

**Bal Panchayat, Gujarat:
A loving family for every child :**

**System Strengthening
in Family Strengthening
(FS) and Family-Based
Alternative Care (F-BAC).**



Project Background:

Four villages: Moti Dumali, Nani Dumali, Gungawada and Jaloda from the Chhotaudepur Block, Chhotaudepur district, were selected as part of a cluster approach to implement the project “A loving family for every child” : System Strengthening in Family Strengthening (FS) and Family-Based Alternative Care (F-BAC). The ultimate aim of the project is to prevent children from getting separated from their families by activating community gatekeeping mechanisms and family strengthening. Under the joint partnership of UNICEF, Miracle Foundation India and the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of Gujarat, Deepak Foundation was identified as an implementing organization. The project area covers 4 villages of Chhotaudepur.

Chhotaudepur is a predominantly tribal district. Major problems faced by the people in the district include poverty, alcoholism, a lack of livelihood sources for secure income and migration. These are also the contributing factors to children’s institutionalization in the area.

Through this project, 800 households (a population of approximately 4500) in 4 villages were covered under the child protection umbrella. Issues faced by children in these four villages included limited access to education, school dropouts, migration with parents, involvement of young children in farm-related work, physical abuse, and health issues. There’s also an issue around elopement at young ages around romantic relationships that end up in early pregnancies and delivering malnourished children.

Rationale

One of the objectives of the programme is to focus on strengthening child participation, roles of children’s committees, children’s involvement, to encourage their participation for their own life decision ” This model of child or adolescent participation is based on the concept of providing children a suitable democratic platform to directly engage with adult duty bearers in order to draw their attention and action on children’s issues.

In the initial visits, issues like child marriage, low literacy rates, school dropouts, neglect, abuse etc. were found to be common in the area. During subsequent FGDs with the villagers, many said that school drop-outs, neglect by the parents, domestic violence, alcohol consumption, tobacco consumption etc. are among the most concerning issues. Interviews with local leaders and gate keepers also found that child marriage and children running away from community are major issues here.

Visits to families, PRI members, the Sarpanchs and the SMCs revealed that child representation was missing in the villages. Neither the parents nor the school authorities were sensitized enough to see children’s perspectives. In order to bridge this gap and provide children with proper channels and mediums to express their issues and problems, a Bal Panchayat was formed in Dumali Juth Panchayat.

Objective of the Bal Panchayat:

- To establish a safety net for the children of the community as per the child rights Convention – the UNCRC.
- To ensure participation of children in the decision making processes on issues that are affecting them; resulting in better outcomes for children and families of the community.
- To create a platform for children to share their issues at the local level.
- To build the leadership skills of the children so they can become the voice for other children.

- To reduce the occurrence of child right issues such as negligence, exploitation, child abuse, school dropouts, child labour, and mapping the issues related to child protection in the community to increase their self confidence and self dignity .

Steps taken for the formation of the Bal Panchayat:

The last three years journey with the Bal Panchayat has seen many ups and downs. It started with lots of energy, engagement and motivation. Some members of the Bal Panchayat relocated to pursue further studies and new members were added. But at the end of three years, we could see leadership in some children who are taking ahead the mandate of child participation and advocating around child protection issues.

The Deepak Foundation team had engaged with adults and children through various activities in the villages. Initially they started with playing games with children. Boys were taking part actively, whereas girls, special children and dropouts were being left behind. The team started visiting schools to address girls' problems and started visiting homes as well to earn trust from the parents to motivate girls to engage with the team. Gradually the girls started engaging, but dropouts and special children were still left behind so with the help of volunteers, the team reached out to them and started informal discussion and interactions.

Gradually children were motivated and started meeting regularly to address and solve the issues of child protection in the community. They named their group Bal Sabha (a children's collective) with children from 4 villages. The Bal Sabha started meeting regularly and resulted in the formation of Bal Panchayat. The Deepak Foundation team has built a good rapport with adults using a variety of activities and 25 village-level volunteers were identified to support the VCPC and Bal Panchayat. The volunteers expressed their views about the child protection scenario as well, with the result that the team identified the vulnerable families who were at risk of unnecessary child separation. They closely engaged with them to know the risk for children. The team also has started to understand the mechanism to address child protection issues. They came to know that the village-level Child Protection Committee was not functional, and started visiting the DCPU and Panchayat office to understand this better. Stakeholders were asked to attend a meeting of children's groups and interact with the children.

Formation of the Bal Panchayat

- In the interactions with children, a group started discussing the children's issues. Based on what was being discussed, the team asked the group how children can contribute to solve the issue and who would like to come forward to contribute towards solutions. Many children from the group showed readiness by raising their hands. They then collectively selected their representatives to solve issues such as stopping child labour, preventing school dropouts, organizing regular fun activities, addressing the issue of discrimination, maintaining hygiene and cleanliness etc. Children decided to form a committee to address such concerns by electing an eligible member for the Bal Panchayat Committee.
- The team also discussed the objectives and goals of the Bal Panchayat, its structure, norms of selection/election, planning activities to address child protection issues, reaching out to children in need, representing children's issues at various platforms like the village-level Child Protection Committee, Gram Sabha, School Management Committee etc.
- Representation from each village was ensured during the formation.
- In the first year the Bal Panchayat had been formed by selection but gradually the older children went for higher studies and left the villages; so replacements were done through a process of elections. Seven children were identified from each village except Jaloda, which identified 14 children considering the number of households and geographical area.

- The election resulted in the selection of a Sarpanch and Deputy Sarpanch. 8 different committees were formed with children from all 4 villages: an Education Committee, a Health Committee, and Anti-Alcohol and Drug Abuse Committee, a Village Development Committee, a Child Marriage Committee, a Child Labour Committee, an Anti-Bullying/Ragging Committee, and a Domestic Violence Committee.
- After the elections/selections, children took their oaths to work for the children in the villages.



Bal Panchayat formation: Chinese whispers activity on 9th November, 2020

Norms for the formation of the Bal Panchayat:

Children discussed building some norms which can help in the selection and smooth operation of the Bal Panchayat:

- Children in the age group of 12 to 14 years will be selected as child representatives.
- Elections will be held every two years
- Regular meetings will be conducted every month with maximum members.
- The Bal Panchayat will regularly visit the identified families and children at risk to understand and support them.
- Two children will regularly attend the VCPC meetings to ensure that their issues and concerns are presented to the larger group and they have a voice.
- A meeting minutes register will be prepared and maintained to record important decisions taken during Bal Panchayat meetings.
- The Bal Panchayat will reach out to all children in the villages to understand their issues and bring them to the surface.



Bal Panchayat Formation: children casting their votes on 9th November 2020



Monthly meetings of the Bal Panchayat



Capacity building – strengthening the Bal Panchayat:

It was very important to support the children in understanding their roles as members of the Bal Panchayat and how to make the Committees effective in governance. Children were asked to brainstorm, write down their thoughts about their village, school and their dreams to ensure that they realize what they want for all children.

Soon after the formation of the Bal Panchayat, the Covid-related crisis happened. Children were not able to come together in one village. So, a clutter-based planning was done. The children were trained on health and hygiene, child rights, child protection, and water and sanitation to ensure that they stay healthy during the pandemic. They organized awareness sessions on wearing masks, social distancing and Covid precautions among other children of the community.

After regularity in the meetings was established, the committee members were given guidance on how to run a Bal Panchayat and its roles and responsibilities. The children needed to understand child protection issues better and know how to identify and address them.

They gradually learned how to work with a solution-based approach and seek support from other local resources like the VCPC, PRI members, and the Anganwadi and ASHA workers. A training session was organized with the nonprofit MARAG, an organisation working on the formation of children's committees and child representation for decades. The topics covered included roles and responsibilities of the Bal Panchayat, leadership skills, advocacy on child rights, and governance of the Bal Panchayat.



Performing stage of Bal Panchayat

The Bal Panchayat was formed in the period July-August, 2020. The Deepak Foundation team has supported the Bal Panchayat initially to facilitate its meetings and discussions around issues affecting children in the community. The children were asked to discuss and share their ideas for addressing these issues. This helped the children to be confident when they participated as a child representative and also broadened their view of looking at the issues. Children have started meeting regularly every month and maintaining a register as well.



Problem tree analysis

In the monthly meetings of the Bal Panchayat, children discussed the adverse impacts of child labour, child marriages, eloping, alcoholism, exploitation, dropping out of school and irregularity in education. They conducted a problem tree analysis, a tool that was taught to the VCPC by Leher. As part of the exercise, they identified issues, its root causes and possible solutions. In following meetings, they completed a detailed analysis and discussions on specific issues.



Roles and responsibilities of the Bal Panchayat :

The Deepak Foundation and Miracle Foundation teams have already shared the roles and responsibilities of Bal Panchayat to the members. But a constant reiteration was required. The Bal Panchayat started inviting the VCPC members too in their monthly meetings. They shared the problem tree analysis and activities they wanted to do and presented the support they required from the VCPC and other village institutions.

Activities towards strengthening Bal Panchayat:

- The monthly meeting is planned with a specific agenda every month where the members prepare an action plan. The members also ensure necessary follow ups with responsible committee members.
- Various knowledge-based sessions are planned in every monthly meeting which allows the members to think beyond the boundaries and understand the issues of children and community well.
- The Bal Panchayat members have taken ahead the outcomes of problem tree analysis. A proper intervention plan was made for each identified issue and necessary actions were taken by the committee.

- The Bal Panchayat members have visited the community leaders and PRI members regularly and made them aware about the issues children face in the community regularly.
- The Bal Panchayat members have conducted regular meetings with school dropouts and SMC members to ensure the re-enrollment of children in school and counseling for the parents to send their children to school regularly.
- Regular sharing of child protection issues with the VCPC members and discussions on the support required from them and from other village institutions.

Initiatives of Bal Panchayat :

1. In one of Bal Panchayat meetings, the children came across a very young child working with parents in pottery work. The children have learned that any child below the age of 14 can not be made to work. Two of the committee members have inquired about the fact with the child and realized that she is enrolled in school but can not go alone. She attends school sporadically and works with her parents otherwise. The Bal Panchayat members brought in VCPC members to counsel the parents and ensure that the child does not work and goes to school regularly. Constant follow ups were also done so that the child does not go to work again.
2. There were children in the community who had left school because they weren't interested or had issues in the family. Such children were counselled along with the family members and 3 children were enrolled in school by Bal Panchayat members.
3. While digging for more information on the issue of school dropouts, it was found that children had to travel 8 to 9 kms everyday to attend higher secondary school. Only a few households can afford to pay for transportation. A survey was conducted by the Bal Panchayat members to list down the children who have dropped school due to the lack of transportation facilities. The survey has helped to identify children in the community who can be supported. An application was submitted to the Education Dept to check the possibilities of arranging transportation.
4. In March 2022, the Bal panchayat members prepared a street play on eliminating gender discrimination. The Bal Panchayat members performed the play in all 4 villages with support from the VCPC members and local community leaders.
5. The Bal Panchayat members, as part of an awareness building exercise in the community, have selected some common places and written slogans on the importance of education, child rights, Importance of mother in life of child, the role of Bal Panchayat etc.
6. The children visited the village Panchayat and also met the Sarpanch. The objective of the visit was to understand the role of the village panchayats and also discuss the support that is required from village head for identified child protection issues. One of the Bal Panchayat members expressed the need for more safety for children and women around the local liquor shops in the village. It was shared that the children are afraid of passing by these shops as they find a lot of inebriated people sitting around. This was presented as a child protection issue with an ask for support from the village panchayat.
7. In a major initiative, the Bal Panchayat members attended a meeting with the District Collectorate of Chhotaudepur. They presented the current child protection issues in the community and what is expected as support from government functionaries. They had also shared the issues faced by Bal Panchayat in carrying out activities in villages and how they are supported by the VCPC members and community leaders. The Collectorate was impressed by the confidence displayed by the children in presenting and advocating for their issues.

Challenges faced by Bal Panchayat members:

1. Due to the Covid pandemic, children could not come together at any common place for a year which has resulted in lesser impact of Bal Panchayat's efforts in the community.
2. Some children cannot attend regular Bal Panchayat meetings because of school timings. The Bal Panchayat has addressed this issue by organizing meetings on weekends or in the evenings.
3. Many members of Bal Panchayat have to move to Ashram Shalas for further education and every year new members need to be replaced. This needs reformation and constant capacity building of new members.

Support provided to the Bal Panchayat

The Deepak Foundation and Miracle foundation teams and the VCPC members have supported the Bal Panchayat on the following aspects:

1. Support in planning monthly visits;
2. Addressing identified issues related to child protection and child rights;
3. Support in planning and organizing the community events;
4. Ideas for awareness programmes, street plays and other initiatives; and
5. Advocacy of child protection issues at various platforms.

Learnings and reflections:

1. The Bal Panchayat members have a very basic understanding on how to function. They are currently being supported/guided by the WCPC/community volunteers/DF team/Miracle team to take the lead and conduct meetings.
2. In the monthly meeting, every Bal Panchayat member participated actively in the discussion and planning of future actions. Everyone shared their views and opinions very confidently.
3. Every Bal Panchayat member had clarity about the issues related to child rights and child protection. This was noticed during the preparation of the action plan.
4. The Bal Panchayat members said their confidence levels were significantly better after performing street plays in the community.
5. After the leadership training the participants understood the importance of optimum use of available resources while working for safeguarding child rights and child protection in the community. The confidence level of the Bal Panchayat has increased.
6. It was observed that participating Bal Panchayat members work together, taking help and support from other team members.
7. It was observed that the Bal Panchayat members have the potential to work on community issues. We need to create such platforms so that they can express their thoughts and experiences.
8. The synergy between the VCPC and Bal Panchayat is key to addressing the child protection issues in the community.

Voices/testimonials from the Bal Panchayat children

“I got to know that one of my friends had dropped out of school and was helping her parents in farm work. I met her parents again and again and explained to them the importance of education, especially for girls. Initially they resisted but eventually they agreed to send her daughter back to school. My friend finally got re-enrolled!”

Bhavna,
Bal Panchayat member, Moti Dumali village

“I got support from the Bal Panchayat members to overcome my fear and nowadays I can face the darkness in the night freely.”

Ankit,
Bal Panchayat member, Dumali village

Way Forward:

Children have started work by using the Bal Panchayat as a platform. The areas of opportunity are:

- Gain knowledge on the UNCRC and child protection issues in the context of their region.
- Know more on how to run a Bal Panchayat:
 1. How to organize elections;
 2. Basic norms and principles for members and candidates;
 3. The process of electing good leaders through a gender-balance approach;
 4. Organizing meetings to reflect on child protection issues and ensuring participation
 5. Generating community-based solutions with the help of village institutions and community engagement.
- Coordinations for the activities; and
- How to prepare annual action plans and review the plans.

Abbreviations:

VCPC: Village Child Protection Committee

BP: Bal Panchayat

CP: Child Protection

CR: Child Rights

DF: Deepak Foundation

FGDs: Focus Group Discussion

PRA: Participatory Rural Appraisal

SMC: School Management Committee

PRI: Panchayati Raj Institutions

ICDS: Integrated Child Development Services

UNCRC: United Nations Child Rights Convention

MFI: Miracle Foundation India