

A PROCESS DOCUMENT ON THE ACTIVATION OF VILLAGE CHILD PROTECTION COMMITTEE



Background of the Project

Miracle Foundation India's programme to create community-led protection mechanisms aiming at family strengthening, prevention and gate keeping, is implemented in collaboration with UNICEF, the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment and the implementing partner Deepak Foundation.

Chhotaudepur is a predominantly tribal area in the Vadodara district of Gujarat. The major problems faced by the people in Chhotaudepur are poverty, alcoholism, lack of livelihood resources for secure income, and migration. These are contributing factors for the children to be institutionalized. A majority of the children in Child Care Institutions in Vadodara come from the Naswadi, Chhotaudepur, Kawat and Pavi Jetpur blocks of the district. These are not from clusters of villages but from a few villages in each block and hence the logic of selection was to have a cluster approach to the project for greater impact.

Deepak Foundation has selected four villages – Moti Dumali, Nani Dumali, Gungawada and Jaloda – for the pilot project to create a scalable and replicable model of family strengthening. It was initiated in selected demonstration sites in Chhotaudepur district as a four-year intervention programme.

Further, to assess and to get a bird's eye view of the key child protection issues as well as the overall situation within the village, a total of 5 Participatory Rural Appraisals, 19 Focus Group Discussions, and 17 Key Informant Interviews with adults and adolescent girls were organized. The situational analysis results were based on interactions with various stakeholders such as PRIs, Anganwadis, teachers, community leaders etc.

A total of 87 vulnerable families were identified as per situational analysis exercise. To further activate and strengthen the Village Child Protection Committees (VCPCs), new members were enrolled and inactive members were removed. One of the major observations after the need assessments was that although village institutes like PRI, SMC and ICDS are more or less engaged towards the solutions, issues like child protection require robust, focussed work and interventions.

Rationale

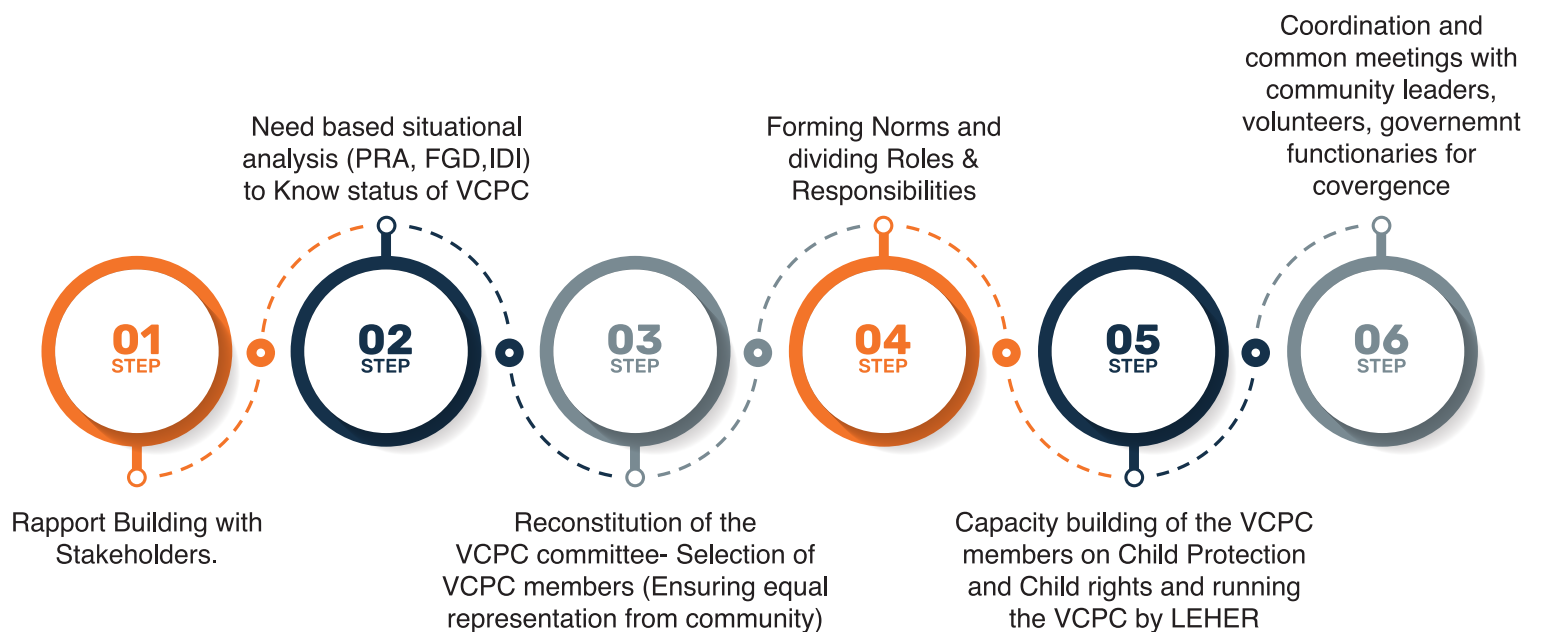
A Child Protection Committee (CPC) is a community-based group including duty-bearers, who are primarily responsible for creating and promoting a child friendly and safe community environment wherein all children's well being, safety and rights are protected. The VCPC is an alliance working towards the well-being and child protection issues of children and young people at the village level. It is essential to make the VCPC active and responsible along with other stakeholders, as facilitators of gatekeeping.

Coordinated and synergized efforts by the VCPC are required to have a strong mechanism of sustainable gatekeeping. This is the only platform to engage the community and ensure and maintain child participation for child protection issues and to build a child-friendly environment in the village. Being a local body, the VCPC has a significant say and strength to address the community's issues such as negligence, exploitation, harm and abuse in form of child marriages, child labour, gaps in qualitative education, nutrition, health and mental health, alcoholism, eloping at adolescent age, etc. The VCPC is the only body that can ensure child participation and engage the community as well as the Panchayati Raj Institutions to protect the children in the community. The VCPC knows the local issues and compelling reasons and accordingly can give guidance or facilitate feasible solutions. The guidance offered by the VCPC cannot be a "one size fits all" solution, as any transition requires careful planning, assessment, and adaptation based on its unique circumstances and context including culture. It is the only body that can analyse the strengths and available resources required to stop children's separation from families. Further, they are responsible for monitoring, reporting and responding to the issues of child protection.

There was a felt need of having a VCPC in the identified villages of Chhotaudepur, to ensure the safety and protection of children and ensure that the voices of children are heard and acted upon.

Steps taken for activating/formation of VCPCs

The selected villages under the project 'Transforming Family-Based Alternative Care in Gujarat' falls under the Group Panchayat Dumali Juth Panchayat. Interviews with members of Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) revealed that a VCPC had been formed in 2016 at the Juth Panchayat. In a visit during the PRA, it was found that many of VCPC members were unaware that they were part of the committee. Consequently, dialogues with the community were initiated to understand the significance of the VCPC. To initiate the reformation process, a thorough handholding support was extended to the Deepak Foundation team by the Miracle Foundation India team. The handholding support included; guidance and discussion on VCPC stakeholders, roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders, and formation processes through revisiting the Government Regulation (GR). Miracle Foundation India organized a detailed and extensive workshop on VCPC formation ensuring the community-led participation under the technical guidance by LEHER (<https://leher.org/>)



1. Various activities were conducted in villages to build rapport and initiate the Need Analysis to get more accurate and appropriate information from the community.
2. A need-based Situation Analysis was done through Focus Group Discussions, Participatory Rural Appraisals and Key Informant Interviews. Families at risk were identified in four villages. Also, this exercise helped the teams to understand the resource allocations in the community, its livelihood options, status of education and social as well as economic conditions. A total of 82 families were identified where there was a risk of separation of child or a child protection issue.
3. During the PRA and FGDs, the Deepak Foundation team came to know that the Village Child Protection Committee only existed on paper, in an inactive mode. To reform and revive the VCPC, a Gram Sabha was organised, in which the process of reconstitution of the committee was carried out with the cooperation of the Sarpanch as well as Panchayat members, plus the District Child Protection functionaries. As per norms, an equal representation from the Sarpanch, Talati (Patwari), Aaganwadi workers, Asha workers, social leaders and children were ensured.
4. After the PRA and groups discussions were complete, the team interacted over various meetings, visits and group discussions with the VCPC members. They found a lack of active mechanisms for child protection in the villages during need assessments. The VCPCs agreed to work actively for child protection and so, the team assessed their knowledge, skills as well as the competency in forming, norming, strengthening and performance to facilitate and activate the VCPC as an effective gatekeeping mechanism.

5. To make this process more effective, volunteers were selected from the village and trained to support the VCPC members and ensure that there is a clear understanding of the child rights and child protection issues among all the duty bearers of the VCPC. To strengthen the capacity of the VCPC members, LEHER was taken on board for making the VCPC sustainable and aligned to its goals and objectives. LEHER built the capacity of teams on the following:

- Reinforcing the mindset of the VCPC, approaching the community as the protagonist led by the VCPCs, enabling the Miracle and Deepak Foundation teams to learn to provide a facilitative space.
- Re-emphasizing the predominant role of the VCPCs in steering and ensuring the sustainability of the project towards family and community strengthening.

Also, a couple of brainstorming workshops were completed to identify tangible areas in which community-led child protection can be incorporated and to train field-based teams on how to facilitate and mobilize the VCPC, their skills, role and functions. In the following year, the focus of the workshops was to assess how the VCPC were progressing from the teams' feedback and via field visits, in order to course correct as required.

6. Participation of government officials during the meeting of the VCPC for effective coordination on linkages with various alternative care options and schemes. Periodical meetings were held and the progress of the initiative was shared with child protection functionaries to seek their guidance and support.

Coordination/engagement with DCPU officials

To strengthen the VCPCs, the Deepak Foundation team took support from the DCPU team and invited the Probation Officer, Non-Institutional Care (PO–NIC) and Outreach Worker of the DCPU to meetings. The DCPU team, along with various experts, created awareness among the VCPC members regarding child protection and child rights. Sessions were organised on children in need of care and protection, children in conflict with law, 1098 Child Line, and children's rights. The PO–NIC explained the structure of the Child Protection Committee, schemes under social defence, what the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) was about, and the adoption process for orphaned children. The Miracle Foundation Gandhinagar team constantly guided and provided handholding support to the Deepak Foundation team throughout the process of the VCPC activation.



Interventions and capacity building sessions with the VCPCs

On formation of the VCPC in each village, members were apprised about the objectives, roles and responsibilities, importance of regular meetings, identification of active and inactive members, legal process of reconstitution, documentation of the minutes post-meeting during the monthly meetings. Along with that orientation sessions were organised and awareness was created among the VCPC members regarding child safeguarding issues such as child labour, early marriage, school dropout, child abuse, violation of child rights and immediate action to be taken, linkages of child at risk (children in need of care and protection) with government schemes/programmes.

To further strengthen the VCPC and community engagement, a collaboration was arranged with the LEHER Foundation. Leher organised a series of workshops with the Deepak Foundation and Miracle Foundation India teams. Various tools were introduced to the teams, such as problem tree analysis, a tool on identifying whether the groups/committee within the villages are active or not, a tool on prioritising and categorising the issues, etc.

After the Leher workshop, the Miracle Foundation India team connected once again with the Deepak Foundation team and discussed the support required to properly facilitate the VCPC and how to give them access as per the real situation. The Miracle Foundation team then decided to provide a demonstration to one of the VCPCs on the self-assessment tool. They selected the Gungawada VCPC, who were told how to do the self-assessment based on assigned parameters. Based on the demonstration, over the next month, all the three VCPCs have undergone the self-assessment process. The Deepak Foundation team collected all the charts of the exercise and did the analysis. One key observation from the analysis was that the VCPC members had given points either quite liberally or scantily. Also, there was a lack of ownership among the VCPC members and the participation of children was also negligible.

These tools helped the VCPC members to identify the existing problems as well as the issues, such as child marriage, child labour, school dropouts, eloping and sickle cell anemia, which were not given weightage but had an impact on families. During the meetings, each identified issue was discussed and a solution to it was identified. During visits to the identified families, volunteers join the project team to understand the needs of the child and family and actions to be taken for family strengthening. Through the problem tree analysis, VCPC members from three villages identified the following issues.

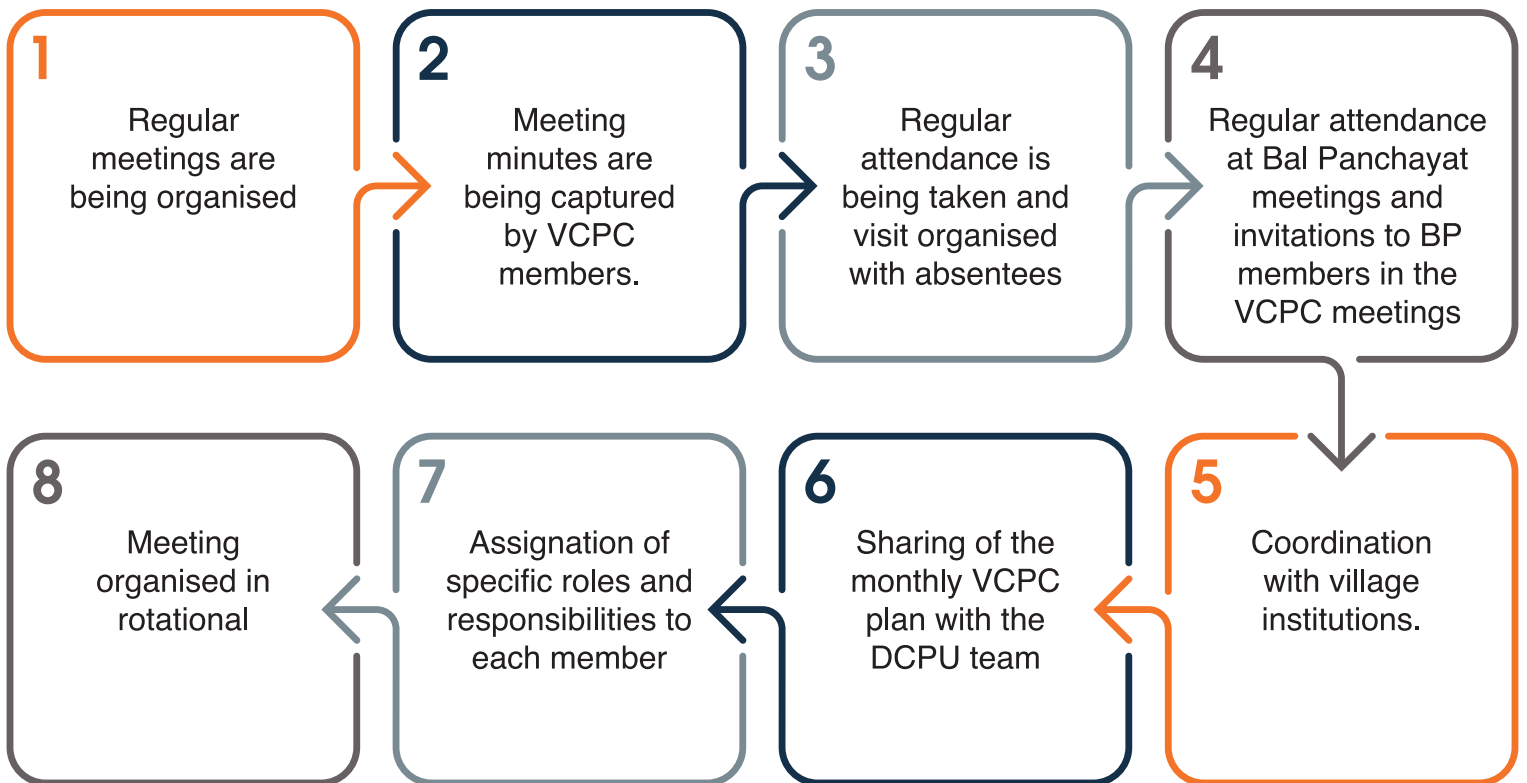
Name of the village	Problems identified
Dumali	Child labour, addiction, education, superstitions
Jaloda	Alcohol addiction, child marriage, superstitions, education
Gungawada	Eloping, education, addiction, child labour

Currently all the 3 VCPCs have completed their self-assessment; based on which they have prepared a six-month action plan. As per the plan, the VCPC members have started home visits to the identified families and they are supporting volunteers towards government scheme linkages and documentations.

The stakeholder engagement and liaison with the government department has created visibility for the VCPC members and community volunteers actively working in selected villages. This helped in creating awareness of various government schemes and programmes through a one-window awareness camp and providing support to many families and children. Sessions by the PO-NIC and outreach workers helped VCPC members to learn about the structure of agencies working for child protection and related services as well as schemes available for children.

Mentoring by VCPC members for the families at risk helped in finalising the feasible interventions. It has improved the level of participation of the families. One can see a change in perspectives around child protection issues among the community. The VCPC and DCPU members have played a pivotal role in bridging the gap between the community and government systems in addressing child protection issues through linkages with family-based alternative schemes. Strong interactions among the village institutions will strengthen the child safety nets within the villages.

Status of VCPC



Monthly meetings of the Bal Panchayat

Strengthening the interventions

To enhance the capacity of the VCPC members on how to strengthen interventions for families at risk, Development promoters oriented the VCPC members on the Thrive Scale™ and shared details and discussed about the families at risk and what interventions are applicable as per the need of the family in the Thrive Scale Scale. Development promoters also told them how to identify red flags and how to immediately address them. Further the Thrive Scale™ progress visit sheets will be shared with the VCPC members so that they themselves can identify the red flags and, based on needs, can plan and suggest effective interventions for the family at risk.

Periodical Self Assessments of VCPCs

To ensure that the VCPCs are working towards their goals and objectives – an approach taught by Leher – periodic assessments were conducted once in three months where the VCPCs identified the areas of improvement and made strategic plans aligned to the objectives for the next three months. In Gujarat, four periodic assessments were done on points like ownership, understanding of the purpose and objective of the VCPCs, regular meetings and attendance of members in meeting, awareness about VCPCs in the community, capacity building programmes and its impact on VCPC, dialogues with community about child protection issues and changes in attitudes and behaviours towards issues, participation and representation of children and their issues in the VCPC, documentation and evaluation. All three VCPCs of Gujarat have shown improvement from the baseline assessment and proper action points are made after each evaluation. The areas of concern that still need more attention are the participation of the Panchayati Raj Institutions and other village-level government functionaries, case management, convergence and regular meetings of the VCPCs.



Learnings/reflections

- The VCPC members have distributed the identified families at risk and supported the finalization of feasible interventions (with the family's consent) with volunteers.
- The VCPCs have started working on providing linkages of the targeted beneficiaries with available schemes and services and also facilitated the process of documentation and submission of applications in one-window awareness camps.
- The VCPC members have actively participated in various trainings organised by Deepak Foundation (on topics such as teachers, parental skills, life skills education) and have also ensured maximum participation of beneficiaries.

- The VCPC has Initiated interactions with Bal Panchayat and village institutions on the need to address child protection issues.
- Child protection issues have been disseminated within the community.
- VCPC members have helped in identification of families in utmost need for COVID-19 relief packages provided under the project. They helped in distributing 1857 ration kits to the identified vulnerable families from four villages of Chhota Udepur.
- Members of the VCPCs are engaged in strengthening the Bal Panchayat. They attend the Bal Panchayat meetings to make children aware that VCPC's functions are aligned with the goals of the Bal Panchayat and committee members can be reached out to, if needed.
- Supported the Deepak Foundation team in organising the one-window awareness camps, mobilising needy families and linking them to various government schemes.
- The VCPC members took a lead in addressing the dropout issues. Children from these four villages did not have transportation facilities, due to which many could not go to the village school, so they took up this issue in the VCPC meeting and later presented this issue in front of the District Collector. As per the Collector's instruction they developed a route map and submitted it along with an application for transportation.
- The VCPC members supported children in addressing child labour issues in Nani Dumali village. They prevented a child from becoming a child labourer and enrolled the child back into the school.
- The VCPC and volunteers actively coordinated with Care India and linked 20 families from the community and provided them with agricultural equipment. Nine families (two from identified families) were supported in making organic pesticides and two other families were provided support in fencing their land to protect their crops from wild boars.
- VCPC members and volunteers mobilised the community to attend a programme under the 'Amrut Mahotsav' organised by the 'Rashtriya Shramik Shiksha Vikas' Board. Information was provided around good health, the importance of the E-Shram card and the importance of education. Forty families benefited, out of which three were from identified families. Each family received Rs. 500.
- VCPC members supported volunteers in preparing a list of 30 families who are not getting their ration and submitted it to the Collector's office (to the Mamlatdar) and the Department of Food Supplies. The outcome of that was a team from the Collector's office visited the villages and inquired about the families and submitted their report.
- VCPC members ensured participation of the Deputy Block Development Officer in a community visit and organized a Gram Sabha with responsible authorities around awareness/sensitivity on child labour.

Exposure visit of VCPC Members

In order to understand the way in which community programmes are being conducted towards family strengthening through community engagement, a visit was organised to YUVA, Mumbai. A total of 21 people including 15 VCPC members, 6 children, 3 members from the Deepak Foundation team and one member from Gujarat Team, Miracle Foundation India participated in the visit. The visit helped the participants to understand the process of involving the community, local institutions, the DCPU and Government department for ensuring child protection and active gatekeeping mechanisms in a better and more practical way. Also, they learned about how the VCPC is strengthened in the rural communities to identify and act on child protection issues.

Voices/Interview/testimonial

“We did not know about the VCPC and its functions, but after joining the committee we learnt what it meant. We learnt various issues about the children in the villages and steps to mitigate the issues.”

– **VCPC member, Dumali**

“After joining VCPC, we learnt about various Government schemes and processes to form linkages. We are more aware about the issues of children and how we can support them to rejoin school and gain an education.”

– **VCPC member, Gungawada**

“Through the VCPC meetings ,we learnt about various child rights. We also learnt about various Government schemes. We have learnt to speak up and present our points with confidence.”

– **VCPC member, Jaloda**

“VCPC members have supported us in the child labour issue. Through their support we have been able to bring a child out of child labour.”

– **Bal Panchayat member, Nani Dumali**

Challenges

- Acceptance around the existence of child protection issues in the community was the first challenge. Lots of rapport building and discussions with community leaders have resulted in community acknowledging, opening up and talking about the child protection issues in community
- The community is predominantly a migrating community. They take their children along to their place of work. This results in the early induction of children into labour, as child labourers..
- The community has limited access to social protection schemes. In discussion with volunteers and capacity building of both the volunteers and VCPC members, many families were linked and benefited with Government schemes and services.
- The community was not aware about alternative care options available for their children by the Government and were enrolling or sending their children to various institutions such as Ashram Shalas and Model Schools or to nearby towns or cities. The VCPC is trying to strengthen the community's own resources so that the children stay with their families.

- The community has local resources like PRI members, ANM, youth groups etc. The VCPC is bringing together these resources to ensure that proper gatekeeping is done and children are prevented from separation from their families and are able to thrive.
- Initially the VCPC members were apathetic about their role in the committee. With capacity building and exposure visits to different communities and institutions, they have realized the importance of child protection and started being responsible duty bearers of VCPC.
- After the reformation of the VCPC, the presence of children in VCPC monthly meetings was irregular. Two child representatives from the Bal Panchayat were trained to capture the issues of children in their meeting and present them in the VCPC meeting. From then on, a larger group of children participated in the VCPC meetings.
- Around maintaining effective gatekeeping mechanisms during the COVID 19, interactions with village institutions and government departments were irregular and community engagement was also hampered.

Learnings:

1. It is very important to understand the village dynamics to plan out interventions.
2. When you are designing some intervention plans, the participation of family is very crucial.
3. Among the dominant issues of village development, child protection was never on the list of priorities. But constantly talking about, discussing and expressing the need with aligned stakeholders and other local governance enables sensitivity towards child protection issues.
4. Bringing change in skills, attitudes and behaviour is a process. It needs time to get absorbed in the day-to-day activities of the community.
5. Involving the Government functionaries like the village head and teachers is a task and a lot of rapport building and constant visits are required to ensure their support and participation.
6. For effective family strengthening, it is very important to coordinate with local institutions and NGOs for ample linkages with available resources.
7. The Thrive Scale™ tool has been very effective in identifying and addressing the red flags in families and provides direction for strengthening five well being domains: health and mental health, education, household economy, family+social relationships and living conditions. This has also enabled systematic and strategic interventions, with timelines.

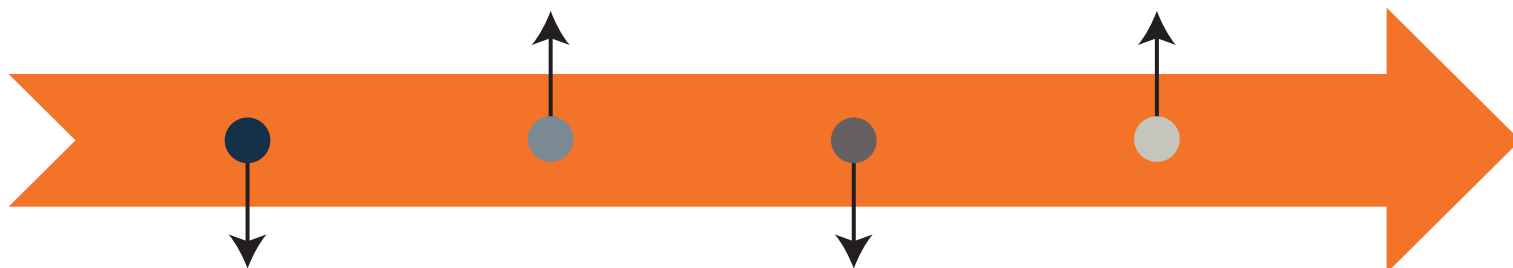


Wayforward

VCPCs will focus on the following activities.

Establish coordination with village institutes and Balpanchayat.

VCPC will ensure community engagement for creating a child friendly environment.



VCPC members will give handhold support to the identified families at risk, quarter progress review visit, awareness of various govt. Schemes and liaising with government departments.

VCPC will identify their gap areas and will build their own capacity to address child protection issues.

Glimpses from the field

