

Ensuring Children's Access to Right to Education in Areas of Civil Unrest: Role of Youth in World's Largest Democracy

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Abstract:

Background and Rationale for Research

Education is important for development of human capacities (Sen 1992, 1996), economic growth (Adeola, 1996), equality (Gradstein, 2003) and social stability (Ritzen, Easterly & Woolcock, 2000). Increased access to education is linked with the promotion of civil society (Walter, 2004) and shows that the government is concerned with the citizens of the country (Thyne, 2006). Notwithstanding all this, it was only in 2009 that India, the world's largest democracy, enacted the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, which provides 8 years of elementary education to every child in the age group of 6-14 years in an age appropriate class, leaving 111 million children in 6-14 age-group (Statistics of School Education, 2007-08) and 41% of youth in 15 to 17 years out of school.

In a country where *Naxalism* (Maoism) is one of the most serious internal threats, the importance of educational institutions has been undermined by concerns of survival. These institutions have been converted in to relief camps during an insurgency, bringing to an abrupt halt the processes of education. Thus, the existence of these institutions is not enough - their effective functioning becomes necessary to ensure the access of children to these and protection of their fundamental right to education.

Conceptual Framework

While significant research has taken place to determine the effects of civil war and conflict on educational access, achievements, expenditure and enrolment (Buckland, 2005; Lai and Thyne, 2007; Stermac *et al* 2012) and vice-versa (Ishiyama and Breuning, 2012), the issue remains gravely under researched in a severely affected nation like India. The literature concerning civil unrest and insurgency in the country offers little understanding on how to effectively reduce the impact of civil unrest on children, prevent it altogether and safeguard their right to education, thereby ensuring their effective access to educational institutions.

To counter this, the NCPCR initiated a pilot program for protection of rights of children, called the *Bal Bandhu* (friends of children) Scheme, in five civil unrest affected States wherein 200 youths were identified from within the affected communities and employed to work for child rights through community mobilization.

Scope of Research: Specific Research Questions / Objectives

This research aims to find out the means to effectively reduce the impact of civil unrest on children, prevent it altogether and safeguard their right to education. In doing so, it proposes to explore (a) the involvement of community in the functioning of educational institutions to ensure that no child



is left behind and out of the purview of education, and (b) the role of youth in mobilizing the community and the government to translate emergency relief in to education. It seeks to address this hypothesis through:

- (i) review and analysis of the work of 100 youths, from low socioeconomic backgrounds from civil unrest affected States, in tracking children, negotiating with their parents, community, teachers and *Naxals*, and bringing them back to school;
 - a. study of the impact of this work on the access of children to their fundamental right to education; and
 - b. exploring the means for institutionalizing, replicating and scaling this work to benefit all children throughout the country by informing the policies, schemes and programmes of the Government of India.

Positive Deviance

As a result, using the positive deviance approach to conduct this research becomes essential since rather than documenting the barriers to access of children to education, there is a need to unpack and analyze uncommon but successful interventions to ensure access. This approach was pioneered by Zeitlin in nutrition research in the early 1990's (Zeitlin 1991) and has since been successfully employed to address other issues such as health care and maternal mortality.

Methodology

Consistent with Zeitlin's (1990) recommendations, this research will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research in a rigorous examination of the factors associated with the functioning of educational institutions in the country.

Quantitative Component

Using the District Information System for Education (DISE) data, this research attempts to examine the change (in numbers) in educational access of children and functioning of educational institutions for them in areas of civil unrest due to the involvement of the youths.

Thus, the quantitative analysis will examine, by use of questionnaire, the impact of youth involvement on community mobilization and participation towards effective functioning of public institutions such as schools, thereby ensuring access of children to the same, in a select number of blocks (2-3) in two civil-unrest affected States in the country. Quantitative data will be collected from the blocks (*Gram Panchayats*) to gauge the improvement in the functioning of educational institutions and increase (or decrease) in the number of children accessing these. This will include:

- number of schools (ashram shalas, residential bridge course centres, hostels, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas) revived/reopened/strengthened due to the efforts of the youths and the community;
- number and profile of children brought back to school and readmitted/reenrolled;
- number of teachers reinstated/appointed to teacher-less schools; and
- details (profile) of missing children, migrant children and children married and sent to other villages/Panchayats/States.

Qualitative Component

The qualitative analysis will document by use of key informant interviews and focused group discussions the role and importance of youth involvement in effective functioning of educational institutions. A case study will be carried out for one best performing and one worst performing



block each with the help of narratives submitted by the youths in each of the two blocks profiling their functions, how they execute these, their routines, and challenges. The narrative submissions (total 10) will help the study to expand upon the quantitative findings and provide a deeper contextual understanding of the key factors in running of and access to educational institutions.

Participatory research

This study aims to carry out research with the youths rather than on them and be involved with one of the household surveys and compilation of its results, emphasizing collaboration, education, and action. As such, the study will employ participatory research, defined by Green et al (1995) as

“...systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change” (p. 194).

Findings and Analysis

This research shows that there is an indispensable role for youth in mobilising local bodies including the community and the government and translating emergency relief into education. These youths act as a bridge/link between the children and the institutions and work towards reducing the impact of civil unrest on children, preventing it altogether and safeguarding their right to education. They do not set up parallel structures and firmly believe that it is the obligation of the State to provide children their basic rights and entitlements. There is no mindless criticism of the State and constant efforts are made to ensure that the government and the community participate as friends in the process of development of children and not as adversaries.

These youths (called *Bal Bandhus*) are heroes themselves – they had managed to reach secondary and higher education by overcoming the barriers to access and were an inspiration for the community. They not only mobilise community and create a groundswell for children’s education, they also take upon themselves to track each and every child in their village, bring her back to school, ensure functionality of that school by negotiating with the military and the *Naxals*, ensure retention of these children and monitor their progress. Alongside, they deliver vaccinations to the pregnant women, get pensions to the elderly and form child rights forums and committees. Most importantly, they assume a twofold responsibility – while they build a momentum for the community to raise demands for children’s education, they pressurise the local governments to respond to these demands effectively.

What thus has begun as an experiment has the potential for turning into a successful model for the rest of the country to emulate given it is not a pilot program for a period of three years beginning 2010.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study will be widely disseminated for policy formulation within the academic community and throughout educational, political, and policy spheres in India and internationally. The study will be used as a basis for wider multi state study to capture regional variation and identify priorities for national government policy development to support educational advance. Study findings will also be presented in an initial comprehensive report and later through academic articles in human rights, development and education journals.

The outcome of the study is to institutionalize, replicate and scale the work of youths to benefit all children throughout the country and not just in areas of civil unrest; and also to inform the policies, schemes and programmes of the Government of India meant for children.

