

BREAKING BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

INDIA CASE STUDY

BALAHITHA: IN FAVOUR OF CHILDREN

Building children's agency: connecting policies with practice for social transformation



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This case study was prepared by Avinav Kumar, Head of Programmes, Change Alliance, and Enakshy Ganguly, Consultant, India. It is the first in the *Breaking barriers to education* series of reports sharing knowledge and lessons learned from Children Believe programs designed to provide children with the tools and training they need to access education, overcome barriers and be a voice for change.

Special thanks also goes to our local implementation partner on the Balahitha initiative, Social Activities for Rural Development Society (SARDS), and the Children Believe India team.

Front cover image: *Bala Panchayat* leaders meet to share their experiences and insights with other young leaders.

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KEY TERMS

Auxiliary Nurse Midwife	A village-level female health worker in India who is known as the first contact person between the community and health services
Anganwadi	A type of childcare centre at the village level providing care for mothers and children between 0 and 5 years with the primary motive to alleviate malnutrition in children
Bala Panchayat	An organization of children modelled after the Indian parliamentary system to directly engage with grassroots level formal and informal child protection actors, eliciting their attention and actions on issues that concern them
Balahitha	Means "In favour of children/child-friendly," also the name of the Children Believe initiative featured in this case study
Balamithrulus	Youth volunteers in the Balahitha program intervention
Bhima Sangha	A union for, by and of working children primarily initiated by the Child Welfare Committee
Chenchu	A designated aboriginal tribe classified under the Scheduled Tribe category; they are largely found in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and Odisha ¹ and speak the Chenchu language
Gram Panchayat/Panchayat	A village self-governing body also referred to simply as a <i>panchayat</i> ; council is elected by the popular voting system
Grama Sabha	The general assembly (people's assembly) of all eligible voters of a village is an interface between the local governance and the people and happens four times a year
Makkala Panchayat	A children's self-governing body created so children can form pressure groups to help solve development issues
Mandal/block	A sub-division administratively earmarked for planning and development; in the state of Andhra Pradesh, it is referred to as a <i>mandal</i>
Panchayati Raj institutions	A system of rural local self-governance established in all the states of India to build democracy at the grassroots level

¹ https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/16581/IN

KEY TERMS cont.

Revenue village	A concept designed as the lowest administrative unit in the settlement hierarchy to improve revenue collection mechanisms and regulate the process for village planning and development
Sarpanch	The elected head of a <i>panchayat</i> , the village council
Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan	The government of India's flagship program for universal elementary education with an aim to promote "Education for All"
Tribal ashram school	A residential school for tribal children

ACRONYMS

ANM	Auxiliary Nurse Midwife
AP-SCPCR	Andhra Pradesh, State Commission for Protection of Child Rights
BC	Backward Class
CAD	Canadian Dollar
CBO	Community-Based Organization
CEFM	Child, Early and Forced Marriage
CFAM	Child-friendly Accountability Methodology
CPCR	Commissions for Protection of Child Rights Act, 2005
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DLCA	District Legal Cell Authority
DLSA	District Legal Service Authority
DWCD	Department of Women and Child Development
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
IMR	Infant Mortality Rate
ITDA	Integrated Tribal Development Agency
MMR	Maternal Mortality Ratio
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPI	Multidimensional Poverty Index
MRO	Mandal Revenue Officer
NALSA	National Legal Services Authority
NCPCR	National Commission for Protection of Child Rights
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NPAC	National Plan of Action for Children, 2016
PLV	Para-Legal Volunteers
POCSO	Protection of Children Against Sexual Offences Act, 2012
SARDS	Social Activities for Rural Development Society
SC	Scheduled Caste (also known as <i>Dalits</i>)
SCPCRs	State Commissions for the Protection of Child Rights
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SMC	School Management Committee
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
ST	Scheduled Tribes
VLCPC	Village Level Child Protection Committee
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

INTRODUCTION

Balahitha motivation and objectives

The **Balahitha** initiative is an attempt by Children Believe to establish **child-friendly accountability** through children's participation in the Markapur division of Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh, India. **Balahitha, which literally means things which are in favour of children**, is an apt name for a program which seeks to create a protective environment for children by reducing the wide gap between the promise and performance of policies, legislation and programs.

This case study seeks to contribute to the understanding of the complexities, challenges and solutions of working within socio-economically marginalized communities to provide children with the tools and training they need to access education, overcome barriers and be a voice for change.

"Child-friendly accountability is a process by which children are empowered and able to meaningfully participate in making certain that those charged with protecting and fulfilling children's rights do what they are supposed to do in accordance with their obligations under international human rights law, and if they do not or cannot, that children and their representatives have some recourse."²

Balahitha draws upon the Child-Friendly Accountability Methodology (CFAM) developed by the ChildFund Alliance, of which Children Believe is an active member, to contribute to the mission of international child-focused agencies to end violence against children.³ Children Believe implemented

the Balahitha initiative in partnership with Social Activities for Rural Development Society (SARDS) from December 2017 to March 2020. Simultaneously, it began integrating elements of this into all of its programs in India.

ChildFund Alliance launched the child-friendly accountability initiative after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by the international community in September 2015. It seeks to contribute to the achievement of **Target 16.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) related to ending violence against children.

After piloting CFAM in India, Paraguay, Vietnam and Mexico in 2017, this methodology was adopted by ChildFund Alliance members and the following countries are currently in different phases of implementation: Burkina Faso and Ghana (Western Africa), India and Nepal (South Asia), Philippines and Vietnam (South-Eastern Asia), Uganda and Tanzania (Eastern Africa), El Salvador and Mexico (Central America), Paraguay (South America), South Korea (Eastern Asia), Papua New Guinea and Australia (Oceania).

Child-friendly accountability is essentially implemented through field-level interventions based on three pillars of the **Triple 'A' Approach**, viz., (i) **Assessment**, focused on knowledge building and fostering understanding; (ii) **Analysis and accountability**, centred on mapping and analyzing the performance of the protection system; and (iii) **Action for social mobilization**, advocacy and corrective action on gaps and bottlenecks identified by children. A fourth pillar of **Capacity building** is mainstreamed across the three pillars. Together, they foster social change and accountability and gradually feed into local to national-level monitoring and accountability.

² ChildFund Alliance, *Child-Friendly Accountability in the Context of Target 16.2: Recommended Methodology*, January 2017

³ ChildFund Alliance, Children International, SOS Children's Villages, Plan International, Save the Children, UNICEF and World Vision formed a working group on Child Rights, Social Accountability and the Post-2015 agenda in 2013 and organized a workshop on child rights and social accountability hosted by UNICEF in London in March 2014.

Through a dynamic and cyclical process, the activities proposed under each pillar build on each other. Together they build knowledge about child rights and protection, identify the gaps in child protection, and work with duty bearers to improve the system. Reporting and accountability are continuously built from this process. Once agreed actions have been taken, the analysis phase is resumed and the cycle continues.

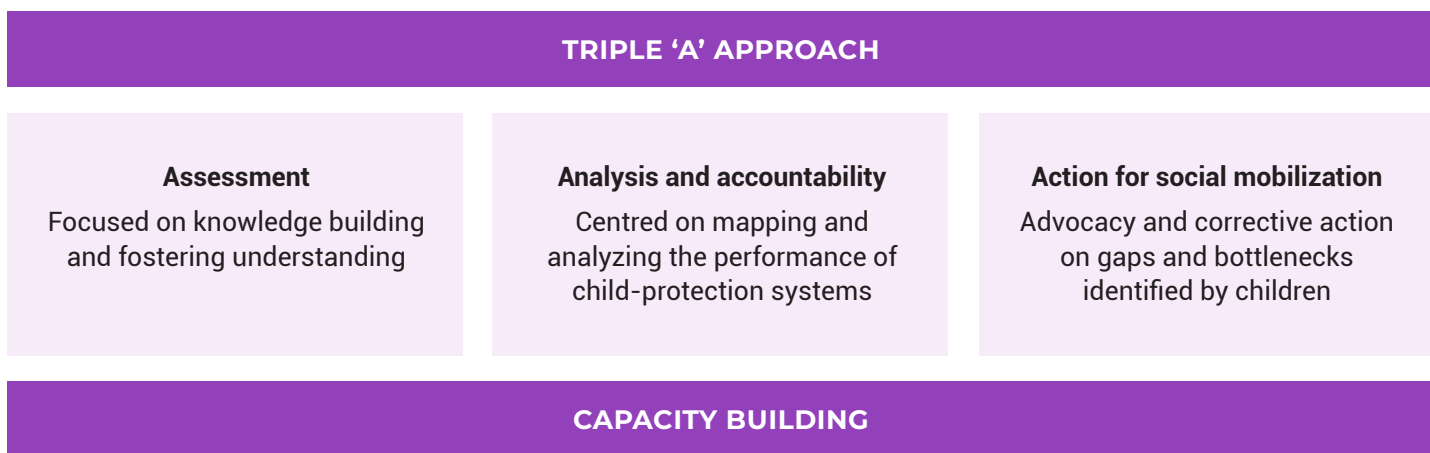
Under the Balahitha initiative, 240 *Bala Panchayat* leaders underwent a four-phased capacity building process. A total of 18 modules on the CFAM were used in trainings over a period of 20 days. The modules were interspersed with sessions where the leaders shared their learnings with their members. As the methodology was designed for small batches of children, there was scope for all members to participate effectively with vigour and interest.

The child-friendly accountability approach offers immense possibilities in view of the post-2015 development agenda, and the focus on bottom-up



Bala Panchayats are an organization of children modelled after the Indian parliamentary system to engage with child protection actors and elicit actions on issues that concern them.

DIAGRAM 1: TRIPLE 'A' APPROACH



accountability for monitoring progress towards the SDG targets. Children and young people as citizens are central to this approach, which enables an effective and sustainable means by which children can hold duty bearers and states accountable to their obligations at local and international levels.

While the Balahitha initiative was adapted for addressing the structural barriers to the realization of children's rights in a specific socio-economic milieu – characterised by

poverty, deprivation and social exclusion – it has all the key features of CFAM, viz., collaboration with children and youth, capacity development of local communities, community-based organizations (CBOs) and government authorities, participatory approaches with a focus on child rights, and the potential for replicability and scaling-up.

Responding to the legal and policy landscape

In India, a plethora of laws and policies that guarantee rights are also applicable to children, including the constitutional provisions (Article 17). Furthermore, special laws have been enacted to provide children with additional protection. These include: The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015; the Protection of Children Against Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012; the Child Marriage Prohibition Act, 2006; the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009; and the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986. Along with the provisions of the Indian Penal Code, special laws have been enacted for particularly vulnerable communities that also apply to children, including the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Act, 2015 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.

The Commissions for Protection of Child Rights (CPCR) Act, 2005, was enacted to set up the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). The NCPCR was set up in 2007 along with the State Commissions for the Protection of Child Rights (SCPCRs). They are expected to act as independent bodies to monitor the implementation of rights and entitlements for children and to take appropriate action in cases of child rights violations.

Balahitha gives primacy to non-discrimination and inclusion, based on recognition that the implementation of legislation has been inadequate, and **the worst affected are children from disadvantaged groups, such as Dalits, tribals and other less privileged socio-economic classes; girls; children with disabilities and sexual minorities.**

Recognition of child participation in policy

The international **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** first recognized children's right to be heard. By ratifying the CRC in 1992, India committed to implement it through national laws and policies. Article 12 of the CRC stipulates:

"1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law."

General Comment No. 12 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child explains Article 12.⁴ "The right of all children to be heard and taken seriously constitutes one of the fundamental values of the Convention... The conditions of age and maturity can be assessed when an individual child is heard and also when a group of children chooses to express its views. The task of assessing a child's age and maturity is facilitated when the group in question is a component of an enduring structure, such as a family, a class of schoolchildren or the residents of a particular neighbourhood, but is made more difficult when children express themselves collectively. Even when confronting difficulties in assessing age and maturity, States parties should consider children as a group to be heard, and the Committee strongly recommends that States parties exert all efforts to listen to or seek the views of those children speaking collectively."

The National Policy for Children 2013 commits that "The State has the primary responsibility to ensure that children are aware of their rights, and provided with an enabling environment, opportunities and supported to develop skills, form aspirations and express their views in accordance with age, level of maturity and evolving capacities, so as to enable them to be actively involved in their own development and in all matters concerning and affecting them" (4.14). Further it affirms, "the state shall promote and strengthen respect for the views of the child, especially those of the girl child with disabilities and children from minority groups, marginalized communities, within the family; communities, schools and institutions; different levels of governance as well as in judicial and

⁴ **General Comment** is a **treaty** body's interpretation of human rights **treaty** provisions, thematic issues or its methods of work. **General comments** often seek to clarify the reporting duties of State parties with respect to certain provisions and suggest approaches to implementing **treaty** provisions.

administrative proceedings that concern them” (4.15). It promises that “the State shall engage all stakeholders in developing mechanisms for children to share their grievances without fear in all settings; monitor effective implementation of children’s participation through monitorable indicators; develop different models of child participation; and undertake research and documentation of best practices” (4.16).



A member of a *Bala Panchayat* participating in an interface bringing stakeholders together.

This commitment has been translated into action points in the **National Plan of Action for Children (NPAC), 2016** (Key Priority Area 4: Participation).⁵ It commits to “Enable children to be actively involved in their own development and in all matters concerning and affecting them.” In the context of Balahitha, NPAC’s commitment to: “Ensure that children actively participate in planning and implementation of programs concerning them and their community” (Subjective 4.2) is particularly important to draw upon.

Balahitha: Situating interventions within the socio-economic landscape

Considerable research and documentation supports the assertions that poverty, deprivation and multiple vulnerabilities undermine children’s rights to protection and development. Further, children bear a disproportionate burden of deprivation due to their social identity in terms of caste, religion and ethnicity in addition to age and gender hierarchies.

The poverty rate in India may have fallen from 55 percent to 28 percent, and 271 million people moved out of poverty between 2005/06 and 2015/16⁶, but a large number of people are still poor or vulnerable to shocks. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which looks beyond the economic criteria and incorporates factors such as living standards, education and health, including poor health, poor quality of work and the threat of violence,⁷ has also decreased. However, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are substantially worse off than other groups in India. According to the MPI 2018, every second person belonging to STs, and every third person belonging to SCs, remains poor.

A **Dalit or Tribal child** typically has lesser voice and agency as compared to peers from other communities, and experience overt and covert discrimination.⁸ In patriarchal societies, such as in India, **girls** are at the receiving end of gender-based discrimination in addition to their social

⁵ <https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/National%20Plan%20of%20Action%202016.pdf>

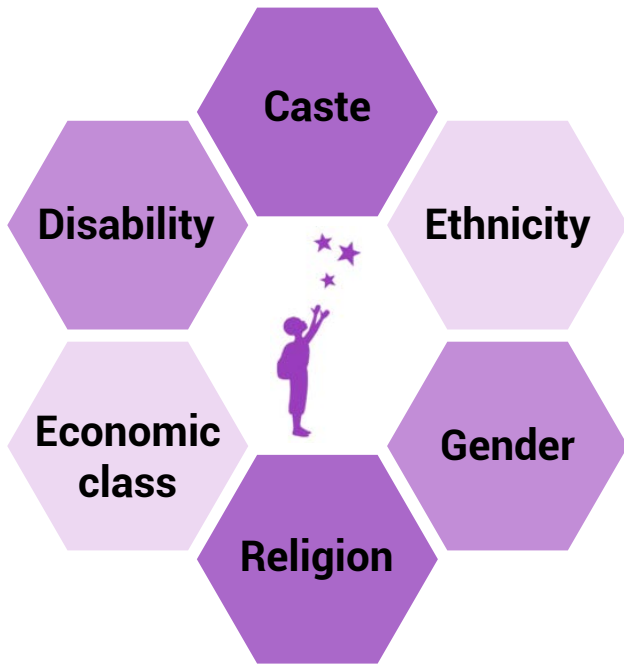
⁶ NFHS-3 and 4.

⁷ The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) is calculated by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative and UNDP and takes into account the incidence of poverty as well as the extent of deprivation. <https://ophi.org.uk/policy/multidimensional-poverty-index/>

⁸ Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (WNTA) et al. Social Exclusion and Inequality: Opportunities in Agenda 2030. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Their role in ending inequalities in India. A Position Paper on the State of Socially Excluded Groups (SEGs) and a Framework of Action. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/11145Social%20exclusion%20and%20Inequality-Study%20by%20GCAP%20India%20.pdf>; Nambissan, Geetha B. Equity in Education? Schooling of *Dalit* Children in India. January 1996. Economic and Political Weekly 31.16 and 17(16) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/239972313_Equity_in_Education_Schooling_of_Dalit_Children_in_India

identity-based discrimination. They are generally deprived of the platforms and opportunities to speak about their lives and experiences, let alone ask questions.

DIAGRAM 2: STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN



Dalit children may be made to sit at the back of the class or at a distance from other children; forced to eat from plates that are marked for their use only; have food thrown on their plates from a distance; have separate or no arrangements for drinking water; and be required to sweep the floor of the classroom. Also undermining their dignity and confidence is being addressed by demeaning caste names “to put them in their place,” and repeatedly being told that education will not be of much use to them.⁹

Similarly, girls are made to sit separately or discouraged from attending schools during their menstruation cycle. Their de-facto role in sibling care and household chores acts as a deterrent in their education. Intergenerational transmission of patriarchal norms and a fear of retribution

contributes to normalization of such gender-based discrimination.

Identification of such discriminatory practices, both overt and covert, requires keen observation and conversations with children over a period of time. A growing body of literature on child rights considers children’s involvement in research as respondents as a measure of its quality, while their engagement as researchers is an even better attribute. Children’s ability to express themselves and ask questions are desirable and empowering qualities.

Growing **rural-urban disparities** — in terms of prerequisite infrastructure, opportunities and access to quality services essential for human development and well-being — are exacerbating the existing caste, gender, ethnicity, regional, religion and class-based inequities in Indian society. As they portend strains in the social fabric and simmering unrest, socio-economic development endeavours are seriously threatened.



Fifteen adolescent girls participated in a group discussion on menstrual hygiene with the village nurse. Of the half that had dropped out of school, all did not have access to sanitary pads.

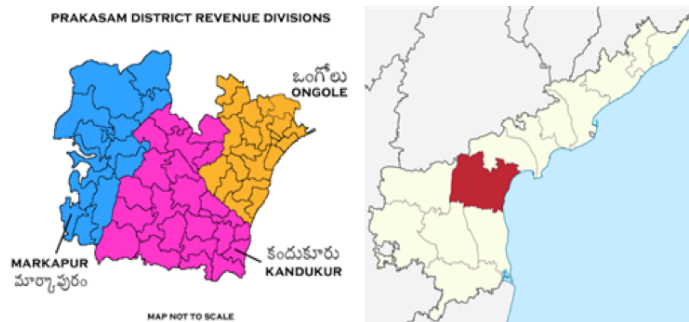
⁹ Morrow, V. and R. Singh (2016). Understanding Children’s Experiences of Violence in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, India: Evidence from Young Lives, Innocenti Working Paper 2016-19, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence, Italy. https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IWP_2016_19.pdf

Poverty, deprivation and social exclusion cannot be addressed by an economic growth-based approach to development alone. The drivers of inequality — such as caste and gender-based discrimination — will persist unless non-discriminatory access to basic services like healthcare and education, and financial inclusion of the most disadvantaged, are secured. Crucial for eradicating caste and gender-based discrimination are context specific policies and interventions by the state together with community mobilization and people's empowerment for ensuring accountability.

Reaching the most marginalized children

With poverty, deprivation and social exclusion as major criteria for selection of the intervention area for the Balahitha initiative, Children Believe and SARDS targeted the Markapur division of Prakasam district in Andhra Pradesh. Although about 81 percent of the population of Prakasam is urban, about 27.6 percent belongs to socially excluded communities, including 23.2 percent SCs and 4.4 percent STs.¹⁰ In rural Prakasam, a startling 48.6 percent of women aged 20-24 years married before 18 years of age, making the district the top contributor of child marriages in Andhra Pradesh and indicative of the low status of girls.

The Balahitha initiative was intentional in selecting to work with *Dalit* communities and Chenchu tribal families. Socially excluded communities, like the Chenchus, are left out of development activities, as context-specific strategies are not adapted in development planning. Chenchus, aboriginals who traditionally hunt and gather, live near forests that are far from any schools, and face additional vulnerabilities due to their marginalized status.



The Markapur division is comprised of 12 *mandals* (sub-districts) covering 199 *Gram Panchayats* (village self-governing bodies) and 235 revenue villages (administrative units to improve revenue collection and regulate planning and development), and the Balahitha initiative covers 120 villages (colonies and tribal settlements). The intervention area is primarily rural and has a sizable proportion of socially marginalized communities. The barriers to socio-economic development in the area were identified as: caste-based hierarchies and related social norms due to social marginalization and economic deprivation; the inability of government and local administration to secure their basic services through relevant, effective and efficient interventions; and weak accountability.



A group of children came together to voice their rights and prepare a child rights charter at a consultation organized by Children Believe.

¹⁰ Census of India, 2011. <https://www.censusindia2011.com/andhra-pradesh/prakasam-population.html>.

BOX 1: MARKAPUR DIVISION IN PRAKASAM DISTRICT IN ANDHRA PRADESH: A SNAPSHOT

- High levels of socio-economical marginalization and underdevelopment characterise Markapur. The infant mortality rate (IMR) of 43 per 1,000 live births is higher than the average of 37 in Prakasam district and 39 in Andhra Pradesh. The Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) of 127 per 100,000 is way higher than 87 in the district and 92 in the state.
- Markapur is also characterized by high incidence of Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) and child trafficking for labour and sexual exploitation. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) - IV, 46.1 percent of women aged 20 - 24 years married before the age of 18, which is higher than the state average.
- The nutrition status of children in Markapur fares worse than in the district of Prakasam due to its poverty; underdevelopment; drought; cultural beliefs and taboos; high number of migrant families and vulnerable population. It's also due to the inaccessibility of the Public Distribution System, poor basic infrastructure of facilities and ineffective functioning of *anganwadis* (childcare centres) located in remote rural and tribal locations.
- Most of the schools lack basic water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities, an adequate number of classrooms, physical infrastructure and teaching learning materials. Enrolment is poor and so is the quality of education and continuance of children in schools. The midday meals provided in the schools are reportedly of low quality and irregular.
- As the area is drought-prone, a large number of people migrate to other districts and states in pursuit of seasonal work. The schooling of children who migrate, and even those left behind with other family members, is affected and many of them drop out to work, which increases their vulnerability to child trafficking.
- There are more than 50 government-run welfare and residential schools for children, including for girls hailing from SCs, STs and other socio-economically marginalized classes. Even though a reasonable infrastructure is provided to children to reside and continue their education, it is under-utilized due to improper maintenance, health and protection issues, and the lack of a congenial environment for children.
- Due to under-reporting and under-recording, the data on crimes against women and children is lacking. But anecdotal accounts indicate a high prevalence of domestic violence, dowry-related offences, marital rape, sexual harassment, abuse, abduction, and cases of atrocities against SC and ST women and girls in particular. Most survivors are lacking in skills to safeguard themselves under duress and are often unable to seek justice in accordance with the law and institutional support mechanisms.
- Children's voices are generally not factored in decisions, even in matters concerning them in homes, schools and communities. The voices of children from socio-economically marginalized communities, particularly girls, are hardly ever heard in public spaces.

Balahitha initiative: An experiment in creating child-friendly accountability

Children Believe introduced child-friendly accountability through the Balahitha initiative in India to bridge the gap between the stated intent of policy and actual results. The organization was guided by its **vision** of a world where every child has a voice and the ability to achieve their full potential, and the **mission** to create a future of hope for children, families, and communities by helping them develop the skills and resources to overcome poverty and injustice.

While the ChildFund Alliance model of child-friendly accountability is designed to monitor performance and

accountability in child protection systems, **the Balahitha initiative used access to inclusive education as the entry point to address key barriers from the lens of gender, and to ensure inclusion of all children by engaging with them as active players to realize their rights.**

Recognizing the right of children to an environment free from violence and discrimination, and their right to be heard and to hold the state accountable, Balahitha's thrust is on engaging with families, communities and government institutions within their specific social context. The effort is to influence them towards accountable responses to the structural barriers to child protection and development while supporting children with their evolving capacities in voicing their informed views and improving their visibility as social actors and citizens.

VISION

We dream of a world where every child has a voice and the ability to achieve their full potential.

MISSION

Children Believe creates a future of hope for children, families, and communities by helping them develop the skills and resources to overcome poverty and injustice.

STRATEGIC INTENT

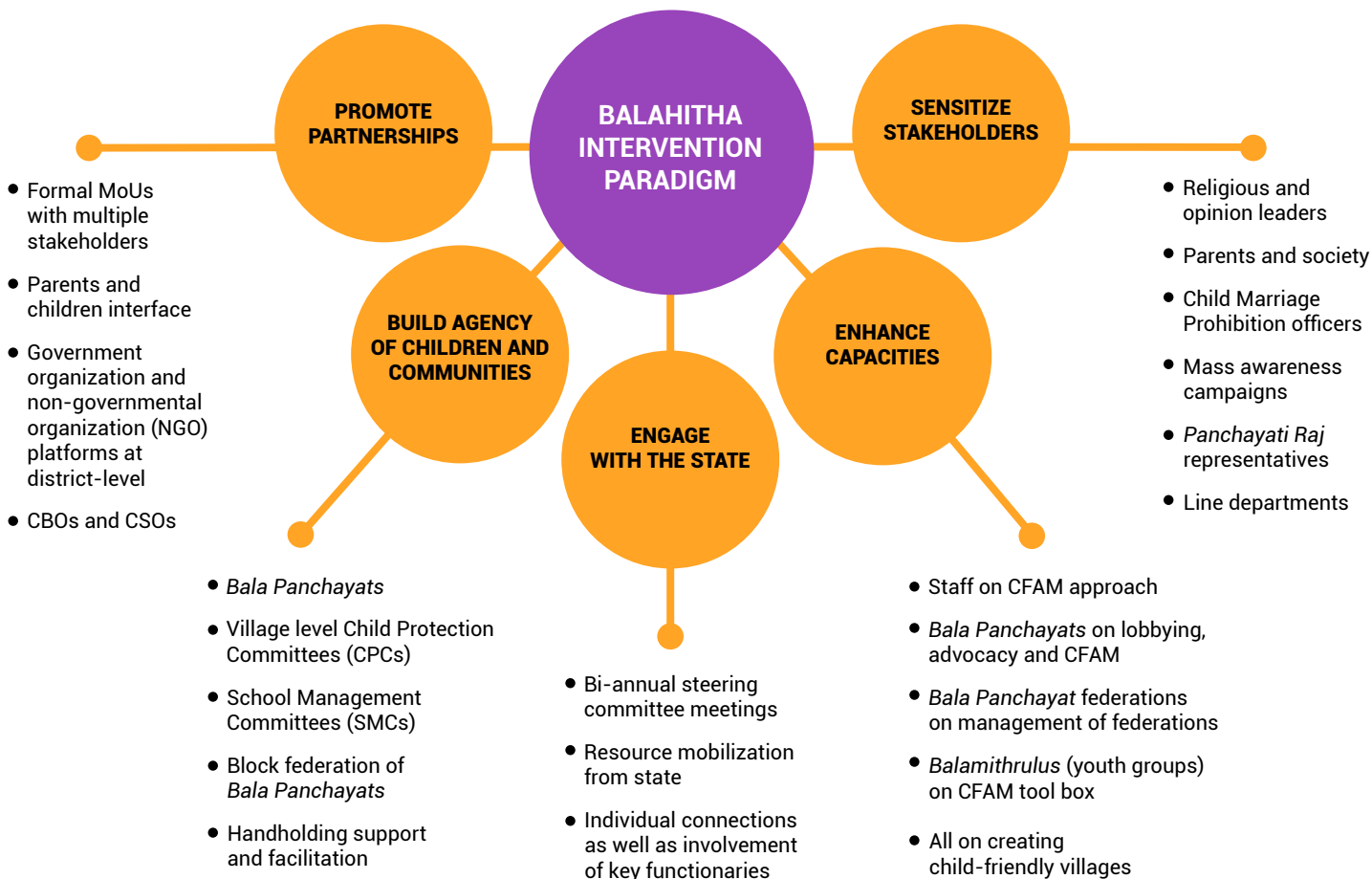
We envision a global community where children and youth play an active role in tackling deep-rooted barriers to change and are educated and empowered to raise their voices to realize their basic needs and rights.

BALAHITHA GOAL

We break barriers to education so children can live and dream fearlessly.

Five key elements

DIAGRAM 3: FIVE ELEMENTS OF THE BALAHITHA INTERVENTION MODEL



1. Building the agency of children and communities

In simple terms, 'agency' is the ability of an individual to independently take and influence decisions governing his or her life and well-being. The higher the agency of an individual, the greater the control and influence they have on the decisions impacting their life.

The context of children, especially from socially marginalized communities, does little to build and enhance their agency, leaving them passive recipients of the impact of the decisions and social practices affecting them.

Implemented in 120 villages, Balahitha has used the existing model of children's collective, viz., *Bala Panchayat* (*Bala* means children, the *panchayat* is based on a "model parliament" with the elected government structure located at the village level), with girls and boys aged 13-17 years to strengthen their abilities to organize and articulate and negotiate their views. **The right to education for every child through the effective participation of all children is the entry point of the Balahitha initiative.**

The process of forming *Bala Panchayats* is designed to function as a democratic platform from where children can

question and challenge the underlying causes of inequities and exclusion. It does require patience, investment of time and a non-threatening questioning of these norms with the parents and village influencers. It has been observed that children are able to overcome resistance with their exuberant energies and to display confidence in their activities.

Bala Panchayats at village level, and their federation at block level, are platforms where children discuss their issues and articulate their questions, demands and collective and individual actions. All girls and boys aged 13-17 years in a village form the *Bala Panchayat* and meet at least monthly. They are trained in skills to communicate and negotiate on rights issues, and are gradually encouraged to engage collectively with parents, elders and influencers in the village.



Bala Panchayat members interface with their parents on a bi-monthly basis to talk about issues of importance to them and to seek their support.

Bala Panchayats in action

- Platform to directly engage with grassroots level formal and informal child protection actors to elicit their attention and actions on issues that concern them
- Identify, prioritize, analyze, strategize and advocate common concerns and issues of the children
- Raise and deal with social issues at home, school and their immediate society
- Participate in campaigns for enrolment and retention in school, promote Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), immunization drives, etc.
- Report child marriages to the authorities
- Proposal to mainstream Child Protection Mechanism Submission of infrastructural and protection issues to the relevant institutions and duty holders for action

TABLE 1: OUTREACH OF BALA PANCHAYATS

Indicators	Total			Scheduled castes			Scheduled tribes		
	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls
Total number of children in <i>Bala Panchayats</i> (13-17 years)	2,298	1,017	1,281	1,902	1,065	837	396	174	222
Total number of children who are in leadership roles (13-17 years)	240	120	120	202	101	101	38	19	19

Girls have an equal opportunity to participate in *Bala Panchayats* and assume leadership roles in accountability related activities. In the process they have acquired self-confidence, a lifelong attribute they can employ in their

personal and public lives. They are expected to exercise their newfound agency, strength and skills to challenge the status quo in their communities and beyond.

BOX 2: BAYANNA: AN INSPIRATION TO TRIBAL CHILDREN



"I know the pain when you are treated differently – today I feel much more confident and will not accept if someone treats me indifferently. I have spoken to my teachers about how I feel. I want to see that every child in my community studies well and lives a dignified life. I am thankful to the Balahitha initiative for giving me new hope and confidence to fulfil my dream and mission by providing CFAM training, exposure and constant motivation."

- Bayanna, aged 15, Bommilingampalli
Chenchu colony

Bayanna, a Chenchu Adivasi, lost his father when he was 10 years old. Coming from a family which survives on non-forest timber produce, he was the first among his six siblings to complete primary education. He shifted from a village tribal welfare school to a high school in Class VI and lived in a tribal welfare hostel in Markapuram. In the hostel, he was treated badly and beaten up several times when he refused to clean the toilets as directed by the warden. Even in school he was ill-treated on many occasions because he "was not clean." When he could no longer bear such treatment, he dropped out of school and began working as bonded child labour in a farm to support his family.

In 2018, members of the *Bala Panchayat* and the Village Level Child Protection Committee (VLCPC) identified Bayanna as one among the children who had been pushed out of school, and convinced his family to let him continue his education. The VLCPC reported to a Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO) that he

was bonded labour and secured his release. Bayanna was readmitted in Class VIII in a government school. Here, too, he felt discriminated against as other children did not want to sit next to him because he had not bathed and wore a dirty uniform. Bayanna says: "it is not that I did not want to bathe but my village does not have enough water for us to bathe or wash clothes every day. What could I do?" But, today, Bayanna is president of the *Bala Panchayat* in his village.

This *Bala Panchayat*, together with the VLCPC, has identified, reported and sought the freedom of 11 child labourers and had them admitted to a government school. Bayanna says he has also resolved to end child marriages in his community, beginning with his friends who have taken an oath that they will not marry a girl who is below 18 years of age. He says: "I want the girls in my community to be educated and not to get married at 12 or 13 years."

Once the initial inertia is overcome, girls and boys are driven by the commitment to exercise their rights and act to improve the lives of others around them — instead of being guided by the norms of monthly meetings and a fixed agenda. Participation in and through *Bala Panchayats*

enables them to become active citizens. But to mitigate the risk of backlash as they exercise their newfound agency and strength to challenge the status quo, the project involves older children and adults from within the parent group and community to support and 'protect' them.

BOX 3: SUCCESS STORY REOPENING OF A TRIBAL SCHOOL AS A RESULT OF ADVOCACY BY CHILDREN AND THE COMMUNITY



Bala Panchayat members request the education minister of Andhra Pradesh, Adimulapu Suresh, reopen a tribal welfare school.

In Pothannagudem, inhabited by 41 Chenchu tribal families, there were 56 school-age children. Only 17 of them studied in the tribal *ashram* school located 35 kilometres away, while the remaining 39 had either never been enrolled in a school or had dropped out. The out-of-school children were engaged in sibling care or as child labour in agriculture. The incidences of child marriage were very high. Most children were malnourished due to low household income, lack

of *anganwadis* and health facilities as well as poor outreach services through frontline health workers.

When SARDS began working in the village in January 2019, the Balahitha team organized local children into *Bala Panchayats* and other stakeholders into the VLCPC. The *Bala Panchayats* demanded an *anganwadi* and primary school at a meeting with the VLCPC. A series of meetings helped to develop an advocacy action plan towards the reopening of the local school, which was closed 10 years ago by the Andhra Pradesh government in the name of rationalization (an exercise to bring the student-teacher ratio of 1:30). Voluntary financial contributions from the families covered the costs of advocacy, especially the visits to government officials to present petitions.

After sustained engagement and follow-up with block and district level functionaries, as well as a petition to the education minister, the school was ultimately reopened in July 2019. Following the reinstatement of the school, 39 children previously out of school are now in a functional school with hope for a better future.

Prior to Balahitha these tribal villages did not know of children's groups and local children were unaware of their rights. They were at high risk of being out of school due to gender and caste-based discrimination; child, early and forced marriage; child labour; and lack of school

infrastructures and access to schooling. Balahitha has brought a transformation among these children to realize their rights. They are leading back-to-school initiatives and combatting child marriage and child labour by negotiating with their parents and other duty bearers.

BOX 4: KOTILINGAM: MAKING OF A GENDER ACTIVIST

"I have realized the importance of gender sensitivity and addressing gender-based violence, as well its impact on the physical, mental and emotional health of girls. I have decided to change my attitude towards girls before changing society. I am thankful to Balahitha for helping me to transform myself and enabling me to transform the attitude of people in my community including boys and men. I want to learn more about the outside world so that I can empower myself better and support the empowerment of girls."

- Kotilingam, aged 17, *Dalit* student in first-year intermediate and a construction worker

Having never had sisters, Kotilingam says he and his friends used to make offensive comments or misbehave with young girls without a thought. But he began questioning his own attitude when he joined the *Bala Panchayat* in his village two years ago and underwent training and exposure. The more he thought about his past behaviour with girls on the street corners and bus stops, the more he realized his problem. He worked to intentionally improve himself and began sensitizing his friends to gender equity and the role of boys and men in making girls and women feel secure in communities.

Kotilingam now visits high schools and boys' hostels with a *Balamithrulu* (youth volunteer) to sensitize boys. He has also reported seven cases of child abuse and was once beaten up badly by individuals belonging to the upper caste for reporting their case. Instead of being deterred, he lodged a complaint against them under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. They were immediately taken into custody and produced before the court. After this incident, he emerged as a popular child rights activist, especially as a defender of girls' rights.

2. Engagement with the state

In the human rights paradigm, which includes child rights, the state is the primary duty bearer and the child-citizen is the rights holder. Drawing on this principle, Balahitha operates with the core belief that the delivery of child rights outcomes ultimately lies with the state.

Collaboration with state agencies has to be facilitated towards ensuring their accountability for the outcomes of rights-focused action. Balahitha encourages and empowers children to engage directly with government institutions as citizens and rights holders and to seek resolution of their concerns. Having the individual and collective connect with key functionaries through a defined mechanism has worked. In their own words: "There is a value in working together" if there is an alignment of key interests, in this case the well-being and protection of children.

This enables the two concerned parties to address each other directly, thereby forcing those in charge of the rights and protection of children to recognize the capacity and

agency of children. Concomitantly, it builds in children a sense of responsibility and leadership, not just to speak for themselves, but also on behalf of others whom they represent before the authorities.

The District Level Steering Committee on Child Protection and Development formalizes this collaborative and constructive approach. Involving key stakeholders with convening and influencing abilities has emerged as a good way to influence decisions and actions.

The road to constructive engagement with the state is fraught with challenges. Child rights issues rank relatively low in the list of priority issues in districts, and government functionaries tend to respond more to formal mechanisms, such as a Memorandum of Understanding or a Government Order, which are difficult to come by amidst shrinking spaces for civil society organizations. The inclination of individual actors at the helm of affairs is critical. An interested and motivated functionary will do wonders and open doors for very constructive engagement and collaboration; but the opposite can result if this is not the case.

BOX 5: SUCCESS STORY RECRUITMENT OF PARALEGAL VOLUNTEERS IN BALAHITHA PROJECT VILLAGES

Balahitha facilitated a sustainable support mechanism for the delivery of paralegal services to the tribal and *Dalit* communities in the operational area of the program.

Following notification regarding the recruitment of paralegal volunteers by the District Legal Service Authority (DLSA) for the Para-Legal Volunteers Scheme of the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), the Balahitha team requested the VLCPCs and *Balamithrulus* identify and encourage suitable local candidates to apply for these positions in their respective *mandals*. Aimed at removing barriers that impede peoples' access to justice, the scheme imparts legal training to volunteers so they can provide legal aid to the hardest to reach populations. Drawn from different walks of life, the paralegal volunteers serve as intermediaries between the common people and the legal services institutions and reach out to people at their doorsteps.

The applications of 48 candidates – including six local *mandal* coordinators from the Balahitha initiative – were submitted to the DLSA for consideration. After interviews and interactions with the applicants, the DLSA selected all of them as paralegal volunteers (PLVs). They underwent induction training for three days before being placed as PLVs in their respective *mandals*/blocks. All successful candidates were from marginalized communities: SCs (29), STs (13) and socio-economic deprived communities known as Backward Communities based on the Indian government's nomenclature (6). The district had never before witnessed the selection by the DLSA of so many SC and ST candidates from remote villages.

The PLVs have organized legal literacy camps for *Bala Panchayats* and facilitated the lodging of complaints of violence against children and petitions for public services with the authorities.

3. Partnerships

A multi-pronged approach with the active participation of multi-stakeholders is imperative to address the complexities implicit in child rights and the promotion of social inclusion. All stakeholders are part of the ecosystem that needs to become non-discriminatory and inclusive. Quite often these stakeholders play an overt and sometimes indirect role in perpetuating the status quo, resulting in social dynamics around identity-based exclusion and discrimination remaining unchallenged.

Although it is extremely difficult and challenging, it is essential to engage with stakeholders individually and collectively to remind them of their roles and responsibilities in the recognition, protection and realization of child rights. Periodic advocacy and interface workshops help bring different stakeholders together around a common approach and agenda. These workshops promote engagement, cooperation and partnerships at multiple levels, including among children in the community, between parents and children in immediate family and society, and between local communities and local administration and *Panchayati Raj* institutions (a system of rural local self-government in India).

The implementing partner, SARDS, on behalf of the program, has entered into formal Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), Cooperation Agreements or letters of intent with several institutions and key stakeholders to facilitate an impactful delivery of the program. These include:

- Project Officer of the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) to implement an inclusive quality education program;
- Mandal Education Officer to participate in government sponsored programs related to enrolment in *anganwadis* and schools and retention in schools;
- District Women and Child Development Authority for training of project resource persons and school teachers on *Kishore Vikasam* Programme (adolescents empowerment program); and
- District Legal Cell Authority (DLCA) for gathering applications and petitions from tribal families.

SARDS' appointment as a member of the District Task Force Committee for implementing and monitoring the *Kishori Vikasam* (adolescent girls' empowerment) Phase III

Program has facilitated the interactions of *Bala Panchayats* and *Balamithrulus* with local government functionaries. These local government functionaries are responsible for the campaigns and programs related to school enrolment and adolescent nutrition with the involvement of community-based organizations.

4. Capacity enhancement of *Bala Panchayat* members for child-led sensitization

Children (13-17 years) are initiated as members of *Bala Panchayats* and empowered to participate in decisions that concern them. They are introduced to a new way of thinking so they can participate effectively in CFAM. They learn about the underlying principles, methods and tools of child-friendly accountability.

Also trained for their role in CFAM – and the creation and management of child-friendly villages in intervention areas – are staff, members of *Bala Panchayats*, block and divisional level Federations of the *Bala Panchayats*, and youth volunteers in intervention villages (*Balamithrulus*).

5. Sensitization of multiple stakeholders by *Bala Panchayat* members

Once initiated in CFAM, children themselves undertook sensitization of key stakeholders. The key players in this are *Bala Panchayat* members and leaders, *Balamithrulus*, or the young people supporting them in their actions, and liaising between them and the VLCPCs.

Multiple stakeholders (viz., the state and its institutions, society and family) by and large determine the experiences of children whose voices are hardly ever heard due to social beliefs that underestimate their evolving capacities. The integration of child-led sensitization components in the *Balahitha* design is an attempt to strike a balance between promoting children's agency and sensitization of the duty bearers for education and child protection.

Bala Panchayat members had an interface meeting with their parents every month, talking to them about their issues and needs and bringing them on board in their endeavours for child rights. A total of 12 meetings have been held with various stakeholders, including religious leaders, *panchayat* members, 127 government line department officials from the Markapur division, and other child protection actors. VLCPCs were formed by the

members of communities with a strong interest in child protection.

When the project began, the *Sarpanch* (elected head of the *panchayat*) played a critical role in mobilizing local communities and setting up VLPCs. Once the ward members representing *Dalits* and tribals were included in these committees they supported the child-led sensitization processes. These involved the *Bala Panchayat* members –

initiated into CFAM through training and other interactions – engaging with stakeholders and duty bearers¹¹ on matters concerning them, and using social media to share information about their endeavours and results in order to inform and influence others. The *Bala Panchayat* members are able to bring their own experiences while questioning inaction or shortcomings in the delivery of public services by the functionaries of local administration.

BOX 6: SIRISHA: A SPARK OF HOPE FOR BUILDING CHILD-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

“Every child must understand, internalize and act upon collectively to claim her legal and statutory rights for a secure and joyful childhood whereas the adults should fulfil their obligations as duty bearers. I will do whatever I can to stop all kinds of violence against children wherever I live throughout my life.”

- Sirisha, age 14, a *Dalit* student of Class IX

Sirisha is a member of the health committee of her village *Bala Panchayat*. She has taken the lead in the pulse polio campaign, immunization campaign, nutrition awareness campaign, birth registration campaign, and the campaign for the enrolment of children in *anganwadis* and schools. She also motivated other *Bala Panchayat* members to participate in an intensive door-to-door campaign to identify out-of-school children, which led to the admission of 17 children into a local high school. With the support of *Balamithrulus*, she has brought to the notice of block level officials local issues related to the drinking water supply, toilets, first aid kits, periodic health check-ups in the schools and community, and auxiliary nurse midwives.

When there was no response from local officials, Sirisha and other *Bala Panchayat* members approached the chairperson of the Andhra Pradesh

State Commission for Protection on Child Rights (AP-SCPCR), the project director of the District Women and Child Development Department, and the chairperson of the Child Welfare Committee on the Special Grievance Day organized by AP-SCPCR on December 7, 2020 in Ongole in Prakasam district.

The accolades Sirisha received from officials for her understanding of child rights, presentation skills and commitment towards child protection did not make her complacent. Instead, she continued to follow up with *mandal* level officials through the Spandana Programme (Public Grievance Mechanism). Most of the *Bala Panchayat* demands have now been sanctioned and implemented.



Submission of grievances by *Bala Panchayat* members for school and community infrastructure improvements to Andhra Pradesh government officials as part of Spandana, a public grievance mechanism.

¹¹ *Panchayati Raj* institutions and local administration, notably the District and Mandal level Education Department, the District Woman and Child Development Authority, the District Legal Services Authority, the Child Welfare Committee and the Juvenile Justice Board.

Facilitating agencies

Implementation partner. Starting out with the successful implementation of a small pilot on CFAM to end child, early and forced marriages in 16 villages, SARDS came on board as the implementation partner for Balahitha. It had all the qualities which were considered essential for such an initiative, and had established relationships with the local authorities and AP-SCPCR.

A vibrant implementing agency is the prerequisite of a successful Intervention for Balahitha. It should be rooted in the local environment and ethos, and have a deep understanding of the structural causes of deprivation and marginalization if it is to contribute to the design and implementation of the program. It should also have the experience of working on issues of children from a rights perspective and collaboration with the government agencies if it is to facilitate the convergence of the response mechanisms. Finally, it should be able to make the intervention model scalable and adoptable by others through effective mobilization and efficient utilization of financial resources.

Technical partner. A hands-on approach has been integral to the role of Children Believe in the initiative. Its inputs were significant in incorporating CFAM into the project design and the larger framework to enable upscaling. Together with SARDS, it identified the location of the program based on the social and ethnic distribution of the population to

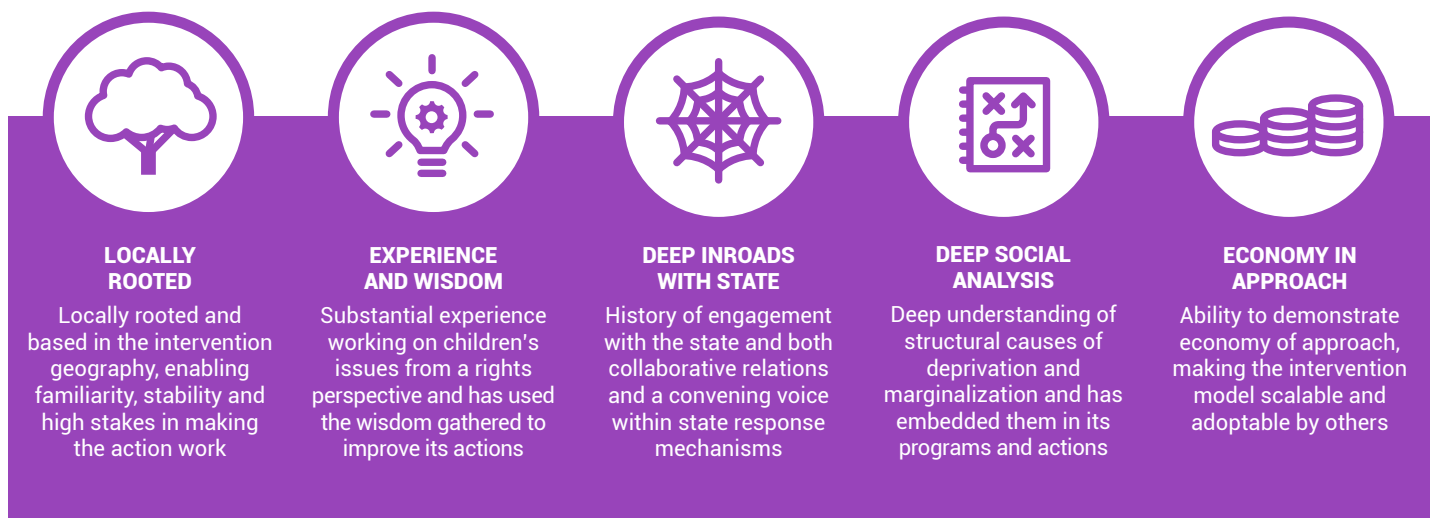
bring the most marginalized communities within its ambit – developing the capacity of the field-based team through technical support, training and monitoring, as well as ensuring continued support of AP-SCPCR for the program.

Supporting partner. Coming on board with its keen interest in promoting the concept of child-friendly villages, AP-SCPCR has provided valuable institutional support and been a keen monitor of the framework and methodology for the potential upscaling of the Balahitha initiative in Andhra Pradesh and beyond.

"I have witnessed "Balahitha," a child-led innovative concept, being implemented in 120 child-friendly villages in the Markapur division of Prakasam. I am amazed at the way it has sensitized children about their rights; enhanced their skills in raising their concerns in families, schools and communities; and challenged negative social norms and practices in public forums. It has resulted in increasing acknowledgement of [duty bearers] accountability by child protection actors and committees. Earlier children were confined, ignored or sidelined but this approach has created a platform for grooming them with leadership qualities and confidence towards breaking the walls of intolerance, violence and hatred for justice, equity and peace."

- G. Hymavathi, Chairperson, SCPCR

DIAGRAM 4: ESSENTIALS FOR A VIBRANT IMPLEMENTING PARTNER



BOX 7: CREATING CHILD-FRIENDLY VILLAGES (AP-SCPCR)**Definition of child-friendly village**

A child-friendly village is a village where children as rights holders are able to realize their rights, and stakeholders and systems – as duty bearers – are accountable to provide services.

Key objectives

To develop the concept of a sustainable community-based and child-friendly village which positively contributes towards the fulfilment of children's rights.

To formulate a child-friendly model at the *panchayat* level as a pilot initiative to achieve child-friendly villages across the country and seek evidence-based learnings with respect to successful strategies and interventions.

To document the experience for scaling up and replication.

Strategies

Ensure the program intervention activates institutions and stakeholders to recognize and prioritize the rights of children in the framework of their roles as well as services of the institution.

To improve the quality of services and effectiveness of service delivery mechanisms to enhance the reach, coverage and impact of services to children.

To impact the knowledge, attitude and practices of parents, community members and other stakeholders towards children's rights.

To provide scope of convergence of all stakeholders and the existing provisions and schemes as related to children.

To develop a system of redress and escalation within the village to address child rights issues.

To advocate for facilitative governance systems at the block and district level which monitor the village and provide hand-holding.

Output indicators

Stakeholders and functional, strengthened formal and non-formal institutions at the village level for ensuring the rights of children, such as child-friendly schools.

Services and schemes related to children are available and utilized such as child-friendly *anganwadis*, police stations and primary health centres.

Marginalized and poor families have access to services related to children.

Overcoming challenges

The initiative has had its fair share of challenges. Children of different social identities coming together on one platform, mingling with each other and taking collective action generally goes against the lived practices of identity-based distancing, if not overt discrimination.

"We faced some challenges initially in promoting children's community-based organizations. There was low acceptance and barriers, including: mobilizing all children with different social backgrounds at a common place; social and gender representation in the leadership; open participation of children in meetings; parent and teacher acceptance to allow children to participate in the *Bala Panchayat* meetings and trainings; and respecting the voices of children in village level meetings and advocacy initiatives. We were able to overcome all the above challenges through our continuous personal contact and rapport building, orientation and sensitization and regular interface sessions with parents and the community."

- Suneel Kumar Ravi, Executive Secretary, SARDS

A challenge to the status quo can attract backlash and test the ability of children to exercise their newfound agency and strength. As mentioned earlier, the project involves older children and adults from the parents' group and community to hedge such a risk. Intensive engagements with children develop the necessary skills and desire required to focus on key interests, engage in meaningful dialogue and negotiate to arrive at win-win situations. The change paradigm thus gets positioned as an aspirational change for children in the minds of most parents, elders and influencers within the village community.

Balahitha's advocacy, focused on the rights and agency of children, at times shakes the families, schools

and communities out of their comfort zone. As a result, children-led sensitization of persons in positions of authority is deemed necessary.



At a government school, girls celebrated International Day of the Girl by taking a pledge against child marriage.

Disseminating the story and achievements is an integral part of the approach. Effective use of social media and the virtual space by the Balahitha team to share such information reinforced the benefits and potential of the program — helping stakeholders open up to engaging with children on child protection and development issues and helping them see the possibilities.

Formal mechanism(s) facilitate collaboration propelled by the interest and inclination of person(s) in authority.

Involving key stakeholders with convening and influencing abilities is a good way to influence decisions and actions; however, child protection and development issues often rank low in the list of priorities in a district. Furthermore, it has been observed that government functionaries tend to respond favourably to a formal mechanism institutionalized through a Memorandum of Understanding or a Government Order, but these are difficult to secure when the space for civil society organizations is shrinking.

Periodic advocacy workshops and interfaces at various levels also help to bring different stakeholders together and synchronizes their approaches through a common agenda.

Sustained engagement with a senior civil judge in the Balahitha intervention area led to his active involvement and a proactive concern for the protection and well-being of local children. This paved the way for the formation of the district level steering committee on child protection and its development as a formal platform for collaboration and constructive engagement.

The ethos of partnership also extends to other levels, such as the relationship of parents with children in the family or of teachers with students. The program integrates intergenerational communication through meetings and events to strengthen these bonds.

Social inclusion: Overcoming the barriers to education

Increased acceptance of social interactions among children beyond the boundaries of their social identities so they feel included in schools and other social spaces is paramount to overcoming barriers to education. Key steps include:

1. Ensuring gender-based equality principles and action among children and parents so they aspire to send their children, especially girls, to school.
2. Overcoming overt identity-based discrimination so children have self-confidence and can shape the decisions that affect them.
3. Acceptance and internalization of the principles of equal opportunities and equity for all children by the service providers and representatives of key institutions to promote non-discriminatory access to basic services by all children.
4. Addressing violence against socially marginalized children by the police due to deeply entrenched identity prejudices.

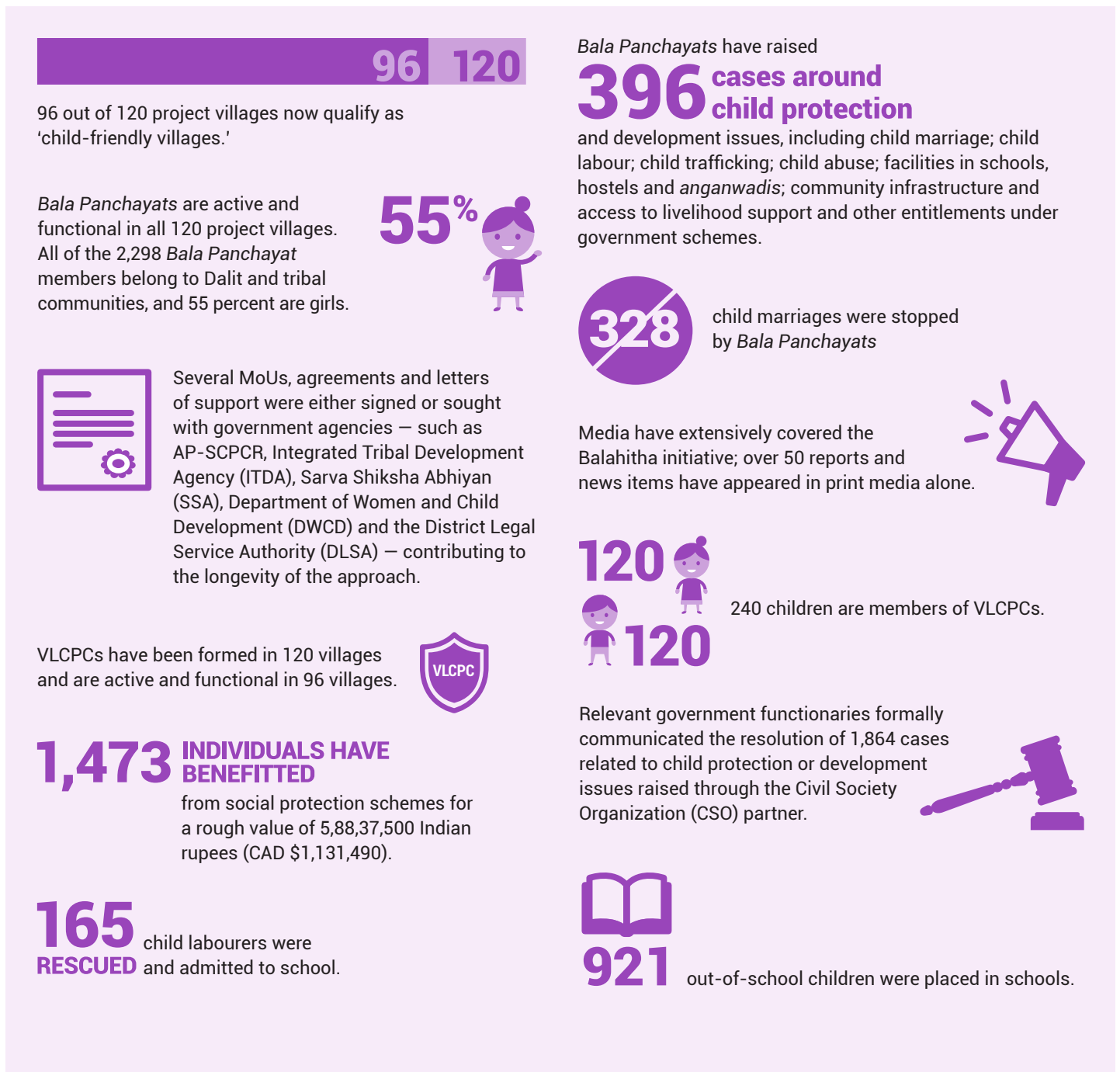
5. Overcoming apathy of the care and protection institutions towards socially marginalized children and making them accountable through data and evidence to the children and the communities they are meant to serve.
6. The new normal of children asking questions, raising their concerns, and not accepting patriarchal norms and patronizing adults.
7. Reducing resistance to children's public participation and exercising their citizenship rights.
8. Children of different social identities intermingling on one platform and agreeing on common action is contrary to identity-based distancing, if not overt discrimination.
9. Children and young people being empowered with technical and legal information so they are better equipped to overcome barriers created by their deeply entrenched social identities and participate in the collectives as equals.
10. *Bala Panchayat* processes require investing considerable time and effort on non-threatening questioning of norms with parents and village influencers.
11. Translating the exuberant energies of children into collective and visible actions, giving parents confidence of a larger vision for their growth and development.

Achievements

Balahitha has strengthened the agency of children and communities, which can have a lasting impact on the well-being of children today, as well as future generations.

Multiple milestones celebrate Balahitha's achievements and suggest the pathway leads to a positive ecosystem for child rights and protection wherein the multiple stakeholders – including the family, society, state and institutions that serve children – come together to realize the intent of the SDGs of “leaving no one behind.”

DIAGRAM 5: KEY SUCCESS MILESTONES FOR BALAHITHA



**BOX 8: SUCCESS STORY
INCLUSION OF BALAHITHA TEAM MEMBERS IN SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES**

The Right to Education Act of 2009 calls for the formation of School Management Committees (SMCs) with two-year terms in all government schools in India, except unaided institutions, through elections in a General Body, which includes all parents. The elected members can nominate two 'co-opted members,' who can be school supporters, eminent educators, office bearers of a voluntary organization, an alumnus of the school or a philanthropist.

SARDS has been invited as a member in 44 SMCs in the operational villages of Balahitha. The recognition and honour for the services of Balahitha by schools, local communities and the Department of Education is an opportunity for the program functionaries to contribute further to effective and efficient school management, monitoring of the infrastructure and other facilities by parents, and sensitization of the SMCs for the development and protection of children.

“Through the Balahitha initiative children gained the courage, confidence and skills to emerge as leaders, irrespective of their vulnerable status. Their stories of transformation are truly astounding. Pravallika, 16, became president of her tribal community’s *Bala Panchayat*. Pressured to marry at age 15, she was able to convince her family to respect her aspirations and see the importance of education for girls. She cited laws and the consequences of child marriage. Shortly after, actions taken by the *Bala Panchayat* resulted in a resolution to stop child marriages being passed by the village-level child protection committee.

Two years ago, Pravallika’s village was widely known for its high rates of child marriage. Now, thanks to Pravallika – and other children eager, and able, to be a voice for change – there have been no child marriages for the past year. Stories like this are found across the communities where we work. The holistic value of education – improving every aspect of a child’s life – was recognized by all those involved.”

- Fred Witteveen, CEO, Children Believe

“When we look at the paradigm on children’s rights, it starts with survival, goes to development, then to protection, and then to participation. ChildFund Alliance has found that big strides have been made in terms of children’s survival, development, and even protection but the toughest has always been participation because it is linked to how cultures view children.”

- Meg Gardinier, Secretary General, ChildFund Alliance¹²

“I had the privilege of visiting the Balahitha program. The process gives significance to each child and sets them on an exploratory process to learn more and be more. Amidst poverty, I saw young leaders bring change and hope into their lives – and into the lives of others – and discover they are an indomitable force. With their newly found skills to dialogue and negotiate they’re able to open closed doors; inspire people at all levels of society to truly care and listen, and bring shared understanding in favour of the rights and concerns of children.”

- Dr. Belinda Bennet, Chief International Programs Officer, Children Believe

¹² <http://equityforchildren.org/2017/09/addressing-child-protection-through-child-friendly-accountability/>

Key learnings

The implementation of Balahitha has given insights and learning into what it takes to build a vibrant intervention model around inclusive child protection and development through active participation of children and other stakeholders. It has also established certain principles that can be adopted and integrated into such programming elsewhere. The key learnings from the intervention are summarized as follows:

1. **Recognize and respect children as key stakeholders:** Children have long been seen as extensions of adults. Even today it takes a lot of effort for families, communities and state agencies to accept that children need to be heard in matters that concern them. This is the first step in the Balahitha initiative.
2. **Collaborate among stakeholders:** Positive outcomes for children depend on collective, complementary and simultaneous actions by multiple stakeholders representing the state and its institutions, society and family. Lasting solutions to complex problems like deprivation, discrimination and vulnerability often lie in understanding and responding to the institutional structures wherein they are situated.
3. **Working together with state agencies has to be the pivot and not an activity:** The collaborative approach stems from the understanding that the state is responsible for delivery of services, whereas civil society organizations can assist in making the delivery mechanism functional and effective. The MoUs, representation in various committees, joint actions and interface platforms help to bring the government functionaries on board right from the beginning, and help foster and embed collaboration.
4. **A rights-based approach rather than a central role of CSOs works better.** As communities which have suffered deprivation and identity-based oppression are often uncomfortable and lacking in confidence about claiming their rights, the project design must integrate elements for their empowerment. Sensitization, orientation, training and other engagements with children along with others members of the community are critical.
5. **A locally rooted and inclusive implementation team is closer to the issue:** Local facilitators are able to strengthen the connection of the intervention with the communities and children. A personal affiliation and commitment is critical for bringing about the greatest impact.
6. **Communicate achievements to bring focus on the possibilities for change:** The use of social media, engagement with local media representatives, personal briefings to key stakeholders, and other mechanisms help communicate the impact of the intervention and thereby sow a seed of hope in the minds of key stakeholders that change is possible. This makes the approach credible and creates goodwill for the implementing and technical agencies partnering with the community to create change. It was observed that key stakeholders then behave like ambassadors and advocate for the approach in totality.
7. **Sustainability is possible through building and institutionalizing community structures:** Processes and mechanisms must be embedded in the context in which they are exercised and led by those who have the highest stake in their continuance if they are to have a life of their own. Structures may be promoted and supported through external facilitation, knowledge and other inputs but the leadership should be with the community. Children take leadership in the functioning and management of these structures but gradually begin identifying and pursuing issues they want to be addressed through them.

Sustaining the momentum

International and national non-governmental organizations promoting child rights have often advocated for policy and legislation, undertaken public information and social mobilization campaigns, assisted with capacity development interventions and delivery of services, and promoted children's participation.

A childhood free from violence and full of opportunities to thrive is the core intention of the Balahitha program – **participation of children and youth are central to this approach.**

Indeed, the initiatives to ensure child participation date back to the 1990s, soon after the adoption of the international Convention on the Rights of the Child. It began with the formation of clubs and collectives; training related to life skills, media and leadership; peer engagement through networks and representation in various platforms. The interface with governance structures at different levels has been intermittent and opportunistic. But holding the duty bearers accountable for their performance has been a weak link in the range of interventions in the interest of child rights.

Many of these organizations planned and budgeted for children's participation as a project rather than a value which had to permeate their organizational culture and interventions. Their inability to assimilate respect for children's agency and a democratic culture is indicative of the gaps between theory and practice.¹³ A one-off project may graduate to a program but ultimately must become a value intrinsic to all programming and activities of an organization or system if it is to sustain a life of its own.

Despite innovations and experiments around the world, children remain passive recipients of their own and rightful welfare, protection and development measures. This is

due to a limited understanding of child participation; the inability to root interventions in local milieus (the cultural and social setting); as well as the inability to establish processes for generational transition, or in simple terms, to ensure cohorts of children make way for the younger lot as they grow up.

The test of Balahitha's sustainability would be its graduation from a project to an adaptable approach. A project may depend on a stable resource support, but an approach is independent of conditionalities if it is able to lend itself to adaptation in a social context different from the one in which it was primarily implemented. Those who are convinced of its value and efficacy are likely to adopt or adapt the approach.

Balahitha has adopted CFAM but with education as the entry point to collectivise children. There have been similar experiments of collectivisation of children, especially child labour and children living and/or working on the streets. **Education offers a safe arena for children in the Balahitha intervention areas with rampant social exclusion.** It allows gradual but sustained children's empowerment and unleashes their agency to the duty bearers in their context.

Bhima Sangha's (a union of and for working children) persistent engagement with *panchayats* to address and prevent exploitative labour of children with the collective slogan of 'children are citizens today' led to the formation of *Makkala* (children's) *Panchayats* in Karnataka.

The *Makkala Panchayats* led the first children's *Grama Sabha* (general assembly) in India¹⁴ in 2002, which laid the foundation for children's direct participation in democracy. The Karnataka Grama Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act¹⁵ now provides the mandate for children's *Grama Sabhas* and obligates the 6,200 *Grama Panchayats* in the state to listen to and respond to children – as citizens. It is a moot point if such an entry point would have been appropriate in Markapur.

Although Balahitha has been implemented as a project in Markapur, it will be scaled up and integrated within the

¹³ Rita Panicker. Children's Participation - A Practitioner's Perspective in Ganguly, Enakshi (ed). 2019. India's Children. Continue to Challenge Our Conscience. HAQ: Centre for Child Rights, New Delhi.

¹⁴ On the lines of Adult Grama Sabhas as per the Panchayat Raj Act of the State

¹⁵ Children's Grama Swaraj. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMLSUotpBYs>

programming efforts of Children Believe. Balahitha also offers lessons to those who seek the realization of child rights, especially the right to education, by ensuring active engagement of children through collectivisation.

As of now, the Balahitha approach requires such engagement where the technical expertise of Children Believe, community inroads and deep engagement of the implementing partner come together to build a sustainable and impactful model on the ground. CFAM holds immense promise in upholding the importance of outcomes in terms of indicators related to children, while challenging and reducing social exclusion, encouraging participation of girls and boys in decision-making – especially in matters concerning their lives – promoting community participation and building young leaders who are a powerful voice for change.



Children Believe works globally to empower children to dream fearlessly, stand up for what they believe in – and be heard. For 60 years, we've brought together brave young dreamers, caring supporters and partners, and unabashed idealists. Together, we're driven by a common belief: creating access to education – inside and outside of classrooms – is the most powerful tool children can use to change their world.

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