

# THE CHILD FOCUSSED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH OF HCDI

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In a country where the monsoon often fails, agriculture, which is the primary source of livelihood, is not an occupation that the community can always rely on. Lack of water in many parts of the country has led to successive crop failures. Coupled with this is the lack of fodder for the animals. Animal rearing traditionally is part of a village activity, but when the means to feed the animals are not available the animals become a burden. For the rural poor the logical step is to sell their next available source of livelihood - the animals, thus depriving themselves of an occupation and the dairy products for the family. When the land they cultivate no longer sustains them, they are forced to mortgage, or even sell it. The forest products - which are considered to be the third source that brings some income for their survival - are not easily available as new laws prohibit them from collecting forest products.

When food, and money are short, the families turn to the local moneylender. Thus begins a vicious cycle of loans, crop failures, hunger, and the need for repayment. Then the exodus to the nearby towns and cities starts. Migration is large scale often with the women and the children. One is witness to this scenario, particularly in the five provinces of our country in the North where a majority of the tribal poor, are concentrated.

An analysis of the poverty in such a village will reveal how great the impact of poverty is on children. In circumstances like these, creatively designed and well-targeted strategic development interventions would only bring a positive change for the children as well as for their families and communities. The efforts of an organization like ours have to be directed

towards creating an opportunity for the child to realize his full God given human potential.

## **WHAT IS A CHILD FOCUSED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME?**

Our Child Focussed Community Development Programme [CFCDP] is not a process meant to simply transfer funds from sponsors to the poor in the villages, so that their immediate needs are met. Nor is it to give them access to basic services and education for their children. It is usually the assumption that the poor lack resources and the solution of providing resources to them would enable them to lead a better life. This sort of strategy merely amounts to a 'welfare approach'. It would certainly not address the impact of poverty, in particular, child poverty that is more degenerating than adult poverty. Besides it would in no way promote a sustainable long-term impact.

Child focussed community development is a development approach in which children, their families and their communities participate and take ownership of the entire development process that affects children. It enables them to understand that, they have the capacity and ability to work together on common issues. Issues when tackled for the greater good would bring out their full human potential. Our role in this process is that of a facilitator.

### **Child Centred Approach:**

The Child centred approach aims to improve the quality of a child's life in its own environment in a four pronged manner. Firstly, apart from addressing the needs of children it facilitates children's, their families and communities participation in the development process. Secondly, it promotes rights, interests and dignity of children. Meanwhile strengthening the capacity of their families and communities. Finally it induces them to mobilize resources as much as possible from within the community, the government and other NGOs. Though the approach is child centred, it recognizes the fact that families and communities can meet their responsibilities towards their

children fully and better when their own capacity to address their needs and rights are also addressed.

The CFCD programme does not exclusively focus on sponsored children alone. It covers other poor children in the villages too. If a project has 200 sponsored children about a similar number of other poor children are also covered equally and they together with the sponsored children play their role in the development process.

HCDI believes that if a development programme ought to be a child centred one, it could be broadly divided into four key sectors to address the issues, which affect their development:

- ❖ Education,
- ❖ Health & Nutrition,
- ❖ Livelihood Programmes;
- ❖ Building Community organizations

## **1. EDUCATION:**

If the poor become more literate their incomes are likely to go up with productivity rising. Their health conditions are likely to improve and the rate of population growth is likely to slow down. Similarly if women's literacy is increased it is likely to result in significant improvements in the lives of their children, that is, better nutrition, higher school attendance and improved hygiene at home. Perhaps this reality seems to be known to the poor and that is why when an NGO approaches a community the first thing that the community asks the NGO is to provide education for their children. It is because they do not want their children to live as illiterates as themselves. Therefore Education, which is vital for the impact it has on empowering the poor to achieve social and economic change, forms the first and foremost component of our development interventions in the CFCD programme.

## **Early Childhood Care And Development [ECCD] Programme:**

In education our main thrust is on early Childhood Care and Development programme [ECCD] through which a young child's physical, cognitive, language and social development are taken care of. The first six years of a child's life are crucial, as the critical brain development takes place during this period. If this process of growth in a child's life has to be successful much will depend upon the child's nutritional and health status. Also important is how the child interacts with the people in its environment. Therefore, a well-designed ECCD programme is carried out for the children in the target villages to receive adequate nutrition, stimulation, care and pre-school education in their early years of life.

The villages in our project area are grouped into clusters. Depending upon the population and the size of each village a certain number of villages are brought under a cluster. As soon as a CFCD project is introduced by HCDI the first activity is to help the community establish ECC Centres in each cluster. Here children up to the age of six or seven, from the villages can partake of the services. In this way Mothers are relieved to go to work and girls are released from sibling care responsibilities, to attend school. ECC Centres - which would have about 60 children each - are established with help from the community. Either they are asked to offer a building or at least a piece of land on which a low cost building is constructed with the help of the community. Each centre is equipped with play materials, teaching aids, basic furniture and equipment and cooking vessels. Pre-School teachers and assistants are chosen, preferably from within the community and are trained for this purpose. Children, who are divided into groups according to their age, sing, play and learn. They receive nutritional food, learning materials and one or two sets of clothes in a year. Children get the opportunity for their intellectual stimulation, active learning as well as social and emotional care. Such an intervention in their early stage would eventually enable them to realize their human potential and play an active role in their families and later, in their communities. In this way not only are children's rights to food, health-care and protection ensured, but also their rights to affection, interaction, security and stimulation.

### **School Education:**

Our CFCD programme also ensures that all other children of school going age in the villages have an access to at least primary and elementary school education. This meets the goal of our country in universalization of Elementary Education for all the children in the age group of 6 to 14. All the school going children in the villages receive learning materials such text books, note books and wherever it is necessary, uniforms, to enable them to attend school and pursue their education. As the quality of the education in the village government schools is usually poor, the school going children come to ECC Centres every evening for extra coaching in their lessons. The slow learners get special attention.

### **Skill Training Programmes For Youths:**

There are many young boys and girls in the villages who have either never been to school or who are dropouts. They spend idle and unproductive lives or at the most spend their time in grazing cattle or collecting firewood from the forest. The CFCD programme doesn't neglect them.

If these youths have to be gainfully occupied either in on-farm or non-farm activities they have to be provided with certain skills. So wherever possible opportunities are made available, to train them in agriculture, animal husbandry, carpentry, pottery, masonry, etc. Boys who have attained some education and who have the relevant aptitude are sent to Vocational Training Centres in the nearby towns/cities to train them as drivers, fitters, plumbers, welders, electricians, etc. In the case of girls, they learn appropriate skills to establish their own petty business, for instance, as tailors, basket weavers, embroiderers of mirror work, etc. In some projects the tribal girls who are unwilling to go for any training are offered a bridal training where they learn to be a better wife and mother and to lead a good family life.

CFCD programme does not merely provide the opportunity for children to learn in ECCCs and for school going children to get education from Government run or Mission schools but also ensures that the parents participate in this whole process and feel that they own these educational programmes. In the villages, Village Education Committees [VEC] consisting of mainly parents as members are formed, which takes the responsibility of supervising and monitoring the educational programmes. It ensures that ECCCs and village schools offer

quality education. Presently such committees have become so active that they have been demanding the teachers, who used to be frequently absent themselves, to attend the school regularly, by exerting pressure on the local government. Wherever the CFCD Projects exist, the villagers say that the children's attendance at school has gone up and the dropout rate has come down. All the issues relating to schools and ECCCs are regularly discussed in the VEC meetings.

## 2. HEALTHS AND NUTRITION:

The Health Care delivery system in the interior rural areas is virtually non available and where available is of extremely poor quality. Therefore our CFCD projects need to have a well-planned programme for Health Care directed towards not only children but also for mothers. The emphasis is more on preventive than curative measures. Poor medical and sanitation facilities coupled with poor personal and household hygiene lead to many water-borne infectious diseases. Normally children in rural areas are affected by polio myelitis, neo-natal tetanus, measles, incidents of diarrhoea, acute respiratory infections, tuberculosis, etc. The serious problem that children and the community suffer, more so in tribal areas, is from Malaria. The interventions include health education for both children and the community, under-5 care, pre-natal and post-natal care, environmental sanitation, family planning and school health. The health of every individual child is regularly monitored by the project; at least one medical check-up in a year is done. Either with the help of the Government or with the help of other international organizations like UNICEF the project ensures that all the children are covered by immunizations.

In the beginning the toughest challenge in the health sector of our CFCD projects is convincing the community through aggressive health awareness programmes. They are counseled; on unhealthy age-old cultural practices they follow of believing in spirits and witchcraft to heal illnesses for both children and adults. [for instance, the superstitions among some tribals are so strong that they believe in quacks treating their small children mainly when they suffer from severe malnutrition by burning with a hot iron on their bellies].

Gradually villagers are encouraged to use indigenous medicines/herbs.

Health awareness programmes are regularly carried out mainly amongst the women - mothers. Some women are selected from the community and trained in health care; they in turn can attend to minor health problems of the community, particularly for women and children. The health care workers are provided with some medicines under the supervision of a doctor, which they sell for a nominal cost when they attend to normal ailments. They are also trained to attend childbirths.

In order to provide safe drinking water and reduce water borne diseases, bore wells are sunk. To provide better sanitation, the community is trained to build low cost toilets behind the houses. Hitherto women have been attending to the call of nature under the cover of darkness. The community is taught to build proper drainage systems. Through the students' movement, pigs that wander about the village and transmit diseases to children are banned and families are taught to go in for stall-feeding. All such health related issues are addressed, to improve the quality of the health of the community in general and the children in particular.

When the community is threatened with serious health problems, special programmes are also carried out. For instance, to control malaria, which is the greatest threat to life in most of the villages, particularly in the states like Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh where incidence of cerebral malaria is very common. The CFCD programme is yet to play a better role in certain areas of health particularly in reproductive and sexual health.

### **3. LIVELIHOOD INTERVENTIONS:**

In the villages, for the poor, traditional farming; animal husbandry, minor forest produce and hunting in the forest have been the major livelihood and income generation options. However, with the depletion of forests, degradation of soil, scarcity of water, lack of fodder for animals, those very options have dwindled. Moreover rules imposed by the Government on the use of forest produce have been adversely affecting the lives of the people. Economy, environment and health are inter connected and have direct impact on life in any community.

Even a minor change in any one of these, affects the others. Whatever the villagers produce from the land and store for their consumption does not last long in a year. They borrow money from moneylenders who exploit them with high interest rates. Of course the vital question is, how much and for how long can they go on borrowing money? Finally they are forced to choose the only option that is available for their survival, which is to leave their homes and go to cities in search of a viable alternative for their livelihoods. That is how the family and mass migration begins.

When the families are forced to face severe livelihood constraints and lack the will to stay back, concentrating exclusively on Education and Health sectors for their children have little or no impact. Our working experience among these communities has taught us this. Therefore, our CFCD project has acknowledged the fact that there is an obvious and urgent need for interventions in the areas of agriculture, land improvement, livestock, and water conservation and in other non-agricultural sectors, which are other sources available for their livelihood. If interventions in these areas have to be successful, the capacity of the families needs to be built up so as to acquire skills that enable them to be more productive. Therefore CFCD project encourages income generation activities, savings, and access to resources that are available with the Government and other NGOs and credit facilities to improve families' income. Enhancement in the income level of the families will naturally improve the future prospects of the children.

As agriculture is the primary source of livelihood, the issues that affect agricultural production are addressed foremost in our CFCD projects. Soil erosion, dry and uneven land, soil fertility, traditional methods of cultivation, pests that ruin the crops, water for irrigation, are some of the problems that the poor farmers have to combat. In order to help improve their agricultural production, families who depend on agriculture come together to discuss and decide the activity that a family would take up. Lands are leveled, various measures are taken up to stop erosion of topsoil, farmers are taught to practice modern methods of agriculture and to switch over to high-yield varieties and multiple cropping pattern. Through community organization they are empowered to assert themselves and avail of the support services that are available from the Government for the agricultural sector. Farmers' groups or

Self-Help Groups are helped to establish seed banks to go in for hybrid crops, as fertilizers are expensive and harmful and many a time families do not have enough money to buy, they are trained to use farm waste in making organic manure and vermin-composting [e.g. use of earthworms]. Pests bring heavy losses to the poor farmers, who cannot afford to buy expensive pesticides. Thus they are taught to use natural pesticides.

Those who do not have land or have small dry land [the poor, here generally have degraded lands that are with low productivity] are encouraged to take up non-farm related activities which would provide alternatives to on-farm activities. Financial assistance in the form of loans [wherever possible groups are formed and are linked to credit institutions to avail loans] is given to the families. For instance in one project, fishermen [who are urged to form groups and do collective fishing with a view of ultimately forming cooperatives to eliminate middle-men] are assisted to acquire good fishing-nets and also helped to find markets for their fish. Women's groups are helped to renovate the ponds abandoned in the villages and are trained in fisheries by linking them with the government to get seedlings, cultivate fish, sell them in the market and share the profits among themselves.

Various other income generation options are also made available to the families. In most of the projects, they are helped with milch buffaloes of a good breed. In two of our CFCD projects, the families who have been helped with buffaloes are going to form cooperatives to sell milk directly to the Dairy. This avoids exploitation by middlemen, from whom formerly they were borrowing money and selling milk for a meager price. Where the lands are dry and animal fodder is in short supply, small animals such as goats are provided through 'gift a goat' scheme, [this means that a family which has received a goat as a gift has to gift the first born female goat to another family in the same community which in turn will do the same].

During the lean season, families who do not have enough food grains for personal consumption tend to borrow from rich farmers, which they return after harvesting with a certain additional amount of grains, which is usually fixed by the rich farmers as interest. In our project in Nagaland, women's groups were assisted with funds to establish Rice Banks in

each village, which are managed exclusively by them. Mothers borrow grains from these banks and return with repayable interest in the form of grain. In this way not only have the women learned to manage such ventures but also have brought an end to the exploitation. In a couple of years the project will eventually get back the entire principal, which will be utilized for the children's education.

In the villages many families have established, tailoring shops, petty shops for provisions, many are engaged in carpentry, pottery and brick making. Their economic status is gradually improving.

#### **4. BUILDING COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS:**

The children, families and community have the right to participate in every decision making process that involves their own development. Usually the voices of the poor are not heard in the decision making process and their concerns remain un-addressed. If the capacity of children and their parents to influence decisions and improve their circumstances is to be enhanced, they need to be persuaded to form their own organizations/groups in which they can work together and exercise a common voice. When they come together strength is born. They realize that they have the strength to address the issues that stall their development and together they can control their situation and achieve many things. Therefore building the capacity of the community becomes one of the most important components of Development in CFCD projects.

#### **Women's Self-Help Groups:**

The CFCD programme lays a strong emphasis on the formation and promotion of women's self-help groups [SHGs] with a view to empower the poor women to cross the social and economic barrier. By this they participate fully and actively in decision-making process in the family, community and at all levels. Awareness is created of the need to work together with men as equal partners and that as men and women together work for equality, sustainable development and communal harmony.

Each CFCD project has promoted 15 to 20 SHGs depending upon the number of villages in each project, each SHG consisting of 15 to 20 women. They save [the amount to be contributed by each woman is decided by themselves] money that, over a period, accumulates into a sizable amount from which members get loans at a low rate of interest to start and run small businesses. In some cases matching grants are given from the project but mostly the SHGs are linked to nearby credit institutions from which they take additional loans if required. The money made available through the thrift and credit system, not only helps them in times of need but also improves their standard of living. Income in the hands of women benefits the household, as they are likely to spend on food, child welfare and household requirements. Thus their enhanced participation in economic developments and their role in the social development improve their social, economic and political status in the society.

The other main objective of SHGs is for them to grow into a strong social movement. They come together to discuss various issues that affect them, their families and the community. They raise their voice against liquor, exploitation by the moneylenders, violence against women, child marriages [in Kshipra the SHGs have taken up this issue and child marriages have come down considerably. Here child marriages are common, even before reaching puberty the child is married and on reaching puberty, the same day the father hands over the girl to her husband], abuse of girls, corrupt government officials, etc.

### **Farmers' Groups:**

Among men, the Farmer's groups are formed so that they can come together for discussions on agriculture related issues. This way, together they can undergo training in agriculture; approach the government as a group, to avail various services in agriculture and animal husbandry. They could even venture into group farming.

### **Village Institutions:**

Village institutions [Gram Sabha / Gram Panchayat] are strengthened through training wherever possible. Besides exposing them to other developed villages of other provinces

[like in Nagaland project] on how to govern their village better and work unanimously for the total development of their village has immediate impact. Where women are not allowed to take part in decision making, men are encouraged to understand the importance of women's participation in the decision making process and accept them as equal members in all the village bodies.

### **Children's Parliament:**

Children's parliament forms an important part CFCD approach as it gives them the opportunity to articulate, express their views and participate in developmental activities particularly in education and health. It is, therefore, important that children's parliaments are promoted in the target villages. This would also create a forum for greater dialogue between children and adults in the community and give them the confidence that they can manage and control their situation and contribute something good towards their own community, a feeling of recognition by adults and an opportunity to improve their skills in group decision-making and group negotiation.

### **CONSTRAINTS:**

Working with communities in the rural areas is not an easy task nor is it free from constraints. Political manipulation, suppression by higher caste people and their own apathy work against their development. Ignorance and illiteracy weighs on them so much so that they do not respond easily. Under such circumstances the change that we are trying to foster is undoubtedly an extremely slow process. The experience, knowledge and skills we at HCDI level have gained so far are also insufficient. With the limited experience, we have been able to accomplish more than what we expected up till now. As we are critical of our own work, we have to say that the quality of the programmes has ample room for improvement. Even in success stories we see shortcomings. To maintain a good quality programme, our challenge is to constantly build up the capacity of the 'implementing organizations' at grass-root level and as well as at the staff level of HCDI. We have to learn more. We want to be more innovative and radical.

## CONCLUSION:

The Child Focussed Community Development approach is still new to HCDI. It is only about ten years ago we ventured into this. This approach, which is cost effective and covers a large number of children and families, gives us ample opportunities, to implement innovatively and creatively designed CFCD programmes. One of our core principles is to ensure that the sustainability of the programme is inbuilt in the whole development process right from the beginning and by the time the project cycle, which could be for a period of 7 to 9 years, gets completed, the community reaches the stage of self-reliance or at least successfully moves in that direction. We do not know how far we will be successful but we will have to wait and see as a couple of our projects have just crossed the halfway mark of the project period. Regular monitoring, evaluation and timely corrections of the programme activities have undoubtedly become an important part of the work.

It should be mentioned that some international NGOs working for children do focus more on the general development of the community and less on children's needs in pursuance of the argument that whatever you do for the community will trickle down to the children. At HCDI the mandate is for children and if the core programme principles are clear then our approach will remain ever child-centred.

HCDI will continue to dream, to see a world that will be without poverty, a world in which every child that is born will have a right to life's essentials - food, water, health care, education and shelter. To realize this dream we have to continue to strive hard to eradicate poverty in general, and the children's poverty in particular. Let what He said; "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, and you did for me," continue to inspire us. More particularly those who are working with the poor in remote areas, at grass root level with devotion and dedication, in all the countries where Kindernoithilfe, HCDI's partner, is working through her different partners.

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