthcare, legal access, or community safety, individual gains hit systemic barriers.

5.3.9 Ethics and Reflexivity

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with clear explanations of the study's purpose, data use, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. For participants with varying literacy levels, verbal consent procedures were employed to ensure comprehension. Interviews were conducted in safe, private spaces away from participants' families, communities, and workplaces to facilitate open and honest disclosure. Pseudonyms were

used to protect participants' identities, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions.

Efforts were made to minimise power dynamics during data collection. Interviewers who did not have a direct prior engagement with participants conducted the sessions to ensure neutrality and foster a comfortable environment for sharing sensitive information. This approach aimed to mitigate biases and encourage authentic narratives.

The researcher maintained reflexivity throughout the study, acknowledging the potential impact of their positionality as an outsider to the demographic and cultural context of Anekal.

5.3.10 Limitations

Given that the study is exploratory, it has several limitations that may influence the interpretation of findings. Firstly, the data represents a snapshot of participants' experiences at a specific point in time, which may not fully capture long-term changes or trends in gender roles and empowerment. External factors, such as economic conditions or political shifts, could also impact participants' perspectives, adding contextual variability. Additionally, while the sample provides valuable insights, it may not encompass the full diversity of experiences within the community, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Expanding the sample size and conducting longitudinal studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics and empowerment outcomes.

5.4 Findings

5.4.1 Reevaluating 'empowerment' through a gender lens

Cultural and Patriarchal Constraints

In discussions with participants, it became clear that despite increased financial independence, many household decisions remain influenced by patriarchal norms. One participant noted,

> "*I can now make decisions about what to buy for my children or manage small household expenses, but for larger matters like investments or property, my husband or father-in-law has the final say.*"

This sentiment was echoed by others, who indicated that while they could handle daily purchases, significant decisions were still controlled by male family members.

Another participant described how her role as an earner had little impact on her influence:

> "*Even though I contribute money, I still have to ask my husband for permission before making large purchases. It's always his word that matters.*"

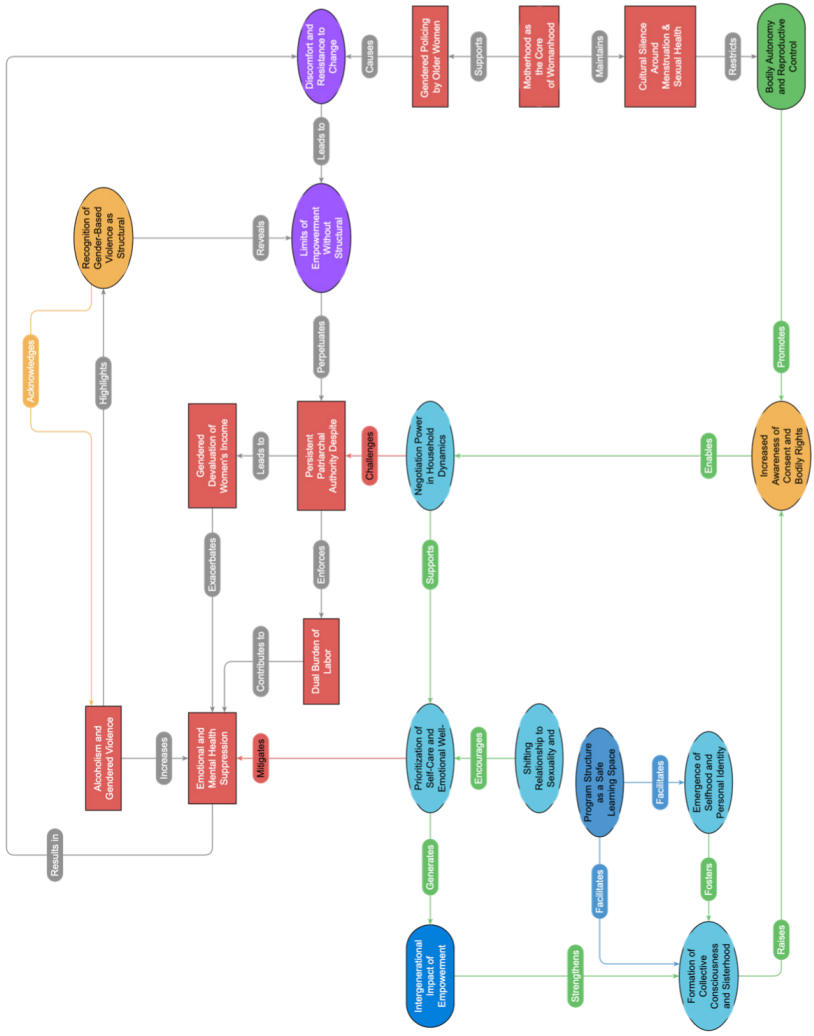


Figure 5.2: Thematic Map of Emergent Themes and their Interconnections

This reflects the persistence of traditional power dynamics, where male authority dominates and limits women's empowerment. Several women also noted that financial independence did not shield them from patriarchal expectations. One participant stated,

> "*I may be earning now, but my husband still believes men should handle important matters. He doesn't take my input seriously for big decisions.*"

This highlights that while women contribute financially, societal norms continue to restrict their full participation in decision-making processes regarding property and family matters.

Dual Burden of Labour

Participant narratives described the overwhelming workload resulting from juggling employment with traditional household responsibilities. One participant shared her daily routine, which reflected the narratives of most of the group:

> "*I wake up at 4 a.m. to tend to the fields before household chores. After cooking, cleaning, and getting my children ready for school, I head to work at OBLF. When I return home, I prepare dinner, help my children with homework, and finish any unfinished chores.*"

This narrative exemplifies the 'dual burden' many women experience as they shoulder full responsibility for household management alongside professional duties. Another participant echoed this sentiment:

> "*Even though I now earn my own money, my workload hasn't reduced at home. My husband still expects me to take care of everything, from cooking to cleaning and looking after the children. It's like having two full-time jobs.*"

Despite their financial contributions, these women are still expected to fulfil traditional roles, reinforcing the gendered division of labour within their households.

The strain of balancing employment with caregiving duties is further compounded by agricultural work in rural areas. As one participant explained,

> "*I work in the fields before and after my OBLF job. There's no rest. My husband helps sometimes, but the responsibility for both the house and the farm is still seen as mine.*"

The expectation that women maintain these duties while employed reflects deep-rooted gender norms that place both productive and reproductive labour squarely on their shoulders. This dual burden is not only physically exhausting but also emotionally draining. Several women mentioned feeling constantly overwhelmed, with one participant expressing,

"*There's never enough time. Even when I'm at work, I'm thinking about all the things waiting for me at home. It feels like I can never catch a break.*"

This highlights the unrelenting nature of their responsibilities, where financial empowerment through employment has not translated into a reduction in household duties or a more equitable division of labour at home.

Caregiving and Reproductive Roles

Participants emphasised that their roles as caregivers remained intact despite their professional contributions. One participant stated,

"*No matter how much I earn or work outside the home, if I fail to take care of my children or the house, it is seen as my failure as a woman.*"

This sentiment was common, as women felt judged primarily on their ability to manage caregiving and household responsibilities. The expectation that women's primary role was to care for their families was deeply ingrained. One woman noted,

"*I am proud of my job, but if my children fall sick or the house is not clean, my in-laws and husband question my priorities.*"

This reflects the belief that caregiving is a woman's ultimate responsibility, with any lapse seen as a personal shortcoming.

Motherhood dominated many conversations, with participants feeling their identities reduced to being mothers.

"*My husband tells me that my main job is to be a good mother,*"

one participant explained. Even those contributing financially felt their worth tied to traditional maternal roles. Another participant shared the challenges of balancing reproductive duties with work:

"*I had to leave work for months because of my pregnancy, and it was as if my contributions didn't matter.*"

This highlights the pressure on women to prioritise reproductive roles, often limiting their personal autonomy and professional ambitions.

Gendered Perceptions of Income

Despite their financial contributions through employment with OBLF, participants consistently reported that their earnings were viewed as secondary to their husbands'. One participant explained,

"*Even though I bring in money, it's still my husband's income that matters most. My salary is seen as 'extra' for groceries or small things for the children.*"

This perception reflects deep-seated gender norms prioritising men as primary breadwinners, even when women contribute significantly to household finances.

This dynamic often led to tension within households. One participant shared,

> "*When I started earning, my husband felt I was undermining his role. He would say, 'You think you can do everything now that you earn money?'*"

Many women recounted similar experiences where their financial independence caused discomfort or conflict, leading to controlling behaviours from husbands threatened by their growing autonomy. Domestic violence was also a recurring theme. One participant candidly stated,

> "*As soon as I started bringing money home, my husband's drinking worsened, and he became more violent. He couldn't handle that I was earning more than him.*"

For these women, financial empowerment did not protect them from domestic violence; in some cases, it exacerbated existing tensions as husbands struggled with shifts in traditional gender roles. Even in supportive households, participants' income was often treated as "pocket money" rather than a meaningful contribution to family stability. This underscores the persistent belief that men's earnings hold more value, reinforcing a hierarchy within the household despite women's increased financial independence.

Alcoholism and Domestic Violence

Even with increased financial independence, many participants reported that domestic violence and alcoholism remained persistent issues in their households. One woman recounted,

> "*My husband drinks every night, and even though I contribute money, it doesn't stop him from becoming violent.*"

This sentiment was echoed by others who felt that their financial contributions did not protect them from their spouses' harmful behaviours, particularly in households where alcohol abuse was prevalent.

Some participants internalised the abuse as part of their fate. One woman stated,

> "*I've learned to stay quiet because if I fight back, it will only make things worse for me and my children. He might throw me out, and then what will I do?*"

This reflects the difficult choices women face in resisting violence within a system that offers little protection or support. Many feared that standing up to violence could destabilise their household or threaten their safety and that of their children, trapping them in a cycle of silence.

Several women shared how their husbands' alcoholism affected their financial stability. One participant explained,

> "*Whatever I save goes to covering for his drinking. He wastes money on alcohol, and I'm left to pay for the children's school fees or food.*"

This illustrates the burden placed on women, where their income is often used to compensate for irresponsible spending, undermining the benefits of financial independence. In some cases, violence and alcoholism are intertwined with issues of masculinity and control. One woman described,

> "*My husband says that now that I work, I don't respect him as a man. He drinks to show me he is still in charge, and when he gets violent, it's a reminder that I can't change anything.*"

This narrative highlights the complex relationship between gender roles, financial empowerment, and domestic violence, where husbands feel threatened by their wives' independence and use violence as a means of reasserting authority. These experiences reveal that financial empowerment alone does not shield women from domestic violence or the harmful effects of alcoholism; fear of escalating violence and lack of viable alternatives keep many trapped in abusive relationships.

Lack of Bodily Autonomy and Health Awareness

Participants expressed that entrenched cultural norms limited their autonomy in family planning and sexual health. One woman stated,

> "*In my household, decisions about having children are not mine. My husband and in-laws expect me to obey.*"

Many felt their reproductive duties took precedence over personal choice. Cultural stigma around sexual and reproductive health was a major barrier to care. One participant explained,

> "*I've had menstrual issues for years, but never talk about it. It's not discussed openly.*"

This silence led women to internalise shame regarding these topics. Participants also reported a lack of support from spouses in family planning. One shared,

> "*My husband refuses contraception, and I'm scared to oppose him. I've had two unplanned pregnancies because of this.*"

This lack of bodily autonomy left women vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies and health complications.

Societal expectations that women's primary role is motherhood exacerbated these challenges. One woman noted,

> "*In my community, being a good wife means having children. People question you if you don't have kids right away.*"

This pressure forced many to endure repeated pregnancies without control over their reproductive health. Health-seeking behaviours were shaped by this lack of autonomy. One participant said,

> "*I didn't want to tell anyone about the pain during pregnancy. By the time I went to the doctor, it was too late.*"

These experiences illustrate how shame and limited decision-making power led to negative health outcomes. Misinformation and societal pressures reinforced barriers to accessing necessary health services.

Mental Health and Emotional Well-being

Participants shared significant mental health challenges, often exacerbated by the pressure to balance roles as caregivers, workers, and homemakers. One woman described her postpartum depression:

> "*After my child was born, I felt overwhelmed and sad all the time, but I couldn't tell anyone. I was expected to take care of the baby, the house, and my work, so there was no space for how I felt.*"

This isolation and suppression of emotional needs were common, with many reporting that mental health was a taboo topic in their communities. Loneliness is another prevalent theme. One woman explained,

> "*I'm surrounded by people, but I still feel so alone. My husband doesn't understand my stress, and there's no one to talk to.*"

This emotional disconnect often contributed to prolonged anxiety and depression. The constant juggling of responsibilities left little time for self-care. One participant shared,

> "*There's never time for me. I wake up early to take care of the house, then work, and come back to more chores. I don't remember the last time I had a moment to relax.*"

This cycle of duties prevented women from addressing their mental health needs. Societal expectations further suppressed their mental health. One woman noted,

> "*As a mother, I'm expected to put my children first. No one asks how I'm doing because it's assumed a good mother doesn't complain.*"

This pressure limited their focus on personal well-being. Overall, participants' narratives reflect a struggle with mental health and emotional well-being, compounded by societal expectations and a lack of support systems. Many women were unable to express or address these issues, leaving their emotional needs unmet.

Social Stigma and Gender Norms

The participants' narratives revealed the strong influence of deep-rooted cultural beliefs that reinforce rigid gender norms, particularly the expectation that a "good woman" suffers in silence. This cultural pressure to endure hardships without complaint discouraged women from expressing their needs or questioning their assigned roles. Several women noted how these norms were passed down through generations, with older women, including mothers and mothers-in-law, often reinforcing these ideals. This perpetuation of traditional roles, where women are expected to bear emotional, physical,

and financial burdens without protest, kept many participants locked into restrictive expectations. The roles of "good mother" and "good wife" were frequently upheld as models of behaviour, leaving little room for personal desires or challenges to these norms. The belief that women should prioritise their families at the expense of their own well-being was a common theme. Women who stepped outside these prescribed roles, even by taking time for themselves or seeking help, faced criticism or were labelled as failures.

Interestingly, it wasn't only men or societal structures that reinforced these gender norms—women themselves played a significant role in upholding patriarchal expectations. Several participants mentioned how other women in the community quickly judged and enforced these standards. One woman said,

> "*The older women, even my neighbours, will talk if they see me doing anything outside what they think is proper.*"

This social policing reinforced patriarchal expectations and limited the space for challenging traditional roles. Another participant reflected,

> "*Sometimes, the women around you are even harsher than the men. They'll criticise you for not doing enough or for not following the 'right' path.*"

This dynamic was particularly evident in interactions between generations of women. Many participants described how their mothers or mothers-in-law enforced rigid expectations around caregiving and domestic roles. These narratives highlight how patriarchal norms are often passed down and reinforced by women, making it more challenging to break free from traditional expectations. Additionally, several participants pointed out how women maintained silence around issues like domestic violence and marital difficulties. This collective silence, enforced by both older and younger women, prevented many from seeking help or challenging abusive dynamics at home.

5.4.2 Reclaiming Their Own Narratives: Outcomes of gender education

Development of "The Self", Social Identities & Personhood

The gender awareness program had a transformative impact on participants, enabling them to develop a sense of personal identity beyond their traditionally assigned roles as mothers, wives, daughters-in-law, or their professional identities as teachers or health workers. For many, this marked the first opportunity to reflect on themselves as autonomous individuals rather than solely in relation to their familial or occupational roles. One participant expressed this realisation poignantly:

> "*For the first time, I thought about myself as a person, not just a mother or wife. I realised I have my own dreams, my own voice.*"

This newfound self-awareness served as a critical juncture, empowering participants to recognise and articulate the patriarchal patterns that had shaped their lives.

Structured reflection and facilitated group discussions emerged as pivotal mechanisms for fostering this sense of identity. These activities offered a supportive environment for participants to "name and frame" their struggles and delineate personal boundaries, thus reclaiming a sense of agency. As one participant explained:

> "*I learned that it's okay to say no. That I have the right to my own space, my own decisions.*"

Such reflections enabled participants to navigate their lives with a deeper understanding of their needs, rights, and individuality, laying the groundwork for greater autonomy.

This process of self-discovery also had broader social implications, as participants began to assume leadership roles within their communities—a significant step aligned with the objectives of the livelihood program. Gaining confidence in their identities, many women actively engaged in local decision-making processes. One participant recounted:

> "*Now, when decisions are made in the village, I speak up. I feel like my voice matters, and people listen.*"

This transition from marginalisation to self-advocacy highlights the program's role in equipping women to participate meaningfully in community leadership, fostering sustainable models of empowerment where women drive their own societal transformations.

Moreover, the impact extended beyond individual empowerment to challenge entrenched gender norms. By questioning harmful practices and raising awareness within their households, participants catalysed shifts toward gender equality. These changes hold significant potential for intergenerational impact, as participants actively modelled and encouraged progressive attitudes in their children. For instance, one participant shared her efforts to prevent her daughter's premature marriage and support her medical education:

> "*I tell my girls now that they don't just have to be someone's wife. They can be who they want to be.*"

This deliberate effort to challenge societal expectations underscores how empowered women can influence future generations, encouraging their children to resist restrictive norms and pursue self-determined paths.

Building Social Capital

The findings reveal that participants developed a collective consciousness and sense of sisterhood, stemming from shared struggles and experiences that had often been suppressed due to societal norms and isolation. This recognition of common challenges was instrumental in breaking the silence

surrounding sensitive issues such as domestic violence, reproductive health, and financial control. One participant reflected:

> "*I used to feel alone in my problems, but hearing other women discuss similar issues made me realise we are all facing the same things.*"

Such realisations underscored the systemic nature of their challenges, reframing them as collective rather than individual struggles.

The cultivation of open dialogue fostered trust and enabled women to express themselves in ways that had previously been unavailable. As another participant described:

> "*It's like we became each other's support system. We could talk openly without fear of judgment.*"

These shared spaces shifted the approach to problem-solving, moving away from reliance on external interventions toward community-driven solutions that were both sustainable and contextually relevant. For instance, participants began accompanying one another to hospitals or health clinics and supporting each other during familial conflicts. One participant remarked,

> "*We started thinking about how we could help each other instead of waiting for someone from the outside to tell us what to do. We know our problems better than anyone.*"

This peer network fostered a deeper sense of empowerment that extended beyond individual change, enabling women to advocate for one another and engage in collective action. Some groups worked together to address domestic violence, while others facilitated access to healthcare services for their peers. The solidarity cultivated within these networks strengthened participants' ability to challenge structural barriers and provided an enduring support system. Many participants continued to meet and support one another informally, even after the initial structured activities ended, creating a self-sustaining community capable of addressing both personal and communal challenges.

Improved Awareness of Health, Consent, and Boundaries

The participants demonstrated a significant increase in their knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and found that utilising interactive methods to explore topics such as consent, bodily autonomy, and personal boundaries helped them actualise it for themselves within their own households and communities. Many participants entered the program with limited understanding due to cultural stigmas and misinformation surrounding women's health. As one participant stated,

> "*We never talked about these things at home. I didn't have the understanding nor the language about my own body.*"

A key method employed was theatre, which illustrated real-life scenarios involving consent. These performances helped participants recognise violations of consent and understand that behaviours they considered normal, such as a partner making decisions about their bodies without consultation, were unacceptable. One participant noted,

> "*Watching the skits made me realise that things I thought were normal are actually wrong.*"

This approach effectively demystified consent by emphasising both the right to say yes and the right to say no. The body mapping exercise was another significant tool, allowing participants to explore their relationships with their bodies by mapping emotions like pleasure, pride, shame, and pain. For many women, this was their first opportunity to reflect on their physical and emotional experiences independently of societal expectations. One participant reflected,

> "*Through the body mapping, I realised how much of my body I felt ashamed of.*"

These methods enabled participants to confront stigmas surrounding reproductive health and consent. The program's comprehensive sessions gradually destigmatised discussions about women's health. One participant expressed newfound empowerment:

> "*After learning about family planning and consent, I felt empowered to talk to my husband about it.*"

Ultimately, the education provided led to improved health-seeking behaviours. Many women reported feeling more comfortable accessing healthcare services related to maternal health and sexual well-being. One participant shared,

> "*I used to avoid going to the doctor because I was embarrassed to talk about my body. But now I feel like I have the right to ask questions.*"

Challenging Cultural Stigmas Around Menstruation and Sexual Health

The findings highlight the significant impact of addressing cultural stigmas and myths surrounding menstruation and sexual health, which have historically left many women with limited knowledge and access to safe health practices. Participants reported entering the initiative with deeply ingrained taboos that silenced discussions about menstruation and reproductive health. A particularly pervasive challenge was the mistrust and misinformation surrounding menstrual products, such as menstrual cups and tampons. One participant admitted:

> "*I always thought tampons were dangerous, that they would hurt or damage my inner parts.*"

By providing factual information and fostering open discussions, these misconceptions were dispelled, enabling participants to approach menstrual health with confidence and clarity.

This increased understanding encouraged participants to break the silence around menstruation, initiating conversations within their families and communities. One participant shared her pride in addressing these topics openly:

> "*I even talked to my daughter and son about periods, something my mother never did with me*."

Such shifts demonstrate the beginning of a generational change, where taboos are challenged, and knowledge is openly shared.

Beyond menstruation, broader sexual health issues were addressed, including reproductive rights, contraception, and family planning. Participants highlighted the burden of contraception and sterilisation often falling disproportionately on women. Discussions emphasised the importance of shared responsibilities in reproductive health, encouraging a more balanced perspective on gender roles in family planning. This reimagining of roles extended to workplace settings, where policies, such as menstrual leave, empowered women to exercise their rights and prioritise their well-being.

Developing a Lens of 'Questioning' and 'Negotiation'

Empowering women to navigate patriarchal norms requires equipping them with the tools and confidence to challenge restrictive decision-making dynamics. Participants reported feeling constrained by traditional gender roles that limited their participation in household decision-making, particularly in areas such as finances, caregiving, and reproductive choices. However, through critical reflection and skill-building, many women began to develop the capacity to advocate for themselves and renegotiate their roles within these domains.

One participant reflected on the gradual nature of this shift, stating:

> "*It's not like they [family/community] will magically change one day. I still have so many restrictions. But now the 'guilt' I felt in 'indulging' in my work has vanished. I can negotiate and pursue what I want.*"

Such narratives illustrate the ways in which personal transformation can serve as a foundation for incremental change within entrenched systems of control.

The ability to negotiate emerged as a central strategy for self-advocacy, enabling participants to articulate their needs and assert themselves more effectively. One woman explained:

> "*I learned how to say 'no' and explain why. It wasn't easy, but now I can discuss what I want without fear.*"

This process of questioning and negotiating extended to traditionally male-dominated spheres, such as household financial planning. For

instance, participants described newfound participation in discussions about budgeting and expenditures, previously seen as the sole domain of male family members. One participant noted,

> "*Before, I never questioned how money was spent. Now, I sit down with my husband to plan together. I know where the money goes and can suggest what we need.*"

Despite recognising that systemic patriarchal structures remain deeply rooted, participants reported greater confidence in their ability to influence decisions within these constraints. As one woman observed:

> "*I know that my husband is still the head of the house, but now I can express my thoughts, and he listens.*"

Such accounts reflect a subtle yet meaningful rebalancing of household power dynamics, where women's voices are increasingly acknowledged and respected.

Prioritising Mental Health, Self-Care, and Emotional Well-Being

Participants faced significant mental health challenges, including stress, postpartum depression, and anxiety, exacerbated by societal expectations that discouraged vulnerability. Many described internalised struggles, shaped by norms emphasising endurance and self-sacrifice. One participant shared:

> "*I always thought I had to just endure everything.*"

The pressures of caregiving and household management left women feeling overwhelmed and isolated. Another reflected:

> "*I felt like I was drowning, with no one to talk to.*"

Encouragement to prioritise mental health alongside caregiving roles marked a turning point for many participants. Structured dialogues fostered recognition of self-care as a legitimate need, a concept previously alien to them. One participant noted,

> "*I never thought it was okay to take a break for myself. But now I realise that if I don't take care of my own health, I can't take care of anyone else.*"

This newfound perspective empowered women to reclaim control over their emotional well-being.

Creating safe spaces for relaxation and leisure further enabled participants to recharge and explore personal interests without guilt. One woman described this shift:

> "*It felt like I was finally giving myself permission to focus on myself.*"

These experiences illustrate how recognising mental health needs can transform not only individual lives but also caregiving and social dynamics.

Awareness of Sexuality and Pleasure

Sexuality and personal pleasure, deeply stigmatised topics, were explored as part of efforts to challenge entrenched cultural norms. Participants revealed that their sexual experiences were often shaped by the desires and needs of their husbands, with little consideration for their own autonomy or agency. One participant expressed:

> "*Sex was something that happened because my husband wanted it. I never thought about whether I wanted it or how I felt.*"

This lack of personal agency reflected broader societal norms that deny women the right to sexual self-expression and autonomy.

Efforts to address these taboos created a space for dialogue on sexual rights and pleasure, encouraging participants to examine their feelings and desires, long suppressed under cultural expectations. Initially, these discussions were met with discomfort, as confronting such deeply ingrained beliefs proved challenging. However, participants began to navigate these conversations within a safe and supportive environment.

By framing sexuality as a right, participants were introduced to concepts of consent, pleasure, and bodily autonomy, previously unfamiliar to many. One participant described the transformative nature of this realisation:

> "*It helped me see the difference between what society expects of me and what I actually need.*"

While some participants acknowledged lingering discomfort around these topics, the dialogues laid a foundation for personal growth and a deeper understanding of sexual autonomy.

These efforts mark an important step in fostering awareness, challenging societal taboos, and planting the seeds for greater agency and self-expression in women's sexual lives.

Recognising Gender-Based Violence

Entrenched social norms perpetuating domestic violence and alcoholism emerged as significant challenges within the community, often internalised by women as inevitable aspects of their roles as wives and caregivers. Many participants recounted accepting abusive behaviour as part of their lived reality, shaped by patriarchal control and societal expectations. One participant reflected:

> "*You see moments of injustice and inequality every day. It is embedded in the small things—where someone sits, who does the work, how I am spoken to, how someone is touching me. Before I felt this inequality, now I have a lens to see them through and shape how I respond.*"

This process of recognition marked an important step in reframing their experiences and understanding the systemic roots of violence.

Discussions around unhealthy power dynamics enabled participants to identify abusive behaviours and critically examine the societal norms that reinforce them, including notions of masculinity tied to dominance and control. Women highlighted their growing ability to question these dynamics, gaining practical tools to navigate or resist situations of abuse. For many, this newfound perspective illuminated their rights and empowered them to envision pathways for seeking support or addressing these issues.

Despite this progress, systemic challenges continue to constrain women's ability to escape cycles of abuse, as deeply ingrained norms that condone violence and alcohol-related harm remain resistant to change. One participant acknowledged these limitations while expressing a sense of agency:

> "*I know it won't change overnight, but now I feel stronger, like I can make a plan to improve my situation, even if it takes time.*"

5.5 Discussion

The findings present a layered understanding of how integrated skilling and gender awareness programs impact women's empowerment. While progress was evident in specific areas, systemic constraints, cultural norms, and intersectional identities shaped the extent of transformation. This study highlights the need for empowerment efforts to balance economic opportunities with strategies that address socio-cultural and systemic barriers.

Financial independence, while a crucial milestone, did not universally translate into enhanced agency or autonomy. Women's earnings often became an extension of their caregiving roles, reinforcing their positioning within traditional familial hierarchies. This underscores the ongoing need to challenge societal norms alongside economic interventions. Unlike Kabeer's (1999) vision of empowerment as the ability to make strategic life choices, financial empowerment in isolation seemed insufficient in addressing entrenched power dynamics. To address this gap, skilling programs should integrate continuous gender sensitisation modules that equip participants with practical strategies to navigate power dynamics, negotiate household roles, and challenge patriarchal norms. These modules should also include intergenerational dialogues to ensure the transfer of gender awareness within families and communities.

Participants' dual responsibilities in both paid work and domestic labour underscore the pervasive nature of the gendered division of labour . The program's economic focus provided avenues for employment, but without accompanying shifts in household dynamics, many women reported experiencing heightened workloads. This finding reflects broader discourses, such as those by Panda and Agarwal (2005), on the importance of equitable redistribution of domestic labour in fostering true gender equity. Interventions that engage male family members in discussions and workshops about equitable responsibility-sharing are necessary to address

this dual burden. Programs could also promote community campaigns showcasing role models practising balanced caregiving to reshape perceptions of domestic work.

Gender awareness workshops played a transformative role by equipping women with tools to question societal norms and navigate patriarchal structures. These interventions encouraged critical reflection on issues such as reproductive health and gender roles, fostering personal and collective agency. Rather than simply providing knowledge, the program cultivated a space for participants to interrogate existing norms, echoing the arguments of Cornwall and Rivas (2015) about the importance of deeper socio-cognitive shifts in empowerment initiatives. To sustain these gains, peer networks developed during the program should be institutionalised as structured collectives. These networks can provide long-term platforms for advocacy and collective problem-solving, amplifying participants' agency within their communities.

However, participants' intersecting identities, particularly around caste and class, revealed additional layers of marginalisation. For Dalit women, systemic inequities compounded their struggles, emphasising the need for targeted strategies that account for intersectionality. Crenshaw's (1991) framework serves as a reminder that empowerment efforts must move beyond generalisations to address the specific needs of diverse groups. Intersectional approaches tailored to the challenges faced by marginalised groups, such as Dalit and tribal women, should be central to program design. Participatory modules co-created with these groups can address barriers tied to caste-based discrimination, geographic isolation, and restricted mobility.

Peer networks emerged as a powerful enabler of collective resilience, allowing women to share experiences and co-develop strategies for overcoming barriers. Unlike top-down interventions, these networks fostered grassroots solidarity and mutual learning, reflecting Batliwala's (1994) emphasis on collective empowerment as a pathway to dismantling patriarchal constraints. Strengthening these networks through training in advocacy techniques, such as petitioning local governments for healthcare access or legal protections, can enhance their effectiveness in addressing systemic issues like domestic violence and mobility restrictions.

Mental health emerged as both a challenge and an area of progress. Many participants faced emotional and psychological pressures compounded by societal expectations and stigmas surrounding mental health. By integrating mental health modules, the program validated participants' struggles and encouraged them to prioritise self-care, aligning with Nussbaum's (2000) assertion that emotional well-being is fundamental to human flourishing. This approach, however, requires further institutional and community-level support to sustain long-term mental health improvements. Expanding mental health components to include culturally sensitive counselling services, peer-led support groups, and collaborations with local mental health organisations can ensure sustained support for participants' emotional well-being.

Cultural norms remained a significant barrier, though participants demonstrated progress in questioning and redefining these norms. By asserting boundaries and renegotiating roles within their households, participants began to challenge patriarchal expectations. This gradual change aligns with Sen's (1999) capabilities approach, which underscores the importance of expanding freedoms and opportunities through agency. Collective action should be strengthened to address persistent barriers, such as domestic violence, through the creation of local advocacy groups. These collectives can act as grassroots platforms to bridge community-level challenges with broader policy advocacy efforts.

Nonetheless, systemic barriers such as domestic violence and restricted financial autonomy persisted, highlighting the limits of individual-level interventions. Addressing these challenges requires a more integrated approach that combines community-based strategies with structural reforms, echoing the insights of Heise et al. (1999) on the multifaceted nature of addressing violence and control. Policy-level advocacy is essential to complement grassroots efforts. Partnerships with local governance structures can drive reforms that prioritise women's control over household finances, expand legal protections against violence, and improve access to reproductive healthcare.

5.6 Conclusion

The insights from this study underscore that empowerment is not a singular or linear process but rather a multifaceted journey shaped by individual, relational, and systemic factors. Integrated skilling and gender awareness programs hold the potential to drive meaningful change, but their impact is contingent on addressing the broader socio-cultural and structural constraints that participants face. Expanding programmatic efforts to include intersectional strategies, fostering collective action, and integrating mental health support can enhance the sustainability and depth of empowerment initiatives. By taking these steps, programs can evolve from addressing immediate needs to fostering systemic and sustainable change, creating pathways for women to achieve autonomy, agency, and collective empowerment in their communities.

In closing, this study demonstrates that empowerment requires a comprehensive approach—one that simultaneously equips women with tools for individual agency and addresses the systemic barriers that limit their freedoms. Only through such an integrated framework can empowerment move beyond rhetoric to become a lived reality for marginalised women, transforming not only their lives but also the communities they inhabit.

Disclaimer: In preparing this manuscript, I have used ChatGPT, Perplexity and Turboscribe version (open-access version) to translate participant interviews, prepare transcripts and frame relevant quotes. I take full responsibility for the content.

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6 Chikankari Artisans and the Digital Economy: Building Resilient Communities in Lucknow Through E-Commerce

Satabdi Roy, Gaurav Majumdar and Vikas Dargan

Abstract

This study investigates the transformative effects of strategic collaborations between Social Purpose Organisations (SPOs), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and digital marketplaces on the promotion and preservation of Chikankari artwork in Lucknow. It specifically focuses on the collaboration between an SPO, the HCL Foundation (CSR partner), and My E-Haat (an e-commerce platform, alongside other digital marketplaces). The research explores how these partnerships have facilitated significant transformation in the lives of women Chikankari artisans, empowering them economically, socially, and culturally. By creating new avenues for income generation, enhancing entrepreneurial capabilities, and providing safe spaces for social engagement, the collaboration has helped artisans build resilient livelihoods. The study uses qualitative analysis to comprehensively understand these interventions. Preliminary qualitative findings reveal that the intervention has fostered financial security, gender empowerment, and entrepreneurial growth, with the forthcoming quantitative analysis expected to support these conclusions. Future research should focus on the continued evolution of digital marketplaces and their potential to drive socio-economic development while ensuring cultural preservation.

Keywords: Chikankari Artwork, Women Empowerment, E- commerce, Skill Development and Livelihoods, Entrepreneurship, Social Security

6.1 Introduction

Chikankari, a traditional embroidery craft from Lucknow, is one of the most cherished and enduring elements of India's textile heritage. Known for its intricate needlework and delicate patterns, Chikankari has been carefully passed down through generations, with women artisans playing a central role in its preservation. However, despite its cultural and historical importance, the craft faces several challenges that affect its economic sustainability and the well-being of the artisans. These challenges include limited access to wider markets, dependence on intermediaries, and a lack of financial security for many women involved in the artform. Additionally, the absence of education and awareness about market trends and modern entrepreneurial practices further limits the artisans' ability to fully benefit from their work, leaving many in vulnerable economic positions.

In recent years, however, strategic collaborations between Social Purpose Organisations (SPOs), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and digital marketplaces have emerged as key drivers of transformation for these artisans. This paper explores the potential of partnerships in promoting Chikankari and enhancing livelihood opportunities for its artisans. Specifically, it examines the collaboration between a SPO—HCL Foundation, and its digital marketplace initiative, My E-Haat, by HCL Foundation. Through this partnership, the focus is on how strategic collaborations can support the craft while improving the socio-economic prospects of the artisans, particularly women, who are deeply engaged in this traditional artform.

One of the key areas of intervention by SPOs and CSR programs has been capacity-building initiatives that equip Chikankari artisans with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate contemporary markets. This initiative typically involves training in areas such as product design, quality control, and sustainable production practices, aligning traditional craftsmanship with modern consumer preferences. By fostering a deeper understanding of market trends, these programs enable artisans to create products that are more likely to appeal to urban and global audiences, thereby increasing their marketability.

Furthermore, the involvement of this CSR initiative, spearheaded by the HCL Foundation, provides an additional layer of support by bridging the gap between artisans and formal financial systems. Access to financial literacy programs and microfinance opportunities allows artisans to better manage their earnings, invest in their enterprises, and escape the exploitative practices of middlemen. Moreover, CSR programs often incorporate mechanisms for fair trade and direct-to-market models, enabling artisans to receive equitable compensation for their work.

Digital platforms, such as My E-Haat, play a crucial role in expanding market access for Chikankari artisans. By leveraging e-commerce, these platforms allow artisans to bypass traditional intermediaries and sell directly to consumers, both locally and internationally. This digital shift not only increases profit margins but also provides artisans with a greater sense of ownership over their work. Additionally, digital marketplaces offer them the opportunity to diversify their product portfolios and adapt to varying consumer demands across geographies, which is crucial for sustaining the relevance of Chikankari in a rapidly changing marketplace.

This intersection represents a promising avenue for addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by Chikankari artisans. It highlights how different entities can come together to support sustainable livelihoods for artisans while preserving and promoting traditional crafts. By fostering strategic partnerships, increasing financial inclusion, and expanding market access, Chikankari artisans are gradually being empowered to overcome longstanding challenges, work towards economic independence, and ensure that their craft continues to thrive for future generations. The evolving ecosystem of support demonstrates that the convergence of social,

corporate, and digital efforts has the potential to revitalise India's textile heritage while uplifting the lives of artisans who have long been its custodians.

6.2 Literature Review

Artisan crafts are a crucial part of India's cultural and economic identity, representing the intricate traditions passed down through generations and reflecting the diverse heritage of the country's regions. However, the handicraft sector has encountered significant challenges in recent decades, particularly in the face of globalisation and rapid industrialisation. Among the most prominent obstacles are shrinking domestic and global markets for handmade products, increasing competition from machine-made goods, and the lack of technological infrastructure to enable artisans to access modern markets effectively (Chutia & Sarma, 2016; Din & Reshi, 2009). These issues not only jeopardise the future of traditional crafts but also have severe implications for the livelihoods of artisans who depend on them, particularly women artisans, who have historically been marginalised within this sector (Wilkinson-Weber, 2004).

Women play a critical role in the traditional crafts industry in India, contributing to a wide range of artisanal activities, from weaving and embroidery to pottery and painting. Despite their extensive involvement, women artisans are often confined to informal, low-paying roles that do not offer them the financial independence or professional recognition enjoyed by their male counterparts (Wilkinson-Weber, 2004; Yadav et al., 2022). They are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, face limited access to education and business training, and are vulnerable to exploitation by intermediaries who profit from their labour without providing fair compensation (Agrahari & Brar, 2016; Littrell & Dickson, 2012). These systemic challenges have perpetuated cycles of poverty and inequality within artisan communities, especially for women, who are often the primary or sole earners in their households.

In recent years, the intersection of CSR initiatives and digital platforms has emerged as a potential solution to some of the challenges faced by India's handicraft sector. While research on this convergence remains limited, particularly in the Indian context, growing evidence suggests that these collaborations can play a transformative role in promoting traditional crafts and improving the economic prospects of artisans (Kalra, 2014; Sattar, 2022).

Studies examining the role of e-commerce platforms in the handicrafts sector indicate that digital marketplaces can significantly expand market access for artisans (Singh et al., 2023; Rehbein, 2013). Traditionally, artisans have relied on local markets or intermediaries to sell their products, which has often resulted in limited sales opportunities and low profit margins. The presence of intermediaries, such as wholesalers or traders, often leads to exploitative practices where artisans are paid a fraction of the final sale price of their goods (Littrell & Dickson, 2012). This

system not only deprives artisans of fair compensation but also inhibits their ability to scale their businesses or invest in improving the quality of their products.

E-commerce platforms, however, provide an alternative model that allows artisans to bypass these intermediaries and sell directly to consumers, both locally and internationally (Rehbein, 2013; Singh et al., 2023). By using online platforms, artisans can showcase their products to a global audience, thereby increasing their sales potential and profit margins. Research has shown that artisans who engage with digital marketplaces often experience improved income opportunities and greater financial security (Mehrotra & Kaveri, 2020; Yadav et al., 2022). This shift to digital platforms also enables artisans to diversify their product offerings, tailoring them to different consumer preferences and trends across various regions, which is crucial for the sustainability of traditional crafts in an increasingly competitive market (Varshney et al., 2023).

Moreover, digital platforms allow artisans to receive direct feedback from customers, helping them refine their products and enhance their business practices (Singh et al., 2023). Access to digital tools and online marketing channels enables artisans to build brand identities and establish long-term relationships with their customers, which fosters customer loyalty and repeat purchases. The success of digital marketplaces in expanding market access and improving income opportunities for artisans has prompted growing interest from both social purpose organisations and corporate entities, particularly through CSR initiatives (Kalra, 2014; Khaire, 2021).

Corporate Social Responsibility has become an increasingly important framework through which corporations engage with social and environmental issues. In the context of the handicraft sector, CSR initiatives have the potential to create sustainable business models that support the long-term viability of traditional crafts while addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by artisans (Khaire, 2021). CSR programs focused on the handicrafts sector typically involve a range of activities, including skill development, business training, financial literacy programs, and support for market access (Agrahari & Brar, 2016).

Recent scholarship on CSR in the handicraft sector highlights the value of corporate involvement in building the capacity of artisan communities. By offering business training and marketing expertise, CSR programs can empower artisans with the knowledge and skills needed to compete in modern markets (Khaire, 2021; Littrell & Dickson, 2012). For instance, corporate initiatives often focus on improving product quality, streamlining production processes, and ensuring that artisans have the resources necessary to meet the demands of contemporary consumers. This support is particularly critical for women artisans, who may not have had prior access to formal education or business training (Wilkinson-Weber, 2004; Yadav et al., 2022).

Collaborations between corporations and digital platforms provide artisans with additional benefits, such as access to online sales channels and digital marketing strategies (Singh et al., 2023). For example, corporate-sponsored training programs might teach artisans how to use social media to promote their products or how to manage e-commerce listings effectively. These initiatives enable artisans to take greater control over the distribution and sale of their products, thereby increasing their income potential and reducing their reliance on exploitative intermediaries (Littrell & Dickson, 2012). Furthermore, many CSR programs prioritise fair trade practices, ensuring that artisans are compensated fairly for their work and that their rights are protected throughout the supply chain (Kalra, 2014; Littrell & Dickson, 2012).

In addition to business training and market access, CSR programs often focus on fostering financial inclusion for artisans. Many artisans, particularly women, lack access to formal financial services, which limits their ability to save, invest in their businesses, or access credit for expansion (Agrahari & Brar, 2016). CSR initiatives that promote financial literacy and provide access to microfinance services can help artisans manage their finances more effectively, invest in their enterprises, and achieve greater economic independence (Mehrotra & Kaveri, 2020). By addressing these foundational challenges, CSR programs contribute to the creation of more sustainable livelihoods for artisans.

While CSR initiatives are crucial for building capacity and supporting sustainable business practices, digital platforms play a pivotal role in amplifying these efforts by providing artisans with direct access to broader markets (Singh et al., 2023). E-commerce platforms, such as Amazon's "Handmade" section or India-specific platforms like My E-Haat, allow artisans to reach customers globally, reducing their dependency on local markets and increasing their earning potential (Rehbein, 2013). These platforms not only facilitate direct-to-consumer sales but also provide artisans with valuable analytics and insights into consumer behaviour, which can inform product development and marketing strategies (Varshney et al., 2023).

The integration of CSR initiatives with digital platforms can create a powerful ecosystem that supports both the preservation of traditional crafts and the economic empowerment of artisans (Khaire, 2021). By combining corporate resources with the reach of digital platforms, artisans are better equipped to navigate the complexities of the modern marketplace. This collaboration also ensures that the value of traditional crafts is recognised and that artisans receive fair compensation for their work.

The challenges facing India's handicraft sector are complex and multifaceted, particularly for women artisans who have historically been marginalised within the industry (Wilkinson-Weber, 2004). However, the intersection of CSR initiatives and digital platforms offers promising opportunities for transforming the sector. By providing artisans with business training, marketing expertise, and access to online sales

channels, these collaborations can help them overcome systemic barriers and achieve greater economic independence (Singh et al., 2023). While research on the intersection of CSR and digital platforms in the promotion of traditional crafts remains limited, existing evidence suggests that these partnerships have the potential to create sustainable business models that benefit both artisans and the corporations involved (Khaire, 2021; Kalra, 2014). Through strategic collaborations, traditional crafts can be preserved and promoted, while artisans are empowered to secure better income opportunities and improve their livelihoods.

6.3 Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to assess the transformative impact of strategic collaborations on the promotion and preservation of Chikankari artwork and the lives of women artisans in Lucknow.

Specifically, the research aims to:

- Examine how these partnerships have provided women Chikankari artisans with economic empowerment.
- Analyse the social and cultural impact of these collaborations on the artisan communities.
- Explore how digital marketplaces have enhanced the market access of artisans, fostering long-term resilience and entrepreneurship.
- Investigate the mechanisms that foster the preservation of cultural heritage while promoting modern business practices through these collaborations.

The integration of rural artisans with e-commerce platforms and capacity-building initiatives represents a significant area of inquiry, addressing pressing issues such as rural development, gender equity, cultural preservation, and digital inclusion. Despite the proliferation of similar initiatives, many share overlapping objectives and methodologies, raising critical questions about their scalability, long-term sustainability, and capacity for innovation. This study aims to contribute to the academic discourse by situating itself within this context, exploring the transformative potential of these interventions while addressing gaps in existing research. It emphasises the importance of examining underexplored dimensions, such as the intersectional challenges faced by artisans due to factors like caste, geographic remoteness, and educational disparities, which often limit equitable access to these programs. Furthermore, the study critically evaluates inefficiencies in current models, such as artisan dependency on platforms, scalability constraints, and the risk of commodifying cultural heritage. By investigating innovative approaches, including the application of emerging technologies and alternative frameworks, the study seeks to

provide actionable insights that enhance the impact and sustainability of such initiatives. Through this academic lens, the research underscores the need for more nuanced, equitable, and enduring solutions for the empowerment and development of the artisan ecosystem.

6.4 Methodology

The qualitative component of this research aims to explore the nuanced effects of the collaboration between the SPO, the HCL Foundation, and My E-Haat by HCL Foundation on women Chikankari artisans in rural and peri-urban areas of Lucknow. To capture the depth of this intervention's impact, the study relies on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with key stakeholders, including women artisans, CSR managers, and representatives from the SPO. This approach is designed to gather rich, narrative data that reveals the artisans lived experiences, their challenges, and how the partnership has influenced various aspects of their personal and professional lives.

Interviews were conducted with a select sample of women artisans to document their individual journeys, capturing their perspectives on income generation, market access, and social empowerment. These conversations provided insight into the historical obstacles the artisans faced prior to the intervention, such as limited access to broader markets, exploitation by intermediaries, and minimal exposure to digital literacy. Furthermore, the interviews sought to understand the artisans' views on how the partnership has improved or altered these aspects, focusing on their experiences with new digital tools, training programs, and direct-to-consumer sales models facilitated by My E-Haat.

In addition to individual interviews, focus group discussions were conducted to foster collective dialogue among artisans (Figure 6.1). FGDs provided a platform for artisans to discuss shared experiences and challenges, as well as the benefits and limitations they encountered during the intervention. These discussions helped to highlight the broader community impact of the partnership, uncovering shifts in social dynamics, collaboration among artisans, and collective empowerment. The group setting also encouraged more open and diverse perspectives, particularly on sensitive topics such as gender roles, decision-making within households, and social mobility. The qualitative data gathered from both interviews and FGDs is focused on exploring not only economic outcomes but also the psychosocial and emotional dimensions of the intervention. This includes examining how women artisans perceive their evolving roles as entrepreneurs and community members, and whether the intervention has contributed to a greater sense of autonomy and empowerment. By documenting these personal stories and collective insights, the qualitative approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how the collaboration has influenced the artisans' livelihoods, skills, and overall well-being.

Ultimately, the qualitative analysis aims to contextualise the artisans' experiences within the broader socio-economic landscape, offering deeper insight into how targeted interventions can empower women in traditionally marginalised sectors.

Figure 6.1: FGD in RajaKheda village, Sarthara Panchayat, Lucknow

6.4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the impact of the My E-Haat initiative on the socio-economic and entrepreneurial empowerment of Chikankari artisans in Lucknow. The design incorporates focus group discussions and in-depth semi-structured interviews to capture rich, narrative data from various stakeholders. The following details outline the research methodology.

- Size of the Cohort: The study engaged a total of 65 participants, comprising 50 women artisans through five FGDs and 15 individual interviews with key stakeholders, including artisans, community resource persons, and representatives from the HCL Foundation and the SPO. The cohort was intentionally selected to represent diverse socio-economic backgrounds, skill levels, and levels of engagement with the My E-Haat platform, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the initiative's impact.
- Selection of Focus Groups: The focus groups were strategically organised across five rural and peri-urban areas of Lucknow where the Chikankari initiative is actively implemented. Artisans were chosen using a purposive sampling method to ensure representation across:

1. Skill Level: Participants included both experienced artisans and those newly introduced to Chikankari.
2. Economic Engagement: A mix of full-time and part-time artisans was included to reflect varying degrees of economic dependence on the craft.
3. Digital Literacy: Artisans with varying levels of familiarity with e-commerce platforms and digital tools were selected to capture a range of experiences.

Each FGD consisted of 8–12 participants, creating a manageable group size conducive to open dialogue while ensuring diverse perspectives. This sampling strategy ensured that the focus groups represented a microcosm of the broader artisan cohort engaged in the initiative. Quantitative surveys or observational studies were considered but deemed less suitable for the study's objectives. The qualitative approach was preferred to allow for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges of the artisans, which are critical to understanding the nuanced impact of the initiative. However, the study acknowledges that incorporating complementary quantitative data in future research could provide additional robustness.

The FGDs were designed to be representative of the broader artisan cohort engaged in the My E-Haat initiative in Lucknow, with a specific focus on women artisans practicing the Chikankari artform. The 50 women selected for the FGDs accounted for approximately 10% of the total artisan population participating in the program in this region. While the participants shared a common craft tradition, a deliberate focus on diversity within the groups aimed to capture a broad spectrum of experiences across variables such as age, years of engagement in Chikankari, geographic location within Lucknow, and socio-economic background. The sample included both emerging artisans and seasoned practitioners, reflecting varying levels of skill development, exposure to digital platforms, and economic dependency on the craft. Special attention was given to incorporating voices from marginalised and under-represented segments, including single women, widows, and those from economically disadvantaged households. This inclusive and intersectional sampling strategy ensured that the findings provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the challenges, aspirations, and lived realities of women artisans within the Chikankari ecosystem.

- **Data Collection and Analysis:** The data collected from the FGDs and interviews were transcribed, manually coded, and analysed thematically. Thematic analysis allowed the identification of recurring patterns and unique insights across key dimensions such as economic empowerment, social transformation, and digital access. Triangulation was employed by comparing data from FGDs and interviews to validate findings and ensure reliability. This involved cross-verifying themes that

emerged from the group discussions with individual narratives captured during in-depth interviews. For instance, if a theme such as increased financial independence through digital sales emerged during the FGDs, the research team looked for corresponding accounts in the one-on-one interviews to confirm or nuance the interpretation. This process helped identify convergences as well as outliers, strengthen the credibility of the insights, and mitigate the limitations of relying on a single data source.

- **Alternatives Considered:** Alternative methods, such as quantitative surveys or observational studies, were considered but deemed less suitable for the study's objectives. The qualitative approach was preferred to allow for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of the participants, perceptions, and challenges, which are critical to understanding the nuanced impact of the initiative. However, the study acknowledges that incorporating complementary quantitative data in future research could provide additional robustness.
- **Representation of the FGDs:** The FGDs were designed to be representative of the broader artisan cohort engaged in the My E-Haat initiative. The 50 artisans selected for the FGDs accounted for approximately 10% of the total artisan population participating in the program in Lucknow. This proportional representation, combined with a deliberate focus on diversity within the groups, ensures that the findings are reflective of the wider community's experiences.

6.4.2 Focus Group Discussions and Interviews

The qualitative methodology employed in this study included **five FGDs** conducted across various rural and peri-urban areas of Lucknow, engaging a total of **50 women artisans** actively involved in the Chikankari artform. Additionally, **15 in-depth semi-structured interviews** were conducted with key stakeholders, including women artisans, community resource persons, representatives from the HCL Foundation, and SPO managers. These FGDs and interviews were carefully designed to capture diverse perspectives and provide a comprehensive understanding of the artisans' lived experiences, challenges, and the impact of the intervention.

Each FGD was structured to encourage open and inclusive dialogue. Participants were selected to represent a broad range of experiences, including full-time artisans, part-time workers, and individuals with varying levels of digital literacy and economic dependence on Chikankari.

The interviews and FGDs were guided by a structured set of questions designed to explore key dimensions of the initiative's impact. The first area of inquiry focused on economic empowerment, examining how participation in the My E-Haat platform had influenced artisans' income and financial security. Participants were asked to reflect on any changes in their ability to save, invest, or engage in long-term financial planning as a result of the initiative.

The second dimension explored was **social empowerment**, particularly how the initiative had affected the participants' decision-making power within their households and communities. Artisans were encouraged to share experiences of taking on leadership roles or new responsibilities within their artisan collectives, shedding light on shifts in their social standing and influence.

Another critical aspect of the discussions was the **transition to entrepreneurship**, with questions focused on the training and support artisans received to move from labourers to independent entrepreneurs. Participants were asked to describe their evolving roles within the craft ecosystem and how they perceived themselves in this transition.

The topic of **gender empowerment** was also a significant focus, with questions probing whether the initiative had challenged societal perceptions about women artisans in their communities. Discussions explored how participation in the program had influenced access to critical resources such as healthcare, education, and government entitlements, offering insights into the broader implications of gender-focused interventions.

Finally, the FGDs and interviews delved into the realm of **digital and market access**, investigating artisans' experiences with digital tools and e-commerce platforms like My E-Haat. Participants were asked how these platforms had expanded their customer base, diversified market opportunities, and facilitated their entry into broader national and international markets.

These carefully structured inquiries provided a comprehensive understanding of the initiative's multifaceted impact, ensuring a nuanced analysis of both individual and collective outcomes.

The findings from these discussions consistently revealed a narrative of transformation, particularly in areas of financial independence, leadership, and entrepreneurial growth. Participants frequently emphasised the significance of consistent income through direct-to-market models, the reduction of dependency on intermediaries, and the expansion of their market reach to national and international consumers. Several artisans shared success stories of establishing small-scale businesses, highlighting their enhanced confidence in managing finances, setting prices, and marketing their products directly.

The interviews with SPO managers and CSR representatives provided valuable organisational insights, highlighting the strategic challenges and successes of implementing these interventions. The structured methodology and focused questions enabled the collection of rich, narrative data that allowed for an in-depth analysis of both individual and collective impacts.

To enhance transparency and reproducibility, the study incorporated a detailed set of guiding questions and a diverse participant pool. This diversity enriched the data by capturing varied experiences across full-time artisans, part-time workers, and digitally literate individuals, ensuring a holistic understanding of the initiative's outcomes. This rigour further

supports the study's contributions to the broader discourse on empowering artisans through strategic collaborations and digital interventions.

6.5 Findings

Economic Empowerment: The qualitative findings demonstrate that the introduction of the My E-Haat platform has led to substantial improvements in the economic conditions of women artisans involved in Chikankari. One of the most notable outcomes reported by the participants was the **shift from irregular and uncertain income streams to more stable and reliable earnings**. By eliminating the need for intermediaries, My E-Haat has empowered artisans to sell their products directly to consumers, enabling them to retain a larger portion of the profits. This has not only increased their income but also reduced their vulnerability to exploitation by middlemen, who have historically taken a significant share of artisans' earnings.

The availability of consistent income has been instrumental in enhancing the financial security of the artisans. Many participants highlighted that they were now able to engage in long-term financial planning, including saving for future needs, something that was previously difficult due to the sporadic nature of their earnings. This newfound financial stability has translated into an improved standard of living for the artisans and their families. Rajni's journey from economic hardship to empowerment is an inspiring example of how traditional skills, when combined with the right support, can transform lives (Figure 6.2). Before joining the My E-Haat initiative, Rajni had limited control over her personal and financial decisions. The irregular and modest income of her parents meant she had to put her educational aspirations on hold, unable to afford her tuition fees. However, everything began to change when Rajni started earning a steady income through her Chikankari work supported by My E-Haat. With this newfound financial stability, she resumed her education, began saving for the future, and took on a greater role in managing household needs. More than just economic empowerment, Rajni experienced a shift in how she was perceived—both within her home and her community. Today, Rajni is not only supporting her family but also inspiring the next generation of girls in her neighbourhood. Young women look up to her, seek her advice, and find in her a symbol of possibility and self-worth. Her

Figure 6.2: Rajni, a Chikankari artisans

story stands as a powerful reminder of what can be achieved when women are given the tools and opportunities to thrive. (*Photograph and identity used with consent.*)

The opportunity to engage in a digital marketplace has significantly expanded the customer base of these women beyond local markets, which has been instrumental in enhancing their financial independence. The platform's wide reach has provided new opportunities for revenue generation, enabling artisans to access national and even international markets, thereby increasing their income potential. Full-time artisans are now earning between INR 50,000 and 70,000 per month, while those balancing Chikankari work with other occupations, such as house-help or daily wage work, are generating an average income of INR 4,000 to 6,000 through their part-time efforts. This ecosystem has promoted economic empowerment among the women artisans, fostering not just income growth but also greater financial autonomy and security.

6.5.1 Social Empowerment

The collaboration has also been instrumental in fostering significant social empowerment among the women artisans. Qualitative findings indicate that participation in the My E-Haat platform has led to an increase in the artisans' decision-making power, both within their households and in their broader communities. With enhanced financial independence stemming from consistent and higher income, many women artisans reported a greater sense of agency in managing household finances, making decisions related to family welfare, and contributing to important economic decisions previously dominated by male family members. This shift has elevated their role within the family, providing them with greater respect and recognition for their contributions. In addition to enhanced household decision-making, the intervention has also enabled women artisans to take on leadership roles within their communities. Many have become more active in organising local artisan collectives, helping to coordinate production activities, manage resources, and advocate for fair wages and improved working conditions. These leadership opportunities have not only strengthened their organisational skills but also contributed to their confidence in engaging with larger networks and stakeholders, including CSR representatives and government bodies.

Through the SPO, 500 women are earning income as Chikankari artisans directly. Among them, 22 women work independently as Community Resource Persons (CRPs) helping to connect with other artisans, mobilisation process and providing them with work. The development of such leadership skills among these artisans has further advanced their social standing within their communities. By participating in collective decision-making and assuming roles traditionally reserved for men, these women are challenging gender norms and asserting themselves as key contributors to both the economic and social fabric of their communities. Further, as Preeti explained,

> "*Before I joined My E-Haat, I didn't have much control over decisions at home, especially with money. My earnings were small and irregular, so I couldn't contribute much. But now, with steady income from my Chikankari sales, I can help support my family better. I've started saving and I make decisions about important things like my children's school and household needs. People in my community now see me differently—they come to me for advice and support, which makes me feel I have an identity of my own and am respected.*"

The qualitative evidence thus highlights the transformative impact of the intervention, which has extended beyond economic empowerment to foster meaningful social change, enhancing the artisans' sense of agency, leadership, and social influence.

6.5.2 Transition to Entrepreneurship

The training and support programs provided by the SPO have played a pivotal role in facilitating the transformation of women artisans from wage labourers to independent entrepreneurs. This shift has been one of the most impactful results of the intervention, as many artisans shared that they now see themselves as small business owners rather than simply workers performing manual labour. The comprehensive support provided by the programs, including skills training, business development workshops, and mentorship, has given these artisans the knowledge and tools they need to manage different aspects of their enterprises effectively. A key component of this transition has been the artisans' increased involvement in the pricing, marketing, and distribution of their products. Prior to the intervention, most of the women were dependent on middlemen or contractors, who largely controlled the pricing and sale of their goods, leaving the artisans with minimal earnings. However, through the SPO's training, artisans have gained a clearer understanding of how to value their work and set fair prices for their products, allowing them to secure better profit margins. This shift in pricing autonomy has been particularly empowering, as it has enabled artisans to take control of the financial aspects of their businesses, increasing their income and financial security.

In addition to pricing, the training programs have enhanced the marketing capabilities of the artisans, particularly in the digital space. Many of the women, who had limited exposure to marketing techniques previously, have learned to promote their products through numerous e-commerce platforms, such as My E-Haat, Itokri, Okhai, GoCoop and MyStore (ONDC Network) have become more adept at reaching broader consumer markets. Further, the products are provided with a CRAFTMARK certification and this newfound ability to market directly to consumers has not only expanded their customer base but has also increased the visibility of their craft along with product authenticity, thereby enabling them to

compete more effectively in a competitive marketplace. This newfound control over some portions of the value chain initially strengthened the artisans' sense of independence and nurtured their growing entrepreneurial identity. Overall, the SPO's training and support programs have facilitated a profound shift in how women artisans perceive their role in the craft ecosystem. By empowering them with the skills and confidence to manage their own businesses (in future), the programs have enabled these artisans to transition from passive wage earners to active entrepreneurs, fundamentally altering their economic and social status.

6.5.3 Gender Empowerment

The My E-Haat initiative has demonstrated a significant impact in dismantling entrenched gender barriers within the Chikankari industry, effectively enhancing women's participation in this traditional craft. This initiative not only empowers women to engage actively in entrepreneurial endeavours but also fosters an environment conducive to their personal and professional growth.

The intervention is strategically designed to create safe and supportive spaces for women artisans. These spaces facilitate their engagement in entrepreneurial activities, free from societal stigma and resistance that often accompany women's participation in traditionally male-dominated sectors. By addressing these societal challenges, this collaboration has become a catalyst for change, promoting gender equity in the workforce and enabling women to assert their economic independence. Through various capacity-building programs, the initiative equips women with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in the Chikankari industry. Training sessions focus on enhancing their craftsmanship, business acumen, and market access, thus elevating their status within the supply chain (Figure 6.3). This approach not only improves their technical abilities but also instils confidence and entrepreneurial spirit among participants. The quality of life has improved for the women associated with this program where there is greater awareness and access to healthcare facilities, decision-making ability in households and so on.

Figure 6.3: Chikankari artisans at the training centre in Lucknow

The initiative also promotes the development of community support networks among women artisans, encouraging collaboration and the sharing of knowledge. These networks offer valuable mentorship and resources that are essential for women as they navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship. Additionally, the women involved have gained fair access to government entitlements through the Convergence Initiative. Nearly 99% of artisans have received their Artisan Cards, and 95% have opened bank accounts. Building such supportive ecosystems is key to ensuring the long-term sustainability of women artisans in the Chikankari sector. As one participant in the initiative shared,

> "*Before joining My E-Haat, I felt trapped by societal expectations and limitations. I had a passion for Chikankari, but I never believed I could turn it into a business. Through the training and support I received, I not only learned new techniques but also gained the confidence to showcase my work. I now run my own small business, and I feel empowered to contribute to my family's income while doing what I love. The community of women I've connected with through this initiative has been invaluable; we support each other, share our experiences, and celebrate our successes together. I truly believe that My E-Haat is changing lives and breaking barriers for women like me.*"

Moreover, it's a multifaceted approach that not only empowers women through skill development and entrepreneurship but also creates a supportive community that fosters resilience and innovation. As a result, the initiative plays a critical role in promoting gender equality and economic empowerment, contributing to the broader goal of sustainable development within the craft sector.

6.6 Discussion

The partnership between the HCL Foundation, My E-Haat platform, and the Social Purpose Organisation represents a promising model for empowering Chikankari artisans in Lucknow by integrating traditional craftsmanship with digital technologies and entrepreneurial training. While the initiative's impact is evident, a deeper analysis of its mechanisms, outcomes, and potential limitations further substantiates its argument. For instance, the findings highlight significant improvements in artisans' income levels and financial security. By eliminating intermediaries through direct-to-market models on platforms like My E-Haat, artisans have retained a larger share of profits, leading to greater financial autonomy. Artisans who previously earned inconsistent incomes now report stable monthly earnings ranging from INR 4,000 to 70,000, depending on their level of engagement. This demonstrates the critical role of digital platforms in restructuring traditional value chains. However, artisans with limited digital literacy and market readiness may struggle to fully leverage these opportunities, indicating the need for tiered support structures that address such disparities.

The initiative has also fostered substantial social empowerment, with artisans reporting increased decision-making power within their households and communities. Women who previously had limited agency are now actively participating in household financial planning and assuming leadership roles in artisan collectives. While this transformation aligns with broader discourses on gender equity in the informal sector, further analysis is required to assess the sustainability of these changes. Societal norms and family dynamics, for example, could potentially limit the longevity of these shifts. Additionally, understanding how younger generations perceive traditional crafts as viable economic opportunities would provide further insight into the broader social impact of such initiatives.

A key achievement of the program has been the transition of artisans from wage labourers to entrepreneurs. Training in areas such as product pricing, marketing, and quality control has enabled artisans to perceive their craft as a business rather than a subsistence activity. Certifications like CRAFTMARK have enhanced product credibility and marketability. However, this entrepreneurial transition is not without challenges. Artisans face competition from power looms and machine-made products, which often undercut handmade items on cost. This raises important questions about the scalability of entrepreneurial success in a competitive market. Moreover, the capacity of artisans to adapt to changing consumer preferences while maintaining the authenticity of their craft requires further exploration.

The digital component of the initiative has been transformative, providing artisans with access to national and international markets. Data suggests that products listed on e-commerce platforms achieved greater visibility and sales compared to those sold in local markets. Moreover, platform analytics offered artisans valuable insights into consumer preferences, allowing them to refine their product offerings. However, the potential dependency on digital platforms introduces risks, particularly if platform policies or algorithms change. Further analysis is needed to evaluate artisans' preparedness to independently manage the complexities of online marketplaces, such as logistics, customer feedback, and returns.

While the initiative has undoubtedly preserved and promoted Chikankari embroidery, it also raises concerns about cultural commodification. Adapting traditional designs to meet global market demands risks diluting their cultural significance, reducing the craft to a commodity. This tension between cultural preservation and commercial viability highlights important ethical considerations. Exploring mechanisms such as design patents or collective trademarks could safeguard the authenticity and integrity of Chikankari while allowing artisans to benefit from global markets.

6.6.1 Future Research Directions

As digital marketplaces and technology continue to advance, future research should focus on how these developments can be leveraged to create new opportunities for artisans. Investigating the potential applications of emerging technologies, such as blockchain for enhancing supply chain

transparency and artificial intelligence (AI) for market forecasting, is essential for bolstering the resilience and sustainability of traditional crafts.

Furthermore, it is critical for future studies to examine the dynamics of the power looms industry and its impact on traditional crafts, particularly in the context of the Chikankari sector. This exploration should address whether the rise of power looms poses a threat to traditional artisans or whether it may present opportunities for collaboration and innovation. Understanding these interactions will provide valuable insights into the competitive landscape and the challenges artisans face in maintaining their craft amid industrial advancements.

Additionally, the compatibility of technology integration with the goal of achieving self-sustainability for women artisans warrants thorough investigation. It is essential to assess whether the current model supports women in transitioning from supplementary income-generating activities to fully relying on their craft as primary livelihood. Such an analysis should consider factors such as market demand, skill development, and access to resources, which are critical for enabling women to establish sustainable businesses.

Ultimately, research should aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between traditional crafts, technology, and the socio-economic dynamics affecting women artisans. By addressing these areas, scholars and practitioners can develop strategies that not only empower women but also promote the sustainability of traditional crafts in an increasingly digital economy. This holistic approach will be vital in ensuring that the integration of technology serves as a tool for enhancing the livelihoods of artisans while preserving the cultural significance of their work.

6.7 Conclusion

This study underscores the critical importance of strategic partnerships in empowering women artisans within Lucknow's Chikankari industry. The collaboration between the SPO, HCL Foundation, and My E-Haat has not only enhanced the economic prospects of these artisans but has also significantly transformed their social and cultural lives. Through this initiative, women have achieved greater financial independence, cultivated an entrepreneurial spirit, and experienced heightened social empowerment.

By providing a detailed account of the research design, the study indicates that initiatives like My E-Haat serve as a transformative force, providing women artisans with the tools and resources necessary to navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing market. By offering training in both craftsmanship and digital marketing, the program empowers artisans to enhance their skills and reach broader audiences. This dual focus on skill development and market access is vital in an era where technological literacy is increasingly crucial for economic participation.

Moreover, the initiative plays a vital role in reshaping societal perceptions regarding women's roles in traditional crafts. By challenging

existing gender norms and creating supportive ecosystems for women artisans, it promotes gender equity and encourages women's active participation in the economic landscape. Furthermore, the study also strengthens the methodological rigour and enhances contribution to the academic discourse on empowering rural artisans, especially women artisans, through digital and social interventions. As noted by one artisan, the initiative has opened new avenues for showcasing their work globally, thus reaffirming the potential for systemic change within the community.

However, the study also raises critical questions regarding potential threats and opportunities within the industry. Notably, the rise of power looms presents a complex challenge to traditional craftsmanship. Future research should delve into the dynamics between traditional artisans and the power looms industry to understand whether this development is a threat to the preservation of craft or an opportunity for innovation and collaboration. Such an examination will be crucial in identifying the competitive landscape and navigating the challenges artisans face as they adapt to industrial advancements.

Additionally, the compatibility of integrating technology with the goal of achieving self-sustainability for women artisans is an essential area for further exploration. The current model should be assessed to determine whether it adequately supports women in transitioning from supplementary income-generating activities to fully relying on their craft as primary livelihood. Factors such as market demand, access to resources, and ongoing skill development are vital components that need to be addressed to facilitate this transition.

In conclusion, this study highlights the tangible and substantial impacts of the My E-Haat initiative on the economic, social, and entrepreneurial empowerment of women artisans in Lucknow's Chikankari industry. It emphasises the necessity of continued research to explore how technological advancements can further expand market access and socio-economic opportunities while preserving the rich cultural heritage of traditional crafts. By fostering strategic partnerships and addressing the complex dynamics within the industry, stakeholders can better support the sustainable development of women artisans, ultimately contributing to broader goals of gender equity and economic empowerment. This holistic approach is essential for ensuring that women artisans can thrive in an increasingly digital economy while maintaining the cultural significance of their craft.

Disclaimer: In preparing this manuscript, we have used the free online paraphrasing and plagiarism checking tool, Quilbot, to support the writing process and maintain the integrity of the research content. Specific sections where AI-generated assistance was used have been marked and described, with details provided in the appendix for editorial and/or review purposes. We take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final content.

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7 Empowering Urban Slum Communities through Collectivisation: A Case Study of Civic Engagement in Mumbai's M-East Ward

Amrapali Mukherjee, Kamakshi Balasubramanian and Shachi Phadke

Abstract

This study explores the impact of community collectivisation on sustained civic engagement and participation among urban poor communities in Mumbai's M-East Ward, an area characterised by extreme deprivation and systemic neglect. Using a single case multi-methods approach, grounded in qualitative and quantitative methods —including focus group discussions, participant observations, and MIS data—the research evaluates Apnalaya's Civic Action Group (CAG) model. Findings demonstrate that collectivisation has significantly enhanced residents' civic participation, resulting in increased engagement for essential services such as sanitation, healthcare, infrastructure improvements, and legal documentation. Capacity-building interventions have effectively equipped residents with the knowledge and tools necessary for independent engagement with governance structures, fostering long-term leadership and community resilience. However, persistent challenges such as bureaucratic delays, resource constraints, high migration rates, and digital literacy gaps highlight ongoing systemic barriers. The study underscores collectivisation as a powerful strategy for empowering fragmented urban communities, offering a replicable framework for sustainable urban development and equitable governance. Recommendations include strengthening digital literacy initiatives, developing adaptable training modules to address volunteer attrition, and sustained engagement to address complex structural challenges.

Keywords: Collectivisation, Civic Action Groups, Urban Slums, Community Empowerment, Mumbai, M East Ward, Apnalaya, Civic Participation, Rights-Based Approach, Capacity Building, Community-led Interventions, Participatory Governance, Urban Poverty, Social Inclusion.

7.1 Introduction

Globally, the crisis of inadequate housing is deepening. As of 2025, an estimated 2.8 billion people—over one-third of the world's population—live in inadequate housing, with at least one billion residing in slums and informal settlements (UN-Habitat, 2024; United Nations, 2025). Slum growth is driven by factors such as urban poverty, inequality, rapid population growth, and weak governance (Cities Alliance, 2023). These global trends are mirrored in India, where 17.4% of urban households were living in slums as of 2011.

The housing crisis in India has been exacerbated by migration from rural areas to urban centres in search of better livelihood opportunities, leading to overcrowding in cities like Mumbai and Delhi (Chakrabarti, 2021). By 2030, 40% of India's population is expected to live in urban areas (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2021). Rapid urbanisation without corresponding infrastructure development has pushed millions into slums, where they lack formal property rights and access to essential services.

Mumbai, a city often viewed as the economic capital of India, exemplifies the challenges of urbanisation. According to the 2011 Census, approximately 42% of Mumbai's population lives in slums, with the M-East Ward recording significantly higher levels of deprivation, where nearly 84.9% of its population resides in slums (Mumbai - Public Health Department, 2011). This ward, home to over 800,000 people, ranks the lowest on the city's Human Development Index. It faces severe deprivation due to limited healthcare facilities, poor sanitation, and inadequate access to clean drinking water. Public health concerns are exacerbated by the proximity of the Deonar dumping ground, which contributes to high rates of malnutrition, chronic illnesses, and maternal mortality (Apnalaya, 2021; Indian Express, 2021).

In the face of such systemic neglect, community empowerment models have emerged as potential strategies to address these challenges. One such model is collectivisation, which seeks to mobilise communities to advocate for their rights, access public services, and improve their living conditions. The role of collectivisation becomes critical in fragmented urban contexts like the M-East Ward, where high migration rates, transient populations, and fragmented social networks impede governance and collective action.

7.1.1 Why Collectivisation?

Unlike rural or organised urban areas, urban slums in Mumbai face unique and complex challenges. High population turnover, transient settlements, and diverse cultural and economic backgrounds hinder community cohesion, making it difficult to establish trust and social capital. Fragmented communities and low civic participation hinder effective governance, as residents often lack the social capital and organisational structures to assert their rights (Ramanath & Ebrahim, 2010). Unlike more cohesive rural or organised urban areas, urban slums like those in M-East Ward face unique challenges due to high migration rates and transient populations, making it harder to build trust and social networks necessary for collective action.

Collectivisation in such contexts serves as an essential strategy to bridge the gap between residents and governance systems. The process enables community members to organise themselves, pool resources, and advocate for their collective needs. By empowering residents to act collectively, collectivisation fosters a sense of agency and leadership within

marginalised communities, enabling them to engage with governance systems and demand their rights (Ramanath, 2016).

The challenges and opportunities of collectivisation in urban slums have been explored in several studies. Ramanath and Ebrahim (2010) highlighted how NGOs navigating slum housing initiatives in Mumbai employ strategies that balance government collaboration and community interests. Their findings emphasise that effective interventions require deep contextual understanding and adaptive strategies. Similarly, Ramanath (2016) documented the resilience of displaced women in Mumbai's slums, focusing on how community-led initiatives fostered long-term sustainability and livelihood resilience. These studies underscore the importance of grassroots mobilisation and collaborative approaches tailored to the complexities of urban slum contexts.

Apnalaya's work in the M-East Ward aligns with these findings. By forming Civic Action Groups (CAGs), Apnalaya has enabled slum residents to take collective ownership of issues such as sanitation, healthcare, and access to identity documents. This collectivisation model not only addresses immediate service delivery gaps but also fosters a sense of agency and leadership within the community. The case study builds on existing literature to explore how Apnalaya's approach adapts to the unique dynamics of Mumbai's slums, providing insights into the potential of collectivisation as a strategy for sustainable urban development.

Apnalaya's community engagement program addresses the challenge of fragmented communities by forming Civic Action Groups (CAGs) grounded in constitutional values. These collectives empower residents to engage with governance systems, foster community leadership, and promote a sense of agency in the community. CAGs tackle both household-level issues, such as accessing identity documents and social security schemes, and community-level concerns like sanitation and infrastructure improvement (Apnalaya, 2022).

Through collectivisation, residents become proactive citizens capable of advocating for systemic change. This process connects slum dwellers to formal governance structures, enabling them to raise issues collectively and hold authorities accountable. Apnalaya's program has not only empowered individuals but also led to tangible improvements in public health, civic amenities, and community resilience in M-East Ward (Apnalaya, 2024).

7.1.2 Geographical Location

M-East Ward exemplifies the urgent need for collectivisation as a strategy to address the deep-rooted systemic issues that have persisted for decades (Figure 7.1). With approximately 84.9% of its population living in slums, the ward is marked by widespread marginalisation. Basic services such as sanitation, clean drinking water, and healthcare are severely limited, leaving

residents to contend with inadequate infrastructure and limited access to essential resources. The proximity to the Deonar dumping ground further exacerbates public health risks, contributing to high rates of malnutrition and disease among the population (Apnalaya, 2021; IndiaSpend, 2017).

The 2011 census indicated that approximately 84.9% of the population in M-East Ward lived in slums, significantly higher than Mumbai's overall figure of 42% (Mumbai - Public Health Department, 2011). Home to over 800,000 people, M-East Ward has only one secondary hospital to serve its residents, resulting in some of the worst health outcomes in the city. In 2021, the ward recorded the highest maternal mortality rate in Mumbai, accounting for 16% of the city's total maternal deaths (Indian Express, 2021). These alarming disparities underscore the critical need for community-driven solutions that not only address immediate service delivery gaps but also foster collective action to advocate for rights and entitlements. The power of collectivisation lies in its ability to mobilise residents, empower them to engage with governance structures, and advocate for the basic services and infrastructural improvements they need.

7.2 Context and Setting: The Intervention

Apnalaya's intervention in Mumbai's M-East Ward aimed to address disenfranchisement, poor infrastructure, and lack of essential services in urban slums. Central to the intervention was a collectivisation model, which empowered residents through the formation of CAGs. These groups encouraged collective problem-solving and community agency.

The intervention's key goal was to build the community's long-term capacity to advocate for itself. Educating residents about their constitutional rights and civic participation enabled them to engage with governance structures. Through CAGs, access to public services such as sanitation, clean water, healthcare, and enumeration was advocated for.

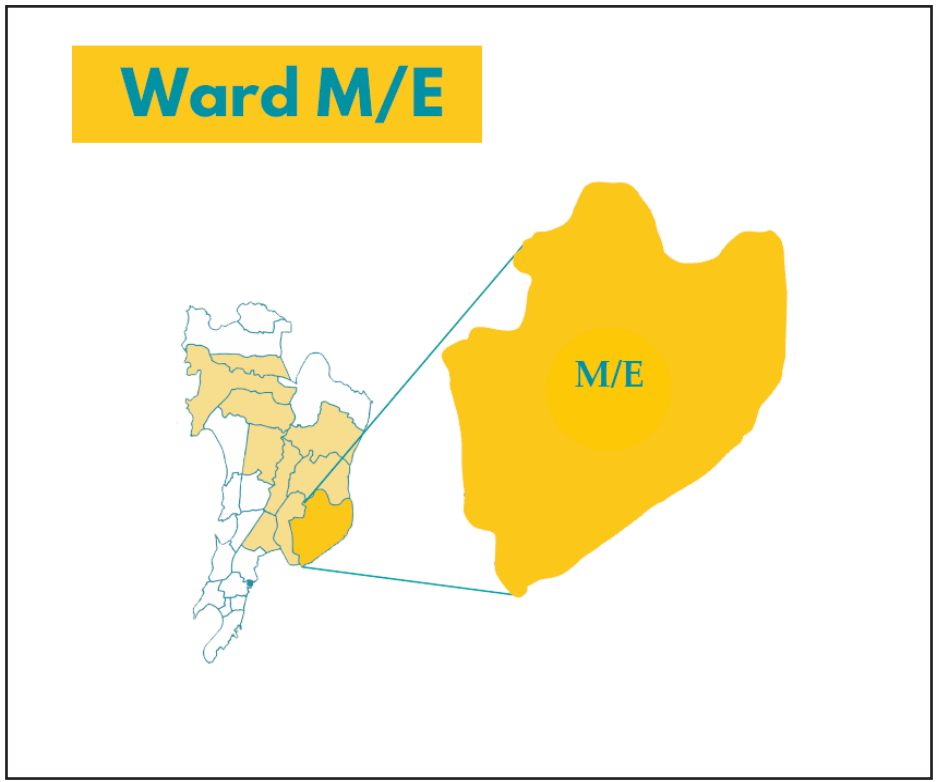
This resulted in tangible improvements. By fostering community ownership and leadership, civic engagement was strengthened, empowering marginalised populations to take an active role in governance. Additionally, the intervention established a sustainable model for ongoing community involvement, breaking the cycle of dependency and ensuring that residents continue to advocate for their rights and improve their living conditions.

7.3 Objectives:

General Objective:

To assess the impact of community collectivisation on sustained community engagement and civic participation in urban poor communities in Mumbai.

Figure 7.1: Ward placement of the ME ward and the ME ward overview



Source: Apnalaya's report images

Specific Objectives:
Objective 1: To examine how collectivisation enhances civic engagement and access to healthcare, sanitation, public schemes, and legal documentation through collective effort.

Research Questions:

RQ1.1: How does collectivisation influence civic engagement and participation in community actions?
RQ1.2: In what ways does collectivisation improve access to healthcare, sanitation, public schemes, and legal documentation?

Objective 2: To analyse how capacity-building and awareness initiatives equip residents to engage effectively with government and service providers.

Research Questions:

RQ2.1: How do capacity-building sessions and awareness programs impact residents' knowledge of their rights and civic processes?

RQ2.2: How do these initiatives translate into effective engagement with government and service providers?

Objective 3: To assess the long-term sustainability of collectives in maintaining engagement with governance systems for lasting community improvements.

Research Questions:

RQ3.1: What evidence is there of collectives sustaining activities and engagement without external support?

RQ3.2: How have former collective members continued community engagement or assumed leadership roles?

RQ3.3: What strategies support the long-term sustainability and scaling of collective action?

7.4 Methodology

This study employs a single-case study design (Yin, 2018) using a multi-methods approach. While the study incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, these methods are not integrated to address the same research questions but rather used distinctly to explore

different aspects of the research objectives. The single-case design focuses on the collectivisation model implemented in M-East Ward, providing an in-depth examination of its processes and outcomes.

7.4.1 Data Collection Techniques

Qualitative data was collected through:

- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** A total of 6 FGDs were conducted with Civic Action Groups (CAGs) and other community members across three neighbourhoods in the M-East Ward. Each FGD typically included 8–10 participants, ensuring diversity in gender, age, tenures in the community, as well as varying levels of engagement with CAG activities.
  CAG members were purposely selected to represent active, newly formed, and established groups. Few other community members were identified through snowball sampling, with initial participants nominating additional residents who had participated in or were affected by collective actions.
  Each discussion lasted approximately 90 minutes and was facilitated by trained internal moderators from Apnalaya using a semi-structured guide focused on experiences with collectivisation, challenges, and engagement with local governance.
- **Participant Observations:** Apnalaya's Field team conducted participant observations in four CAGs selected to represent different stages of collective development (newly formed, mature, and transitioning to independence) and geographic diversity within the ward. These observations helped capture the informal, lived experiences of community engagement.
  Observations were carried out over 3 months, with researchers spending an average of 2–3 days per week in each community, attending CAG meetings, community actions, and informal gatherings.
  CAGs and communities were chosen based on their activity level, willingness to participate, and representation of the ward's demographic and socioeconomic diversity. The team documented group dynamics, leadership emergence, interactions with public authorities, and the implementation of collective actions.

Quantitative data has been sourced from:

- Apnalaya's existing MIS system which collects data every month. The data spans from 2021 to 2024, with only data from January to April being utilised for the year 2024. To ensure coherence, this study explicitly links methods to its objectives. For example, FGDs and participant observations were used to address questions related to community engagement and governance interactions, while MIS data were

analysed to measure quantitative changes in service access and participation levels.

7.4.2 Approach of the Study

The study adopts a case study approach, focusing on the collectivisation model implemented in Mumbai's M-East Ward, where Apnalaya has been actively engaged for more than fifty years. While Apnalaya has long embraced a rights-based approach in its work, the structured collectivisation model, through the formation of CAGs, was formally initiated in 2016-17. This approach allows for a detailed examination of the specific processes and outcomes of collectivisation within this urban slum community, focusing on the evolution of civic engagement and community empowerment over time.

This study adopts a multi-methods design, where qualitative and quantitative data are collected independently to address different facets of the research objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2016). The methods are not integrated for triangulation but instead aim to provide complementary insights. This distinction ensures clarity in answering specific research questions and avoids methodological inconsistencies.

By integrating qualitative insights from community members and quantitative outcome measurements, the study provides a comprehensive evaluation of how collectivisation has impacted civic participation and access to essential services in M-East Ward. The case study approach also aligns with participatory engagement theories, examining how community capacity for civic action to drive systemic change has developed and how this engagement translates into improved interactions with public institutions.

7.4.3 Stakeholder Involvement

Stakeholders played a vital role in ensuring the study's relevance and practicality. They included:

- **Community Members (Civic Action Groups):** Residents of M-East Ward participated in focus group discussions, surveys, and interviews, offering valuable insights into the real-life impacts of collectivisation on their lives and contributing to the study's understanding of both challenges and successes.
- **Local Government Authorities:** Interviews with officials from health posts, schools, police stations, and other offices helped evaluate the impact of collective community actions on local services and infrastructure improvements.
- **Program Implementers (Apnalaya):** Apnalaya facilitated access, monitored progress, and provided data, drawing on their extensive experience implementing the CAG model and rights-based development.

7.5 Findings

This case study on the collectivisation model in M-East Ward examines the impact of community-led civic actions, capacity-building efforts, and the sustainability of these initiatives from 2021 to 2024. It highlights how the model empowered residents to take ownership of local issues, engage with governance systems, and achieve tangible community improvements. Key aspects of the study are outlined in the following sections.

7.5.1 Increased Civic Participation

The data from *Table 7A.1* in the appendix demonstrates the effectiveness of Apnalaya's collectivisation model in fostering household-level civic participation. Between 2021 and 2024, community members initiated 1,614 civic actions across Citizenship & Advocacy, Education & Livelihood, and Health & Disability sectors. These actions reflect a growing commitment among residents to address local civic issues, such as obtaining essential documents like Voter IDs and Aadhar cards—crucial for social and economic inclusion.

Despite this progress, only 56% of these actions were completed, with 690 actions remaining pending, particularly within the Health & Disability sector. Qualitative data from focus group discussions and participant observations revealed several underlying factors contributing to this gap. Residents frequently encountered complex and time-consuming procedures for accessing government services, with documentation requirements that often changed without notice. Many described the process of securing disability certificates as especially challenging, involving multiple medical assessments, verification steps, and travel to distant government hospitals—barriers that were especially significant for elderly or disabled residents.

Resource limitations also played a significant role. Local government offices were often understaffed, leading to long delays in processing requests. Many residents lacked the financial means to cover transportation costs or medical examination fees required for certain civic actions. Additionally, limited digital literacy and access to technology hindered the ability of older residents to complete online submissions independently. The availability of trained community volunteers to assist with these processes was also insufficient to meet demand, further slowing progress.

Volunteers noted a shift towards online submissions, signalling increased digital literacy. Still, challenges like unclear submission processes and limited digital skills, particularly among older residents, hindered progress. High engagement from Rafi Nagar highlights the model's success in reaching those with limited access to services. However, improved digital training and support systems remain crucial for ensuring more successful civic actions.

Table 7A.2 in the appendix indicates that 372 household civic actions were initiated across Citizenship & Advocacy, Education & Livelihood, and Health & Disability verticals in Apnalaya, with a 57% completion rate. These

actions include demands for infrastructure repairs, sanitation improvements, and basic utility services. Community efforts also focused on cleaning lanes, addressing illegal constructions, and upgrading toilet chambers, reflecting concerns for public health and safety.

Progress in sectors such as sanitation and infrastructure remains particularly challenging due to a combination of structural and behavioural factors. For example, the number of community toilets is often insufficient for the population they serve, resulting in overcrowding and long wait times. Many toilets are poorly maintained, frequently lack a reliable water supply, and are sometimes left unclean, which discourages use and exacerbates public health risks. These issues are compounded when community members are reluctant to take collective responsibility for cleanliness or when there is no formal mechanism for regular maintenance.

In addition, the physical layout of many slum settlements—characterised by narrow lanes and dense housing—limits access for municipal cleaning vehicles and makes waste collection logistically difficult. Some areas are situated on or near dumping grounds, further complicating sanitation efforts. Changing entrenched habits around waste disposal and encouraging consistent community participation in maintenance activities require sustained engagement and repeated follow-up by both volunteers and staff.

It is also important to note that some of the civic actions that are reported as 'in progress' are in their early stages. They are going through the necessary standard administrative timelines and processes, as a result of which they are still in progress and not yet completed. These challenges mean that even with strong community mobilisation, achieving lasting improvements in sanitation and infrastructure is a gradual process. It demands not only advocacy and resource mobilisation but also ongoing education, behavioural change efforts, and persistent coordination with local authorities.

While many actions remain pending, such as demands for a lift and escalator at Govandi Railway Station, the collectivisation model has empowered Civic Action Groups (CAGs) to drive important local changes and sustain pressure on relevant authorities.

Data from *Table 7A.3 in the appendix* shows 4,358 participants engaged across Apnalaya's programs in 2021-2022, with the Citizenship & Advocacy program seeing the highest engagement (3,414 participants), underscoring its role in fostering civic action. The two-year process began with Year 1, focused on training local leaders, SHG members, and youth in foundational civic knowledge. Year 2 transitioned into an action-oriented phase, where participants addressed immediate community needs, such as obtaining Aadhar cards post-COVID and facilitating school admissions. This shift from training to action highlights how the collectivisation model not only increases participation but also empowers community members to address local issues independently.

The growth of CAGs further demonstrates the model's impact. In 2021, 45 CAGs were formed, with 15 more added in 2022, bringing the total to 60 groups. This expansion reflects the community's growing engagement in civic matters, with community members increasingly coming together to advocate for their rights. The steady growth aligns with the transition from training to action, as participants took greater ownership of community challenges. The formation of these groups underscores the effectiveness of the collectivisation model in fostering sustained civic engagement.

Qualitative feedback from Apnalaya staff adds that people were eager to work for the community, and attendance at nukkad meetings was high. However, as participants gained confidence and began solving issues independently, attendance decreased—an indicator of sustainability rather than disengagement. Apnalaya's focus shifted towards creating federations within the community to address larger-scale challenges.

Both intra- and inter-migration led to a decline in the number of CAG volunteers attending training. Volunteers couldn't be replaced easily, as new volunteers hadn't attended previous sessions. Despite this, the remaining volunteers' commitment ensured continued momentum in civic actions. This adaptability highlights the model's strength in fostering long-term engagement and self-sufficiency within the community.

One of the most notable outcomes of collectivisation has been the increasing reliance on technology for civic participation, with a growing number of community members using online submission systems. While this shift signals a positive trend toward digital engagement, it also highlights a critical gap in digital literacy, particularly among older residents. Addressing this gap will be crucial for ensuring that all members of the community can participate equitably.

The high engagement levels in areas like Rafi Nagar underscore the model's potential to mobilise communities with limited resources. Localised problem-solving, such as addressing sanitation and obtaining essential documents, has empowered communities to take ownership of their needs. However, the persistence of unaddressed systemic issues, such as demands for infrastructural upgrades at Govandi Station, reveals the need to complement community-driven actions with sustained advocacy for larger structural reforms.

7.5.2 Capacity Building and Empowerment

Between 2021 and 2022, Apnalaya conducted over 50 capacity-building sessions in Mumbai's M East Ward to empower the community. More than 4,300 participants, including 3,414 from the Citizenship & Advocacy program, attended sessions on Fundamental Rights and Duties. These are aimed at enhancing civic awareness and fostering self-advocacy. Community members were introduced to tools like the Civic Action Toolkit, helping them navigate processes such as RTIs and PILs to hold authorities accountable. Training in Urban Governance equipped them to engage with local governments and demand better services.

Leadership and collectivisation sessions enabled participants to lead civic actions, resulting in the formation of 60 Civic Action Groups (CAGs) by 2022. Sessions on Diversity and Inequality enriched their understanding of social justice issues, further building the community's collective capacity. The shift from knowledge acquisition in Year 1 to proactive engagement in Year 2 reflects the community's transition from learning to leadership.

Table 7A.4 in the appendix highlights key outcomes, including 79 stakeholder visits involving 182 participants, which demonstrate increased interaction with key external entities to address local issues. Additionally, 13 exposure visits with 314 participants show the community applying their learnings in real-world scenarios, particularly in Health & Disability and Citizenship & Advocacy programs.

The community's shift from awareness to action is evident in the 132 civic actions organised with 214 participants, addressing local challenges such as sanitation, infrastructure, and public health. This reflects the overall success of the training programs in equipping community people with the skills and confidence to advocate for tangible improvements in their neighbourhoods.

Table 7A.5 in the appendix reveals the growing impact of these capacity-building efforts, with 132 applications submitted between 2021 and 2024, benefiting 251,334 families. In the first four months of 2024 alone, 37 applications were submitted, positively impacting 9,583 families. This rise in submissions indicates the community's growing ability to navigate bureaucratic systems and access essential services, reinforcing the effectiveness of Apnalaya's initiatives.

Qualitative data underscores the community's focus on public health and sanitation, with numerous civic actions aimed at cleaning lanes,

Figure 7.2: Some before-and-after pictures of lane cleaning activities initiated by the community.

Source: Collectives in coordination with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation

roads, and open gutters. Requests for pest control services, particularly to address issues with rats and mosquitoes, further highlight the community's concern with hygiene and sanitary conditions. Additionally, actions related to infrastructure, such as demands for the reconstruction of toilet chambers, repairing streetlights, and fixing electric meter boxes, emphasise ongoing needs for basic infrastructure improvements. Public safety concerns are also prominent, with demands for CCTV cameras and better public transportation facilities, like lifts and escalators at Govandi Railway Station.

Overall, while the qualitative data suggests that sanitation and public health remain the top priorities, the community is also advocating for long-term improvements in infrastructure and safety, demonstrating their active engagement in addressing a wide range of issues that affect daily life. The combination of both quantitative and qualitative data reflects the community's increasing empowerment to take action and advocatefor meaningful changes in their surroundings (Figure 7.2).

In addition to the data-driven outcomes, a few more qualitative insights from a community member and an Apnalaya employee further illustrate the transformation brought about by the capacity-building efforts. Before the training, community members were unaware of their rights and struggled to raise their concerns effectively. As one community member noted,

> "*Earlier, people did not know about their rights; they couldn't raise their concerns. Now, they can tell after the training(s), quoting the Constitution. People have become confident and aware of their duties. For example, if a drain is clogged, they know to inform the authorities or explain to others not to cause the blockage*."

The training provided the community with a deeper understanding of how the system works and what processes to follow. This knowledge empowered them to approach issues more patiently and proactively, whereas previously, they would blame the authorities without fully understanding the situation. Now, community members take initiative to resolve small issues, such as sanitation and road cleaning, with minimal involvement from Apnalaya staff. As the same member shared,

> "*If there is any concern, the volunteers share it in meetings where staff support them, but most of the time, self-initiatives have become the norm*."

For example, if an issue like a clogged lane was noticed and authorities didn't act quickly, volunteers would approach Apnalaya staff for guidance on what to do next, showing a clear shift towards collective problem-solving. This before-and-after scenario vividly highlights the impact of the trainings, which have not only equipped the community with practical knowledge but have also fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility, reinforcing the success of the collectivisation model in empowering residents to advocate for themselves and their communities.

The capacity-building sessions facilitated by Apnalaya have proven instrumental in transitioning communities from awareness to action. Participants have not only gained knowledge about their rights but have also successfully applied this understanding to address local challenges. The steady increase in self-initiated civic actions reflects the tangible outcomes of these trainings, which have equipped residents with the confidence and skills to navigate governance systems independently.

A key enabler of these successes has been the collaborative engagement with external stakeholders. Activities such as exposure visits and stakeholder interactions have broadened the community's understanding of governance processes, while also establishing vital networks for advocacy. Moreover, the participation of community members across generations in these initiatives suggests a cascading effect, where younger members of the community are inspired by the proactive involvement of their elders.

The shift from theoretical knowledge to actionable empowerment is further evident in the outcomes achieved, such as the submission of 132 applications benefitting over 250,000 families. These figures highlight the potential of capacity-building efforts to catalyse sustained improvements in service access and accountability.

7.5.3 Long-Term Sustainability of Collectives

Long-term sustainability of collectives can be defined in terms of:

1. Empowered and informed citizens initiating and sustaining need-based collectives.
2. Continuation of activities of the collectives without support from Apnalaya.

Creating a federation of collectives for larger-level systemic adoption. Some erstwhile community collective members have now joined other collectives of their choosing and continue to actively engage in their communities and demand systemic action. Their awareness of Constitutional Values and the Human Rights-Based Approach empowers them to identify civic issues, relevant stakeholders, and negotiate solutions.

Shakir used to be a member of the community collective in Shivajinagar. He has now been a part of Paani Haq Samiti, another community collective movement, for over 7 years. Paani Haq Samiti, with a motto of Jahan Jeevan Wahaan Paani (Where there is life, there should be water), works on access to water in urban slum communities. It also engages with government stakeholders to highlight policy gaps in access to water in the urban slum communities. Paani Haq Samiti worked closely with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation to develop the 'Water For All' policy. The capacity building sessions at Apnalaya helped him understand his rights as a citizen, understand the lack of access to those basic rights and build confidence to talk to government stakeholders.

Najma is a 22-year-old woman residing on road no. 14 in Bainganwadi. She is currently employed as an Academic Educator in MagicBus. She takes

out time to facilitate documentation camps for the community members. In her words-

> *"Apnalaya ka training ka daily life mein bahut kaam aata hai. Humaare yahan ganda paani aata hai. Maine 2-3 baar online and offline complaint kiya. Aas paas k logon ko bhi bataya ki saaf paani humaara adhikar hai."*

(Apnalaya's training helps with issues of day-to-day life. We get unclean piped water. I have raised complaints 2-3 times using online and offline methods. Also made the people in the neighbourhood aware that clean water is our basic right). She also raised the matter with the elected representative in her area for a faster solution. Her simple action raised awareness about the basic right to clean water among the community members. She teaches her students to use the BMC's online complaint registration portal 1916 for raising complaints with respect to community hygiene.

In a step towards cascaded tapering of support from Apnalaya towards sustaining the Community Collectives, Apnalaya has incentivised 2 volunteers per Community Collective. There are approximately 100 volunteers to continue the activities of the 49 community collectives, like conducting centre meetings, facilitating civic actions, facilitating nukkad meetings, report making, etc.

Going ahead, Apnalaya also plans to form a federation of community collectives. A federation would be a subject-specific entity (Sanitation, Safety and Social Security- derived from the community-based needs assessment) with representation from two members each, from the smaller collectives for larger-level system adoption activities.

The long-term sustainability of the collectivisation model is evident in the continued efforts of community collectives to address systemic issues. The transition of individuals like Shakir and Najma into leadership roles illustrates how empowered residents can drive broader change, inspiring collective action within their neighbourhoods. These personal stories emphasise the importance of nurturing local champions who can act as catalysts for systemic reform.

Apnalaya's efforts to institutionalise collective action through the planned federation of collectives signify a forward-looking approach to advocacy. By creating structures that address community needs such as sanitation, safety, and social security, these federations will ensure the sustainability of the model beyond Apnalaya's direct involvement. The challenges posed by high migration rates have tested the resilience of the model. The ability to maintain momentum despite these disruptions speaks to its adaptability and relevance in transient urban communities. However, this also underscores the need for flexible training and support systems to ensure continuity in collective efforts.

7.6 Conclusion

The collectivisation model in Mumbai's M-East Ward has played a transformative role in mobilising communities, empowering residents, and fostering civic engagement. Through capacity-building efforts and the formation of CAGs, the program has not only enabled residents to take ownership of local issues but also provided them with the tools and confidence to advocate for their rights. However, while the model has shown significant successes, there are still barriers to achieving its full potential.

Table 7.1 highlights what is working and what is not working within the program.

The aspects that are working—such as increased civic participation, capacity building, and sustainability—reflect the remarkable potential of the collectivisation model to empower communities with knowledge and actionable tools. Through training sessions on rights, governance, and advocacy, participants have gained the confidence to independently navigate systems, engage with authorities, and advocate for their needs. The formation of Civic Action Groups has inspired a profound sense of collective ownership, enabling volunteers to lead initiatives that create lasting impact. These efforts illuminate a path toward long-term sustainability, as communities embrace self-reliance and reduce dependence on external support.

While the model has achieved transformative successes, challenges like incomplete civic actions, migration disruptions, and digital literacy gaps present opportunities for growth. Addressing bureaucratic delays and resource limitations in complex sectors such as Health & Disability is essential to maximise the potential of civic actions. Migration, though a transient challenge, underscores the importance of adaptable training and support systems to maintain continuity. Bridging digital literacy gaps, particularly among older residents, holds promise for unlocking broader civic engagement and inclusivity.

This journey exemplifies the resilience and ingenuity of urban slum communities, offering a blueprint for scalable and adaptive solutions. The work ahead lies in refining these systems to ensure no community member is left behind in the pursuit of equitable governance and sustainable development.

Findings suggest that this initiative has a positive impact on empowering urban slum residents by giving them the tools and confidence to advocate for their rights. The formation of civic groups and increased participation in local governance have improved public health outcomes and infrastructure in several areas. However, the challenges outlined above have important implications for the sustainability and scalability of the model. Without addressing the gaps in completion rates, digital skills, and volunteer continuity, the long-term success of the program may be compromised.

Table 7.1: Key Wins and Roadblocks

KEY WINS	ROADBLOCKS
Increased Civic Participation: The collectivisation model has empowered residents to take active roles in addressing local issues. The formation of 60 CAGs and widespread civic actions, especially in marginalised areas like Rafi Nagar, shows the model's success in mobilising communities. People are now independently tackling issues like obtaining identity documents, which reflects a growing sense of ownership.	**Completion Rates:** Despite strong participation, the completion of civic actions remains an issue. Bureaucratic delays and resource limitations are stalling progress, particularly in sectors like Health & Disability. The gap between initiating actions and seeing them through to completion underscores ongoing systemic challenges.
Capacity Building: Community members have gained confidence and a deeper understanding of their rights. After training, many now directly engage with authorities, quote constitutional rights, and take action. This empowerment is evident in their ability to hold local governance accountable, as seen in the proactive steps taken to address community challenges.	**Impact of Migration:** Migration is disrupting the continuity of CAGs. When volunteers move away, they cannot be easily replaced due to the lack of prior training for newcomers. This has weakened the consistency of collective efforts and poses a challenge in maintaining momentum in transient communities.
Sustainability of Collectives: Volunteers are becoming more self-reliant, reducing their dependence on Apnalaya. Former collective members are transitioning to other initiatives, maintaining their civic engagement. The plan to create a federation for efforts for system strengthening indicates the program is fostering long-term sustainability and collective leadership.	**Digital Literacy Gaps:** While there's a shift towards digital platforms, older residents struggle to navigate these systems. The community's digital engagement remains uneven, limiting the reach of online submissions and civic actions. More targeted digital literacy programs are needed to ensure that everyone can participate fully.
Self-Initiatives: The community's shift towards self-initiated problem-solving demonstrates the impact of the program. Volunteers are independently resolving issues like sanitation without waiting for external support. This increased autonomy in dealing with everyday problems shows that the collectivisation model has instilled a sense of responsibility and leadership within the community.	**Uneven Sector Engagement:** While there's strong participation in sanitation and basic infrastructure issues, other areas, like public transportation and utilities, are progressing more slowly. Persistent problems, such as demands for a lift at Govandi Station, indicate that sustained effort is still required to drive change in more complex sectors.

In marginalised urban slum communities, the method of collectivisation has been proven effective in engaging residents and enabling them to address their own issues. If similar contextual conditions exist, the same model could be replicated to mobilise and empower communities in other regions. Apnalaya's experience in the M/E Ward demonstrates that the collectivisation model is a viable framework that can be adapted to address a wide range of societal issues, provided that sufficient capacity-building support is available. The model works to build self-driven collectives while fostering collaborations when needed, based on the collective's discretion.

Apnalaya's Collectivisation Toolkit (in the appendix), which has been developed and refined through its interventions, serves as a practical resource. This toolkit is now being used across Apnalaya's areas of intervention and is also available for external stakeholders working in similar contexts. NGOs and practitioners can utilise this toolkit to streamline their engagement strategies and adapt the collectivisation model to their specific needs, providing a structured way for communities to effectively engage with governance systems and cultivate social capital.

Disclaimer: In preparing this manuscript, we have used the ChatGPT version 3 open-access version to adequately reword sentences to fit the required word limit. We take full responsibility for the content.

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Appendix to Chapter 7

Community Collectives Toolkit - Community Collectives Toolkit.pdf

Table 7A.1: Household-Level Civic Action Summary by Program

Program Name	Total Household Civic Actions Initiated	Total Household Civic Actions Completed	Total Household Civic Actions Closed	Household Civic Actions Pending
Citizenship & Advocacy	664	365	19	299
Education & Livelihood	121	110	0	11
Health & Disability	680	430	2	250
Total	**1614**	**905**	**21**	**690**

Table 7A.2: Community Level Civic Action Summary by Program

Program Name	Total Household Civic Actions Initiated	Total Household Civic Actions Completed	Total Household Civic Actions Closed	Household Civic Actions Pending
Citizenship & Advocacy	234	132	0	102
Education & Livelihood	28	14	0	14
Health & Disability	110	67	0	43
Total	**372**	**213**	**0**	**159**

Table 7A.3 (2) Participation Rates by Program for Civic Training and Actions (2021-2022)

Programs	No. of Participants		
	2021	2022	Grand Total
Citizenship & Advocacy	1868	1546	3414
Education & Livelihood	356	245	601
Health & Disability	163	180	343
Grand Total	**2387**	**1971**	**4358**

Table 7A.4 (3): Programmatic Engagement: Stakeholder Visits, Exposure Visits, and Community Civic Actions

Stakeholder Visit		
Program	**No of Meetings**	**No of participants present**
Citizenship & Advocacy	75	174
Education & Livelihood	3	5
Health & Disability	1	3
Grand Total	**79**	**182**
Exposure Visit		
Program	**No of Meetings**	**No of participants present**
Citizenship & Advocacy	5	165
Education & Livelihood	1	7
Health & Disability	7	142
Grand Total	13	314
Community Civic Action		
Program	**No of Meetings**	**No of participants present**
Citizenship & Advocacy	64	87
Education & Livelihood	10	24
Health & Disability	58	103
Grand Total	**132**	**214**

Table 7A.5(4): Yearly Breakdown of Applications Submitted and Families Benefited

Year	Number of Applications Submitted	No. of Families benefited
2021	1	0
2022	42	110738
2023	52	131013
2024	37	9583
Grand Total	**132**	**251334**

8 From Vulnerability to Strength: The Impact of Thrive Scale™ on Family Strengthening and Child Separation Prevention in Urban and Rural India

Subroto Chatterjee and Richa Tyagi

Abstract

This study addresses the urgent need for family-based care for children without parental care, as emphasised by the UN General Assembly's 2019 resolution, India's Juvenile Justice Act 2015, and Mission Vatsalya. The primary aim is to evaluate the effectiveness of the Thrive Scale™ tool developed by Miracle Foundation India in generating measurable, data-driven decisions to plan and implement suitable interventions for family strengthening. The study covers the purview of family strengthening initiatives across the five wellbeing domains, conducted with 153 families (89 from Chottaudepur, Gujarat, 64 from Ramnagar, Waze Pune, Maharashtra), analysing the assessment and intervention planning data from the Thrive Scale™ tool. Analysis of this data revealed a significant increase in well-being scores: from 74% to 94% in Gujarat and from 64% to 74% in Maharashtra. Early identification of risks, timely interventions, and continuous monitoring were key to fostering family resilience. Recurring challenges with livelihood, alcohol abuse suggest a need for long-term interventions. The study concludes that family strengthening is a complex, non-linear process requiring ongoing follow-up and adaptable interventions. The Thrive Scale™ tool empowers the Child Protection Workforce to make informed decisions, aligning with the Juvenile Justice Act and enhancing case worker efficiency in strengthening families.

Keywords: Family-based Care, Thrive Scale™ Tool, Family Strengthening, Child-family Separation, Family Strengthening.

8.1 Introduction

As of 2023, India has an estimated 436.6 million individuals under the age of 18, constituting about 30.5% of the total population (UNICEF, n.d.). Recent data indicates that approximately 24.1 million children in India are impacted by floods, cyclones, heatwaves, and other emergencies annually (UNICEF, 2023).

Children do well when their families do well, and families do better when they live in supportive neighbourhoods and communities. Many families facing socio-economic hardships are at risk of separation due to external pressures, such as poverty, health crises, or lack of access to essential services. A child's separation from family can have detrimental effects on a child's well-being.

A recent study included in the Journal of the National Human Rights Commission, India, revealed that parents place their children in institutions due to (1) poverty & migration and (2) socially acceptable beliefs that institutions are a means to disciplining and educating a child (Bajpai, 2017). According to government data and Indian practitioners, about 50% of the children in CCIs come from families that are unable to take care of them due to their financial situation. The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed many families deeper into poverty, which has led to a rise in the number of children in distress.

According to the official data cited by MWCD, the number of children affected due to COVID-19 in India is 1,53,827. This data, however, is not restricted to Covid-19 orphans alone. Of the 1,53,827 children registered on NCPCR's Bal Swaraj portal, 1,42,949 children have a single parent, 492 are abandoned children, and 10,386 children have lost both their parents, said the ministry (Indian Express, 2022).

Children may be pushed out of the protective net of their families due to several stressors, which are unique to every community, family, and child. In response to these challenges, family strengthening is understood as an umbrella approach to the care of children in their families, whereby vulnerable families, caught up in the vicious cycle of economic, social and cultural deprivation, are supported to build protective factors and prevent unnecessary separation.

Family strengthening refers to programs, strategic approaches and deliberate processes of empowering families with the necessary capacities, opportunities, networks, relationships and access to services and resources to promote and build resilience, such that children are provided safe and nurturing care even when the family is under stress. These programs and processes depend on the active engagement of parents, caregivers, children, youth and other family members in decisions that affect the family's life (India Alternative Care Network, 2025).

Given the scope of family strengthening programs, a multi-sectoral preventive approach is essential. Regular mapping and assessment of at-risk families by the state, and identifying their vulnerabilities, is key to family strengthening. Vulnerability mapping tools are being developed by State Government departments as well as civil society organisations to enable the identification of at-risk families requiring sponsorship and a range of family strengthening services. Community-based child protection groups, local self-government bodies, and other community stakeholders become the strong conduits and proponents of family strengthening services. Convergence of community mechanisms and stakeholders with child protection mechanisms at all levels enables gatekeeping, referrals, and linkages with services on a need basis.

Miracle Foundation India facilitated the implementation of programs aimed at preventing child & family separations through community-led interventions, participation of village-level child protection committees, and

district child protection workforce. This paper analyses the effectiveness of the Miracle Foundation India Thrive Scale™ tool in guiding and supporting family strengthening programs, focusing on a comparative analysis between rural (district Chotta Udepur, Gujarat) and urban (Ramnagar, district Pune in Maharashtra) contexts.

8.2 Literature Review

In the Indian context, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act of 2015 (JJ Act, 2015) underscores the importance of family preservation and rehabilitation of children within their families wherever possible. The Act emphasises that alternative care arrangements should only be made when necessary, thus encouraging the strengthening of family-based support systems.

Vulnerability mapping is essential for family strengthening as it identifies families most at risk and ensures targeted, effective interventions. By addressing vulnerabilities early, the methodology helps prevent family breakdown or child separation, while enabling efficient resource allocation and informed decision-making. The insights gained guide tailored, sustainable solutions that address root causes and foster resilience within families and communities. Additionally, vulnerability mapping supports monitoring and evaluation, providing a baseline to track program impact and refine approaches for long-term success.

The State Government departments are coming up with / using the vulnerability mapping frameworks. The Department of Women, Child Development & Social Security, Government of Jharkhand, has developed a 16-indicator vulnerability mapping tool to address vulnerabilities affecting children and families, ensuring a data-driven approach to child welfare. The vulnerability mapping tool is designed to systematically assess the risk and support needs of children based on various factors. It evaluates key aspects such as family composition, health status, education, age, living environment, safety, nutrition, emotional well-being, and parental responsibilities. Each criterion is scored, with higher scores indicating greater levels of vulnerability. The tool categorises children into three groups—least vulnerable, vulnerable, and highly vulnerable—based on their total score, ensuring a structured approach to identifying those at risk. This assessment tool serves as a decision-making framework for child welfare organisations, enabling them to prioritise resources and interventions effectively. By documenting findings and the evaluator's details, the tool ensures accountability and transparency in assessments. Ultimately, the tool facilitates targeted action to address the immediate needs of children in vulnerable situations and supports long-term child protection planning.

Referring to the consolidated tools and guidelines on vulnerability mapping of children in need of care and protection issues by the Directorate of Women & Child Development, Government of Madhya

Pradesh, the vulnerability mapping tool is a structured framework designed to assess and quantify the risk levels of children in vulnerable situations. It evaluates key components such as family composition, health status, education, age, living environment, safety, nutrition, emotional well-being, and parental responsibilities. Each factor is scored based on its severity, with the total score categorising children into three levels: least vulnerable, vulnerable, and highly vulnerable. Additional considerations include family history, access to welfare schemes, and protective or risk factors. The tool also includes sections for documenting the date, evaluator's name, and findings, ensuring transparency and accountability.

Functionally, the tool helps child welfare organisations systematically identify risks and prioritise children who need immediate support. It provides insights for designing targeted interventions, such as healthcare, education, or housing support, based on specific needs. By offering a clear scoring system, it facilitates resource allocation, policy-making, and effective monitoring of interventions over time. This comprehensive approach ensures that vulnerable children are assessed holistically and supported with appropriate and timely actions.

The National Commission for Protection of Child Right's (NCPCR) Vulnerability Mapping Tool and Madhya Pradesh's (MP) Vulnerability Mapping Tool share the common objective of identifying and addressing risks faced by children in need of care and protection. However, they differ in scope, methodology, and specific focus areas. While the MP government vulnerability mapping tool is more tailored to the specific needs and challenges of Madhya Pradesh, emphasising localised implementation and grassroots engagement, the tool developed by the NCPCR is broader, standardised, and designed for national application. The Commission initiated an exercise of vulnerability mapping through the programme Samvardhan to Combat Child Trafficking, along with other existing mechanisms.

The use of JJA tools of Individual Care Plan (ICP), Social Investigation Report (SIR) is integrally used in child and family assessment by the social workforce. These tools help to assess unique child-specific characteristics, needs, support correspondingly family family-specific background factors, strengths, vulnerabilities, and insecurities; however, there remains a need to analyse, track the progress across the steps of case management, leveraging the data generated through the ICP/SIR tools. There is a need to make the case management process more holistic by prioritising needs and risks such that the case worker can plan support intervention strategies in order of the criticality of the risk faced by a particular child and/or family. This is particularly necessary in the case of accentuated safety concerns, which can be seen as red flags.

Thrive Scale™[1] is a methodology that guides a particular child, family case across the case management process. The Thrive Scale™ tool is a family participatory evaluation tool that enables the child protection workforce, and case workers, towards data-based decisions, conducting risk

assessments, intervention planning, and progress tracking for reintegration of children from the child care institutions to family and protecting them from separation from their families, thus ensuring a holistic and effective approach to family strengthening. This tool aids in determining whether intervention is needed and assists in planning immediate and long-term actions across the five key domains. It also helps to identify Red Flags, which are urgent concerns that signal immediate threats to a child or household, requiring swift intervention. Identifying these risks early enables timely responses, ensuring child safety and preventing harm.

Family and social relationships refer to the assessment and evaluation of the quality and stability of a child's familial and social connections. This domain focuses on assessing the strength of relationships, the presence of a supportive family network, the availability of positive role models, the level of communication and trust within the family, and the child's overall sense of belonging and connection to their immediate and extended social circle.

Education focuses on assessing and evaluating the child's educational opportunities and experiences. This domain considers various factors related to education, including school enrollment, attendance, access to quality education, educational resources and materials, teacher-student ratios, special learning needs, and the overall learning environment. It examines the child's educational progress, academic achievements, and engagement in learning activities. Additionally, the Education domain considers factors such as educational support systems, attitudes around education, and opportunities for extracurricular activities and skill development.

Health assessment and evaluating the physical and mental well-being of the child and family members is a domain that considers the various aspects of health, including access to healthcare services, regular medical check-ups, timely vaccinations, and preventive care. It also examines the child's overall physical health, including balanced nutrition, exercise, and sleep patterns, access to physical and play activities, and a clean and hygienic living environment. The mental health component of this domain evaluates the child and family's emotional well-being, resilience, and the presence of any mental health challenges or disorders. It considers factors such as the child's ability to cope with stress, ability to form meaningful social and interpersonal relationships, adapt to change, cope with stress, demonstrate empathy, and behave in socially appropriate ways, as well as access to mental health support services, and the presence of a supportive and nurturing environment.

Living Conditions focuses on evaluating and assessing the physical environment in which the child resides. This domain considers factors such as the safety, cleanliness, and adequacy of the living space, including

housing conditions, access to clean water and sanitation facilities, and overall hygiene. It also considers the availability of essential amenities, such as electricity, toilets, and ventilation. The domain examines the suitability of the living conditions to meet the child's developmental needs, including access to recreational facilities and a supportive neighbourhood or community environment.

Household economy refers to the assessment and evaluation of the financial stability and well-being of the child's household. It involves examining various aspects of the household's economic situation, including income, expenses, debt, savings, and access to necessities. This domain aims to determine the level of financial security and resources available to meet the needs of the child and the family. It considers factors such as employment status, income sources, financial planning, budgeting skills, and the ability to cover essential expenses, such as housing, food, healthcare, and education.

Thrive Scale™ uses a strength-based approach by focusing on areas in which families are thriving and can be optimised to prevent the child from being separated from their family. For each of the parameters, milestone is scored on a scale of 1-4, respectively, in crisis (Needs immediate attention); 2 = vulnerable (Needs attention, but not urgent); 3 = safe (attention helpful but not necessary); 4 = thriving (no attention needed). It also helps to identify Red Flags, which are urgent concerns related to the safety of a child within the family.

What distinguishes the Thrive Scale from the other tools specified above is that Thrive Scale is not just another child and family assessment tool, but informs the case worker in making intervention plans for preventing family separation and tracking progress on Family strengthening by considering the voices of the family and child. By acknowledging specific needs within the five wellbeing domains, the methodology facilitates targeted and effective interventions. Case workers can better and more quickly identify which areas to focus on with their families' cases by comparing wellbeing domain scores and marking vulnerable milestones. Families, in turn, feel more supported by having all five domains covered. Additionally, they can visually see their progress over time as interventions are completed and scores shift over time.

Scholarly works on child welfare and protection have consistently shown the effectiveness of community-driven programs that address the socio-economic conditions leading to families in crisis and separations. Recent studies on social work practices in India reveal that localised approaches like the use of assessment tools, such as the Thrive Scale™ by Miracle Foundation India, can generate valuable data for proactive interventions. Such tools help NGOs and community workers in identifying vulnerabilities early and preventing crises that may lead to the breakdown of families (Sharma, 2022).

8.3 Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this research paper is to evaluate the effectiveness of the Thrive Scale™ methodology developed by Miracle Foundation India to guide the case management process, creating measurable, data-driven decisions that can support planning suitable interventions for family strengthening.

'Case management process' is a systematic and coordinated approach that encompasses various activities aimed at effectively addressing the individual needs and goals of children and families. A standard case management process is important to ensure that children and families receive appropriate support, resources, and services, and in turn, to prevent the separation of children from families, provide support for separated children for family reintegration, and/or placement in family-based alternative care settings.

The core principles of case management are aligned to those laid down in the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2015 (Government of India, 2015). The process is highly individualised and focuses on the best interest of the child, follows the five steps of intake, assessment, planning & implementation, monitoring & follow-up and case closure. These are nonlinear and iterative in nature.

Miracle Foundation is a 24-year-old organisation with a vision "to ensure a family for every child in our lifetime". The organisation's strategic focus is on enabling effective gatekeeping by empowering social workers and strengthening community prevention efforts, and transitioning children from institutions to families by providing support to government bodies and child care institutions. At its core is to facilitate, strengthen the child protection and allied systems towards family strengthening by providing the support needed to ensure their long-term well-being, helping children thrive in a stable, nurturing environment.

The Thrive Scale™ methodology was developed by the organisation after extensive research and study of the family-based care models and frameworks, globally, as well as the national legislative framework on non-institutional care set out by the Juvenile Justice (Care & Protection of Children) Act 2015, the then Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS).

8.4 Hypothesis of the Study

The Thrive Scale™ tool, developed by Miracle Foundation India, serves as an effective, evidence-based assessment mechanism that supports family strengthening interventions by generating measurable data on family well-being, addressing vulnerabilities early, and preventing unnecessary child-family separation. By regularly assessing economic stability, child safety, health, education, and emotional support, the Thrive Scale™ enables targeted interventions that reduce risks of separation caused by socio-economic challenges.

The hypothesis proposes that the Thrive Scale™:

1. **Create Evidence:** By regularly assessing families (As a third step of case management: follow-ups) through the Thrive Scale™, measurable data will be generated that reflects a family's progress or areas of concern. This data can then be used to guide further interventions and support systems.
2. **Strengthen Families:** The tool supports family strengthening programs by identifying and addressing vulnerabilities early on through the first step of case management: Assessment, offering targeted interventions (such as access to financial assistance, healthcare, or emotional support) that help keep families together.
3. **Prevent Child-Family Separation:** By addressing risks before they escalate through red flags, the Thrive Scale™ tool helps prevent unnecessary separations caused by factors that can be mitigated through proper intervention.

8.5 Methodology

This study examined two community-based projects aimed at preventing the separation of children from families under the mentorship of the Miracle Foundation India. One program was located in the urban area of Ramnagar, Waze Pune, Maharashtra, while the other was based in the rural area of Chotta Udepur, Gujarat. The family strengthening initiatives were conducted with 153 families (89 families from Chotta Udepur, Gujarat, 64 from Ramnagar, Waze Pune, Maharashtra).

The Chhotaudepur district in Gujarat is a tribal-dominated rural area, with over 85% of the population belonging to Scheduled Tribes (ST) and the remainder consisting of Scheduled Castes (SC) and other communities. The primary livelihoods in this region include farming, seasonal labour, bamboo basket making and selling, and animal husbandry. The Ramnagar community of Maharashtra is a slum community with 15 to 20% of people owning businesses, while 75 to 80% work in low-paying jobs: garbage collection and housekeeping. Using Miracle Foundation India's vulnerability checklist, 89 families at risk were identified, with a total of 128 children (Boys 62: Girls 66) in Chotta Udepur, Gujarat. Whereas 64 families at risk were identified, comprising a total of 132 children in Ramnagar, Maharashtra.

These programs marked the first community-level prevention project initiatives under the tripartite Maharashtra & Gujarat State Government, UNICEF and Miracle Foundation India partnership, providing an opportunity to establish evidence-based frameworks in two distinct geographical and demographic contexts. Miracle Foundation India partnered with the Deepak Foundation, a well-established organisation with a deep understanding of local communities and strong operational capacity in both Gujarat and Maharashtra. Additionally, Miracle Foundation engaged with Child

Welfare Committees (CWCs) in these states to prioritise areas for the family strengthening program, ensuring a targeted and impactful approach.

The methodology consisted of analysing the assessment and intervention planning data from the Thrive Scale™ tool captured by the social workers in the case management tracker (CMT)[2] between March 2020 and March 2024. Two case studies are presented later in the study, one from each state, tracing the progress made by the families in the required areas of the five well-being domains following the five steps of the case management process.

As stated in the introduction section earlier, the case management process consists of five key stages: intake/admission, assessment, planning and implementation, follow-up, and case closure.

1. **Intake/Admission:** The process begins when a child or family is identified as being at risk of separation.
2. **Assessment:** A baseline or first Thrive Scale™ (TS) assessment is conducted, or red flags are identified that indicate potential risks during the planning and implementation stages.
3. **Planning and implementation:** Social workers develop and carry out intervention plans to address the identified needs. This involves linking the family to necessary services, support networks, and resources aimed at empowering the family and providing security for the child.
4. **Follow-ups:** Ongoing monitoring ensures that the family continues to benefit from the support provided. Revisions to the care plan are made when needed based on the family's evolving circumstances.
5. **Case closure:** Cases are closed once the care plan's goals have been met, and the child's long-term protection and well-being are assured.

The family strengthening interventions, identified through the Thrive Scale™ assessments, carried out in the project location included a range of support initiatives such as capacity building in parenting skills, linking families to social welfare protection schemes, life skills education, health and hygiene promotion, psychosocial and educational support, and career counselling. Special attention is given to critical safety concerns or "red flags," which are addressed with priority attention to safety planning on an urgent time-bound basis to prevent family breakdown.

To ensure sustainability, the program actively engaged stakeholders at the district, block, panchayat, and village levels, including District Child Protection Units, Block Development Officers, Panchayati Raj institutions, Village/Ward-level Child Welfare & Protection Committees, and community groups such as Bal Panchayats (Children Clubs)), ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers, Anganwadi workers, ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife), and Self-Help Groups (SHGs). The program's findings are shared with these local stakeholders to foster their participation and ownership, ensuring community-based support for the program's long-term sustainability.

8.6 Findings

The key findings highlighted the impact of the Thrive Scale™ tool leveraged in assessing and addressing challenges faced by families by following a systematic case management process in both geographical settings, including insights from a real case study.

8.6.1 Chhotaudepur, Gujarat

A needs assessment was conducted to evaluate the vulnerability status of these families across the five well-being domains, identifying red flags and planning interventions to support them. Quarterly assessments were carried out to track the progress of each family. The Thrive Scale assessment done over the three-year duration depicted through a spider graph below illustrates both domain-wise and overall progress of the families (Figure 8.1 to 8.3).

Figure 8.1: Needs assessment through Thrive Scale (based on five well-being domains)

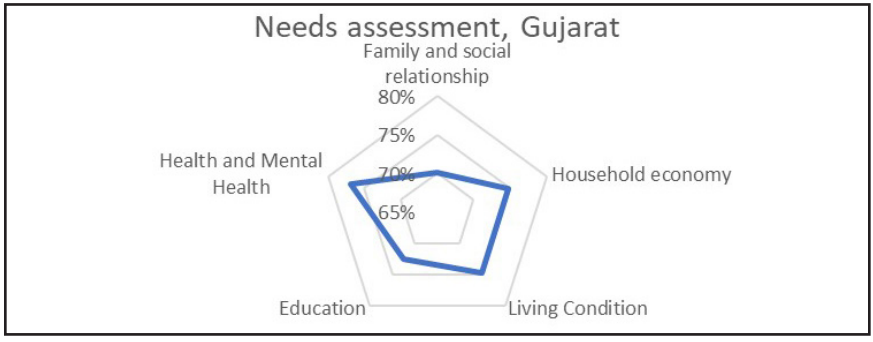


Figure 8.2: 10th Visit score (based on five well-being domains)

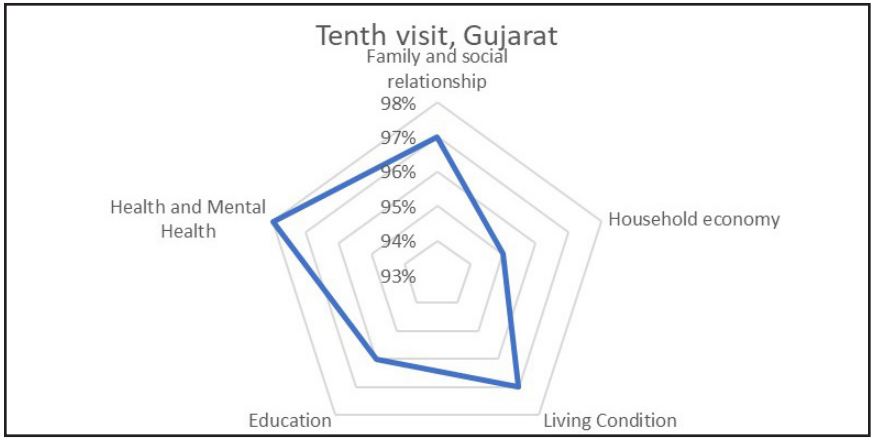
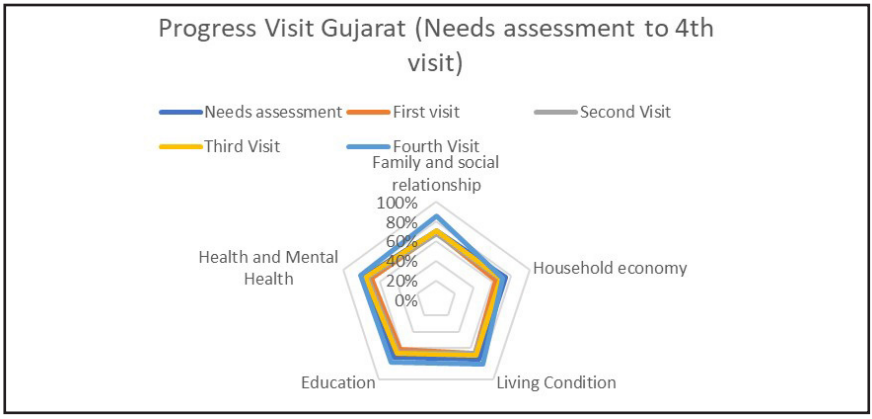


Figure 8.3: Overall progress in TS score (based on five well-being domains)



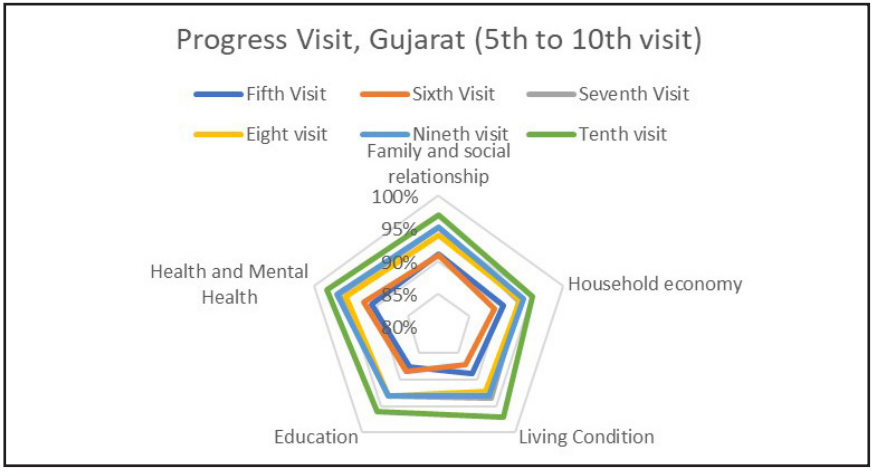
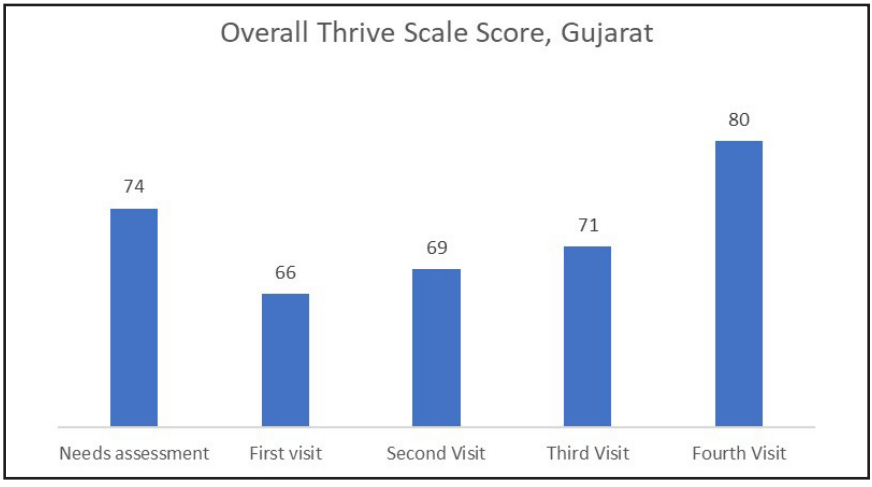
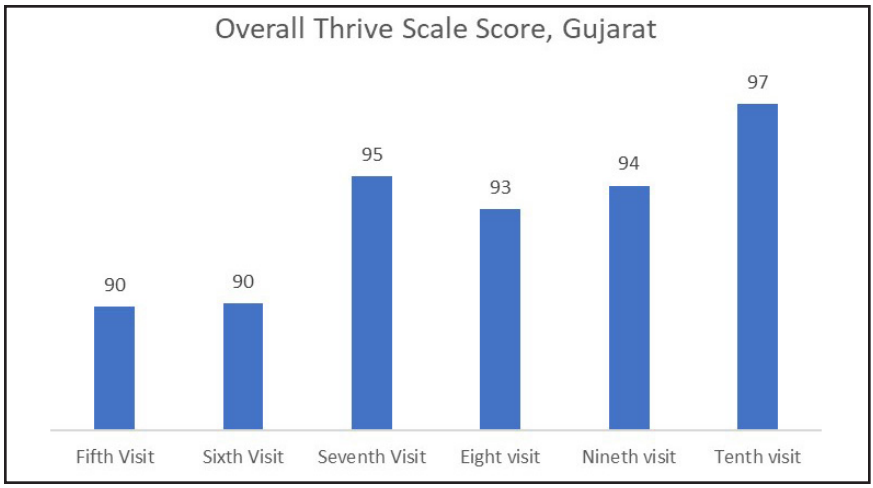


Figure 8.4: Overall progress in TS (based on visits)





During the year 2024, the 10th progress visit in Gujarat was completed, and data for 83 children was updated in 'Thrive Well™' during the 10th visit. Significant efforts were made to strengthen linkages and address red flags among vulnerable families (Figure 8.4).

A thorough evaluation of red flags reveals root causes, allowing for customised interventions across various well-being domains. The graph below shows the domain-wise red flags (Figure 8.5A to 8.5B):

Figure 8.5A: Visit-wise Red Flags (1)

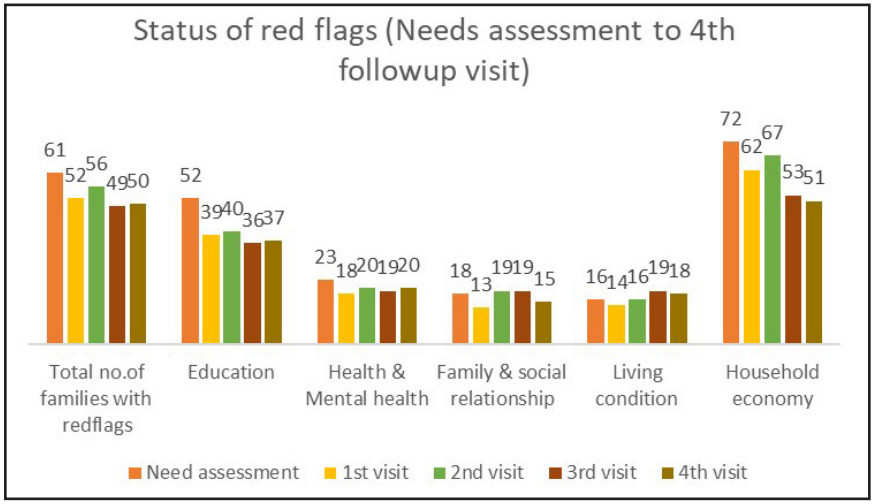
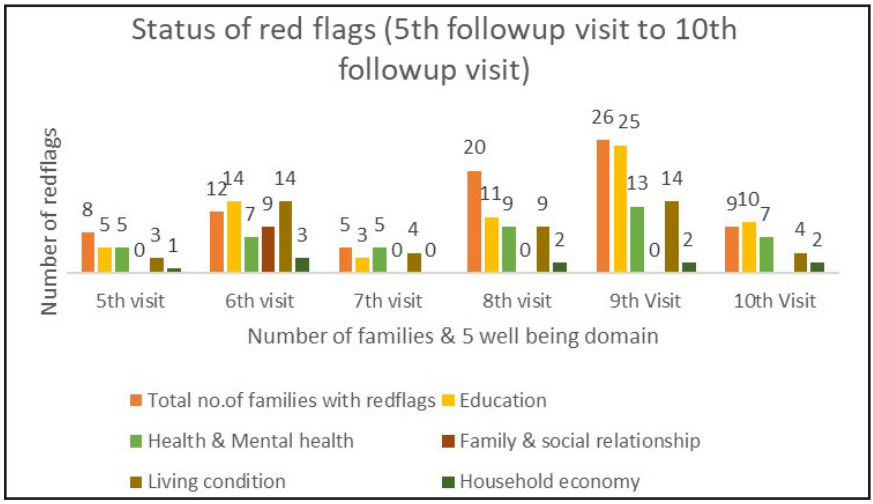


Figure 8.5B: Visit-wise Red Flags (2)



Recurrence of red flags was seen; this was mainly due to the following reasons.

- Education: No interest in studies, migration with family
- Household Economy: Poor earnings, non-sustainable livelihood, migration
- Family and social relationships: Risk of child marriage & child labour
- Living conditions: Poor kachha house, no toilets
- Health and mental health: Alcohol addiction was the main reason

8.6.2 Gujarat

In Gujarat, out of 89 identified families, 56 families are in follow-up (children 83: 38 Boys and 45 girls), 11 families have migrated, while 22 families have completed their intervention requirements, leading to the closure of their cases.

Case Study

This section of the study peeks into the case study of one family from Gujarat's intervention area. The case studies highlight the challenges and successes of the family:

Step one: Intake

During the situation analysis and identification of vulnerable families using the vulnerability checklist, a woman-headed family, led by Keshwari (name changed), was identified. She lived with the challenges of widowhood for a decade after the passing away of her husband, Manojbhai, and was solely responsible for raising their six children—five daughters and one son.

Step two: Assessment

The predominant needs, concerns and areas of strength were identified through Thrive Scale™ first assessment. After the passing of her husband, Manojbhai, Keshwari found herself in a difficult position, shouldering the responsibility of raising their six children—five daughters and one son—alone. The loss of her husband left the family without a steady income, plunging them into financial hardship. Keshwari faced immense pressure, not only to provide daily necessities but also to arrange for her daughters' marriages, a significant cultural expectation in her community. The weight of these obligations, along with the desire to ensure her son received a proper education, became overwhelming for her.

With no breadwinner in the family, both her son and daughters struggled to continue their studies. The financial strain meant that resources for education were scarce, and the children faced frequent disruptions in their schooling. In addition to the economic challenges, Keshwari dealt with the emotional burden of raising her family single-handedly, navigating societal expectations, and trying to keep her family together amid their growing vulnerabilities.

The situation called for immediate support and intervention to prevent further decline in their well-being and to provide opportunities for the children to continue their education without hindrance.

An assessment across five well-being domains was conducted using the Thrive Scale™, as outlined below in Table 8.1:

Table 8.1: Needs Assessment Thrive Scale™ Score

	Health & mental health	Education	Family & social relationships	Living condition	Household economy
Needs assessment	61%	56%	63%	63%	50%

Step three: Planning and Implementation

Based on the assessment, support interventions were planned accordingly. The Miracle India team, along with the local partner organisation, engaged with stakeholders at the district, block, panchayat, and village levels, including the District Child Protection Unit, Block Development Officers, and village leaders (Mukhiya). Village Child Protection Committees (VCPC), Bal Panchayats (children's clubs) were activated to strengthen child protection systems at the village level.

Amidst these efforts, the VCPC and Bal Panchayat were formed, with dedicated volunteers trained in life skills and mental health awareness. Through initiatives like psychosocial support and regular home visits, the committee aimed to identify and address the needs of vulnerable families, including Keshwari's family.

During one such visit, VCPC volunteers recognised Keshwari's struggles and engaged with her family to better understand their situation. Through compassionate dialogue, they encouraged her children to prioritise education and offered ongoing mentorship and support.

Additionally, the VCPC facilitated access to government schemes designed to help families in need. These included the Ganga Swarupa Yojana for widow pensions, E-Labour Card, PMJAY (Ayushman) Card for healthcare, educational support for her children, Aadhaar Card updates, and ration card revisions.

Step four: Follow-up

Quarterly follow-ups were done with respective families by the team of the local partner organisation were done as described below in Table 8.2:

Table 8.2: Quarterly Follow-ups

Q1:	The documents were reviewed for accessing government schemes, including the Child Sponsorship Scheme. Overall Thrive ScaleTM Score: 60%.
Q2:	VCPC/ volunteers helped the family connect with the Sponsorship Scheme, but the son, Punit (name changed), was hesitant to visit the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) (required as per the process for approval of sponsorship support). Overall Thrive Scale Score: 68%.
Q3:	VCPC/ volunteers educated the family on health, hygiene, stress management, and values. Volunteers processed the Shram Yogi card. Overall Thrive ScaleTM Score: 96%.
Q4:	The family received the Shram Yogi card, but Punit still refused to go to the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) as he was afraid. Overall Thrive ScaleTM Score: 58%.
Q5:	Both children are continuing their studies, and the mother remains engaged in labour work. She has also started seasonal farming on her own land. Both children have expressed that they do not wish to go to a Child Care Institution (CCI) to avail of the sponsorship scheme, and the mother is determined to educate them. Additionally, the mother is receiving a widow's pension. Overall Thrive ScaleTM Score: 94%.
Q6:	Family absent due to a function. Overall Thrive ScaleTM Score: 93%.
Q7:	Children were attending school and college regularly. Mother supports their education. Overall Thrive ScaleTM Score: 95%.
Q8:	The male child received an education kit and benefited from a health camp. Overall Thrive ScaleTM Score: 97%.
Q9:	The female child is now in college, and with increased family income, her case was closed. The male child continues his studies. Overall Thrive ScaleTM Score: 98%.

Step five: Case closure

With the help of various government schemes, Keshwari now receives a regular widow's pension, providing her with a steady source of financial stability. Educational support has significantly lightened the burden of her children's schooling expenses, ensuring they can continue their education without interruption. Additionally, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY) card (Ayushman Bharat scheme) guarantees free medical treatment for the family in case of serious illness, offering them a critical healthcare safety net.

The ongoing support from the Village Child Protection Committee (VCPC), Bal Panchayat, and community volunteers played an instrumental role in the family's recovery. Volunteers made regular home visits, offering psychosocial support and ensuring that the family accessed all available resources. This community-driven assistance created a safety net around Keshwari's family, making sure that their needs were addressed promptly.

Through the Thrive Scale™ final assessment, it was observed that the family's overall well-being score reached 80%, indicating significant progress. Importantly, there were no remaining red flags in the family's status. Keshwari acknowledged that she now feels empowered to manage her family's needs and future independently, expressing her gratitude for the interventions that helped them overcome their vulnerabilities.

Regular support from the VCPC, Bal Panchayat, and community volunteers ensured that Keshwari and her family remained on a stable path. As a result, they now have the confidence and ability to take charge of their future without external assistance. Keshwari, in particular, expressed her sense of relief, knowing that her children's education and health are secure and that the family can continue to thrive on its own.

As a result of all these interventions, Keshwari's family has seen significant improvements in their circumstances. One of her daughters is now pursuing higher education in college, while her son has found employment in a shop in Vadodara after completing his 12th grade. Their combined incomes, supplemented by agricultural earnings, have markedly improved the family's financial situation, allowing them to manage their household expenses more comfortably.

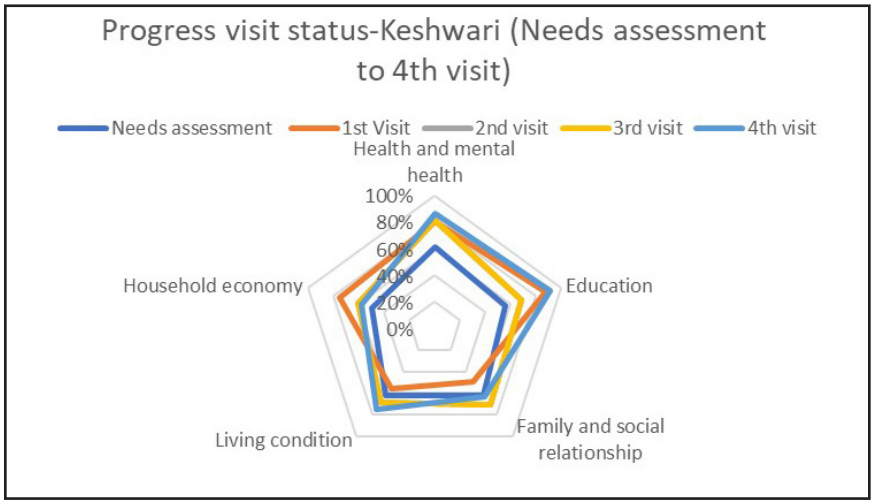
Current Income Summary

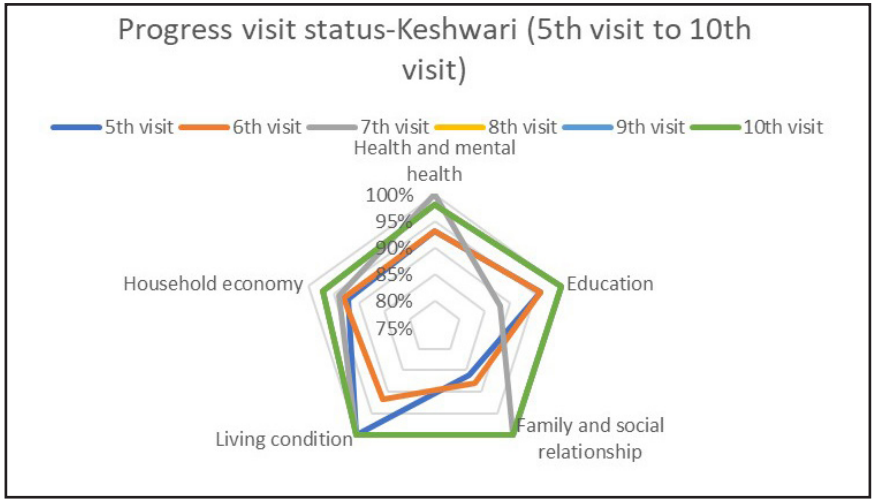
1. Widow Pension: ₹1,200 per month
2. Son's Employment Income: ₹8,000 per month
3. Agricultural Income: ₹15,000 yearly

Now, Keshwari is on the path to overcoming her challenging circumstances, paving the way for a brighter future for herself and her children.

The following graph), through Thrive Scale™, shows the overall progress in the family (Figure 8.6).

Figure 8.6: Overall Thrive Scale™ Score





8.6.3 Maharashtra

In the Ramnagar community of Maharashtra, most household dwellings were poorly built, with 80 to 85% being temporary structures. Families typically consisted of 6 to 7 members.

Local committees like the Mahila Arogya Samiti (MAS) were absent, leading to poor health awareness and high rates of alcoholism and domestic violence (60-70%). Many women suffered from health issues due to neglect and inadequate hygiene.

Education was limited, with most children only completing up to 7th grade. In areas like Khan Vasti and Annabhau Sathe Chowk, girls' education rates were lower than boys.

Additionally, the Child Protection Committee (WCPC) was not established, resulting in a lack of knowledge about child rights and protections. Ignorance about children's health, education, and government schemes prevailed, with no local NGOs working on these issues.

A needs assessment was conducted to evaluate the vulnerability status of these families across the five well-being domains, for identifying red flags and planning interventions to support them. Quarterly assessments were carried out to track the progress of each family. The spider graph below illustrates both domain-wise and overall progress of the families (Figure 8.7 to 8.10).

Figure 8.7: Needs Assessment (based on five well-being domains)

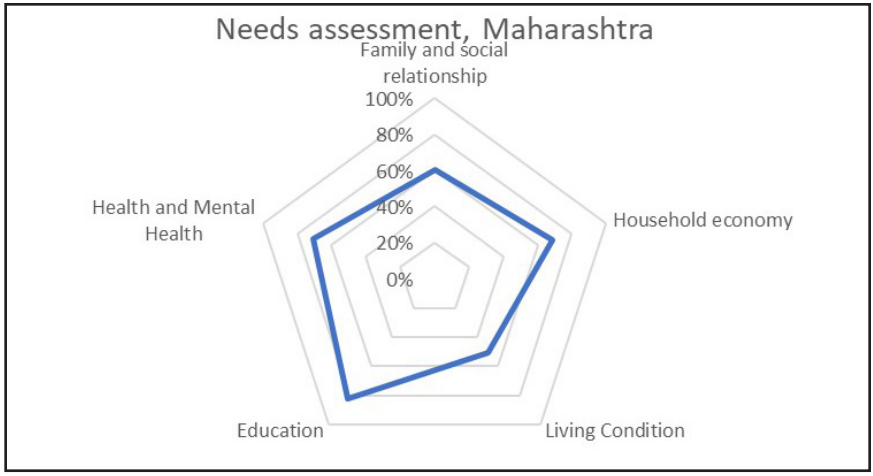


Figure 8.8: Sixth visit (based on five well-being domains)

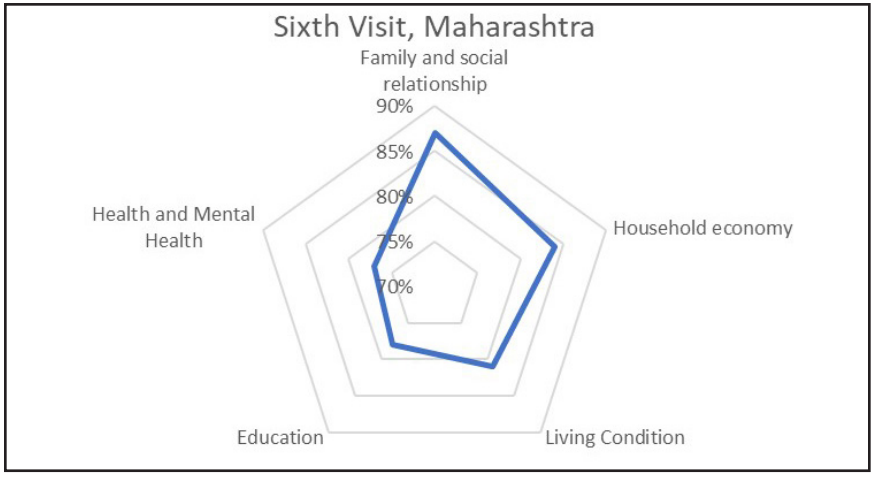


Figure 8.9: Overall Visit-wise Progress

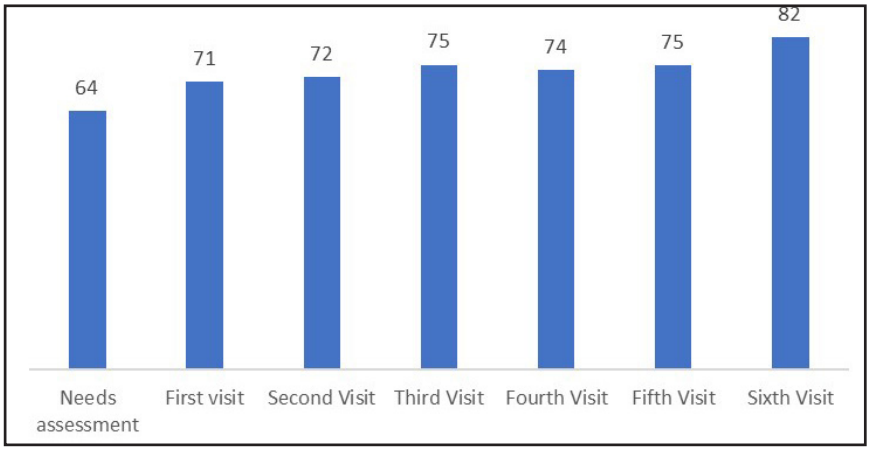


Figure 8.10: Overall Thrive Scale Score (based on five well-being domains)

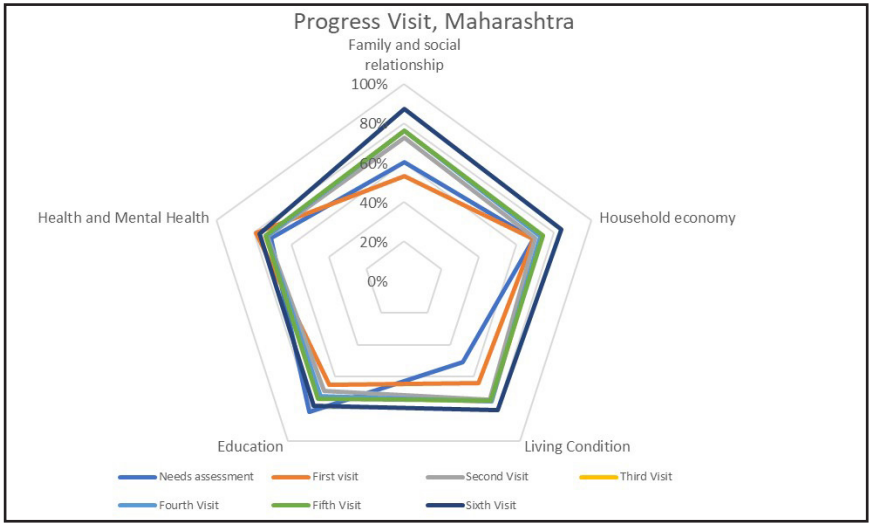


Figure 8.11A: Red Flag Score (1)

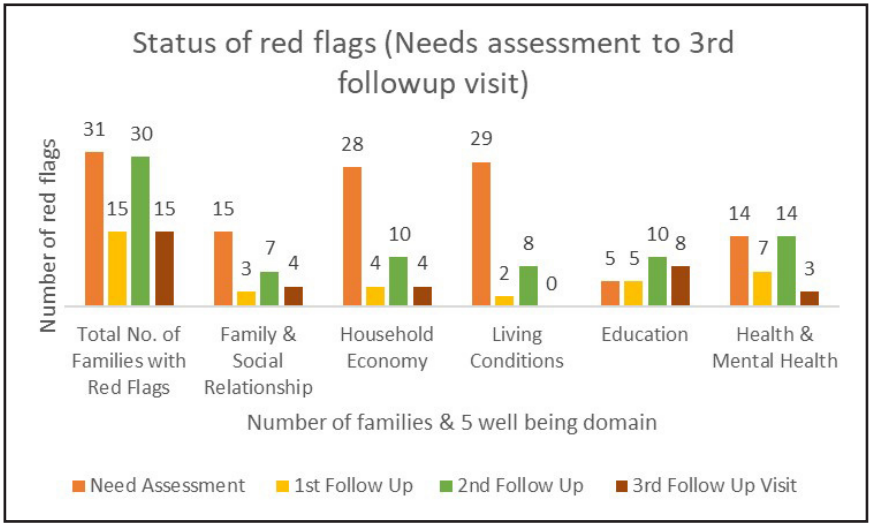
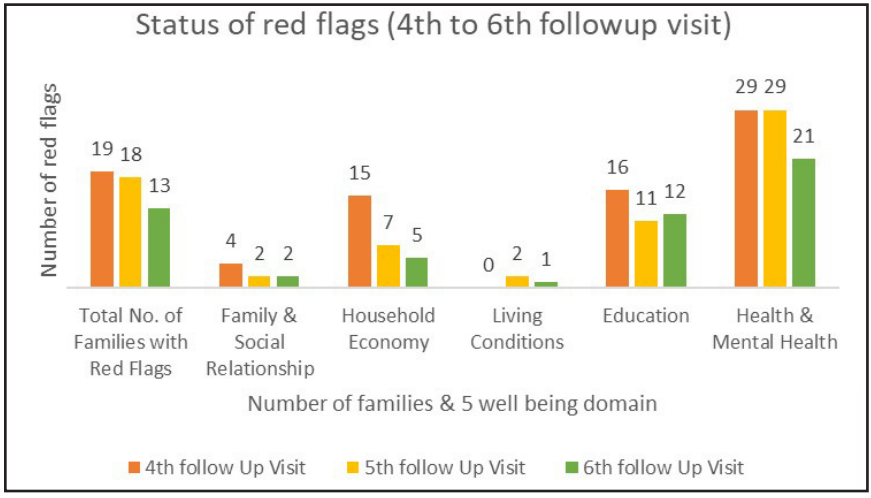


Figure 8.11B: Red Flag Score (2)



Figures 8.11A and 8.11B show that there was a recurrence of the red flags, mainly due to the following reasons:

- Household economy: Poor earnings, non-sustainable livelihood, migration
- Family and social relationships: Risk of child marriage & child labour
- Living conditions: Poor kachha house, no toilets, poor sanitation, health and hygiene
- Health and mental health: Alcohol addiction was the main reason

Overall, in Maharashtra, among the 64 identified families, 51 were in follow-up, 11 families migrated, and 2 family cases have been closed, with 31 out of 64 families thriving.

Case Study

The following section shows the family strengthening work through case management by using the Thrive Scale™ methodology.

Step 1: Intake

During the situation analysis and identification of vulnerable families using the vulnerability checklist, Sunita Sharma (name changed), a 32-year-old single mother, was identified as facing overwhelming challenges following a severe accident that left her husband incapacitated. With her husband no longer able to provide financial or emotional support, Sunita was forced to assume full responsibility for their two young children, Karthik (11) and Pawan (5) (names changed). Her situation was further deteriorated by the lack of stable income, limited access to social support, and the pressing need to ensure her children's well-being amidst these growing adversities.

Step 2: Assessment

The initial Thrive Scale™ assessment identified key needs, concerns, and areas of strength for Sunita. Relying heavily on her own resilience and the support of her mother, who provided shelter during challenging times, Sunita navigated her circumstances in Malwadi. With a modest monthly income of ₹7,000 from working as a housekeeper for six households, she struggled to meet their basic needs, and the financial burden was significant. The emotional toll of single-handedly raising two children under such conditions turned each day into a relentless challenge.

Despite these hardships, Sunita's determination began to emerge. While her husband and his family remained in their village, offering neither financial nor emotional support, Sunita was resolute in her commitment to create a better future for her children. She aspired for Karthik and Pawan not only to have access to education but also to thrive amidst the difficulties they faced. The table below shows the assessment score of the family.

Table 8.3: Thrive Scale™ score of assessment (1st visit)

	Health & Mental Health	Education	Family & social relationships	Living condition	Household economy
Needs assessment	61%	81%	45%	37%	75%
1st visit	63%	70%	71%	66%	62%

Step 3: Planning and Implementation

Sunita received support from the Ward Child Protection Committee (WCPC) and community volunteers who worked to identify and address the needs of vulnerable families like hers. These local champions, trained in life skills, child rights, parenting skills, and mental health awareness, made regular home visits and provided psychosocial support, helping Sunita find stability during a difficult time.

Through their assistance, Sunita was linked to several government schemes, including the Balsanogan Yojana (financial assistance for children), ABHA Card (health support scheme), and other initiatives such as the E-Labour Card and Sukanya Samruddhi schemes. These programs offered essential financial relief and healthcare access for her children, ensuring that their basic needs were met.

Additionally, the local NGO, IDEA Foundation, provided support in the form of educational coaching and financial aid for her children's schooling. Pawan, now in the 4th grade at Smita Patil School, actively participates in extracurricular activities, while her younger son, Karthik, is just starting his educational journey in Jr. KG. With their school fees partially covered and extra educational resources, the burden on Sunita began to ease.

The changes were not just financial; Sunita also grew as a parent. Through training sessions on positive discipline, hygiene, child rights, and child development, she gained valuable parenting skills that improved her relationship with her children. Sunita learned to manage their emotional needs better, communicate effectively, and instil discipline in a healthy way.

Step 4: Follow-up

During the follow-up phase, the Ward Child Protection Committee (WCPC) and community volunteers continued their regular visits to ensure Sunita received ongoing support and to monitor her progress. These follow-ups were crucial for assessing the effectiveness of previous interventions and for providing additional assistance as needed (Table 8.4).

Pawan and Karthik are still receiving educational support, with Pawan actively participating in extracurricular activities and Karthik beginning his educational journey. As a result, Sunita's confidence as a parent continues to grow, and she is increasingly able to envision a better future for her children.

To further enhance their well-being, efforts are underway to connect Sunita with the Ladaki Bahin scheme. An Asha worker, in collaboration with community volunteers, is planning home visits to provide essential health services. Additionally, regular parenting skills sessions are being offered, along with meetings with Pawan's and Karthik's teachers to ensure continued engagement with their education.

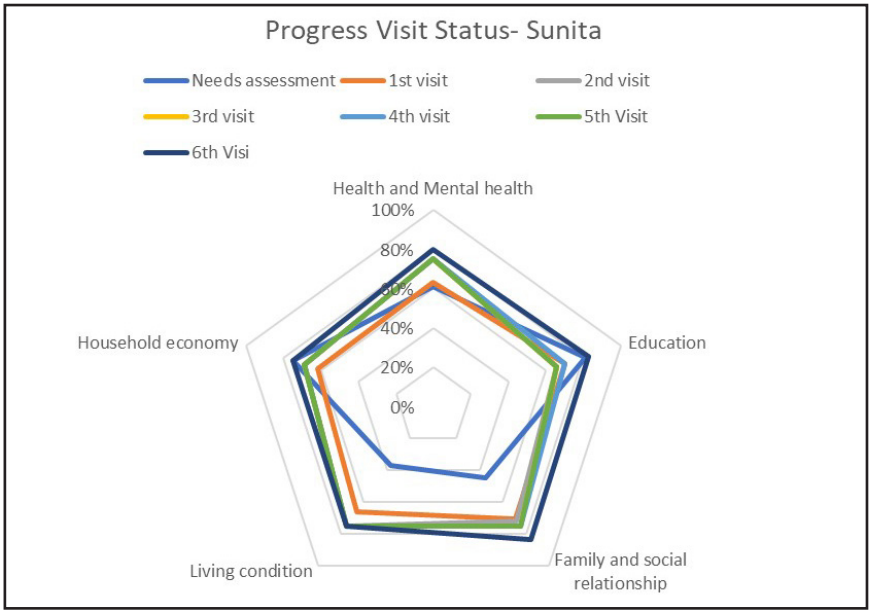
Table 8.4: Follow-ups

First Visit:	The community volunteers and WCPC identified Sunita as a vulnerable family in need of support. Regular home visits commenced, during which the team provided psychosocial support and counselling sessions to help Sunita navigate the emotional and financial challenges she faced. Overall Thrive Scale Score: 55.68%.
Second Visit:	Efforts to link with government schemes faced challenges due to the lack of basic documents. However, community volunteers and WCPC members continued to follow up diligently. In addition, educational support from the IDEA Foundation allowed Sunita's children, Pawan and Karthik, to receive coaching and partial financial aid for their schooling. Overall Thrive Scale Score: 71.72 %.
Third Visit:	Sunita participated in training sessions focusing on positive parenting, child rights, child development stages, hygiene, and emotional management. These sessions empowered her to enhance her relationship with her children and effectively manage their emotional needs. Overall Thrive Scale Score: 72.67%.
Fourth Visit:	The WCPC and community volunteers conducted regular follow-up visits to monitor Sunita's situation. They organised a one-window awareness camp to provide information on available schemes and services, further aiding families like Sunita's. Through continued home visits and psychosocial support, the team maintained a connection with Sunita, ensuring she felt supported and empowered. Overall Thrive Scale Score: 73.26%.
Fifth Visit:	In this phase, the WCPC and volunteers successfully connected Sunita with various government schemes, including the Balsanogan Yojana (financial aid for children), ABHA Card (health support), E-Labour Card, and Sukanya Samruddhi Yojana. These connections provided essential financial and healthcare relief for her family, contributing to their overall well-being. Overall Thrive Scale Score: 72.67%.
Sixth Visit :	In this phase, the mother is actively managing all family needs, with improved parenting skills and stronger social relationships through regular engagement with community volunteers and WCPC. Both children attend school regularly, with partial educational support provided. The family is connected to government hospital services, and the mother has successfully overcome stress, ensuring a stable and supportive environment for her children. Overall Thrive Scale Score: 80.20%.

The case remains open, as the family and community recognise that some support is still needed. We will close the case when both the family and the community feel that all necessary assistance has been provided.

Figure 8.12 below shows the Thrive Scale™ scores progress for the family

Figure 8.12: Overall progress in Thrive Scale™



8.6.4 Comparative Analysis of Rural and Urban Community Prevention Programs

In analysing Miracle Foundation India's community prevention program using the Thrive Scale, a comparison between the rural area of Chhotaudepur, Gujarat, and the urban area of Ramnagar, Maharashtra, can highlight key insights into how the nature of assessment data, intervention planning varies given the different regional urban and rural contexts.

Rural Area: Chhotaudepur, Gujarat

- **Challenges:** Families face economic instability, limited access to educational and healthcare facilities, and poor infrastructure. A high percentage of families live in raw, makeshift homes
- **Program Implementation:** The Thrive Scale™ was used to assess 87 vulnerable families, identifying a total of 132 children at risk. The assessment focused on well-being domains such as economic stability, child safety, health, and education.
- **Interventions:** Quarterly assessments and targeted interventions, supported by Village Child Protection Committees (VCPC), helped improve family conditions. Access to government schemes (widow pensions, labour cards, and healthcare) provided financial and social support.
- **Impact:** Over time, measurable improvements were recorded in family well-being, with most families progressing significantly, as indicated by the Thrive Scale™.

Urban Area: Ramnagar, Maharashtra

- **Community Characteristics:** Ramnagar is an urban slum area where most families are engaged in low-wage jobs such as housekeeping, garbage collection, and day labour. Many families live in overcrowded conditions with limited access to sanitation and healthcare services.
- **Program Implementation:** The Thrive Scale™ was utilised to assess 64 vulnerable families in Ramnagar, identifying 148 children at risk. The assessment focused on key well-being domains such as economic stability, housing conditions, health, child safety, and education access.
- **Interventions:** Regular assessments were carried out in collaboration with the Ward Child Protection Committee (WCPC) and community volunteers. Families were connected to key government schemes such as the Balsanogan Yojana, ABHA Health Card, and labour welfare schemes, which provided crucial financial and healthcare assistance. Efforts were made to improve housing conditions, focusing on hygiene and sanitation, as many families lived in temporary structures. Additionally, educational support was provided through local NGOs, ensuring children received school coaching and partial financial aid. Psychosocial support and parenting skills training further empowered parents, helping them better manage their emotional and financial challenges while strengthening family dynamics.
- **Challenges:** Urban poverty, high rates of alcoholism, domestic violence, and crime are prevalent. The absence of community-based organisations like Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) or local protection mechanisms creates further risks for children.
- **Impact:** The Thrive Scale™ data showed marked improvement in living conditions and family stability, with Geeta's family achieving financial stability and her children continuing their education.

Comparison and Key Insights

- **Economic Stability:** Both regions face economic challenges, but the interventions differ based on available local resources and livelihood opportunities. Rural families rely more on agriculture, while urban families depend on wage labour.
- **Social Structure and Support:** In rural areas, community-driven programs like VCPCs and government support schemes are vital for improving family stability. In urban settings, the absence of strong local support structures requires more intensive intervention by the NGO.
- **Children's Education and Health:** In both areas, the Thrive Scale™ helps track children's educational progress and health. Urban areas often suffer from a lack of awareness about child rights and protection, while rural regions face logistical challenges in accessing services.

The Thrive Scale™ proves to be a flexible tool, adaptable to both rural and urban environments, offering data-driven insights that enable targeted interventions suited to each community's unique challenges.

8.7 Limitations

1. **Initial Pen-and-Paper Implementation:** The Thrive Scale™ tool was initially implemented in a pen-and-paper format, creating potential challenges in data accuracy and efficiency. Manual data entry was prone to human error and delays in timely analysis,
2. **Technological Transition and Accessibility:** While transitioning to a digital version of the Thrive Scale™ was a significant improvement, full integration across all communities remained a challenge. Limited access to technology and digital literacy in rural areas hindered the tool's effective usage and compromised the quality of data collected.
3. **Case Worker Turnover:** Frequent turnover of case workers posed a significant limitation, as the effectiveness of Thrive Scale™ assessments often depends on the rapport built between the case worker and the family. Disruptions in continuity impact trust, data reliability, and the intervention process itself.
4. **Case Worker Mindset:** The Thrive Scale™ is not merely a data collection tool but a child- and family-centred intervention planning and follow-up tool. A key limitation lies in case workers viewing it solely as a means of collecting data rather than as a tool to drive meaningful interventions. For effective implementation, case workers must adopt a mindset focused on building relationships, understanding family dynamics, and ensuring that their assessments lead to actionable, child-focused outcomes.
5. **Cultural Relevance and Adaptability:** The Thrive Scale™ tool may need further adaptation to address the specific cultural contexts of rural and urban families. Without appropriate localisation, it risks missing key nuances in family dynamics, challenges, and strengths unique to different regions.
6. **Training and Capacity Building:** The tool's successful implementation relies heavily on the training and familiarity of community workers and volunteers. Variability in the quality of training or engagement levels may impact the consistency, reliability, and accuracy of data collection.

8.8 Recommendations

1. **Enhance Training Programs:** Strengthening training initiatives for community workers and volunteers on the Thrive Scale™ tool is essential. Comprehensive training should include the tool's usage and its adaptability to local cultural contexts to ensure accurate assessments of family needs.
2. **Increase Community Engagement:** Actively involve families and community members in the assessment process. Feedback mechanisms should be established to gather insights from those directly affected, allowing for continuous improvement of the tool and interventions.
3. **Tailor Interventions to Local Contexts:** Recognise the distinct challenges faced by families in rural and urban settings. Design and implement

tailored strategies that address the specific socio-economic and cultural factors influencing family dynamics in each context. For example, addressing the high percentage of low-paying jobs in Ramnagar can lead to targeted economic support initiatives.

4. **Expand Access to Technology:** Invest in technology infrastructure in rural areas to ensure community workers have access to digital tools. This can include providing devices, internet access, and training on digital literacy to facilitate the effective use of the Thrive Scale™ tool.
5. **Implement Monitoring and Evaluation Systems:** Establish robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the ongoing effectiveness of the Thrive Scale™ tool. Regular evaluations should inform adjustments and enhancements to the tool and related interventions, particularly in light of findings regarding the educational engagement of children.
6. **Strengthen Partnerships with Local Government and NGOs:** Collaborate with local government and NGOs to leverage their expertise in family strengthening programs. Building strong partnerships can enhance the overall effectiveness of interventions and provide additional resources for vulnerable families.
7. **Strengthen Community Support Networks:** The absence of community organisations, such as the Child Protection Committee, highlights the need for grassroots support systems. Establishing and empowering local committees can help monitor family well-being and provide timely interventions when needed.
8. **Integrate Health and Social Services:** With health crises being a significant risk factor for family separation, integrating health services with social support systems is essential. This includes access to mental health services, regular health check-ups, and nutrition programs to address the holistic needs of families.
9. **Develop Tailored Interventions for High-Risk Families:** Specific interventions should be designed for families with multiple red flags. Comprehensive case management strategies that include a combination of economic, health, and educational support can help stabilise these families and prevent crises.
10. **Strengthening Case Worker Engagement and Retention:** To address caseworker turnover and foster the right mindset, their efforts should be recognised and incentivised through district government policies, such as performance-based bonuses and professional development opportunities. Regular training should emphasise the Thrive Scale™ as a child- and family-centric intervention tool, not just a data collection method, while offering emotional support to prevent burnout. These measures will enhance motivation, reduce turnover, and strengthen their engagement with children and families.

8.9 Conclusion

This paper has examined the effectiveness of the Miracle Foundation India Thrive Scale™ tool in strengthening families across rural and urban contexts. The comparative analysis of Chhotaudepur (rural) and Ramnagar (urban) revealed that the Thrive Scale effectively identified vulnerabilities and provided targeted interventions, leading to a reduction in unnecessary child-family separations. The hypothesis that the Thrive Scale™ generates measurable evidence to support family strengthening programs has been substantiated, with early identification of risks and timely interventions improving overall family resilience.

While the tool has proven its value, challenges remain in scaling its impact, particularly with sustaining interventions and expanding outreach. Additionally, the transition from the initial pen-and-paper format to a technology-driven approach highlights the need for ongoing refinement. Recommendations include enhanced training, improved data collection, and customised interventions tailored to the unique needs of rural and urban settings.

In conclusion, the Thrive Scale™ has the potential to significantly improve child well-being and family stability. By adopting the proposed recommendations, stakeholders can further strengthen its role in fostering healthier, more resilient communities and ensure that future interventions are both impactful and contextually appropriate.

Disclaimer: In preparing this manuscript, we have used the Chat GPT (open-access version) to edit the language. We take full responsibility for the content.

Endnotes

1. The Thrive well is now digitally available as mobile first Thrive Well app and web platform
2. Case management tracker (CMT) supports the case manager with a system to analyse, track the progress across the steps of case management process, leveraging the data generated through the ICP/SIR/TS tools

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PART 3

Organisational Efficiency: Navigating Sociological and Technological Dimensions

9 Sociological Perspectives on Behavioural Change Initiatives: Integrating Theory and Practice to Enhance Social Sector Resilience

Yash Singh Sisodiya

Abstract

This paper discusses how to effect behavioural change in the social sector using insights from sociology. The scholars intend to bridge the gap between theory and practice. This study incorporates sociological perspectives into the conceptualisation and implementation of social interventions. The major sociological theories that will be analysed include the following: social norms, collective behaviour, cultural dynamics, health promotion, educational reforms, and environmental sustainability. The research proposes strategies for integrating theory with on-the-ground efforts, bringing into focus community engagement, cultural sensitivity, and institutional support in increasing the resilience and impact of initiatives within the social sector.

Keywords: Behavioural Change, Sustainable, Urban, Innovation

9.1 Introduction

Behavioural change initiatives are very important to deal with some burning social concerns and to help communities build strength. Change behaviours have been developed to shift an individual or group's attitudes, beliefs, and practices that, in turn, make way for healthier and more sustainable behaviours. For instance, effective social sector behavioural change is an imperative step towards stronger public health improvement, education, environmental sustainability, and general overall community well-being (Lefebvre, 2013). Yet, behavioural change is notoriously short-lived because of the multiple individual, social, and cultural factors that affect how one acts (Callero, 2023). While sociological theories like social norms, collective behaviour, and cultural dynamics provide frameworks for behavioural change, their practical application in social sector initiatives (e.g., Swachh Bharat Abhiyan) remains underexplored. This creates a disconnect between academic insights and on-ground implementation, leading to unsustainable or ineffective interventions.

Failing to bridge this gap risks perpetuating ineficient resource allocation and ineffective policies, undermining effirts to address critical issues like public health, environmental sustainability, and educational equity.

This exploration of social norms, collective behaviour, cultural dynamics, and the role of institutions provides a framework to understand

how behaviours are constructed in context through perspectives in sociology. This understanding is important in conceptualizing interventions that resonate with target populations and assure lifelong change. This study aims to unveil how sociological perspectives are translated in the conceptualisation and implementation of behavioural changes in the social sector.

This paper attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice by analysing relevant sociological frameworks and case studies where these theories have been applied successfully. This way, we seek approaches that will fortify behavioural change programs through participation by the community, cultural responsiveness, and institutional capacity.

9.2 Literature Review

The literature review serves as a foundation for understanding how the complex intertwined relationships that exist between sociological theory and behavioural change work in the social sector. This section will look at current sociological theories that explain the manner in which behaviour is shaped through social norms, collective dynamics, and cultural contexts critically. By synthesising key texts and recent studies, we aim to highlight the theoretical frameworks informing our comprehension of behavioural change.

9.2.1 Sociological Theories on Behaviour and Social Change

Sociological theories addressed how social structures, institutions, and cultural dynamics shape the behaviour of individuals and groups. Of importance in this regard are the following:

- Social norms theory: It researches how perceptions of what is normally or acceptably conceptualised as being part of a group's behaviour affects individual behaviour (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019). Social norms theory, rooted in early 20th-century sociology—particularly Émile Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness—gained modern articulation through the work of Robert Cialdini (1991) and later Brian Cislaghi and Lori Heise (2018), who formalised distinctions between injunctive norms (perceptions of approval/disapproval) and descriptive norms (perceptions of common behaviour) Emerging to address gaps in rational choice models, which struggled to explain group-driven actions, the theory gained traction in public health and social policy contexts, such as explaining why community-led messaging (e.g., framing cleanliness as "local pride" in India's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan) succeeded where top-down mandates failed; residents internalised sanitation as a collective expectation rather than a government rule. Critics, however, note its limitations. Norms are often context-specific, may reinforce power imbalances (e.g., dominant groups defining "normal" behaviour that marginalises

minority practices), and underplay individual agency or economic constraints (Dempsey et al., 2018). Modern iterations have evolved to address these gaps, distinguishing between perceived norms (what individuals believe others do) and actual norms, integrating intersectional frameworks to account for overlapping identities (e.g., caste, gender) in shaping norm adherence (Ghosh & Banerjee, 2018), and expanding to digital contexts where social media amplifies norm diffusion (e.g., viral cleanliness campaigns). At its core, the theory posits that behaviour is shaped by group identity, perceived consensus, social sanctions (rewards or punishments), and dynamic adaptation to new information, as seen in Swachh Bharat, where community norms shifted from "tolerating dirt" to "priding cleanliness", (Tankard & Paluck, 2016).

- Collective behaviour theory: Emerging from early 20th-century sociology to explain non-institutionalised group actions like riots and protests, this theory was initially framed by figures such as Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess (1921) as a response to social strain, where individuals, lacking clear norms, act on shared emotions. Gaining prominence during periods of upheaval (e.g., 1960s civil rights movements), it was later expanded by Neil J. Smelser (1962), who identified "value-added" conditions (e.g., structural strain) necessary for collective action. In contexts like Swachh Bharat, the theory explains how Indore's residents moved from passive compliance to active participation—citizen committees and peer enforcement emerged organically, driven by shared frustration over poor sanitation. However, critics argue that the early formulations which pathologized collective action as "irrational," overlooked structural inequalities (e.g., pre-existing community networks in Indore), and neglected the leadership or organisation (e.g., municipal campaigns structured the effort). Modern iterations have shifted from viewing crowds as irrational to recognising their potential for positive change, integrating resource mobilisation theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) to explain how groups access resources and shape "diagnostic" (problem) and "prognostic" (solution) frames (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Digital platforms further expanded the theory, enabling rapid norm diffusion (e.g., viral photos of clean streets). Today, the theory highlights emergent norms, contagion (imitation), structural strain, and mobilising structures (networks), as seen in Swachh Bharat where strain (dirty streets) and networks (citizen committees) and contagion (peer modelling) drove sustained change (Goldstone & Gureckis, 2009).
- Cultural dynamics theory: Rooted in 20th-century anthropology and sociology—influenced by Clifford Geertz's (1973) view of culture as a "web of meanings" and later scholars like Ron Lesthaeghe in 1995, countered the static notions of culture, instead exploring how values, beliefs, and practices evolve in response to internal (generational shifts) and external (globalisation) forces (Sewell, 1997). Applied to contexts

like Forgotten Foods: Memories and Recipes from Muslim South Asia, it explains how Muslim South Asian foodways adapt to migration (e.g., Sri Lankan Malay cuisine blending local and migrant traditions) or political attacks (e.g., Indian Muslims asserting culinary heritage to counter stigma). Critics, however, argue that the theory can be overly abstract, neglecting material factors (e.g., caste-based hierarchies marginalising "smelly" offal dishes) or romanticising tradition (e.g., framing "authentic" cuisine as static). Modern literature has integrated intersectional and political-economic perspectives, as seen in Arjun Appadurai's (1996) "culinary cultures" framework, which examines global flows (colonialism, trade) and local resistance (Actis, 2003). The theory now emphasises cultural negotiation—how communities balance preservation and adaptation (e.g., Afghan refugees in Berlin blending Afghan and French cooking techniques). At its core, it focuses on symbolic meaning (e.g., yarkhandi pulao as a Silk Road symbol), change agents (migration, policy), power or inequality (dominant groups shaping norms), and agency (communities actively reshaping traditions), as illustrated in Forgotten Foods where food is both a site of memory and dynamic adaptation of one culture to the another (Khan et al., 2023).

These theories highlight the fact that the social context in which the behaviour is taking place must be considered, and that social structures and institutions play a significant role in influencing the behaviour of groups in general and individuals in particular.

9.2.2 Behavioural Change in the Social Sector

The initiatives in the social sector—intended for better health, higher education, and a greener environment through behavioural change—have had a very long history. Unfortunately, most of these initiatives failed to meaningfully change behaviour. Most of the present approaches are limited by the lack of clarity between theory and practice (Osman et al., 2020). While social sector organisations rely more often on ideas culled from behavioural science theories for informing their interventions, the gap between such theoretical frameworks and practical implementations is ever wide (Nilsen, 2015). On this score, bringing sociological theory into practical efforts can help social sector organisations better develop more effective and sustainable behavioural change initiatives tailored for the social context of where such organisations will exist.

9.2.3 Background and Rationale

Behavioural change is of essence in tackling social issues and strengthening the social sector. In this regard, sociological theory has turned out to be a useful tool for the analysis and steering of human behaviour (Servaes, 2022). The integration of sociological perspectives with practical effort will

enable social sector organisations to better and more sustainably manage change. The purpose of this research is to identify how sociological insights can inform and augment the effectiveness of change initiatives in the social sector. We hope to gather relevant sociological theories; and from case studies on the application of these theories, we may propose theoretical approaches that can be used in the integration of theory with practice towards effective behavioural change.

9.2.4 Objectives

1. To examine the theoretical approaches of sociology in respect to behavioural change; the norms-orientation, collective behaviour, and other cultural orientations.
2. Examine the case studies that apply sociological theories for interventions in the social sector, focusing on health, education, and environmental sustainability.
3. Formulate strategies in the integration of sociological theory with practical approaches to sustain behavioural change in the social sector.

9.3 Methodology

9.3.1 Case Study Selection

This study employs a single-case study design focused on Indore, India, to examine how sociological theories inform behavioural change in the social sector.

Indore was selected based on three criteria:

1. **Relevance to Social Sector Goals:** Indore's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) is a flagship environmental sustainability initiative, directly aligning with the study's focus on social sector behavioural change.
2. **Measurable Impact:** Indore has been consistently ranked India's "cleanest city" seven times (2016–2023), providing clear evidence of behavioural outcomes (e.g., reduced littering, improved waste segregation).
3. **Theoretical Alignment:** The campaign's success is frequently attributed to community-driven strategies, making it a robust context to apply sociological theories of behaviour (e.g., social norms, collective action).

9.3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through a mixed-methods approach to capture both quantitative outcomes and qualitative insights.

Primary Data

Semi-Structured Interviews

- **Participants:** 25 stakeholders, including municipal officials (n=5), community leaders (n=10), and residents (n=10) from Indore's ward 7 (a high-performing zone)
- **Focus:** Perceptions of campaign strategies, community engagement, and behavioural changes
- **Example questions:** "How did the campaign communicate cleanliness as a community norm?" and "What motivated you to participate in waste segregation?"

Direct Observation

- **Sites:** Five public spaces (markets, parks, residential lanes) and two waste segregation centres
- **Duration:** 40 hours of observation over two months (January–February 2023)
- **Focus:** Visible behaviours (e.g., littering, use of dustbins), community interactions (e.g., peer reminders to segregate waste), and campaign materials (posters, hoardings)

Secondary Data Document Analysis

- **Sources:** Municipal reports (2014–2023), Swachh Bharat campaign materials (brochures, social media posts), and academic studies on Indore's sanitation (e.g., CPCB, 2021)
- **Focus:** Policy design, campaign messaging, and quantitative metrics (e.g., waste collected, cleanliness rankings)

9.3.3 Analysis of Data

A thematic framework that was in line with the study's theoretical perspective (social norms, group behaviour, and cultural dynamics) was used to examine the data.

- **Coding:** To find recurrent themes (such as "community pride" and "localised messaging"), primary data (interviews and observation notes) were coded inductively using NVivo 12. Using predetermined codes that were generated from the theories, secondary data (documents) were coded deductively (e.g., "norms," "collective action").
- **Triangulation:** To improve validity, results from observations, interviews, and documents were cross-checked. For instance, municipal garbage reports were used to verify interview statements regarding reduced littering.
- **Application of Theory:** Social Norms Theory: Examined how perceived community norms were influenced by campaign advertising, such as "Indore: The Cleanest City."

- **Collective Behaviour Theory:** Analysed how peer networks and citizen committees inspired group action.
- **Dynamics of Culture Theory:** Investigated ways in which cleanliness became linked to local identity (e.g., "Proud to be from India's Cleanest City").

9.4 Findings

9.4.1 Behavioural Change Using Community Engagement to Target Public Attitudes

Primary Data (Interviews/Observations): Rather than official directives, 22 out of 25 interviewees (88%) credited Indore's success to "community-led message." For instance, one municipal official said, "We made cleanliness a point of pride—we didn't merely fine littering." Instead of saying, "Obey the rules," posters stated, "Indore's cleanliness is our triumph" (Respondent B, Municipal Officer). This was verified via observation: Peer interactions (e.g., "Don't toss that here—our street is the cleanest!") were common in ward 7, where 90% of inhabitants used authorised dustbins.

Secondary Information (Records): Interview statements were supported by municipal records from 2022, which indicated a decrease in littering complaints after the initiative. This foundational step further reduces landfill burden, conserves resources, and ensures a cleaner urban environment. After a year of dedicated effort, Indore earned the title of India's cleanest city in 2017. The city made an impressive leap in the rankings, jumping from 25th place in 2016 all the way to the top spot in 2017 as part of the Clean India Ranking. Thanks to the city government's initiatives, Indore became a bin-free city, showcasing their commitment to cleanliness and sustainability (Samuel & Warsi, 2024).

Table 9.1: Summary Analysis of Behavioural Change Mechanisms in Indore's Cleanliness Campaign

Theme	Primary Data (Interviews/ Observations)	Secondary Data (Records/Reports)	Theoretical Insight Applied
Community Messaging and Social Norms	22 out of 25 interviewees (88%) attributed behaviour change to community-led messaging. **Observations:** Peer-to-peer reinforcement noted at 3 of 5 public spaces.	Reduction in littering complaints (Guardian 2025). Posters and hoardings focused on pride narratives rather than penalties.	***Social Norms Theory:*** Cleanliness framed as a shared community value, internalised through social reinforcement and normative cues.

Collective Action via Citizen Committees	18 out of 25 interviewees (72%) highlighted citizen committees as crucial drivers. **Observations:** Weekly cleanliness drives recorded at 2 of 5 neighbourhoods, involving ~30–40 residents	Indore is divided into 22 zones and 85 wards, and citizen participation is a core component. The Citizen committees are active across Indore.	***Collective Behaviour Theory:*** Informal leadership and peer accountability enabled structured community action and long-term mobilisation.
Civic Pride and Identity Formation	20 out of 25 interviewees (80%) linked personal motivation to civic pride and Indore's cleanliness ranking. **Observations:** Civic pride messaging evident in 4 of 5 sites through banners and community celebrations.	Local media portals framed cleanliness as "Indore's identity" rather than a government agenda.	***Cultural Dynamics Theory:*** Pride in civic reputation created emotional investment, transforming policy goals into cultural identity.
Participation in Waste Segregation Systems	24 out of 25 interviewees (95%) confirmed active household participation in segregation. **Observations:** Compliance verified at 5 of 5 waste segregation centres (with staff–resident cooperation).	85% city-wide compliance rate (2023), enabled through public-private collaboration as per policy reports (2022).	***Collective Behaviour and Institutional Theory:*** Behaviour change was facilitated through tangible infrastructure and daily habit formation.
Sustained Engagement through Continuous Learning	19 out of 25 interviewees (76%) stressed the importance of workshops and continuous education. **Observations:** Monthly workshops documented in 3 of 5 sites visited.	Over 50 community seminars organised (2022–2023 campaign records), validating sustained citizen participation.	***Social Learning Theory:*** Ongoing education and feedback loops reinforced pro-social behaviours and updated norms.

9.4.2 Collective Social Change: Empowerment via Joint Ownership

Primary Information (Observations/Interviews): "Citizen committees" were highlighted by 18 out of 25 participants (72%) as being essential to mobilisation. One inhabitant declared, "A committee consisting of ten homes was established. We alternated keeping an eye on the roadway and even gave prizes to children who kept it tidy" (Respondent D, Resident). According to observations made in ward 7, these committees arrange weekly "cleanliness drives" in which 30 to 40 citizens take part.

Secondary Information (Records): Interview data on collective mobilisation was supported by campaign records (2018), which indicated more than 120 active citizen committees in Indore.

9.4.3 Pride in the Community: An Enduring Motivator

Primary Information (Observations/Interviews): Local pride was associated with Indore's designation as the "cleanest city" by 20 out of 25 participants (80%). "When we first won, folks celebrated like we'd won a cricket match," a community leader explained. "It is now our duty to maintain the title" (Respondent F, Community Leader).

Secondary Information (Records): This pride was emphasised in media reports from 2021, with local publications characterising cleanliness as "Indore's identity" as opposed to a policy objective.

9.4.4 Waste Management: Creating New Things Together

Principal Information (Interview): 95% of families participated in the door-to-door collection systems that personnel at waste segregation centres demonstrated (observed in 4 to 5 sites).

Secondary Information (Records): According to municipal data from 2023, The city's waste segregation compliance was fuelled by collaborations between the municipality and private contractors.

9.4.5 Ongoing Involvement: Ongoing Education

Primary Information (Interviews): 19 out of 25 participants (76%) said that "ongoing workshops" were essential. According to a municipal official: "We meet with citizens once a month to talk about new issues, such as how to deal with plastic garbage. It maintains the momentum" (Municipal Officer, Respondent C).

Secondary Information (Records): Campaign programs for 2022–2023 included more than fifty community seminars, which supported the assertions made in interviews regarding ongoing involvement.

9.5 Discussion

This synthesis includes a review of cases and literature reviews that concentrate on the need for aligning sociological theory with practical practices for improvements in behavioural change initiatives in the social sector. The main findings of this review will be clarified, including implications drawn from a theoretical point of view; challenges found in trying to enforce the theories would be brought out, and ways of strengthening the impact on behavioural changes provided.

9.5.1 Integrating Sociological Theory with Practice

The fact that Indore has been named India's "cleanest city" seven times demonstrates how effective social norms theory is in influencing behaviour. Cislaghi and Heise (2019) focus on injunctive norms—perceptions of what is socially acceptable—aligns with the campaign's emphasis on presenting cleanliness as a source of pride for the community ("Indore's cleanliness is our success").

According to interviews, community-led messaging that reframed cleanliness as a signal of shared identity rather than a mandated norm was responsible for 88% of participants' success. For example, to mainstream garbage segregation, municipal campaigns employed slogans such as "*Indore ki Safai, Indore ki Baat*" (Indore's cleanliness, Indore's pride), which capitalise on descriptive norms (beliefs about what others do).

- **Social Norms Theory:** The Catalyst of Community Pride: The Indore's case study examines how Social Norms Theory played a pivotal role in shaping cleanliness behaviours in Indore. Rather than relying on rules or penalties, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan in Indore successfully embedded cleanliness as a community-driven social expectation. Clean behaviour—like using dustbins and segregating waste—became a visible norm reinforced by peers, local messaging, and civic pride. Slogans such as "Indore's cleanliness is our triumph" and public celebrations of the city's "cleanest city" title for 8 consecutive years helped transform cleanliness from a government directive into a symbol of collective identity and pride, motivating sustained citizen participation and self-enforcement of norms.
- **Theory of Collective Behaviour:** Organizing Through Organised Networks: Collective behaviour theory is best illustrated by the function of citizen committees in Indore, where 72% of the participants stated that they are essential (Goldstone & Gureckis, 2009). As "mobilising frameworks" (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), these committees offered structured avenues for involvement. Weekly cleanliness drives involving 30 to 40 people were observed, which reflected emergent norms in which group efforts were self-reinforcing. Indore's story illustrates how structured networks (such as ward-level committees) transform collective energy into persistent action, in contrast to early criticisms of collective behaviour as

"irrational" (La Macchia & Louis, 2016). This is consistent with the notion of resource mobilisation, which highlights the function of structure in maintaining movements.

- **Theory of Cultural Dynamics: Hygiene as Cultural Asset:** Since cleanliness and cultural capital were entwined, Indore's prosperity also reflects the cultural dynamics theory (Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 1988). Sanitation became a symbol of shared identity as media reports presented the status of "cleanest city" as a source of pride for the area. This is similar to the idea of cultural capital, which holds that social acknowledgment gives activities (such garbage segregation) value (Ramsey, 2024). Cultural norms were internalised, as evidenced by the citizens' descriptions of feeling "ashamed" if their streets were dirty.

9.5.2 Challenges of Applying Theory to Practice in the Social Sector

Following a very promising line of findings, some challenges emerged in the process of transferring sociological theories to practice.

1. **Complexity of Social Contexts:** Social behaviour is deeply influenced by economic conditions, political climates, and history as it is by other dimensions. The outcome can therefore become pretty ineffective in terms of how interventions or strategies will be received or how they might be used best.
2. **Resistance to Change:** Communities generally resist the establishment of new behaviour based on intensive and strong norms or doubt over externality intervention. The offer must remain engaged for a long time with building the confidence of the community.
3. **Resource Constraints:** Organisations characteristically rely on sparse resources, hampering an extensive approach, due to which sociological insight may not be implemented. In a sharp budgetary constraint, organisations may remain focused on the short-term outcome rather than the behaviour being transformed in the long term.
4. **Scalability Issues:** While localised interventions are valued within specific contexts, scaling similar interventions is very challenging. In some settings, cultural dynamics will also differ, along with community involvement, that make it difficult to translate the interventions across different contexts.

9.5.3 Strategies for Enhancing Behavioural Change Initiatives

To address these issues and make programs more effective in behaviour change programs, we propose several strategies inspired by sociological understanding. They are discussed next.

1. **Community Engagement:** This is the engagement of the community at every step in the intervention design and delivery as an imperative of ownership and relevance. This is achievable through participation approaches that empower communities to express their needs and preferences.

2. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Interventions must be culturally relevant or responsive to local cultural values and practices. Cultural assessments should be done extensively before actual implementation, in order to identify potential barriers to and facilitators of behavioural change.
3. **Institutional Support:** Building relationships with local institutions, such as schools, health care providers, or community organisations—would create an environment to allow for support of change. The collaborative effort amplifies resources and expertise combined with improved credibility in these communities.
4. **Continuous Learning and Adaptation:** Having institutes formulate mechanisms for continuous monitoring and evaluation allows an organisation to continuously assess the influence of their efforts. Feedback loops inform any adjustments and make sure interventions stay relevant and effective across time.
5. **Capacity Building:** The stakeholders may include the community leaders, educators, and health care workers. Capacity building can assist the stakeholders in effectively bringing about a behavioural change among their constituents.

9.6 Conclusion

Three practical methods for strengthening behavioural change programs are highlighted by the success of Indore's Swachh Bharat. They are:

1. **Made Use of Local Identity:** Centre interventions on stories that resonate with the culture (for example, "pride in community" in collectivist cultures). Environmental ads, such as "Protect the Khan and Saraswati rivers, to protect India's soul," could, for instance, link garbage reduction to local heritage.
2. **Strengthen Mobilising Structures:** To maintain involvement, fund community-led organisations (such as citizen committees and self-help groups). Governments should avoid relying too much on directives from above and instead invest in autonomy and training.
3. **Ongoing Education and Adaptation:** Indore's momentum was maintained by monthly workshops, which 76% of participants said were essential. Programs in the social sector should incorporate feedback loops (such as community surveys) to modify tactics in response to changing standards.

Although the case of Indore supports these arguments, it also draws attention to their shortcomings. Social norms theory, for example, presumes that community values are uniform, yet Indore's success necessitated communicating with a variety of ward-level identities (e.g., favouring marketplaces vs. residential neighbourhoods). Likewise, the emphasis of collective behaviour theory.

Indore's story shows that sociological theories are instruments rather than abstract frameworks for creating institutionally backed interventions

with a cultural foundation. Even in environments with limited resources, social sector programs can achieve resilience by emphasising local pride and community ownership.

Disclaimer: In preparing this manuscript, I have not used any AI tools for whatsoever purpose. I take full responsibility for the content.

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10 Enhancing Social Purpose Organisations' Capacity through Process Documentation: A Comprehensive Approach to Technology-Driven Real-Time Monitoring and Evaluation System Development

Andrea Vincent, Murali Mohan Reddy, Gullaiah Gari Kuna Divya Jyothi and Jayashree G

Abstract

This paper outlines the process undertaken by an organisation supporting Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) to establish a robust Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) system. By leveraging technology, expertise, capacity building, and mentoring, the organisation integrated a results framework into a technological platform that facilitates real-time data collection to enhance program implementation. Prior to project design, an assessment of the NGOs' situations and needs was conducted, followed by the development of a Theory of Change and a Logical Framework model, which is suited to each NGO. The study employs Process Documentation as its methodological approach, characterised by continuous data collection from selected pilot sites, emphasising the learning process through key informant interviews, participant observation, and report analysis. Findings highlight several key insights, including the necessity of need assessment for acceptability, the importance of digital infrastructure and continuous mentoring to foster technology adoption, and the value of a participatory approach in refining the MEAL system. The study emphasises that effective, technology-driven MEAL systems require ongoing learning, action, and reflection, highlighting that this initiative must not be treated as a one-time effort but rather as a continuous process to achieve sustainable impact.

Keywords: Process Documentation, NGOs, Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL), Research Enablement and Productivity Platform (REAP) and Real Time Data Monitoring and Evaluation.

10.1 Introduction

NGOs are committed to serving a social mission and achieving public good. They face pressure to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs and services, often requiring outcome evaluations and impact assessments. Despite increased attention, NGOs have made slight progress in improving their evaluation practices, particularly in response to accountability pressures from key stakeholders, such as donors (Liket et al., 2014). While there has been a rise in NGO involvement in Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), the actual utilisation of this data remains limited, with many NGOs

finding themselves "drowning" in data but failing to use it effectively for strategic decision-making (Snibbe, 2006). Innovative approaches to MEAL, such as the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), are proposed to collect real-time data, which can reduce data collection costs (Hadyniak, 2014). These approaches allow for prompt modifications to strategies and activities, resulting in the achievement of desired social impact. Digital transformation thus enhances data accuracy, transparency, and stakeholder satisfaction, and enables efficient access to information. A KPMG study on "Monitoring and Evaluation in the Development Sector" highlights that many respondents rarely use ICT-enabled visualisations or GPS data, indicating the continued labour-intensive processes in MEAL (Hadyniak, 2014). Despite efforts to enhance technology and inclusion in the digital space within the third sector, grassroots experimentation with ICT remains constrained by slow infrastructural development. According to IT for Change (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2014), this limitation means that only a few urban NGOs and pilot projects in rural areas are able to effectively utilise these technologies. Additionally, many donor-driven initiatives tend to favour high-profile, campaign-mode solutions, which often create dependencies on specific hardware or software and fail to address deeper issues of rights and inclusion. Furthermore, a substantial body of non-government research has explored the facilitators and barriers to technology usage. However, there is a notable lack of studies that outline the processes technology providers and non-profit leaders should follow to effectively integrate technology into meal-related initiatives aimed at enhancing social impact and promoting social equity.

In this context, this paper details the process undertaken by an organisation (coGuide) supporting NGOs in establishing a robust Monitoring and Evaluation system. Through the use of technology, expertise, capacity building, and mentoring, the organisation effectively integrated the results framework into a technological platform, allowing for the collection of real-time data to guide and enhance program implementation.

This documentation of program processes helps coGuide to improve its service delivery based on real-time observations and reflections from the field. It also aids in refining strategies for their NGO clients by enhancing the understanding of NGO operations, challenges, and specific needs. Additionally, it supports informed decision-making regarding product improvements, scaling, replication, and service enhancements. The process documentation provides coGuide with clear guidelines for working with NGO clients, which reduces ambiguity, avoids process redundancies, and can also be utilised for onboarding and training new staff.

This article aims to detail the entire process involved in integrating technology into the MEAL aspects of NGO projects, describing the challenges encountered and summarising the lessons learned. It is necessary to know the NGO's situation and assess its needs before the project is designed. The paper begins by describing the initial steps taken to develop a theory

of change and a logical framework model for respective NGOs. It then explores the methods used to gain knowledge on processes that support the digitalisation of Monitoring and Evaluation, along with the strategies employed to facilitate digital adoption. It also outlines the refined strategies adopted by coGuide to translate this knowledge into actionable outcomes. This documentation helps NGO leaders, technology providers, and thought leaders gain an understanding of effective strategic insights for integrating technology into the MEAL programs of social purpose organisations.

10.2 Literature Review

Non-profits engage in monitoring and evaluation for various reasons, with two key motivations being external accountability and the opportunity to foster learning practices that emphasise internal accountability towards achieving organisational goals and vision. In the second case, collecting data and insights provides managers with the information necessary to make informed decisions that advance the organisation's mission. Empirical literature frequently emphasises that NGOs struggle to conduct effective evaluations when they are carried out under external accountability pressures (Liket et al., 2014). The literature on accountability within NGOs emphasises the importance of "felt responsibility," an intrinsic quality that can enhance the effectiveness of nonprofit organisations by encouraging individuals to be accountable to themselves and to one another (Fry, 1995). Organisations that foster a supportive learning environment, where managers and staff actively engage in learning practices, are more likely to use data for internal decision-making. They also tend to have stronger connections to sharing evaluation data. Additionally, intentional strategies that promote a culture of learning and data within an organisation appear to be key drivers of data-driven decision-making. These strategies help inform decisions, assess and improve programs, and train staff, ultimately leading to enhanced accountability practices (Robichau et al., 2025). Technology integrated into MEAL systems can significantly support the concept of "conversation for accountability" by facilitating open communication, data transparency, and collaborative decision-making.

In his influential work, Behn (2003) identified eight key purposes of evaluation that managers in public organisations may seek to achieve: control, budgeting, celebrating, motivating, promoting, evaluating, learning, and improving. Evaluation measures should be planned in accordance with the purpose of the evaluation.

However, the lack of conceptual clarity regarding the objectives and purpose of evaluation, combined with poorly defined evaluation questions and debates over the most effective evaluation methods, often leads to confusion among NGO managers. Therefore, it is essential to involve various stakeholders and adopt participatory approaches to reach a consensus on the purpose and design of evaluations, ensuring their usefulness and

relevance (Liket et al., 2014). A technology provider working with NGOs to streamline MEAL processes should be mindful of the conceptual challenges associated with evaluation. They must also offer flexibility in their product features and service offerings to accommodate these complexities.

In addition to the complexities related to evaluation terminologies, methods, and purposes, the provider should also understand the reasons behind the reluctance of NGO partners to utilise technology. A qualitative study was conducted to explore "why NGOs are reluctant to use ICT in their primary activities." Data was gathered through 20 interviews with NGOs of varying sizes and backgrounds, examining the use of ICT across the NGO value chain (program design, fundraising, fund management, and program delivery). The study addressed all three dimensions of the TEO (Technology, Environment, and Organisation) framework. The key reasons for NGO hesitation to adopt ICT, as identified in the study, include: lack of skills and ICT resources for field staff and participants, limited financial resources, insufficient leadership engagement and sub-optimal decision-making structure, lack of prioritization of ICT investments, absence of standardized software for program design and delivery, overestimation of ICT project implementation risk and concerns over data privacy when serving vulnerable communities (Godefroid et al., 2024).

10.3 Problem Statement and Objectives

Identifying the facilitators and barriers for adopting Monitoring and Evaluation is essential for successfully integrating technology for MEAL purposes. Additionally, understanding the factors that promote or hinder technology adoption within these organisations is critical. For such an intervention to succeed, it must target the specific needs and circumstances of the clients. Therefore, a product-based company assisting NGOs in building a strong MEAL system with a web application should consider the following questions before designing the solution. What processes support the digitalisation of MEAL, and how can these be effectively implemented within NGOs? What challenges do NGOs face during the integration of technology into their MEAL processes, and what solutions can be implemented to overcome these challenges? What strategies facilitate the successful adoption of technology in MEAL initiatives among NGOs? What lessons can be learnt from these interventions? How to design an action plan based on the lessons learnt after the process documentation?

10.3.1 Objectives of Process Documentation

1. To establish effective methods for assessing the specific needs and contexts of NGOs before project design.
2. To explore and document the processes that support the digitalisation of Monitoring and Evaluation in NGOs.
3. To identify challenges and propose strategies that facilitate the adoption

of technology in MEAL initiatives for NGOs.
4. To translate insights from technology integration into clear, actionable outcomes that enhance NGO effectiveness.

10.4 Methodology

10.4.1 Methods and Processes Used

The study employs the method of process documentation to detail the entire journey from planning to the implementation of a pilot project within selected NGOs. The methodology employed in this study centres on process documentation, a social science research tool defined by Roman P. Reyes (1984) as providing continuous information to an agency adopting a new intervention strategy. This approach collects data from a few pilot sites, focusing on activities, emerging problems, and field issues. David Korten (1980) further emphasises process documentation as a "learning approach" that contrasts with traditional "blueprint approaches." It involves testing strategies in selected sites, or "learning laboratories," where agencies refine their methods and develop new capacities. Key resource institutions and a working committee, composed of agency members, resource personnel, and staff, manage the learning process. This committee systematically reviews experiences from pilot sites to inform strategy refinement.

10.4.2 The Stages of Process Documentation

The study employed a comprehensive process documentation approach to thoroughly understand the program's impact. This methodology involved several key steps:

1. **Planning and Preparation:** The initial phase focused on defining the objectives of the documentation process. This included identifying key stakeholders, outlining the scope of the pilot project, and establishing the criteria for data collection.
2. **Data Collection:** Various qualitative methods were utilised to gather rich, contextual data.
3. **Data Analysis:** Collected data was systematically reviewed and analysed to identify emerging themes, challenges, and lessons learned.
4. **Refinement of Strategies:** Insights gained from the data analysis informed the refinement of intervention strategies, which helped to make adjustments based on real-time feedback and observations.
5. **Documentation of the Process:** The final step involved compiling the findings and documenting the entire process. This included outlining the objectives of each stage, detailing the key processes involved, describing challenges encountered, and summarising the lessons learned throughout the journey.

10.4.3 Key stakeholders involved

Data was collected by the process documentation team from the management team of coGuide, the technical team that deploys new product features in REAP, Research Associates from NGO verticals who are intensely involved in the entire project implementation, and NGO leaders and staff who use coGuide' products and services.

10.4.4 Data Collection Techniques

For the study, data were gathered at regular intervals through key informant interviews, participant observation, report analysis, and discussions, capturing the reflections and experiences of key actors as primary data sources, which is highly qualitative in nature (Fig. 1).

1. **In-depth Interviews:** Interviews with NGO leaders (C and D) explored their experiences and challenges in detail.
2. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** FGDs with the program implementation team helped us collect diverse viewpoints and collective experiences.
3. **Key Informant Interviews:** Engaging with the CEO and CTO provided strategic insights into the organisation's vision, challenges and future plans.
4. **Observations:** Meeting sessions of NGOs, as well as orientation and capacity-building sessions organised as part of the digitisation of the MEAL process, were observed to gain insights into group dynamics and decision-making processes.
5. **Reflective Essays:** Research associates provided insights into their perspectives on the digitalisation of the MEAL process, offering valuable qualitative data.
6. **Email Communication Analysis:** Email exchanges with clients were analysed to understand communication, concerns, feedback, and the dynamics of relationships.
7. **WhatsApp Chats:** Informal conversations provided real-time insights into client interactions, highlighting immediate issues and solutions.
8. **Minutes of Meetings:** Detailed records of meetings documented key discussions, decisions, and action items, aiding in understanding the program's progression.
9. **Audio and Video Recordings:** Discussions with NGO representatives were recorded to capture conversations accurately, providing context that might not have been captured in writing.

10.5 Profiles of NGOs

NGO C:

This organisation is based in Chennai and was founded by a group of women activists. The organisation is committed to improving the status of women in Tamil Nadu by promoting women's rights, leadership, and empowerment through focused campaigns and community engagement to build a gender-just society.

NGO D:

This organisation is based in Mangalore and is committed to promoting gender equality among marginalised communities to foster human development. It achieves this through education, research, training, and by building networks with communities, civil society organisations, and state institutions.

SSE Webinar:

coGuide recently hosted a webinar on the Social Stock Exchange (SSE) to assist NGOs in understanding the process of registering and listing on the SSE. The panel featured the Founder of the first NGO to be listed on the SSE, the Director of the Social Auditor Network, and coGuide's CEO. The webinar highlighted the benefits of the SSE and how coGuide's REAP tool can support NGOs in achieving their objectives. Of the 108 registered NGOs, 60 participated, including NGO C and NGO D. Impressed by coGuide and REAP's capabilities, both NGOs subsequently engaged coGuide to establish MEAL systems for their programs using REAP.

Before the webinar, coGuide provided the panel speakers with an orientation on the REAP platform. The speakers expressed strong support for the product, highlighting its significant value proposition for NGOs. They collectively agreed that there is a "huge demand in the NGO sector" for a solution like REAP, emphasising its potential to address key challenges and improve operational efficiency.

10.6 Findings

10.6.1 Step 1: Request for an Introductory Call and Product Orientation

The process began with scheduling introductory calls with NGOs to understand their MEAL requirements and to provide an orientation on the REAP product. This request for an introductory call can be made by either the NGO or coGuide. In this case, the NGOs C&D reached out to coGuide after attending a webinar on the Social Stock Exchange.

Since coGuide was originally developed for medical research, venturing into the social sector introduced a level of unfamiliarity for both parties regarding the use of REAP for NGOs.

According to NGO C,

> *"I had my own doubts, like I thought, coGuide is an app for PhD students".*

Once the NGO's intent behind reaching out to coGuide aligned with our broader engagement strategy, we proceeded with the subsequent steps.

As coGuide's CTO explains,

> *"The Big value proposition lies in helping NGOs better understand their programs, specifically, identifying key data capture points, understanding data flows, and customising the REAP product to their needs".*

In the case of NGO D, they cited the following intents for reaching out to us,

- *They observed a need for more objective data collection in the entire programme.*
- *Participants often felt pressured to provide the "correct" answers, and most of the time they were unsure whether the data was collected after the fieldwork.*
- *As a result, they had to conduct extensive cross-checking and verification to ensure accuracy.*

Whereas, according to the Director of NGO C,

> *Before reaching out to coGuide, they had been trying to work with [...] apps to address their data collection and monitoring needs. However, the communication with [...] took a long time, and they realised that the platform, designed primarily for commercial organisations, wasn't the best fit for NGOs. Recognising the need for a more suitable solution, they decided to try coGuide, as it seemed better aligned to their requirements.*

Since both the NGO's requests aligned with coGuide's strategy, we proceeded with the demonstration of REAP product features, usage, and services provided.

During these introductory calls, we realised that it is more effective to provide NGOs or client-specific demonstrations rather than a general overview. For example, if the NGO is working in the field of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), it is more impactful to present REAP through an SRHR-specific model. It was also important to communicate using NGO specific language, avoiding terms related to the research process.

The two key learnings that emerged from this process are,

1. Many NGOs run multiple programs, making it challenging for them to adapt REAP for various programmatic needs. Therefore, we recommend starting with one project to ensure smoother integration
2. There is a strong need for financial support from donors, and a vision to digitise among NGO leaders and staff to digitise their M&E processes. This indicates a readiness to adopt digital solutions like REAP for improved program management and reporting.

10.6.2 Step 2: Understanding the Scope and Purpose of MEAL

Different NGOs come up with different Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) needs. Therefore, it is essential to understand each organisation's program objectives and the purpose behind setting up a MEAL system.

For instance, NGO D was focused on digital adoption and setting up MEAL for course correction, while NGO C focused on monitoring the daily activities of its network partners, including tracking the resources spent in

the field. For both organisations, the purpose of adopting digital and real-time data capturing is the understanding of the data trail, which shows the transparency of data entry, the progress of the program, and financial aspects. The information related to beneficiaries can be understood with the help of data capturing, like the 'where' and 'how' of them.

A comprehensive understanding of an NGO's program objective can be better achieved by reviewing their program documents (Strategic Plan document, Vision and Mission document, complete list of their programs, baseline and end-line tools, data catalogue of existing data, and M&E outcome indicators if they have any). However, obtaining these documents on time is often challenging, as it requires frequent follow-ups and reminders.

On further requests for remaining documents, NGO C stated,

> "*We are bad at the documentation, and that is what we are trying to change*".

The lack of interest in documentation may be due to their willingness to work more with beneficiaries and in the field rather than worrying about the data collection process or lack of awareness of the importance of data collection for MEAL. Additionally, some NGO's focus more on the number of activities conducted and the amount spent for each activity rather than the impact that they could create out of their activities.

Once the documents are received, they must be thoroughly reviewed. One of the major challenges in understanding the program objectives was that NGOs frequently lack clarity on program implementation plans. So, we made sure to share brief summary write-ups of our understanding of programmes after every discussion and asked NGOs to confirm to improve the clarity of both parties. Additionally, creating flowcharts to outline the various steps in program implementation has helped them to quickly visualise the process and confirm whether the program flow is accurate.

After understanding the project objectives, the next step is to set up the MEAL system within REAP. Since many NGOs lack clarity on how to align their MEAL requirements with REAP, our earlier conversations with many NGO clients and leaders have been useful in identifying effective ways to structure their setup. In some cases, in-person meetings are recommended to build stronger connections.

10.6.3 Step 3: Program Planning

After understanding the program objectives and MEAL requirements, the next step is program planning to set up the MEAL system in REAP. We begin by conducting a desk review of the program documents, followed by internal brainstorming to create a structured program framework. This includes outlining the program flow, such as target areas, determining the number of forms required, listing key variables, frequency of data collection, the person responsible for the data collection and mapping the beneficiaries and stakeholders, such as the number of trainers, resource persons involved, at each level.

The resulting mind map is then critically peer-reviewed both internally and in collaboration with the client. It typically goes through multiple iterations and frequent meetings to ensure all aspects are accurately captured.

On receiving the approval of the mind map from the NGOs, the coGuide team works on **developing a Project Implementation Plan (PIP)**, which has the timelines of the deliverables, all the activities/tasks conducted as a part of the study, and financial budgeting is proposed based on the effort estimate (level of experts, duration to complete the task). Sometimes, NGOs may overlook certain details during discussions, which can often be identified by reviewing the proposals they submitted to donors, which are essential for developing a comprehensive PIP.

Once finalised and approved by all concerned people of coGuide, it is shared with the NGOs for confirmation. Negotiations are considered by coGuide based on the level of the finances allotted to the project to set up MEAL, also keeping in mind the Social Responsibility of the coGuide.

In this context, both NGO D and NGO C have opted for only one of their donor-funded programs, with minor negotiations to fit into the budget for digital adoption and their empowerment through technology.

10.6.4 Step 4: Defining the Theoretical Framework, Log Frame, and Mapping the Indicators

Once the program structure is finalised, the next step involves defining the theoretical framework (Theory of Change) and developing the logical framework (Logframe). TOC being a significant framework to set up the M & E system, both parties were unclear about it. Neither of the NGOs has a proper logical framework to track their progress.

As a service provider, the coGuide team took the initiative to deepen our understanding of TOC and the MEAL process. After a thorough understanding of the concept of TOC and the project objectives of both NGOs, we developed a framework, mapping all the indicators related to inputs, activities, expected or anticipated outputs, outcomes, and impact of the program and aligning with the objective of the program. Along with these, the target, source, means of verification and frequency of data were also mapped.

Each team member tends to draft a different set of indicators based on their individual perspectives, making it challenging to consolidate them into a single framework. After developing the frameworks for both NGOs C&D, the framework is described to these NGO leaders and staff and their input is received on the plan of capturing the data flow. We have given them the flexibility to decide the scope of their M and E exercises and the extent to which they want to utilise technology for data collection. We made sure we worked on the comments and inputs provided by leaders and staff at each step.

A key observation during the process was that most NGO's rarely conduct pre-and post-assessments as part of their evaluation activities

and have minimal need to capture long-term outcomes and impacts. Additionally, there was considerable confusion among team members regarding core evaluation concepts, particularly the differences between outputs, outcomes, and impacts. Many were also unsure about the purpose of the evaluation itself or how to define and track impact-related variables.

Finalising the framework that best fits their program context required multiple iterations and extensive brainstorming sessions. To make this process clear, we involved a dedicated MEAL expert to guide us through the process to ensure alignment with each program flow and intended results.

10.6.5 Step 5: Designing the Instrument, Selecting the Tools

To evaluate the effectiveness of any program and accurately measure its outcomes, it is essential to develop a well-structured data collection tool. This process involves identifying appropriate assessment methods, instruments, data collection modes, and the frequency of assessments. In collaboration with two NGOs (C and D), coGuide initiated discussions to understand their assessment plans, reviewed existing tools, and proposed revisions based on identified gaps. A comprehensive literature review informed the development of a new tool aligned with the program's objectives. The draft tool underwent internal validation and expert review, followed by translation and integration into the REAP platform.

During validation, it became clear that NGO C lacked a standardised intervention manual and had limited clarity on key concepts, relying instead on scattered reference materials. Despite initial resistance, internal dialogues helped emphasise the need for a structured assessment approach. Conversely, NGO D was more receptive and completed data collection through REAP. A separate tool was also developed to assess the knowledge and attitudes of Resource People. The process faced challenges such as delays from experts, a lack of standardised content from NGOs, and translation issues. Key learnings included the importance of involving additional experts in advance and using skilled translators. It was recommended that the MEAL process be introduced gradually, emphasising the role of standardised tools in achieving more than just monitoring outcomes.

10.6.6 Step 6: Designing and Development of M&E System through REAP

After developing a logical framework with mapped indicators based on program objectives, the next crucial step was designing a streamlined data flow process using REAP, a real-time data capturing system. REAP facilitates transparent and immediate data collection, helping identify gaps and monitor progress efficiently, enabling timely adjustments. The team conducted internal brainstorming sessions with technical experts to design user-friendly, efficient forms in REAP. Using Excel, the team mapped out the structure—including form names, hierarchy, and necessary

variables—ensuring simplicity and minimising data entry time. Forms were customised in regional languages like Tamil and Kannada to meet NGO-specific needs, keeping usability at the forefront.

After integrating the variables into REAP, the forms were tested, debugged, and refined before being finalised for use. The approach emphasised making the forms as easy to use as sending an email. While REAP was primarily used for M&E, its full potential includes accounting, auditing, document management, and embedding learning materials—making it a robust tool for overall program management. Despite challenges like language diversity, data privacy concerns, and form complexity, the process highlighted REAP's flexibility and scalability. NGOs showed interest in expanding its use beyond M&E, and the team continues to support them by customising forms, ensuring data compliance, and offering hands-on training and demonstration templates.

10.6.7 Step 7: Implement and Monitor

The coGuide REAP initiative was introduced as a MEAL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning) tool to help NGOs make their programs more effective and evidence-based through real-time data collection and analysis. Its core purpose is to assist NGOs in tracking program activities, identifying challenges early, making informed decisions, and ensuring accountability to stakeholders. To implement REAP, coGuide supported NGOs in setting up the tool, provided extensive training to staff and network partners, and offered continuous technical assistance. The process included a phased rollout, starting with internal staff and expanding to partner organisations, involving hands-on training sessions in local languages to ease adoption.

Despite the positive reception, the journey was met with several challenges. NGOs faced delays in data entry due to limited digital literacy, infrastructure constraints, and a lack of clarity around REAP's full potential. While some staff adapted quickly, others felt overwhelmed by frequent meetings and unfamiliar technology. Network partners, especially older members, showed limited interest in using the tool, often preferring traditional pen-and-paper methods. Nevertheless, feedback from these sessions helped coGuide refine REAP—addressing usability issues, adding offline features, and making the interface more accessible. Key learnings emphasised the importance of consistent training, internal motivation, lateral learning, and infrastructural support to successfully integrate digital tools like REAP into MEAL systems.

Looking ahead, actions include distributing mobile devices for field data collection, strengthening internal dialogue around accountability, developing dashboards for decision-making, and automating routine tasks. Directors acknowledged the need for a cultural shift towards digital adoption, driven by inclusivity, openness to learning, and continuous technical improvements. By templatizing workflows and embedding active

learning into the system, coGuide and its partner NGOs aim to scale REAP effectively and enhance its value as a decision-support tool across networks.

10.6.8 Step 8: Data Analysis and Report Generation

Data analysis is a vital component of the MEAL framework as it helps assess program effectiveness, monitor progress, and guide informed decision-making for improvements. In the case of NGO D, after completing baseline assessments, the team developed an analysis plan tailored to the organisation's needs using REAP, a real-time digital data tool. The flexibility of REAP allowed the coGuide team to deliver preliminary insights—such as gender-based findings—swiftly. A more comprehensive analysis plan was then developed, ensuring that the final results were detailed and aligned with donor expectations.

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse student responses across key domains such as Knowledge, Attitude, Preparedness, and Action. The findings provided gender-based insights that the NGO found valuable for refining the program. The Director appreciated REAP's digital capabilities, especially its real-time data tracking and in-platform report generation. Despite facing challenges such as data quality issues and delayed assessments due to communication gaps, key learnings emphasised the importance of early clarity on donor requirements and proactive stakeholder engagement. Moving forward, greater coordination with stakeholders and review of donor proposals were recommended to improve planning and execution.

10.7 Conclusion

The paper intends to outline the complete series of steps undertaken during the process documentation, highlighting the objectives of each stage, the key processes involved, the challenges encountered, and the lessons learned throughout the process. The study revealed several key insights from the process documentation of establishing a Monitoring and Evaluation system within selected NGOs.

The paper provides a comprehensive outline of the steps taken during the process documentation, emphasising the objectives at each stage, the key processes involved, challenges faced, and lessons learned. Several critical insights emerged from this study on establishing a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system within selected NGOs.

- **Need Assessment and Framework Development:** Conducting a thorough needs assessment and developing an initial framework is crucial for enhancing the acceptability of the MEAL system. Engaging in discussions with key stakeholders and reviewing project documents ensures a comprehensive understanding of the intended MEAL activities. Clarity regarding evaluation objectives and questions is essential, as it guides the overall design and implementation of the MEAL framework.

- **Digitalisation and Capacity Building:** The existing technological infrastructure and digital literacy levels within organisations significantly influence the successful adoption of technology. Products developed for Monitoring and Evaluation should meet the diverse requirements of users, ensuring that they recognise their utility and return on investment. Continuous mentoring, capacity building, and active stakeholder engagement are vital for reducing resistance to technology adoption and facilitating seamless integration into existing workflows.
- **Continuous improvement of product features**, based on the evolving needs of NGOs, is crucial for ensuring scalability.
- **Participatory Approach:** Employing a participatory approach throughout the process documentation provided valuable insights into the experiences and reflections of stakeholders. This engagement fosters a more informed and responsive approach to the development of Monitoring and Evaluation systems. By continuously integrating feedback and learnings from the field into the system's evolution, organisations can enhance the effectiveness of their programs and ensure successful implementation.
- For developing an effective, technology-driven real-time Monitoring and Evaluation system, the processes of learning, action, and reflection must become integral to an organisation's operations. It is insufficient to treat the exercise as a one-time initiative, and continuous follow-up and iterative improvements are essential for achieving sustainable impact.

Disclaimer: In preparing this manuscript, we have used the Grammarly (Paid) and ChatGPT (Open) version to rephrase, copy-edit and language enhancement of the entire paper. We take full responsibility for the content.

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