



TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN:
A community's journey...

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DATE OF PUBLICATION

December 2016

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Leher would like to express its gratitude to a few people without whom this work in communities would not have been possible.

We thank Ashley Menezes, Bapi and Suchira Nag, and Kunal Shroff for their belief in our work, and their generous contributions to support the initiative in Madhubani.

We express our thanks to Dr. Abhiroop Mukhopadhyay from the Indian Statistical Institute for his advice and inputs on data and analysis. We are grateful to Aniruddha Kulkarni from UNICEF for his guidance and support in conceptualizing the program, his thoughts and regular feedback on our work. Leher expresses its gratitude to Pradeep Narayanan from PRAXIS: Institute of Participatory Practices for mentoring the Leher team, and for building our capacity on participatory processes.

We thank experts from the sector: Dr. Bharti Sharma, Enakshi Ganguly Thukral from HAQ: Centre for Child Rights, Tannistha Datta, Vandhana Kandhari and Ved Prakash Gautam from UNICEF for their feedback, encouragement and support.

We are grateful to the District Magistrate (DM) of Madhubani, Girbar Dayal Singh for his guidance in developing the programme. We express our admiration and gratitude to Sarvo Prayas Santhan, Nirmala, the Director, and the team: Abhishek Chandra, Anil Kumar Singh, Basuki Nath Mahto, Kamla Kumari, Neelam Kumari, Pramod Lal Safi, Sadhana Singh and Shakuntala Kumari for their tireless efforts and commitment.

PREFACE

In 2012, after working with Childline India, for more than a decade each, we (Kajol and Nicole) began to contemplate a change in our careers. The Government of India adopted Childline1098 as the nation's emergency outreach helpline service for children in distress, and was going to support its expansion to all districts of the country.

A civil society developed model of providing emergency services to children, had successfully brought together hundreds of NGOs in the country in partnership with the government at all levels, and leveraged the telecom revolution, to provide a uniform branded emergency helpline service to children. It was the vision of the founders of Childline, and we worked to achieve this milestone, with dogged determination and perseverance.

The experiences in Childline made us want to think more comprehensively about child protection. At the time, Childline was responding to two million calls a year, with very significant interventions for children who were in trouble. It was estimated that the service coverage in about 100 cities responded to about one percent of the population of children in the country. Yet, from this small percentage of children, thousands were falling out of family and community safety nets, requiring emergency help. It was clear that something was amiss at home, and in communities, where children live. There were other powerful reflections from experts working on child rights, which stayed with us: 'Child protection has no traction because nobody wants it, the state will deliver only when it is what the people want', 'Child protection does not have a brand or profile. It is not understood. It explains the lack of investment and political will around the issue', 'Both the problems and the solutions to violence, abuse and exploitation of children belong here to us, we need to own them and do something about it'.

Our experience shaping the emergency response service, while also, watching the juvenile justice system grow and gain strength, led us to strongly believe that the time has come for the State to accelerate its delivery of a system for preventing and protecting all children from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect.

The need is for a system to exist for all children: around families, neighborhoods and communities, active before signs of 'unprotected-ness' begin to show, which steps in at the first signs of risk or harm, responds, prevents children from falling out of family and community safety nets, secures, repairs and restores families and communities, helping them stay together and protect their children. Communities, families and children need to be key partners in protecting children, and driving the demand for child protection.

We asked ourselves, in a context where there is dearth of people and money for child protection, could families and communities be in part the answer to bridging some of the gaps? It is not just the responsibility of the State. Families and communities too must be responsible for keeping their children safe. It is instinctive to most people to want to protect children. Is there a way to harness this instinct, to bring the strengths of family, community, informal social protection networks, together with the formal systems of child protection and public social protection? Would it be possible to systematize and scale-up a community based initiative and integrate it into the child protection system? Could evidence be generated? Can change be measured? Would the State or anyone else adopt aspects of this work and support it on a long-term basis?

As we started our thinking, we learned that there was work on community based child protection mechanisms taking place both around us in India, and internationally. There was a lot of knowledge available, which we could learn from. The Juvenile Justice Act, and the Integrated Child Protection Scheme(ICPS) provide opportunities for leverage. ICPS began the discourse on the creation of a protective environment for children, and strengthening the capacity of families to care for their children. It promotes community based services, and establishes village, block and district level committees to promote and monitor child protection.

We had none of the answers to the questions raised, but felt a compelling need to try. We found support and guidance from experts from the sector, friends and family.

A few of our ex-colleagues, excited about developing a community based preventive child protection initiative, came on board as part of our founding team. In 2013, we set up Leher, a child rights organization, whose focus is on building and strengthening the preventive approach to child protection. We envision a society where caring families, alert communities and responsive governments come together to ensure the rights and protection of all children.

In 2014, Leher partnered with Sarvo Prayas Sansthan (SPS) to develop and implement a community based preventive child protection initiative in the district of Madhubani in Bihar. The program focuses on organizing and capacity building communities, to take self-driven initiative and to work in collaboration with the government to protect and keep their children safe. We adopt a participatory approach to the work in communities, encouraging them to set the agenda for issues they want to address. The position taken with communities is that this program does not bring the answers, but would instead hand hold communities through a journey of transformation, where we learn and find answers together from resources which, exist in the environment.

Through this work on child protection in communities, we are aiming to develop effective synergy between 'top-down' and the 'bottom-up' structures and approaches. Our theory of change is that sensitized, organized communities, equipped with appropriate knowledge and skills, would make efforts to keep their children safe from violence, abuse and exploitation, grow into key partners of the child protection system, shoulder their share of responsibility, and drive demand for service delivery and accountability for child protection from the State.

Into the third year of work in Madhubani, reaching out to 27 out of the 63 villages, we intend to cover over a 5-year period, our initial learning has been both challenging and encouraging. Communities take their time, they instinctively want to do better by their children. They gradually garner the will to question the status quo and change for their children. Communities can achieve results. Children have a key role to play in driving change, and they motivate adults in their communities to change. We have also learned that nurturing and capacity building the community mobilizers is a critical area of work, which requires the investment of time and resources. We admit that at this stage of the program, a lot of the initiative has been driven by Leher and SPS. In the next year, we aim to let go a lot more, and learn what extent of facilitation would be needed for communities to take the leadership role. We also want to undertake expansion within the district, and to a few more districts in the country to gain a critical mass of experiences, from which, possibly, a model could be distilled and offered for replication.

One of our biggest wins, we believe, has been our investment in the community process, in giving the time to communities to understand how to identify problems, break them down, take collective decisions, plan action, and follow-up. It enables systematic and logical functioning and keeps the community engaged and active. This approach to problem solving also enables communities to take stock, generate evidence, review their work, and revisit their plans in a cyclic manner. It facilitates healthy open communication, transparency and accountability among all involved.

We invite your attention to this report of almost three years of work. We take the opportunity to share some of our experiences and insights from this journey. We also ask you to think and raise questions with us, on how such initiatives could be scaled up nationally and made sustainable.

We express immense gratitude and thanks to our colleagues Tasha Koshi, Richa Nagaich, and Nipa Bhansali for their passion and belief in people, children's rights and social change, their thinking and imagination in developing the program, their support and mentoring to the team in Madhubani, their perseverance and patience with developing the system for documenting evidence and measuring change, and for taking great trouble to photograph and document compelling stories from the field.

Kajol Menon and Nicole Rangel Menezes

Founders of Leher

ABBREVIATIONS

AG	Adults Group/s
ANM	Auxillary Nurse Midwife
ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
AWC	Anganwadi Centre
AWW	Anganwadi Worker
BCPC	Block Child Protection Committee
CBCPM	Community based child protection mechanism
CG	Childrens Group/s
CM	Child marriage
CP	Child protection
CPC	Child Protection Committee
CWC	Child Welfare Committee
DCPC	District Child Protection Committee
DCPU	District Child Protection Unit
DM	District Magistrate
ICPS	Integrated Child Protection Scheme
MNREGS	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
SCPC	State Child Protection Committee
SCPS	State Child Protection Society
SHG	Women's Self Help Group
SMC	School Management Committee
SPS	Sarvo Prayas Sansthan
VCPC	Village Child Protection Committee/s



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Every child has a right to protection-to a safe and secure childhood. The Indian Constitution, the UNCRC, and existing laws in the country guarantee protection to children in India. The government has enacted many special laws, and policies for the safety and protection of children. India is also a signatory to several international treaties and conventions, that promote the rights and protection of children. In 2009, the Government of India introduced the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS),

Statistics on status of child protection

A government study on child abuse found that more than half the children interviewed had experienced some form of sexual abuse (MWCD study on child abuse 2007).

More than 10 million children work in some form of child labour (Census 2011).

More than 89,000 cases of crimes against children were registered in 2014 (NCRB 2014).

Child sex ratio declined from 927 girls per 1000 boys in 2001 to 914 in 2011 (Census 2011).

In 2012, 9500 children and adolescents were killed in India, making India the 3rd largest contributor to child homicides globally.

2.6 million girls in India aged 15-19, have faced forced sexual intercourse, or a forced sexual act (UNICEF, Hidden in Plain Sight 2015)

which, among many things, speaks of the creation of a protective environment for children, and promotes community based care and protection alternatives for children. It also funds, what can be considered, the beginnings of a child protection system in India. Yet, despite the right intent, analysis points out that child protection receives the lowest investment of government resources, and has hovered at a constant low of 0.03% of union budget resources over many consecutive five year plans of the government.

Reality is, that caught in a helpless cycle of poverty, divisions of identity-religion, caste and class, and ineffective governance, childhoods of millions of children end abruptly. Keeping children safe, protecting them from violence, abuse and exploitation, involves challenging the status quo in society. It involves addressing inequities, questioning power, patriarchy, can be overwhelming and is often perceived as a higher-level need, to be afforded only by some. The system to protect children as it exists in the country today, reaches just a fraction of children, and only when they are in serious trouble.

The Leher team comes from a background of having worked several years in developing India's emergency helpline response for children. The sheer volume and nature of calls seeking help received by the helpline,

pointed to a few things: that there clearly is a lack of protection at home and in communities, where children live, allowing for them to slip into highly vulnerable situations; there is a need to look at child protection more comprehensively; there is a need for a preventive system that surrounds a child, at home, in the family, neighborhood and community. The system for child protection under the Juvenile Justice Act had gained some strength through collaborative efforts of government and civil society. Enactment of the ICPS brought funding for child protection structures, services, and mechanisms. The time seemed right to initiate a pilot community based district preventive child protection program. In 2014, Leher, in partnership with Sarvo Prayas Santhan, began work in the district of Madhubani, in the state of Bihar.

The program draws children, families, and duty bearers together, to share responsibility for making communities capable, self-sufficient, safe spaces in which childhood thrives. The work supports communities to grow in their understanding, to ask and find answers to questions, to stand up against injustice to children, to use local expertise and resources, to seek effective functioning of public services and social protection facilities, and to think and

Theory of change: Sensitized, organized communities, equipped with appropriate knowledge and skills, would make efforts to keep their children safe from violence, abuse and exploitation, grow into key partners of the child protection system, shoulder their share of responsibility, drive demand for service delivery and accountability for child protection from the state.

act together to ensure that children are secure, safe and happy in their communities. The purpose is to contribute learning to distill a cost-able, manage-able model, which can be funded and institutionalized by the government or others, in partnership with civil society. The program nearing the completion of three years, is at the half way point. The journey, though challenging, is beginning to show signs of change and possibility. This report shares results, and learning of the work so far.



PREVENTIVE CHILD PROTECTION IN COMMUNITIES- ABOUT THE PROGRAM



Coverage

Madhubani's population is 4.4 million (census 2011), number of villages is 1111, average population per village is 3000, and average population of children is around as 40% of total population.

Program Details	No.	Persons engaged
District	1	
Blocks	3	
Villages	27/63	
VCPC	27	270
Adolescent Groups	36	360
VCPC meetings (Jul'15-Sep'16)	405	
Adolescent groups (9 boys, 27 girls)	540	

Table 1

The program covers 63 villages across 21 Gram Panchayats in Bisfi, Pandaul and Rajnagar blocks of the district of Madhubani in Bihar. It is active in 27 villages, currently reaching out to a population of about 1,00,000 persons of which roughly 40,000 are children. This is 43% of the total targeted program coverage. Since inception, until September 2016, there have been 405 VCPC meetings, 540 adolescent group meetings, and currently there are 630 persons actively engaged in the program at the village level.

Building blocks

Participatory practices: The program adopts use of the participatory approach and practices to work with communities. Community participation underlies the spirit and culture of the program. The endeavor is to equip communities with skills to critically evaluate their situation, mobilize themselves, seek answers, plan, act, demand and drive the system, for the safety and protection of children.

Baseline for child protection in the district: A district level baseline is conducted in coordination with the district administration. It comprises a primary study reflecting the stories, perceptions and perspective of communities (adults and children); a secondary study comprising analysis of district level published data on children, mapping of accountability, government and non-government services and programs for children; consultations at the district level—at the planning stage to gain ownership of the departments to the process, their views and insights; and finally to share findings and undertake planning for work, which is to follow.

The baseline study draws the district (communities and government) into a structured discussion and planning for child protection.

Building leadership and skills in adolescent girls and boys:

The program invests in building capacities of adolescents, taking them through a year-long process of capacity building and experiential learning: understanding self and environment, democratic decision making, responsibility, problem-solving, collective action. The objective is to give them skills which would serve them in their own lives. It is also a strategy of the program to nurture the next generation of village level child protection leaders from among young people.

Synergy between children and adults: Children and adults come together to work for change. Children have access to information, can flag issues to parents, and speak for their rights, in many ways that adults cannot. Conversations about rights travel home to parents, who overcome resistance and work in synergy with children to make communities safe for children. The endeavor is to strike the right balance where children are not burdened with the responsibility of obtaining their rights, but have their voices heard in collaborative efforts between their communities and the government

Organizing, capacity building and equipping communities to be ambassadors for child protection: The program shares knowledge, skills and methods with communities, which help them to think and function transparently, in a structured manner. It helps communities find and nurture a collective voice on child protection issues. The program builds leadership and ambassadors for child protection from key groups in communities, which include adolescents, youth, duty bearers, parents and civil society organizations, who would advocate for child protection in their spheres of life and work.

Meaningful partnership with government to avail entitlements: Communities are dependent on government for most service delivery for children and families.

They join hands with duty bearers, and the village, block and district level, to make service delivery and access to social protection schemes more effective. The program facilitates dialogue with duty bearers, which brings about identification and resolution of issues, and more accountability from duty bearers and service providers.

Program Components

The program works bottom upwards with a great deal of focus on capacity building community members (adult and children at the village level) through formation and facilitation of Village level Child Protection Committees (VCPC), and adolescent children's groups. The issues raised at the village level, form the agenda for work undertaken at the block and district level.

Village level Child Protection Committees: These committees are constituted at the village level as the point of convergence for discussion and action on child protection. The committees are formed in accordance with guidance outlined in the ICPS, however, the departure from ICPS is that the Secretary of the committee is appointed from among community members who are not duty bearers or leaders. The scope of work of the VCPC includes addressing child protection issues, supporting and counselling parents and families, awareness, and assisting families and children avail of their entitlements under schemes and services.

Adolescent Groups (girls and boys): Groups of adolescent girls and boys are formed at the village level. It is encouraged that girls and boys are in the 13-17 years of age profile. These groups discuss child protection issues, undertake activities, projects, events, report matters to the VCPC, provide support to their peers, and undertake joint interventions with the VCPC.

Scope and approach to work

Focusing on child protection and prevention of violence, abuse and exploitation of children, the mandate for prevention in communities has evolved to include,

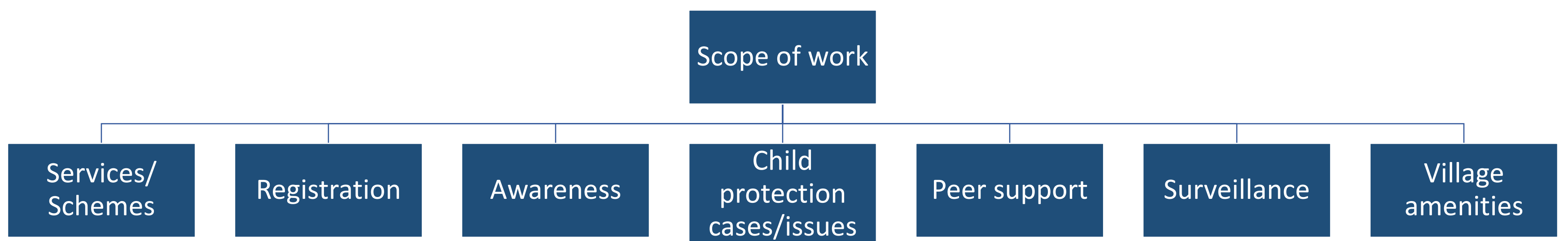


Figure 1

addressing gaps in services for children at the village level, assistance to families for obtaining entitlements through social protection schemes and facilities, awareness, peer support (parent to parent, and young person to young person), improving village level infrastructure to ensure safe and maximum mobility for children in the community, response and support to individual cases of protection violation, referral to the child protection system, surveillance and monitoring (*nigrani*) in the community, liaison between families and government departments.

Discussions in communities take place in a systematic manner. It facilitates the break-down of issues into portions which are not overwhelming to address or resolve, facilitates a rational assessment of the situation, understanding realistically what can be achieved, making commitments to address issues, planning, assigning tasks, undertaking actions, following up until the desired outcome is achieved. Review is a key component built into work at the community level.

There are reviews of work conducted at regular intervals as well as routine review of work in progress in every meeting. The meetings follow a structured approach, which includes review of action taken, updates on tasks undertaken by members, updates on visits to school and the AWC, fresh issues are raised and planning for the same is undertaken. Records are maintained for each meeting. The purpose is to enable work at the village level get systematized and become efficient over time, and to keep the community active in the long term.

Activities

Meetings and discussions: VCPC and adolescent children's groups have formal monthly meetings. These meetings also serve as a platform for parents, adolescent groups to raise issues, for the VCPC to take cognizance, act, provide counselling, and advice. In addition to these, there are several routine informal discussions, which take place in the community.



Figure 2

Through these discussions awareness is spread, community members are sensitized and co-opted into discussions, community support is sought for individual cases of children.

Visits to the school and Anganwadi centre: Members of the VCPC (non-duty bearers) undertake monthly visits to the school and Anganwadi centre. During these visits, they keep a check on the mid-day meal, corporal punishment, discrimination, other schemes and benefits delivered through the school, interact with teachers, the head master/mistress and children of the school, to understand and address issues. Similarly, at the Anganwadi Centre, they are able to assess whether children are receiving nutrition, immunization, educational input, supplementary nutrition, and serve as a bridge between mothers and the Anganwadi worker.

Evidence gathering and documentation: Children and community members gather information, and make assessments of conditions and situation of children in their village. Each community participated in developing the baseline for child protection in their village. They undertake small assessments with the resources and skills available to them. It enables them keep track of children and their issues at the village level.

Home visits: The VCPC and the adolescent children's groups conduct home visits to counsel parents, or to keep watch over families whose children may be at risk. Adolescent group members do not visit alone but are always accompanied by a VCPC member. In certain cases, the adolescent group members may accompany the VCPC members on request.

Liaison between families and government departments for availing of entitlements: The VCPC help families with the procedure to be undertaken to avail of entitlements under various schemes, as well as with civil registration for children. It involves visits to the departments and meetings with officers at the block level, coordination and providing information to the families, assisting families with filling forms and making applications. Where necessary, community members also raise issues before the District Magistrate through the forum provided by the weekly 'DM Darbar' (open house meeting) at the district

headquarters.

Case intervention: The VCPC address requests for help from parents, children or the adolescent groups. These may be individual cases or addressing issues which affect groups of children in the village. Interventions involve discussions with parties involved, counselling and supporting parents, escalating the case to the CWC/police, seeking assistance from government departments at the block level, addressing issues with specific village level duty bearers.

Role of the facilitating organizations

Sarvo Prayas Sansthan (SPS)

Sarvo Prayas Sansthan is Leher's partner in Madhubani, and has worked to develop and implement the program with Leher. The role of the organization includes undertaking data collection for the child protection baseline study for the district of Madhubani, facilitation and documentation of the program in the communities, capacity building of communities (VCPC and adolescent groups), advocacy and coordination with the block and district administration, input to program development, testing and giving feedback on activities.

Leher

The role of Leher is to develop, oversee, and monitor the program, capacity building of Sarvo Prayas Sansthan and the team, advocate for community based child protection programs at the district, state and national level, develop knowledge, tools, and look for opportunity to scale the initiative to other districts of the country. A key purpose of the work undertaken by Leher is to document, reflect on learning, and to share learning with those in positions of influence, as well as those who are undertaking similar work, to amplify the discourse around the need for a comprehensive child protection system with community based child protection mechanisms, as a key component. As the program advances in communities, the learning is documented in the form of tools. These are currently, being reviewed and consolidated. A summary of tools developed is outlined in the table 2.

Tools	Content Blocks
District need Assessment Study	<p>A guide on how to conduct a child protection district need assessment study</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Training module for research team ○ Secondary data collection template ○ Village level Primary data collection tool ○ Block level data collection tool ○ Analysis frames and templates
Facilitation of Village Level Child Protection Committees	<p>A step by step guide to VCPC formation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A guide to facilitate formulation of village level child protection plan ○ Orientation and sensitization of VCPC ○ How to conduct proceedings at meetings ○ Registers and documentation ○ Activities to keep CPC members engaged <p>Guide to functioning VCPC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ undertaking quarterly self-review for VCPC ○ Guide to conduct annual village level exhibition of VCPC <p>Documentation Templates and analysis frames</p>
Facilitation of Adolescent groups	<p>A guide: Ice-breaking activities with adolescents to earn trust of the community and introduce concepts of rights and collectives.</p> <p>How to conduct effective adolescent group proceedings.</p> <p>In-depth guide on preparing adolescent groups to be effective collectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Group formation ○ Significance of a collective ○ Getting started
Capacity building of facilitators	<p>A comprehensive guide for organizations who facilitate preventive community based programs for child protection (work in progress).</p>

Table 2

Path envisaged for the work in communities

The target is for community based child protection initiatives to be functional in a critical mass of blocks and villages in a district, (and eventually in a critical mass of districts in a state), in a manner that communities take full ownership over a period of five years. In the period of five years the aim is for community action to influence implementation, and decision making for children at the district level, resulting in the adequate institutionalization

of linkages, protocols, and procedure at the district level, which would ensure effective functioning of systems and services for children at home, in their communities. Strong community based child protection initiatives would reduce child labour, child marriage, keep children in school, allow them safe access to services, increased mobility in the community, and receiving entitlements would help families stay together. Refer Table 3.

Phases	(I) GROUND SETTING	(II) FORMATION		(III) TOWARDS OPTIMAL FUNCTIONING		(IV) HAND OVER
Time	12 months	18 months		24 months		12 months
	→					
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baseline <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Primary study ○ Secondary study ○ District Child protection Plan • District level consultation • Village level stakeholder meeting 	<p>VCPC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formation notification from DM • Announce VCPC formation in the village • Drafting of village plan • Orientation on CP • Norms for functioning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Monthly meetings ○ Monitoring visits ○ Cases 	<p>Adolescent groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formation • Group Formation Stage I – Initiating group & understanding self (through participatory specially designed set of activities using minimal material) 	<p>VCPC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routine functioning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Monthly meetings ○ Monitoring visits ○ Cases Block/district level advocacy • Capacity building • Quarterly review • Village exhibition of work (getting into routine functioning) 	<p>Adolescent groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group Formation Stage II – Understanding Significance of collective (through participatory specially designed set of activities using minimal material) • Life skills – peer pressure, gender equality etc • Routine functioning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Monthly meetings ○ Cases ○ Activities, projects ○ Documentation (getting into routine functioning) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VCPC & adolescent groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Routine functioning • Local partner <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ quarterly monitoring visits ○ Increasing block & district advocacy (NGO becomes technical resource for district) ○ extends work to additional villages • Increasing linkage between CPCs at village-block
Lead	Leher & SPS own ground setting	Leher & SPS own formation		Leher supports SPS & community own optimal functioning		Leher slowly phases out, SPS supports & community owns

Table 3



Generating evidence and making it part of routine work in communities is a challenging but critical aspect of work in communities. The work in Madhubani began with a district level baseline study. As work progressed, many issues were added to the scope of work in communities, while, at the same time, communities were not able to take up some issues they had identified at the time of the baseline study. While some significant results have been achieved at the village level, many pieces of work remain pending because of gaps at the block and district level. Non-receipt of funds or materials from the district or the state, is a big problem. Delays caused by imposition of code of conduct at the time of elections over the past three years, have slowed down the response of the administration. This section of the report provides a summary of the baseline (district need assessment) study for the district of Madhubani conducted by Leher, a comparison of issues identified by communities and issues they currently address, and an analysis of work done by VCPC and

adolescent children's groups for a fifteen month period (July 2015-September 2016).

Overview of the child protection District Need Assessment Study in Madhubani

Madhubani is one of Bihar's 36 districts, located in North Bihar. It comprises of five sub-divisions and 21 blocks, 399 panchayats, and 1,248 villages. With an area of 3,501 sq km, Madhubani, as per the 2011 census has a population of 4,487,379. In 2006, Madhubani was one of the 250 most backward districts of the country. Over the last decade, migration from the district has increased. This is due to low agricultural yield, few job opportunities, frequent floods, political environment, closure of industries, rice mills, and sugar mills. In more than 70% households 1-4 members work outside the district. Children migrating along, or with families or relatives is routine.

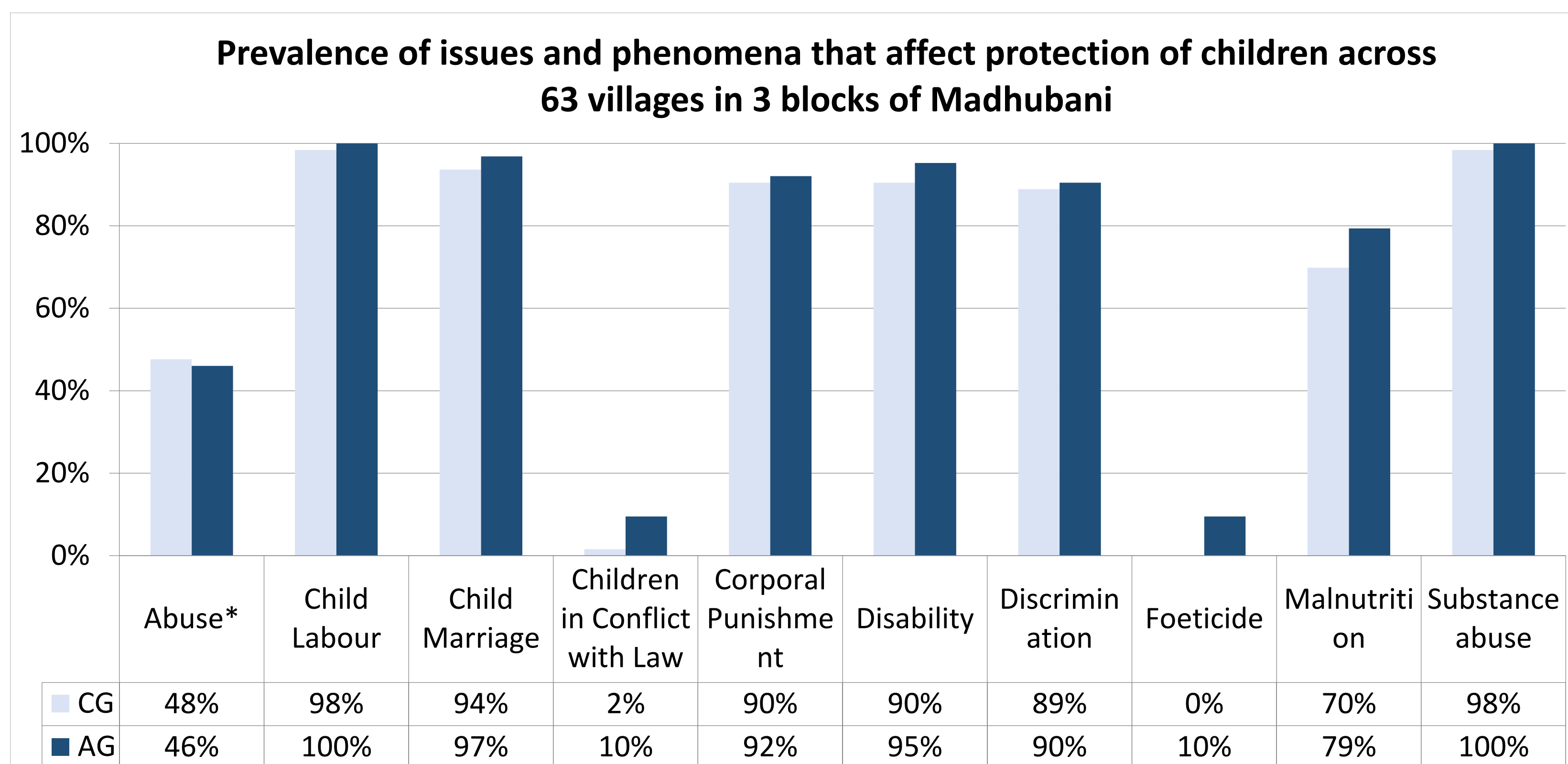


Figure 3

Prevalence of child protection issues:

The study inquired into communities (children and adults) across 63 villages, to understand what they identify as issues which affect the protection and safety of children. Communities identified a wide range of child protection issues as ones which affect their children. The issues identified can be seen in Figure 3.

The study found that children in the age group of 10-15 years reported that in majority of the cases, girls were harassed by boys and men from the higher caste and therefore complaining was pointless. Parents and girls just ignored the harassment, fearing it would bring unnecessary attention and dishonor to their family name. Teasing, touching etc. is routine to the daily lives of girls and women in the village. Hence, they limit their movement to in and around their home or move in groups when they need to go anywhere – toilet, school etc. In 62% villages it was reported that children under 14 years of age migrate for work. Across 79% of villages, it was reported that on average, girls get married before or soon after completing class 10. Many parents fear their daughters will elope causing the family dishonor. Beating with a stick, duster, sit-ups, pulling the ear, being made to stand in the sun are some of the common forms of punishment. In one block, children said that the children from higher caste get milder punishments than those of the lower castes. The special facilities for children with

disabilities in school was limited to a ramp at the entrance as was shared by teachers and adults. Teachers expressed the need for services for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Respondents shared that one of the reasons why children with disability were not receiving any benefit from the government was that most of them did not have a disability certificate.

Awareness of child protection mechanisms: In 100% of the villages it was reported that both children and adults had no awareness about child protection mechanisms at the district level, other than the police. Other than the women's self-help groups (SHG), communities did not identify any other welfare committee at the village level as existent, not even the School Management Committee (SMC).

Social protection schemes/services for children: In majority of villages, social protection schemes for children were available to some people, and they reported being not completely satisfied with the quality of the service. Some of the complaints included that the quality of the mid-day meal was poor, only upper caste children were given plates to eat on, the ASHA was not regular and not accountable to the community as she hailed from an affluent family. Paper work delays, bribes, and cost of bicycles being higher than the amount received made it hard to avail of the Bicycle Scheme.

With regards to the Kanya Vivah Yojana, the sample villages reported dissatisfaction with the scheme due to a number of reasons like - high level of corruption, lengthy procedures to file application, long delays in receiving the money and deduction in the amount of money to be provided with no explanation.

Social protection schemes/services for families: Social protection schemes for families were available to some in most of the sample villages and more than half were dissatisfied with the quality of the services. In the case of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS), 92% of villages rated the quality of service as bad. Adults in 92% of villages reported that the scheme was available to only a select few in the village who were influential and close to Panchayat members or the dealers. Many felt that they received the wrong category card and should be entitled to more benefits.

Communities reported the 102 free ambulance service takes too long to reach and many villages are inaccessible. Community members complained of corruption being a big hindrance in availing of Indira Awaas Yojana.

Problem tree analysis: Communities participated in a problem tree analysis exercise. They could analyze their situation and identified poverty, lack of awareness, large families, fear of having to pay high dowry as girls got older, societal pressure, easy access to substances like gutkha, beedi, alcohol, lack of parental supervision, as some of the causes for child labour, child marriage, and substance abuse, respectively. They also indicated a keenness to mobilize themselves for the protection and care of their children.



Issues discussed during District Need Assessment conducted in 2014 vs. VCPC discussions between July 2015-September 2016

Issues discussed		District Need Assessment Study (2014)	VCPC discussions (Jul'15-Sept'16)
Child protection issues	Abandoned	√	
	Abuse	√	√
	Adoption		√
	Child labour	√	√
	Child marriage	√	√
	Child in conflict with law	√	√
	Corporal punishment	√	√
	Discrimination	√	√
	Drop out		√
	Elope		√
	Malnutrition	√	√
	Substance abuse	√	√
Civil registration	Birth registration		√
	Disability registration		√
Parvarish			√
Services	School- Human resource		√
	School - Infrastructure		√
	School – Scheme – Chattravatti	√	√
	School –Scheme – Bicycle scheme		√
	School-Scheme – Mid-day meal	√	√
	AWC-Human resource		√
	AWC- Infrastructure		√
	AWC – Immunization	√	√
	AWC-Supplementary nutrition	√	√
Family targeted schemes	Ambulance 102	√	
	Antyodaya	√	
	Indira Awas Yojna	√	
	MNREGS	√	
Village amenities	Electricity		√
	Roads		√
	Toilets		√
Vocational training			√

Table 4

Analysis of data for 27 villages (July 2015 - September 2016)

Documentation of the functioning of the VCPC and children's group began formally in July 2015. An analysis of the work undertaken by VCPC and adolescent's groups

for the period July 2015 to September 2016 is presented below. Table 5 below lists the issues identified by VCPC across the 27 villages, and the results achieved.

Issues		Identified/ reported	Action	Change
Civil Registration (no. of cases)	Birth Registration	139	113	70
	Disability Certificate	27	25	10
	Disability Pension	11	11	3
Village level services/ schemes - School (no. of villages)	Human resource	10	7	5
	Infrastructure	13	13	7
	Scheme-Chatravatti	18	18	4
	Scheme-Bicycle	4	4	2
	Scheme-Mid day meal	18	18	18
Village level services/ schemes -AWC (no. of villages)	Immunization	16	16	16
	Infrastructure	21	20	¹ 6
	Supplementary nutrition	21	21	20
Parvarish (no. of cases)	Parvarish	40 ²	40	8
Child Protection issues (no. of villages)	Child Marriage	5 ⁴	4	4
	Child Labour	17	17	³ 17
	In addition, other cases < 3 of abandoned, abuse, corporal punishment, discrimination, dowry, drop out, malnutrition, physical abuse, substance abuse were also identified by VCPC members across villages and discussed in the same manner.			
Village amenities⁵ (no. of issues)		19 ⁶	17 ⁷	10
Request for vocational training (no. of villages)		12	6	

Table 5

1 - Bisfi- Parsa, Salempur, Bhojpandaul Pandaul- Sisouna Rajnagar-Bishanpur, Pariharpur

2 - 49 cases were identified = 40 children where extended family want to avail the benefit under the Parvarish scheme, 7 where extended family does not want to avail the benefit under the Parvarish scheme, 2 where the Parvarish scheme is not applicable

3 - The issue of child labour was discussed across all villages. In 17 villages more than 1 case of child labour was identified. 82 cases of child labour were identified across these 17 villages, where 38 children have stopped working and 28 have were admitted back in school

4 - No action- Badki Pokhar, Shekhtoli Bisfi; Marriage postponed Shekhtoli Rajnagar; Marriage stopped - Shahpur, Gagapur, Bhagyashree, Pandaul

5 - Nature of issues (i) Roads, Toilets, electricity, PDS, playground etc.

6 - Bisfi - Nahas Rupouli, Chandrabana, Parsa, Salempur; Pandaul – Shahpur, Gangagpur, Jamsam, Dhous Siswa, Raghunathpur ; Rajnagar- Bishanpur, Bhariya, Pariharpur

7 - Pandaul – Shahpur, Gangagpur, Jamsam, Dhous Siswa, Raghunathpur ; Rajnagar-Bhariya

Civil Registration

Birth Registration: All 27 villages identified birth registration as an issue to be worked on. Of these, 20 VCPC in 20 villages took up the task of obtaining birth certificates for action. In 113 cases VCPCs have assisted the families in applying for birth registration certificates off which, in 70 birth registration certificates have been obtained. In the remaining 69 cases, in 28 cases the forms have been submitted to the PHC and the ASHA is following up for issue of certificates, 41 are still in the application stage. 107 cases of birth registration were identified/or reported to the VCPC between January and September 2016.

The VCPC have classified the children who require birth certificates into three groups, which facilitates effective follow-up action for obtaining birth certificates. These groups are (a) children under 21 days of age born in the village (b) children born in hospital who have not been provided birth certificates and (c) children above one year of age. The VCPC have worked out a process in the community to assist families with obtaining birth certificates. When the VCPC receives information of a birth, assistance is offered to the family with filling out the birth registration form, and the form is handed over to the ASHA to follow-up at the PHC. The VCPC then follows up with ASHA till the certificate is obtained.

Disability Certificate and pension: In the baseline study over 90% of villages reported that there were children with disabilities in their villages. They stated that problems with obtaining benefits were linked to not having disability certificates. Obtaining these certificates entailed a time-consuming procedure.

27 cases of children requiring disability certificates were received across 25 villages. Of these, in 10 cases, disability certificates, have been obtained, in nine cases applications have been made, and the VCPC are following up, in eight cases VCPC is still assisting the family with the process of application. Of the 10 cases where disability certificates were obtained, the VCPC is now assisting families in 5 cases with obtaining the disability pension. There are six additional cases in which VCPC are assisting families with obtaining the pension making the total cases of children with disability with certificates but awaiting pensions 11 in total. VCPC and families complain that the procedure is very lengthy.

Village level services/schemes

School: Issues related to the school were identified in all 27 schools. Other than human resource related issues, and infrastructure, most of these issues raised are related to benefits to be received through schemes which are rendered through the school. Quality of education or performance of children in school was not identified as an issue.



Human Resource: Issues related to teachers were raised by VCPC in 10 village schools. These issues included shortage of teachers, irregularity and inappropriate behavior. In one school the irregularity of teachers was addressed, in two schools, inappropriate behavior was addressed, and in one school, an additional teacher was appointed. Actions taken by VPCP, included school visits, meeting with school Head Master (HM) and writing letters to the District Education Officer (DEO).

Infrastructure: Infrastructure related issues in schools were brought to the committee in 13 villages. These include broken/absence of boundary wall (6), inadequate number of desks (1), no kitchen (1), no space for playground (1), no toilet (1), and no water-pump (1). For these issues the VCPC have written letters to the Block Education Officer (BEO). The boundary wall issue has been escalated to the DEO. However, none of these issues have been resolved. Reasons include non-receipt of funds by the department at the block

level. The VCPC continues to follow up. The VCPC has received success in resolving issues, which can be addressed at the village level. Some of these include succeeding in ensuring that a locked functional toilet was made accessible to children, getting a 'Dabang' (goonda type) man who appropriated some of the school property to store his belongings to remove it, and getting the Mukhya (village headman) to build a better road to enable children to walk safely to school.

Mid-day meal scheme: 18 villages raised issues related to the Mid-Day Meal scheme. These include inadequacy, irregularity, and that the meal which is served, is not as per the menu etc. 18 villages have reported improvement in the regularity/ quality of the meal being served. This is owed to the monthly visits to the school by each VCPC. Because of these visits, the school staff is more cautious of what is served to children. Further, the VCPC forum has also provided the teachers a space to clarify to the community that many times there are shortages



in supplies received from the block, and therefore, the school can serve the children only from what is available. This has allowed the community to see the situation from the school's side, and be more understanding towards them.

Chattravatti scheme: The issue of availing the Chattravatti scheme was raised across 18 villages. VCPC members met school teachers in all 18 villages with regards to availing Chattravatti scheme. The issue was resolved in four villages in Bisfi, and children have begun to receive the scholarship amount. However, in two blocks, it is still pending (Pandaul and Rajnagar) with the respective BEOs, as the allotment has not yet been received from the district.

Scheme-Bicycle: Of the four villages the issue was raised in, in two villages, the benefit has been received, in one village it is being followed up on, and in one village the claimant does not want it.

Anganwadi Centre (AWC): The VCPC worked on issues related to immunization, infrastructure and supplementary nutrition at the Anganwadi Centre.

Immunization: The VCPC received complaints with regards to immunization in 16 villages. Parents became irregular with regards to immunizing their children because they believed that the ANM was not administering the immunization injections correctly. Across all villages when the VCPC investigated it was found that there was a communication gap between the ANM and the parents. Children sometimes got fevers, or were unwell after receiving immunization. These are common side-effects of certain types of routine immunization. The ANM was unable to communicate this to parents, who thought she was incompetent or even corrupt. To address this, in all 16 villages, a member of the VCPC is present at the AWC on every immunization day.

Infrastructure: Issues related to infrastructure were raised in 21 villages. In six villages, they were resolved. The solutions included making non-functional anganwadis functional (3), making the toilet functional (1), repairing the road to the anganwadi and (1), renting space till new anganwadi is built (1). 15 villages are still in the process of following up with duty-bearers to



Anganwadi centre in a village in Madhubani

that the anganwadis are functional.

Supplementary Nutrition: Supplementary nutrition was reported as an issue in 21 villages. 20 villages have now started receiving supplementary nutrition. However, owing to shortage of supplies, the practice is to provide supplementary nutrition in a few villages for a short period in a year, on a rotational basis. The monthly visits by the VCPC members has ensured that the supplementary nutrition has been handed over to the children appropriately.

Parvarish Scheme: The objective of this scheme is to provide financial assistance to families for care of orphans and children of parents effected by HIV or leprosy. An amount of Rs 900/- and Rs 1,000/- per month is deposited



in the account of the and the 0-6-year-old and 6-18-year-old claimant child, respectively (both of which are joint accounts with their guardians).

The VCPC have received requests for Parvarish for 49 children. Of these, the VCPC has assisted families with the application process for 40 children, two children did not qualify, and in the case of seven children, the families decided that they did not want to avail of the scheme. Of the 40 applications submitted, eight children have started receiving the benefit. Across all villages, VCPC have worked out a procedure for assisting families with availing the Parvarish Scheme, which is described in Figure 4

Parvarish is a new scheme in the state of Bihar, and there was almost no information provided as to how to avail the benefits of the scheme. The procedure outlined in Figure 4 which is now a streamlined process, was determined by the team. In more than a year, only eight children have begun to avail of the much-needed financial support. Recently, the Leher SPS team at the District Child Protection Committee (DCPC) meeting highlighted the inefficiency and unnecessary waste of time, to the DM. The DM understood the issue and directed that thereafter, for the entire district the joint account and legal guardian details, should be submitted at the time of making the application. This decision would substantially reduce the time taken to avail of the scheme.

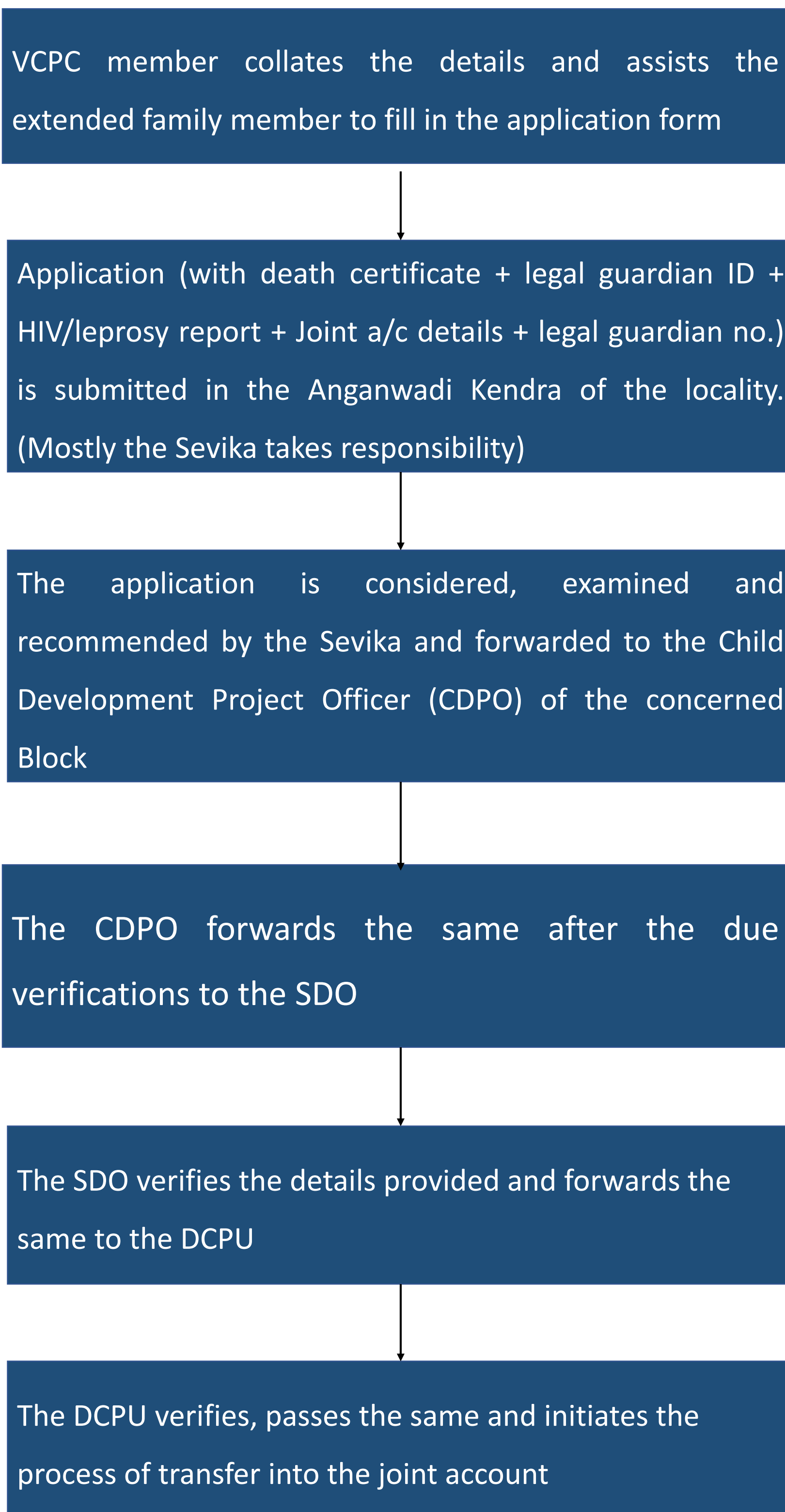


Figure 4

Child Protection issues

Child Marriage:

97% villages reported practice of CM (DNA, Madhuabni) **Mar- Sep'14**
 Formation of VCPC & adolescent groups

Jul'15

Kanthi Kumari, Bisfi
 VCPC got to know just hours before the wedding & were hesitant to **dissuade** parents

Discussion on

Aug'15

- Root issue of CM
- Impact of CM – short & long term
- Dilemas
- Understanding legal provisions protecting the child against CM
- Initiating conversation on CM with neighbours/friends/community members
- Vigilance

Ruksana, Rajnagar
 VCPC though hesitant, approached the family to dissuade them & finally convinced them to **postpone** the wedding

Oct'15

Orphan, Rajnagar
 VCPC was of the opinion that since the girl was an orphan and just 7 months under 18 years it was in the best interest of the girl to **go ahead with** the wedding

Mar'16

Preventive action

- Discussion
- Vigilance
- VCPC writing to and initiating conversations with different individuals/vendors who are normally part of a wedding – Tentwala, Halwai, Pandit to commit against CM

Kanchan, Guriya and Bhagyashree, Pandaul
 VCPC and the girls group approached the parents together & through multiple discussions **dissuaded** them

Aug'16

Figure 5

Five cases of child marriage have been reported. Of these, in two cases reported the marriage could not be stopped/postponed, in one case the parents agreed to postpone the marriage till the girl had completed 18 years of age, and in three other cases, the marriages were stopped and the girls are continuing with their education. No cases have been reported since February 2016. The VCPC are of the opinion that marriages have not stopped entirely, but that they are being conducted outside the villages where VCPCs are not present. The VCPCs systematically takes up the following actions to create awareness on child marriage: (a) discussion on child

marriage (b) discussions in the community (harm and law) and (c) preventive actions. Figure 5 is a timeline that presents the child marriage cases identified in villages across the three blocks between July 2015 -September 2016, and how over this period there has been a slow change in the stance of the VCPC and adolescent groups on the issue of child marriage. They have moved from believing child marriage is a norm, to realizing the impact it has on a child, then reporting it to VCPC, undertaking actions to dissuade families from letting the marriage take place, and actions to prevent future child marriages.

Child Labour: Child labour is frequently discussed by the VCPC and the adolescent children's groups, 44 and 34 times, respectively. Early into their work, the VCPC in all villages took a decision to prepare a list on the number of children who are working outside the village. They were not successful in preparing the list, the reasons were that many parents refused to give the information. When asked, many parents stated that their children were outside the village with relatives, learning a trade. The VCPC changed their strategy, and decided to conduct discussions about child labour in the communities without seeking specific information. Gradually, parents came forward with information. Across 17 villages 82 cases of child labour were identified. The VCPC had meetings with parents to convince them to stop their children from working. 38 children have stopped working. Of these 28 have been admitted back to school and the VCPC routinely follows up with the school and parents. In 10 cases the VCPC does not have information on what the children are currently doing.

While poverty and economic reasons account for much of child labour, there were also some instances where parents reported to the VCPC that their children worked because of (a) parents' own lack of awareness of impact of child labour, and negligence (b) child's disinterest in studies and unwillingness to listen to parents (c) children missing school sometimes to help parents in their agricultural work. The VCPC support and counsel parents

to help them understand the importance of education, get their children back in school and support them find other suitable options in case school is not an option for a child.

Substance Abuse: Substance abuse was discussed frequently in both VCPC and adolescent groups, 31 and 38 times respectively. 10 cases of children consuming tobacco, cigarettes, and gutkha were identified across the 27 villages. VCPC, in collaboration with the adolescent group, children addressed these cases and reported that none of the children consume these products any more. The actions taken by the VCPC and the adolescent children's groups include: (a) speaking to the child and his/her families (b) integrating the child into the adolescent group (c) discussions with vendors to stop them from selling products to children, making vendors aware that the law prohibits sale of tobacco products to children (d) follow-up with children and their parents.

In the case of work on child protection issues and cases in the community, the VCPC and the adolescent children's groups have worked effectively together to identify, act, support children and their parents, undertake preventive actions, monitor affected children, and ensure that other stakeholders in the community behave responsibly (tobacco vendors, vendors who provide services for marriage, priests in temples etc).



LEARNING AND REFLECTION



When work first began in Madhubani, experiences were very different from what they are now. Every time the team visited a village, communities expected something to be handed out to them. To them, the team from SPS and Leher were surveyors from the government, and eventually they would receive money or kind. They would crowd around, pouring out their stories, each one trying to be more deserving of ‘help’ than the next. They would hold on to the team in an almost intimidating manner, following the vehicle till they could not keep up with it. Nirmalaji, the head of SPS, would repeatedly say at meetings with communities, “We are not here to give you anything. Look at us. We have nothing. We are here to support you. We will hold a torch and flash a light, but you have to walk the path”.

Yet, it was hard to practice being a facilitator of a culture/behavior change. It was difficult to not be the do-gooder-social-worker who jumped in to save the day. Mindsets had to change, from ‘doing what it takes’ for each request for help, to putting in the time and effort to ‘bring communities together, to do what it takes’ for each request for help. The hardest part was getting accustomed to not being able to make a meaningful intervention in every plea for help, if the community was not prepared to take a stand.

The team felt communities had to be incentivized to be drawn into discussion. The urge to provide a snack and tea at every meeting was high. “Bina nashta meeting nahin hoga (without a snack no one will sit in a meeting).” The program and the children belonged to the community. Leher and SPS had joined them. To stop being outsiders, meant having to stop ‘giving’ them something each time, even something as small as a cup of tea. The team was eventually able to stop, the habit of routinely feeding, and the attendance did not dwindle.

“Communities will remain forever dependent on Leher and SPS and not come to independently own the child protection mandate, if every meeting has a banner in the background with Leher and SPS logos on it”, a piece of constant advice from a mentor who is an expert on PRA. However, “Banner nahi lagayenge toh community shak karenge (communities will be suspicious of us, if we do not put a banner up with our names on it)”, is the counter argument from the field. There is still a lot to be achieved in terms of communities fully owning the program, but being mindful about it, reflecting on it, and making small shifts on a regular basis, is part of the journey of getting there.

The work over the last three years has been an immense and humbling learning experience for both the team at SPS, Leher, as well as the communities. It is as much a struggle as it is an adventure. Small successes energize communities, give them confidence, and lead them to believe that change is possible. Reports from the field carry stories and voices, which make the feeling of change palpable. There are several questions still unanswered. However, the work so far, affirms the belief, that communities have an inherent sense of wanting to protect their children. They are not able to protect their children, for many reasons, causing them to accept practices and traditions, which harm children as a normal unchangeable way of life. Community based child protection mechanisms can provide the support and means to communities to collaborate with the State to protect children, and prevent them from falling out of the community.

The work in communities seeks to test whether principles of social change, informal systems of protection, and state child protection systems, can be brought together in a somewhat structured manner, in which progress can be tracked, measured, and framed, for replication and scale.

The learning from three years of work in Madhubani has been documented below under three sections: the approach, insights from work done, thoughts to move forward with.

To ensure equal distribution of power and to create a space which is guided by the ethos of democratic participation, the secretary of the VCPC is a nominated member from the community, one who is not a duty bearer or leader.

The Approach: Striving to create VCPC as a community owned, democratic and transparent space

Nurturing leadership from ordinary citizens in the village:

The VCPC are constituted in accordance with ICPS guidelines for VCPC. Among the members of the VCPC are duty bearers at the village level, namely, ASHA, AWW, teacher, and Mukhiya (village head). To ensure equal distribution of power and to create a space which is guided by the ethos of democratic participation, the secretary of the VCPC is a nominated member from the community, one who is not a duty bearer or leader. The role of the Secretary is to steer the committee, lead and coordinate the action taken by the committee, liaise with the adolescent children's group in the village. All VCPC secretaries are women.

Facilitating structured and transparent proceedings in the VCPC:

The committee sets its own agenda after discussing and prioritizing issues. It enables them to take responsibility for decisions and actions. They function in a structured manner. All committees have registers, attendance is taken, the agenda is documented before the meeting, and minutes are recorded. Every meeting follows a structured pattern: (a) stocktaking of the agenda of the previous meeting (b) obtaining updates on responsibility assigned in the previous meeting (c) a review of pending actions to be taken (d) flagging new issues, decision taking and planning action.

Identity for VCPC: VCPC felt having an identity would enable them establish their presence in the village. They decided to apply to the Panchayat Secretary for a stamp. It took more than a year of following up with the department at the block level. All VCPC (18) in two out of three blocks were formally issued stamps by the department. The stamp is in the custody of the Secretary of the VCPC. The stamp gives them a sense of pride, ownership, and a position of strength in the village.

Setting expectations with communities-No quick fix:

Leher and SPS approach communities clarifying from the outset that the team brings no hand-outs, tricks or quick solutions. The facilitators handhold, and support

communities in their journey to secure and protect their children. The community is assured that the support will last for a considerable amount of time—five years at least.

After much conversation about child marriage Savita Kumari, the leader of the girls' group got married. The VCPC, SPS team, and children's group intervened, the whole village was trembling with tension. Threats were made to VCPC members. Dowry had been paid. The VCPC and children's group requested the girl's family to stall the wedding. The boy's family agreed and then changed their mind. The VCPC was not strong enough and was not able to stop the marriage. Initially we were shaken, and demotivated, wondered how it was not possible to stop a marriage after all we said. The experience shook up the whole village, but in hindsight, even the failed attempt, had a positive impact, the whole community now knows that child marriage is an issue. It gives us courage. Basukhinath Mahto, Sarvo Prayas Sansthan.

Overall, the role of facilitators in communities has been to: (a) draw them into conversation/discussion (b) listen and reflect-back to communities the questions they raise (c) assist and share with them the means to break down problems, strategize, prioritize and act. It enabled the communities to understand that big problems do not go away overnight, and that they require sustained attention, dialogue, and action over a long and undefined period of time.

Careful balanced facilitation: Facilitation of processes is key to nurturing a community owned, vibrant and functional VCPC. There is a delicate balance to be maintained, one in which the facilitator needs to hand hold and support, step in to lead in difficult situations, yet, step back to allow the VCPC, the Secretary and members to take the lead role. A key learning has been to adjust the tempo of facilitation to the pace of the VCPC and community, so that they are prepared for when they move from the phase of deliberating on an issue, to planning and action.

Working with available resources in the environment: The facilitators acknowledge the difficulty faced by communities in protecting their children.

There have been a few cases where the Mukhya has repaired a road leading up to the school/AWC so children and teachers can reach safely, but largely panchayat untied funds are still quite inaccessible to VCPC. For two years, without success, SPS has been following-up with the DCPU for organizing capacity building meetings of VCPC. Adolescent girls have been asking us for vocational training. It is not sustainable to 'provide' special training that cannot be sustained, so we put the question back to them to see how we could support them find available vocational training options. –Leher team member

There is recognition of the communities' inherent will to protect their children. Working collectively, on issues identified by the communities with existing knowledge, resources and experiences available to the community slows down the pace of work, but makes it more real, and viable for the long term.

This thinking guides every aspect of work-budgets, manner of facilitation and communication. Beyond a meagre cost of materials to support programs, and the cost of the team of facilitators, the endeavor is to work within what is available and mobilize resources from the environment.

Moving from non-confrontational to the challenging issues in a village: The VCPC are very influenced by the social dynamics and politics of the community. They are reluctant to disturb the status quo-power, religious and cultural practices and traditions, which had to be respected. Initially, issues which they perceived as those which would create a stir in the community, were accorded least priority. For example, during the initial discussions while undertaking the DNA for the district, caste discrimination underpinned all feedback from communities. They reported that children of lower castes faced more corporal punishment in school, benefits under social protection schemes reached the higher castes and more influential families in the village, rude treatment was meted out to children and families of lower castes, BPL card classifications were wrongly accorded giving higher caste and affluent more benefits than the poor and lower caste in the village. However, no conversations have come up in discussion in the initial

stage. Communities preferred to work on non-confrontational issues, like birth registration, disability registration and access to the Parvarish scheme. These are lengthy processes, but do not involve taking a position or debate, and so are easier to work on. The committees have been able to begin work on child marriage and child labour. Finding success in addressing the non-confrontational issues powered the VCPC, helped build credibility and gave them the confidence to progress to more difficult issues. Addressing caste inequities and discrimination would follow when VCPC and facilitators, have gathered more experience, and trust from the community. A more layered approach would have to be worked out.

Participatory processes-the backbone of the program:

Both Leher and SPS have been very fortunate to be mentored and trained by experts from PRAXIS: Institute of Participatory Practices, on both the philosophy and methods of using PRA in communities. It has helped the team establish the central philosophy of the work, which is, to regard all stakeholders of communities as equal partners who share in the responsibility of keeping their children safe. Participatory processes have enabled communities to look at their problems, break down overwhelming problems into pieces, which can be addressed at different levels, make rational assessments of their situation, let diverse voices be heard, have meaningful discussions and conversations. Over time, it has led to VCPC and adolescent groups functioning in a more effective and structured manner.

Soon after VCPC began their work in all 27 villages, they undertook a school assessment and prepared a report card for each school. It was their first activity as a group. While the reports had too many discrepancies and a compilation of all 27 villages was not possible, it was a very meaningful exercise for the committees, because they got to see in one place the status of their schools. As an outcome of this exercise the VCPC members routinely visit schools. The data analysis of work done so far reports very high success in resolving issues related to schools which can be addressed at the village level.

Participatory processes have enabled communities to look at their problems, break down overwhelming problems into pieces, which can be addressed at different levels, make rational assessments of their situation, let diverse voices be heard, have meaningful discussions and conversations

Insights: Community, program development and management, the child protection system

In the community

Success at achieving small changes in the system at the village level: The VCPC draws the village together into a focused conversation on child protection and prevention of violence, abuse and exploitation of children. At the time Leher and SPS initiated the baseline study the predominant feeling expressed by the community was immense dissatisfaction with duty bearers, services, and social protection facilities received at the village level. The data analysis of work done so far demonstrates success at resolution of issues which can be addressed at the community/village level. A lot of the success can be attributed to more transparency and accountability between community members and duty bearers, which is a result of open communication between both.

Restorative in nature: The learning is that: (a) VCPC have facilitated fair and open communication between community members and duty bearers, which has restored trust and repaired broken communication between the two (b) repeated conversations allow for understanding of concepts to grow and take life in minds of communities-it enhances ownership, triggers imagination and ideas (c) small activities and initiatives

Learning about substance abuse, how it was affecting the children from a very young age and its negative impact on the community – in terms of restricted mobility of young girls and women in the village, the Sarpanch of Pariharpur, mobilized the women of her community and stood up to the local liquor mafia, which led to the shutting down of an illegal liquor shop. Seeking a long term solution, she escalated the matter to the block administration, and has ensured that no new liquor outlet, whether licensed or not, is set up in her village. – Leher team

*“So what if I have never attended school and I am not educated, I will do whatever it takes to ensure the safety and well-being of my children and the children of this village”
- VCPC, Pariharpur, Rajnagar.*

A girl in the girl’s group meeting shared that owing to harassment by a boy on her way to school every day, she does not feel like going to school any more. The girls group and VCPC intervened. Both the groups first spoke to the boy. The girl’s group secretary also reported the matter in the school. The girl now goes to school regularly and reports that the boy does not pass any comments at her now.- Girls group, Ramtola, Pandal

snowball in to bigger and better (d) when community members make mind shifts it lasts for life (e) the process is time consuming, proceeds at the pace of the community and (f) the impact is long lasting.

Recognition as the platform (the go-to place in the village) to support families on a range of issues regarding their children: The VCPC is a platform which works to ensure that their children are safe, protected from violence and exploitation. Hence, as the data points out, their mandate has systematically evolved to include (a) assisting families to obtain their social protection entitlements for children (b) monitoring safety and protection of children in the village (c) monitoring village level services for children, (d) lobbying for village infrastructure amenities to make the community more accessible ensuring better mobility (e) assisting families and children with discussions on child protection issues and (f) a space where children themselves, parents, elders, even duty bearers bring their

Ramesh stole Rs.5,000/- from his house and spent the money with his friends at a mela. He had only Rs.200-300 left. When his mother got to know, she spoke to his friends. The friends discussed it in the boy’s group meeting and took the mother and Ramesh to the VCPC. Ramesh admitted that he stole and he also confessed to gambling, and consuming tobacco products. The boys group threatened that he might have to lose the membership to the group and the friendship of his peers if he does not stop stealing, gambling and quit consuming tobacco products. With pressure from the boys group and intervention by the VCPC, Ramesh has now stopped gambling and stealing and attends school regularly. Shahpur, Pandal

concerns and seek guidance with regards to the safety and protection of children. The issues discussed so far by VCPC include fear of daughters eloping, substance abuse, sexual abuse, bunking school absenteeism, need for vocational training and job options, illegal adoption, theft by a child, and medical assistance.

Depth of conversations increases with time: As time progresses conversations and voices of communities come to sound like the facilitators, both in tone and content. It is observed that community members replay things said to them, they also begin to find answers to their own questions and doubts. This is a sign that concepts are being internalized and that attitudes are changing. An analysis of repeated discussions on the same issues, showed the change in nuances of conversations over time. With regards to child marriage, the conversations, led to interventions in a few cases of child marriage. While there have not been many new cases of child marriage reported, the committees continue to discuss the issue amongst themselves and in the community. They discuss the impact of child marriage on the health of girls, the law, and they have initiated some preventive actions by talking and writing to vendors, and religious places known to have roles in marriage ceremonies and celebrations.

Adolescents take conversations home and bring their families on board: Parents did not object too much to boy’s engaging in group processes. In fact, they appreciated the boys being engaged in productive activities. The adolescent girls however, faced resistance from their families, when they started attending group

meetings and workshops. The pressure on them to help their mothers with household and agricultural work is quite high. Often, mothers would call out to their daughters, who would not leave the group, but shout back, bargaining for more time. At times, some mothers, would angrily drag their daughters home. However, as time lapsed, parents began to hear from the VCPC about the benefits received by the community. Conversations from the adolescent groups about rights and entitlements began to travel home with the girls and boys. Resistance from parents gradually began to ebb away.

“More than anything else the group has given us an opportunity to come out, reclaim spaces, find our voices, and stand up for ourselves and other children in the village”. Very recently, the group together with the VCPC was able to convince the parents of an 11-year-old boy to stop sending him to work at a tea stall, and the girls readmitted him to school. The girls say that they are not afraid anymore of the criticism received from some elders of the community. ‘Saraswati Kishori Samuh’(Saraswati girl’s group), in Macholiya village, Bisfi block, Madhubani.

Conversations about rights and entitlements travel home. Girls report that their parents see the difference in their lives, are more amenable to letting them continue their education, and to delay marriage plans. The girls in some villages, have asked for a repeat of certain activities conducted with the group for other girls who are not part of the adolescent group.

Role of VCPC and adolescent groups in being alert to what is happening to children in the village: ‘Nigrani’ or ‘Surveillance’ has evolved as a key role played by the VCPC and the adolescent groups at the village level. It also involves close communication between children’s group and the VCPC. The adolescent groups report issues to the VCPC. Nigrani involves a set of activities which the VCPC undertake routinely, through the month between the monthly meetings, and they give feedback of their findings to the committee based on which, subsequent actions are planned. These include conversations and discussions in the community, visit to school, anganwadi centre, and

home visits. However, the challenge is to help committees with skills to examine and analyze their findings, such that they are constantly evolving and finding more issues to address, and to ensure that they do not plateau.

Development and management of the community based preventive child protection initiative

Capacity of the local team: Leher’s time (as the promoter of the program) is divided equally between program development, monitoring of the program, and capacity building of the local organization. As components of the program were developed and tested, it was critical to develop the capacity of the local team to ensure that they could be effective facilitators and communicators in the field. The areas included shared vision, values, attitude and philosophy of the program, understanding use and application of PRA methods, working in a systematic structured manner, skills for facilitating processes with children, value and skills of documentation, and program interventions. This required and will continue to require the investment of time and effort.

Developing processes with children: Work with adolescent groups began immediately when the program started in Madhubani. However, a year into the program it was learned that the groups were keen to come together. However, they were not picking up independence or any serious direction. Leher and SPS went back to the drafting board, undertook a reflection of what was going on in the adolescent groups, on what the children were saying, and what emerged was a clear articulation of the objective of working with adolescent groups: (a) sharing skills with adolescents which will help them through their life’s journeys (b) nurturing the next line of leadership for village level child protection committees from adolescents. It resulted in the development of a structured process for organization

of adolescent groups and a training tool to support the facilitator. Some of the skills imparted to children include understanding self, understanding each other and the environment, understanding group dynamics, strengths of a collective, organizing collective action, problem solving approach, democratic group processes-elections, leadership-responsibility, accountability and transparency, undertaking projects, rights, entitlements and responsibility.

Adolescent groups recently had elections to select their leaders. The team was taken aback with how the word 'chunaav' changed the dynamics and energy of the groups. Elections in these informal groups of children, made them political, and they associated politics and elections with power and 'varchasav'. Children must be political. However, they absorb from the political climate around them, and it shapes their perceptions and expectations of adult life, and leadership. Children organizing themselves into groups presents a unique opportunity for them to learn and practice democracy, leadership, responsibility and collective action. It is important for children to learn about the significance of elections in a democracy, role of an elected leader and that there is a lot more to democracy than winning or losing an election. -Leher team

Developing process, tools and testing in collaboration with local team and community: Every aspect of work and monitoring had to be developed in collaboration with the local partner and tested in the community. Despite this, many times, there would still be problems and changes would be required to be made. The Leher team has documented all activities, and prepared tools for implementation of the program. These are still a work in progress, which can be finessed as more experience is gained.

Reflection on the need for a nodal/driving function: Currently, the development and management of this pilot initiative has been driven by Leher. The role includes design of program, development of knowledge and tools, capacity building of stakeholders, monitoring,

data compilation and analysis, and advocacy for community based preventive child protection to be adopted, scaled up and integrated into the national child protection system. If such an initiative was to be scaled up and systematized within the national child protection system, a nodal/driving function would be needed for the long-term. Currently, the government departments, SCPS, DCPU and NGOs are key stakeholders of child protection work. As the scale of work would be very large, there is a need for large-scale thinking, and partnerships.

Child Protection System and community based child protection mechanisms

Formal recognition of CBCPM as part of the child protection system in legislation: Currently, there is no mention of community based child protection mechanisms in any child protection law or policy. The ICPS is the only document which speaks of a protective environment, and constitutes informal and unfunded child protection committees at the village, block and district level. There is a need for CBCPM including VCPC to receive formal recognition in law and policy and for funds to be made accessible for their development.

Capacity building for VCPC: Village level child protection committees have been constituted in many states in accordance with the guidance in the ICPS. However, they receive no systematized capacity building, which is imperative, if they have to function effectively, in a sustainable manner. Funds and guidance for the same should be made available to the DCPU and the SCPS.

Guidance for VCPC on how and when to report cases to the child protection system: The VCPC need guidance, and protocol on how and when to invoke connections to the formal child protection system at the district level, especially with regards to individual cases of children. VCPC also require a code of conduct.

Linkages between VCPC and the block and district: Village level committees need the support of the block level committees and officers, and the district

committee and officers for child protection, in order for the child protection issues they raise to be addressed. Block and district level child protection committees need to be established and function effectively to support the community level work and demands. The system as a whole needs to gear up to deliver on issues raised by communities. In Madhubani, a number of issues remain pending due to inability to deliver at the district and block level. The DCPU and the SCPS need to step up their interventions to support effective child protection in communities through making funds available for capacity building, effective facilitation of SCPC, DCPC and BCPC, release of funds on time, creation of IEC and awareness materials with appropriate messaging, review consultations and discussions within the state and districts to take stock, identify and address bottlenecks, among other things.

The learning at this stage of the field pilot in Madhubani, is that community based initiatives can be successful in keeping children safe, protected and with their families.

There is a critical need to widen the discourse, and expand the interest group across all sectors and strata of society, to develop momentum and support in the country, for preventive child protection work with communities.

Thoughts to move forward with

“One day, relatives had come to visit my house, so I sent my son to the shop to buy ‘khaini’ and ‘pan parag’ for them. The shop keeper sent him back without it. He told my son he does not sell tobacco products to children. I had to go to the shop myself, but I was happy to see the effect of your work. I also feel happy that children will be influenced to keep away from nasha (intoxicants).”

Feedback from a parent to the VCPC, Khoir village

The journey of a community towards social change... A parent who is now more confident and feels acknowledged by the community for allowing his 16-year-old daughter to continue her education by postponing her wedding, a shop owner who now is hesitant and fears selling gutkha, pan, beedi to children in the village, a teacher who is no longer irregular to school and is watchful about the quality of mid-day meal being served, a girl who is confident enough to tell a boy that she will report him to ‘Childline 1098’ if he continues teasing her, or children changing the route they walk to school to pick up their friend on the way, ensuring that she attends school every day and does not drop out because her parents fear her walking alone. These stories clearly establish that a community can protect its children. It is an investment worth making.

The learning at this stage of the field pilot in Madhubani, is that community based initiatives can be successful in keeping children safe, protected and with their families. However, to create a model would require a critical mass of experiences, for which, the program must be scaled up and practiced in a few more diverse districts. Learning, knowledge and experiences from others engaging in similar activities, would also need to be consolidated to develop a model. There is a critical need to widen the discourse, and expand the interest group across all sectors and strata of society, to develop momentum and support in the country, for preventive work with communities. Technology, especially, mobile telephony and the Internet, provide huge levers, and exciting opportunities through which, communities would be able to monitor, measure, tell their stories and advocate for the protection of their children.



Leher is a child rights organization, which believes that every child has a right to a safe and secure childhood, and that government, civil society organizations, and communities must collaborate to ensure that every child is protected from violence, abuse and exploitation.

Our vision is for caring families, alert communities and responsive governments to come together for the rights and protection of all children.

We aim to build a culture of child protection. Leher strongly believes that it is possible to change the status quo. Leher focuses on prevention at the primary level- communities, government, and for all children.

The need is for a system to exist for all children: around families, neighborhoods and communities, active before signs of 'unprotected-ness' begin to show, which steps in at the first signs of risk or harm, responds, prevents children from falling out of family and community safety nets, secures, repairs and restores families and communities, helping them stay together and protect their children.

Could families and communities be in part the answer to bridging some of the gaps? It is not just the responsibility of the State. Families and communities too must be responsible for keeping their children safe. It is instinctive to most people to want to protect children. Is there a way to harness this instinct, to bring the strengths of family, community, informal social protection networks, together with the formal system of child protection and public social protection? Would it be possible to systematize and scale-up a community based initiative and integrate it into the child protection system? Could evidence be generated? Can change be measured? Would the State or anyone else adopt aspects of this work, and support it on a long-term basis?

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