

Bal Panchayat, Maharashtra Process Document

*A loving family
for every child*



Background of the project and reason for formation:

Ramnagar, Warje Malwadi is a locality in Taluka Haveli, Pune City. The area was selected to implement the pilot project on demonstrating a scalable and replicable pilot model of family strengthening and activating community networks in selected sites (slums and villages) in the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat. The ultimate aim of the project is to prevent children from separating from their families by activating gatekeeping mechanisms. Under the joint partnership programme “A loving family for every child” between UNICEF, Miracle Foundation India and the Department of Women and Child Development (Government of Maharashtra), Deepak Foundation was identified as an implementing organisation. In this pilot project, the area covers 1190 households with a population of approximately 6500 in 5 clusters: Mahatma Phule Chowk, Tuljabhavani Chowk, Bharat Mata Mitra Mandal, Annabhau Sathe Chowk and Khan Vasti.

As per the situational analysis at the beginning of the project and while implementing the project, many opportunities to make the community a safe and thriving place for children have been identified. Children showed a lack of good habits. They are left alone at home all day; there is no one to look after them when the parents go to work. The dropout rate is high and there is truancy. They go to school but do not actually attend classes. In many cases, the parents are not aware about their children’s educational performance.

Children would imitate older children and often adopt addictive habits. The community as a whole was practicing poor personal hygiene. Discrimination between boys and girls is common and older girls drop out of school after the seventh grade to take care of younger siblings. Poor economic conditions also affect the education of the children.

The formation of a Bal Panchayat at the local level was a suggestion that came from the community to ensure the child participation in each process – something that impacts child protection over time.

Rationale

Child participation is an important component under the project with an objective of strengthening the overall role of the Bal Panchayat, deepening children’s involvement in activating child rights and addressing protection issues in the community. The 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 elicit their attention and action on issues that concern them.

During initial visits, issues such as child marriage, low literacy rate, school dropouts, neglect, abuse etc. were observed in the area. During the Focussed Group Discussions (FGDs), many of the community members said that school dropouts, neglect by parents, domestic violence, alcohol consumption, tobacco consumption etc. are the issues of concern in the community. During interviews with local leaders and gatekeepers, it was found that early marriages in certain pockets of community happen as well.

In visits with families, villages, PRI members, Sarpanch, and SMCs, it was found that representation of children was missing in the community. Neither the parents nor the school authorities were sensitized enough to see children’s perspectives. To bring child protection issues to the surface, and include voices of children in community development, a Bal Panchayat was formed in Ramnagar.

Objective of the Bal Panchayat:

- To ensure participation of children in the decision-making process on issues that are affecting them leading to 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 childrens' leadership skills so they can become the voice for other children and become better citizens.
- To identify families and children at risk through this platform.
- To address the child right issues such as negligence, exploitation, child abuse, school dropouts, child labour and mapping issues related to child protection so that timely and proper action can be taken.

Steps taken for formation of Bal Panchayat:

The entire journey of setting up the Bal Panchayat has been an enriching learning experience. Before the Covid period, the Bal Panchayat was formed by asking children willingly to participate. Many children accepted the roles as it was seen as a leadership role. But when they were oriented about their roles and responsibilities and what is expected from them as a Bal Panchayat Member (for instance, being present in the monthly meetings, working on community issues, etc.) many members stepped back. Others migrated during the Covid period and the Bal Panchayat became defunct. Considering the gaps in the formation of the group, the reformation of the group took place after the lockdown ended. The following steps show how the formation happened:

1. Awareness among the community and children about the need for Bal Panchayat:

It was evident that until people understand the need, they do not take any measure or ownership. The Deepak Foundation team started working with adults to reach out to children in the community. The children were brought together to brainstorm and understand their situation in the community including issues that they face in the community which has an impact on their life. A series of awareness sessions with various games and activities were organized in the community to ensure that the children understand their issues and accept them as issues.

To ensure that the children and adults keep working around the issues of child protection, regular interactions were maintained with the community and children. Various stakeholders like Corporators, teachers, ANMs, the Asha worker, the Anganwadi worker, community leaders, WCPC members and PRIs were involved in different activities. Around 20 volunteers were also identified under the project who supported the entire process from time to time.

2. Formation process of the Bal Panchayat:

During the initial discussion about forming a group, some motivating factors were: coming together for a good cause, the importance of the group to resolve the issues together, and to get to know children better. A training on the process of Bal Panchayat formation was given to the children in the community. After the training, some children came up with a plan on how to form the Bal Panchayat. The Deepak Foundation team provided additional guidance.

The selection of Bal Panchayat members was done in a democratic way. An entire election process was developed and run by the children to ensure that each child got an opportunity to share his/her/their view and vote in favour of an appropriate candidate. The entire process was led by the children from the community under the guidance of adults. And thus the Bal Panchayat with elected members was formed.

After the elections, the process of allocation of the responsibilities took place on the basis of the votes received to the members and their area of interest. Then, within the selected group members, a voting process took place to form a core committee and allocation of responsibilities such as education, entertainment, health, and a Chief Minister.

3. Norming stage of Bal Panchayat:

The Bal Panchayat also decided on a few common norms to run things effectively.

- Children in the age group of 10 to 18 years will be selected as child representatives.
- Elections will be held every two years.
- Children's problems will be discussed with the community/ward Corporators
- Visits to be organised with parents of children who do not go to school to convince them of the importance of schooling.
- Information about out-of-school children in the neighborhood will be given to school teachers.
- The community level activities/programmes can also be done through Bal Panchayats to increase the children's confidence, develop leadership qualities and make them aware of social issues by informing them about the activities of Bal Panchayats.



Capacity building of the Bal Panchayat:

- Capacity building sessions were conducted on understanding roles and responsibilities with Bal Panchayat members by Deepak Foundation Team, Miracle foundation Team and Leher.
- The members were also given guidance on how to take up child rights and child protection issues which they feel are important and supported with the possible solutions. Bal Panchayat members have also attended WIFA sessions (to combat Covid) and take their learning with other children of the community.
- A leadership training workshop on child rights was facilitated by Mr. Santosh Shinde from Vidhayak Bharati. During this training, the children learned about characteristics of a leader, the role of leader, how to advocate etc.
- A series of training sessions were organized for the children to understand child rights and child protection issues in the community. The children have understood the problems that were evidently present in the community but never talked about.

- An exposure visit to a child-friendly police station at Warje Malwadi has been organized. The objective behind the exposure visit was to reduce the fear of police and to develop friendly relations between the police and children. This has helped to ensure that the children understand what is the role of the police in child protection and whom to approach when such issues are found in the community. This has helped the children to see the police as a positive and approachable group of people so that they can openly express themselves with the police without any hesitation.
- A group of 27 representatives from the DCPUs of 27 Districts of Maharashtra visited the Ramnagar community to understand the functioning of the WCPC, Bal Panchayat and community volunteers. There was a fruitful interaction among the Bal Panchayat members and DCPU team. The Bal Panchayat members were motivated and inspired to work more effectively after the facilitation of their work and efforts from the DCPU team.
- Bal Panchayat members (WCPC child representatives) shared their roles and responsibilities and community-level initiatives with the State Child Protection and Child Rights Commission Chairperson.

4. Performing stage of the Bal Panchayat:

The Bal Panchayat was formed in July 2020. The Deepak Foundation team had supported the Bal Panchayat initially to facilitate the meetings and discussions of issues affecting children in the community. The children were given an opportunity to discuss and share their ideas to address these issues. That has helped them become confident as children's representatives and also broadened their perspectives. Children started meeting regularly every month and maintaining a register as well.

- Problem tree analysis: A problem tree analysis activity (reference: Leher) was conducted with Bal Panchayat members. The participants discussed the various problems in the community and decided to analyze child labour as an issue. They drew a tree on chart paper. At the trunks they wrote down issues like child labour, and at roots, they mentioned causes of child labour. At the branches they wrote solutions for the issue. All Bal Panchayat members discussed the chart and learned to analyze the problem.
- Roles and responsibilities of Bal Panchayat members: The Deepak Foundation and Miracle Foundation India teams had already shared roles and responsibilities of Bal Panchayat members but as per need, the topic was revised. They were also suggested how to raise a child-related issue in the monthly as well as the WCPC meetings.
- The Bal Panchayat's activities: The monthly meeting is planned with specific agendas wherein the group members prepare action points. Necessary follow ups are also conducted by responsible members every month or as and when needed.

● Initiatives and interventions of the Bal Panchayat for children in community

Community level

1. Bal Panchayat members conducted a street play highlighting child protection and child rights issues like addiction, child labour and bullying on the occasion of the local Ganapati festival in two areas of the community in the presence of the WCPC members.



2. The members of Bal Panchayat finished a community mapping exercise to find hotspot areas. The objective was to know which spaces are considered to be unsafe for children. In the leadership training, children were asked about the places they fear while going to and returning from school. The idea was to work on areas that cause insecurity to children. They were told to write those areas down on the chart and the reason why they feel scared in such places.



3. Bal Panchayat members are working on the issue of school dropouts. They have already completed a survey of school dropouts in the community with support from volunteers and have identified 28 such children.

In coordination with the WCPC, the Bal Panchayat members are generating awareness about education among the children and their parents now. Also, the Bal Panchayat is working on enrollment of all the dropouts. Out of the total 28 dropouts, five children have been enrolled in primary school.



4. Children have taken the initiative to organize a Bal Melava (a children's fair) to engage children during the summer holidays. They also organized some games such as goal setting, drawings on child rights, and balloon games. In the Melava, a total 97 children (50 girls and 47 boys) participated. Apart from children, 3 WCPC members and 20 community members also participated in the Melava.

5. The Bal Panchayat members are running two study groups in the Ram Nagar community to support children's education.

6. During the Covid period, Bal Panchayat members prepared awareness posters about social distancing, wearing masks, staying at home and information on the pandemic. The posters were pasted at common areas where footfall is high to spread awareness as well as support families to take care of their health.

7. The Bal Panchayat visited the local Traffic Police station:



8. As the Bal Panchayat had already planned a month-wise annual action plan; they decided in the April monthly meeting to give a letter to the traffic police for the traffic problems on the way to school. Children have to walk on the busy road on the way to their school. On the 28th April 2022, children visited the traffic police station and gave a letter to the concerned department. Police officers gave an assurance to children that they will take action on the issue flagged as soon as possible.

Challenges faced by the Bal Panchayat & team

- Due to the Covid situation, children could not come together at any common place for a year which lessened their overall impact in the community.
- Due to different timings of schools, all the members could not attend the meetings regularly or collectively participate in the initiatives. To address this concern, evening and weekend meetings/events are being planned.
- The children of the community migrate to other locations seasonally which makes it difficult for the Bal Panchayat to address their issues and concerns along with education.

Support provided to the Bal Panchayat by adults i.e. W/VCPC members, Deepak Foundation and Miracle Foundation India

- Support in planning monthly meetings.
- Address identified issues related to child care and protection by children,
- Support from the WCPC committee members in critical cases and events such as the Bal Melava, Covid awareness, poster making, street play etc.
- The school head master provides support to the Bal panchayat for awareness programmes and the children's study group.

Learnings and Reflections

- The first Bal Panchayat failed because the members' expectations were different from what is actually required from them. When we re-started the process, we first made sure all children understood the aims and objectives of the Bal Panchayat as well as what would be expected from them as members.
- Bal Panchayat members have a very basic understanding of how to function as a group. Presently they are being supported/guided by the WCPC/community volunteers/Deepak Foundation team/Miracle Foundation India team to take the lead and conduct meetings which ensures self reliance.
- In the monthly meetings, every Bal Panchayat member participates actively in the discussion and planning of future actions. Everyone shares their views and opinions quite confidently.
- Every Bal Panchayat member has clarity about the issues related to child rights and child protection. This was noticed during the preparation of the action plan.
- The Bal Panchayat members shared their experience about improvement in the level of confidence after performing street plays in the community.
- The Bal Panchayat children are very enthusiastic overall.
- After the leadership training, the participants understood the importance of optimum use of available resources while working for safeguarding child rights and child protection.

- It was observed that Bal Panchayat members work together, taking help and support from each other.
- It was observed that the Bal Panchayat members have the potential to work on children's issues in depth. We need such platforms so that they can express their thoughts and experiences.
- During the feedback of leadership training from children, they were given chits and asked to write their feedback. A feedback tree was drawn by the children on a chart and the chits were pasted on that chart.

Voices/testimonials from the Bal Panchayat children

Being a Bal Panchayat member, I feel proud and happy to attend the monthly meetings. We enjoy the games conducted during the meetings. We also get a chance to interact with the other children of the community.

- Kartik (Bal Panchayat member)

It was a great experience meeting with the children of the committee from the Bal Sangharsh Sangathan, Mumbai. I was inspired to work for our community's children. I got lots of ideas to work on child protection.

-Sanchita Mhaske, Bal Panchayat member

After the leadership training my confidence has increased and I am good with stage performances. I am not afraid to present my points/views. It was felt that now we strongly believe in unity and teamwork.

- Bal Panchayat member

Way Forward/Next actions:

- Implementing the annual activity plan that was prepared by the Bal Panchayat.
- Awareness programme on the Bal Panchayat, on child marriage, child labour, the school dropout issue, and health and hygiene. This will include street plays, posters making, and rallies.
- Initiatives such as a school dropout children survey.
- The Bal Panchayat members will conduct a 2 days WASH training session with the community children.
- Activation of study groups in the community.

Photo Gallery:

The occasion of Ganesh festival, Bal panchayat members performed street plays at two places in Ramnagar, and conducted awareness on Child labour, Addiction and Bullying.



Bal Panchayat members performing a street play at the local Ganesh festival



Exposure visit to a child-friendly Police Station – Warje Malwadi, Pune – for the Bal Panchayat team.



Interactive session with Master trainers and Bal Panchayat members,



Bal Panchayat member (WCPC child representatives) interacting with the SCPCRC chairperson. Members shared their roles and responsibilities and community-level initiatives.



Bal Panchayat Elections 2021, Ramnagar Pune

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