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A big initiative for the little ones

Kalangari Villakam has been raising pertinent issues related to rehabilitation and long-term development of the district. In its twelfth issue in the editorial it brought the focus on children who lost either, or both parents to the tsunami, and the mechanisms for ensuring the welfare and protection of these children. It asked whether it was not the time that we all got together to take a fresh look at the plight of these children. As recent developments in the children's sector in Nagapattinam show, this question is being answered.

The registration of the Child Secretariat in May 2007 is a first step at institutionalizing the collaborative approach in working on child related issues. While in the past few months the children's core group has been able to provide support within the sector, this has largely been at the micro-level. As a legal body with wide representation of NGOs, and recognition and support of the district administration and donors, the potential of the Child Secretariat to address issues across the district at policy level is immense. The stakeholders involved in this building initiative have truly "all got together to take a fresh look" at children's issues.

The seed has now been sown and how the tree will grow and the fruits it will produce will depend on the care and nurturing that we are able to provide it. And that is the first challenge that lies before us. The pertinent questions now are how can we need to make this initiative work? How can we build a strong institution that represents all children and agencies working with children? How do we identify, prioritise and address the broader issues on child rights and protection? Can we ensure that children are not only recipients but also participants in the functioning of the body? How do we pitch our voices to create a single voice that speaks for the welfare of all children across Nagapattinam district? As the days go by and we see how the Child Secretariat is able to function, these questions will get addressed. Till then, we wish it all the very best!

This issue of Kalangarai Villakam is a special issue on Children ■

The Child Secretariat: Fortifying our commitment towards children's welfare

In May 2007 the Child Secretariat was established in Nagapattinam. This is a landmark in the child related initiatives in Nagapattinam district. It is the logical progression of the Children Core Group, an initiative at coordination and networking between NGOs working on children's issues in the district. This article traces the formation of the Children's Core Group and its movement to a legal registered body.



advocacy. A Children's Core Group (CCG) was formed to move this idea forward and to manage the funds left over from the Children's Day celebrations.

NCRC coordinated the CCG, which began to meet regularly to discuss and address issues related to children.

Key issues taken up by the Children's Core group

- Dissemination of Information – GOs related to education – GOs 33 and the 127 & 248 through posters and handouts. This activity contributed towards enabling the community to realize their entitlements and reducing drop-outs
- Education assistance to deserving children from the balance fund. 307 dalit and tribal children have been provided educational and medical support through the child welfare fund.
- Conducting a study on the children who have lost either, or both parents to the tsunami, to identify area for implementation

Ever since the tsunami, there has been a focus on the children of Nagapattinam district. This is one of the groups most vulnerable in a disaster. Many children lost their lives in the tsunami, and those who survived have been scarred for life.

Many children lost one or both of their parents in the tsunami and were moved in with other family, or to orphanages. Those whose families had lost their shelters were uprooted to temporary shelters. They had to deal with the death of, or part ways with a loved one, a friend, a relative. Normal life and education was disrupted.

Through its child sector focus NCRC was involved in information dissemination and advocacy support for children's welfare

In October, 2006 NCRC proposed a plan to celebrate the Children's day as a mega event, bring together all the affected children. The district administration and many NGOs wholeheartedly supported the idea. A steering committee of NGOs was formed to coordinate the event.

The event was a big success (refer Kalangaria Villakam #3). The process of working together and putting the event together for the children made the NGOs realize that the issues of children were common across the district and that by working together they could address many more operational issues and also contribute towards policy and



- Contribution towards drafting guidelines for the children in Institutional care Centers and in the villages
- Influencing election manifesto by meeting with all party candidates before Assembly Election and appraising them of children's issues. This was followed by meeting the winning candidates at the taluk levels
- Supporting the children excluded from beneficiary lists to get included
- Conducting Meetings & workshops on Child Rights / Child Protection

As NCRC's closure was imminent, given that the coordination requirements were coming down as the communities were being rehabilitated, the CCG had to take a decision on its own future. Once NCRC phased out who would take the ownership to coordinate the group? In the absence of a coordinator could the group sustain? Would the priorities of individual organization take precedence over group functioning? Were all the members committed to work together in the long-term? How would the group grow and fund its activities?

These issues were debated by the group and a consensus developed that if the NGOs were committed to work for the welfare of all children and saw themselves as long-term service providers in the district, then they would need to work together, within a formal, professional platform. The CCG decided to register a body, the Child Secretariat. The district administration saw merit in this move and assured all support towards this endeavour.

On 15 May, 2007 the child secretariat was registered under the societies act.

The Child Secretariat will coordinate with the District administration, NGOs, Elected panchayatars, and children group's federations. It will function within the guidelines of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. ■



Vision

Create a Child Friendly District where child hood is the right of every child and all children are ensured about their rights and enjoy a happy child hood.

Mission

Promote child protection policies and practices amongst stakeholders and children for ensuring the overall development of all children.

Objectives

1. To provide a platform for all the NGOs working in the children sector in the district of Nagapattinam, to come together and address the issues related to children.
2. To advocate for policy level interventions in the district, based on information on the status of children collected through comprehensive field studies.
3. To support and strengthen the smooth functioning of existing mechanism for child protection such as the Child Line, Village Watch Dog Committees and Child Welfare Committee etc.
4. To build the capacity of stakeholders in identifying and addressing issues related to children.
5. To start a district level resource centre, which will provide all available IEC materials etc. for all stakeholders.

Impressions

Sr. Mercy of Good Shepard, who is the President of the Child Secretariat; and Mr. Ashok of the Leonard Cheshire International, who is the Joint Secretary of the Child Secretariat, spoke to Klangaria Villakam on the evolution and future of the CS. Given here are some excerpts of the interview...



SR. MERCY

On the genesis of networking...

The Children's day event of 2006 was a form to interact with other NGOs and get involved in activities for children on a wider scale.

Good Shepard saw this as a platform to work with others towards a common cause.

Usually in such events organisations come together and after the event they disperse. In the case of the Children's day event there were funds that had been unspent and NCRC called us for a meeting on how these funds should be used. When we met we felt that together we could come up with many ideas to help children. We decided to open a bank account for the funds. There were formalities required on how we would do this. The steering group, formed to manage the event was already there, so we decided to convert this group into the Children's Core Group

On ideating the Child Secretariat...

In mid-2006 we realized that NCRC would soon be closing and this pushed us to think of options for the sustainability of the group.

When we were deciding the future of the CCG, UNICEF asked us to visit CLPOA, a network of NGOs and the government that worked on children's issues in Kolkata. Our Kolkata exposure visit to CLPOA was very interesting and gave us the conviction and confidence that the Child Secretariat was needed in Nagapattinam. This was a successful public-private partnership programme that was able to address many needs of children. We realised that similar things could be done here. There were many issues in Nagapattinam that needed to be addressed and only a formal body, recognized by

the government would be able to provide the platform to discuss and take action.

On the advantages of a Child Secretariat...

I think the idea to have a Child Secretariat was a very good idea since, individually all NGOs have limitation on the geographic and operational areas of operations. But the needs of the children are not based on the work the NGOs in their area do. For instance, health care is an important requirement for children, but very few NGOs work in this area. As a formal body we can coordinate support in such areas. The CCG also worked well in this regard. NGOs at the meetings were able to look beyond their individual programmes since they knew that support from others in the group was possible.

On working, not only for, but with children...

In the CCG we began involving children. The children's parliament was functioning well in Nagapattinam and the capacities of



elder children were being built to identify and focus attention on their issues. As a group working on issues related to children's welfare we could not ignore the contribution that the children themselves could make towards children's welfare. The CS is still very new and its members are only NGOs. But we will need to bring the children's opinions and perceptions on board through different mechanisms.

On the future...

In Nagapattinam we look forward that all NGOs working with children will participate, work together to identify and address children's issues. We also look forward to contributing to the sector at a state and national level.



MR. ASHOK

On LCI's involvement...

LCI seek to mainstream the disabled. This is possible only when we are able to work with other organizations and the government. We were looking for an entry point to work with others and the functioning of the core group impressed us.

They were concerned with child welfare, had begun looking at issues on child right's and protection, provided support to needy children and were open to bringing a broad range of issues on board.

It would also be a symbiotic relationship. For us it was important that a network like the CCG ensure that issues of the disabled are included in their agenda. For the CCG, our participation would make a difference since we would be able to better articulate the special needs and our presence would make a difference when issues related to disabled children were deliberated at external forums.

At a more operation level when disabled children participated in events like the children's day, anti-child labour day, they got an opportunity to come into the limelight and interact with other children. The other child were also sensetised to the needs of the disabled.

On working with the administration...

Our experience of working with the district administration has been quite smooth. Dr. Radhakrishnan (former-Collector, Nagapattinam) perceived the Children's Day event as an important mark of the 1st year of the tsunami. He was very supportive of this and other initiatives. Now with its registration, the CS has received recognition and backing of the top level officials in the administration. The Collector, Mr. Jawahar S. Tenkasi has agreed to be the ex-officio Chairman of the Child Secretariat. This will be very helpful in enabling us to access different kinds of support.

On the challenges...

Networking, despite all its positives, is always a challenge. Keeping all organisations together, towards a common purpose will be a challenge. For the organisations, their agenda will always be the priority. To align the individual agenda to a common one will require discussion and patience. We will need to find ways to bridge the difference and balance all interests. It may seem difficult, but it is possible since we are all finally committed to welfare of children.

On the future ...



The platform has now been laid. The future depends on the perception and commitment of the members of the CS. We need to finalise our plan of action and work as a professional body. We have recently been engaging in organization development exercises that have started with us reflecting on goals, objectives, priorities, immediate plans, etc. The facilitation, provided by Mr. Raghunathan of Catalyst Management Services Pvt. Ltd. and supported by NCRC has given us clarity for what we are going to do in the near future...for the next six months to a year. As we move forward we will little by little we will develop our long-terms plans and strategies. ■

NGO profile - SNEHA

SNEHA with its vision to empower fisher people has been working with fishing community since 1984 to help them access sustainable livelihood and basic rights. It works in Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu and Karaikkal district of Pondicherry. SNEHA'S work gained momentum in the last several years due to the changes in the macro economic policy in the fishing sector. SNEHA is facilitating the processes of empowerment through trainings, information dissemination, enabling participation in decision-making, intervention through legal aid, creating awareness through literacy, involving in participatory researches, mobilising support through advocacy and lobbying. In addition to the initiatives, Sneha renders support for people's struggles, working with progressive democratic organisations, forums, and networking at national and international levels to transcend the micro level issue to the macro level policy.

SNEHA has also facilitated the formation of Community Based Organisations. The main focus of SNEHA is been women and children. Women Sangams, Self Help Groups, Taluk and District Level Federations were promoted for empowerment of women. Facilitation of cooperatives at village level is one of its major activities and it is currently poised for a Multi state Women Cooperatives for accessing credit for sustainable livelihood propositions.

SNEHA supports children through forming them into children groups, children panchayat, children assembly and their convergence to the children parliament.

SNEHA is continuously campaigning for eradication of child labour, environmental concerns, gender sensitisation, sectoral concerns of fishermen communities...etc. The sangams and federation have addressed various gender, sectoral, environmental and child rights issues at various levels.

Services rendered to Children:

1. Material assistance (like note books, School bags, Learning Materials etc.)

2. Other services (like psychosocial support, tuition centres, day care centres, ICDS, residential care, formation of clubs, parliament, balwadi etc)
3. Infrastructure facilities built (like balwadi, tuition centres, school building, residential care homes, play schools, children parks etc)
4. Children's Activity Centres

Achievements:

SNEHA has contributed to improved Child Rights & Gender Perspectives among the community members and children, including the issues of child rights violations in schools and community. It has formed and supports the functioning of 105 children panchayats with 5250 children in 51 villages and 65 adolescent children groups with 1900 adolescent girls in 51 villages. It has created separate space where children can play, study and share their problems. ■

Panneer Selvam had a tough decision to make. His family wanted his elder sister to get married, but they did not have enough money for the occasion. His family asked him to leave school and go for fishing to earn money. After the tsunami destroyed his house and compelled him to move to a temporary shelter with his family, it was his schooling and friends in the 7th Standard that kept him going. But his family was also important and in the end he decided to quit school.

For the two year that went fishing he attended a supplementary school conducted by SNEHA. He earned enough to get his sister married and was able to keep in touch with studies.

After the marriage he expressed his willingness to complete his education. SNEHA helped Panneer Selvam join the 8th standard under SSA and thereafter supported him in getting admission in higher school. He is now studying well, but still finds it difficult to meet the expenses.

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, 2000

The JJ Act seeks to consolidate and modify the law relating to juveniles in conflict with the law and children in need of care and protection. It draws from the Constitution of India – Art 315, 39, 45 and 47, the UN Convention on the rights of the child – 1989, the Beijing Rules – 1985, and the Riyadh guidelines – 1990.

The Act recognizes children as right holders. It prohibits imprisonment under all conditions and focuses on care and protection rather than imprisonment. It provides for proper care, protection and treatment by catering to their development needs, and by adopting a child-friendly approach in the adjudication and disposition of matters in the best interest of children and for their ultimate rehabilitation. This could be through various institutions (Government or NGO) established/recognized under this enactment or through non institutional services such as adoption, foster care, and sponsorship. It ensures differential procedures and institutions to deal with children in conflict with the law and children in need of care and protection.

An attempt has been made through this enactment to make up for the lacunae in the existing adoption laws by permitting persons belonging to all religions to adopt.

The act also gives wider roles to NGOs, lays down the roles of local governments and provides for the creation of a children's fund.

Since this Act relates to children in need of care and protection, it is relevant to the tsunami affected children of Nagapattinam and NGOs working with children need to understand the Act and its implication, the Child Secretariat, with support from NCRC has been conducting workshops to spread awareness on the Act. ■

Source: Presentation by Ms. Girija, resource person for the workshops conducted by CSt and www.csa.org.in

Studying Children's Needs

The first steps of the Children's Core Group, now registered as the Child Secretariat (CSt) is to understand the issues of children at the district level and prioritise areas of intervention. This is being done through a few studies. These include a study on status of children who lost either, or both parents to the tsunami, and study on child headed households.

The purpose of the study of the children who lost either, or both parents to the tsunami in Nagapattinam is exploratory, to understand the profile of these children, the change in status of the children after the tsunami so as to assess needs that the CSt could focus on. It would provide pointers for intervention, advocacy and guidelines for future. A pilot was conducted to get a brief of the issues. The pilot covered 58 children and a children's meet was organised to bring children and gently discuss issues, ensuring that all issues were handled with sensitivity. Some salient points emerging from the pilot:

Nearly 64% of the children reported some problem related to their current place of stay. These problems related to guardians, emotional breakdown and reduced concentration in studying, lack of facilities and safety in the temporary shelters. Some issues regarding accessibility to education, quality of teaching and lack of water facilities were also shared. However, given the limited scope of this study these issues would need to be explored in greater detail.

Areas of support that has emerged from the preliminary survey, is developing a community/habitation level institutional mechanism to monitor the status of children and to report to various agencies to enable better environment and effective interventions for affected children.

The study on child headed households would understand the specific needs of these children.

These studies will enable the CSt and all others working with children in the district to prioritise interventions. ■

Resources on children



The State of the World's Children 2007: Women and Children – the double dividend of gender equality examines the discrimination and disempowerment women face throughout their lives - and outlines what must be done to eliminate gender discrimination and empower women and girls. The report argues that investment in women's rights will ultimately produce a double dividend: advancing the rights of both women and children.

There is also a pocket-sized Executive Summary that provides an overview of the report, and includes summary indicators that provide economic and social data on all of the world's regions

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The “**Knowledge Community on Children in India**” (KCCI) is an initiative spearheaded by UNICEF India that aims to promote information-sharing on policies and programmes related to children in India.

In partnership with the Government of India, UNICEF seeks to fill gaps in the knowledge base in terms of implementing successful programmes for children – that is, to answer the basic questions of “what works?” and “what could be improved?”. Ultimately, the goal of the KCCI initiative is to learn lessons from the field in order to improve programming and eventually influence policies related to children.

As part of this programme, the KCCI website aims to be a dynamic, up to date repository of evidence based research in the form of case studies, research papers, articles, on policies and programmes related to the development of women and children. The content of the KCCI website is managed by eSocialSciences (eSS), a broad-based, multidisciplinary social sciences and humanities portal. URL: www.kcci.org.in