

LIVING THE LIFE IMAGINED

A PROCESS DOCUMENTATION OF THE 'PLAN INDIA-SYPM DAY CARE CENTRE' PROJECT FOR CHILD BEGGARS UNDER THE DREAMS ON STREET PROGRAMME

PLAN INDIA

2016

PLAN INDIA

Vision

Plan's vision is of a world in which all children realise their full potential in societies which respect people's rights and dignity. It is an independent organisation, with no religious, political or governmental affiliations.

Mission

Plan aims to achieve lasting improvements in the quality of life of deprived children in developing countries through a process that unites people across cultures and adds meaning and value to their lives by:

- Enabling deprived children, their families and their communities to meet their basic needs and to increase their ability to participate in and benefit from their societies.
- Building relationships to increase understanding and unity among peoples of different cultures and countries.
- Promoting the rights and interests of the world's children.

Authored by: Chitra Gopalakrishnan

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE: HOW IT ALL BEGAN

**CHAPTER TWO: GROWING THE PLAN INTERNATIONAL-SYPM DAY
CARE CENTRE**

CHAPTER THREE: CHANGED LIVES, CHANGED LIFE PATHS

CHAPTER FOUR: ENGAGING, CONVINCING AND INSPIRING CHILDREN

CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

It is not unusual to see clusters of children combing the roads of New Delhi's R K Puram Sector 3 flyover area to beg for food and money. Those riding or being driven in motorised vehicles, and pedestrians are relentlessly chased by this fleet-footed pack at intersections, either singly or in groups. And, sometimes with parents, and sometimes not.

Their pursuits are brisk and tireless. There is a surge of desperation and hurriedness of effort with each traffic snarl, as hopes of gain mount. They peddle their package of despair, auctioning it with tears, torn clothing, and stories that may or may not be true. And, begging can stretch anywhere between an hour and twelve, depending on their day's cache.

Street connections are hence central to these children's everyday survival, identity, and coping strategies that they develop to handle this way of life.

While these children and their vagrant ways are extremely visible to city's inhabitants, whose reactions vary from extreme annoyance (as they see them to be law-breakers) to being deeply perturbed (as they are viewed as victims of societal apathy), policy planners seem indifferent to them.

This disinherited lot are excluded from outreach programmes and policy intervention, slipping completely unnoticed between the categories of 'child labour' and 'street-active children', whose identities are also problematic as of now. It is a grave omission.

While discrete studies on child beggars exist, country-wise data on their numbers, age groups, and gender is absent. And, questions on who these children are, why they are on the streets, how they get there, where their homes are, how they survive, and where their parents are ... are just beginning to be asked.

As their existence is well below the social horizon, and they are excluded from all manner of social rights, dignity, integration, choices, opportunities and participation, it would be fair to say child beggars are children with a dire lack of a childhood.

Keen on the social inclusion of child beggars (and their families), their reintegration and a reduction of their harms, Plan India and the Society for the Promotion of Youth and Masses (SPYM) have collaborated to change the habits and circumstances of these children. This plan has come in the guise of a non-custodial Day Care Centre Project, started on December 1, 2015, which is really a 24-hour residential complex.

Situated in the vicinity of the children's encampments, near R K Puram Sector 3 flyover area, the Centre targets to be a transformative space. It accommodates child beggars and their families' full time (or attempts to) within a child-centered community development framework.

Its intent for the child beggars is ambitious with far-reaching consequences:

- create a safe home they sadly lack
- integrate them as a community by nurturing social bonds
- enhance their learning and numeracy skills using fun, diversionary, non-formal, and contextual methods
- ensure their enrolment into *aganwadi* centres and ready them for formal education within schools
- use art and culture as therapeutic mediums to extend children's psychosocial capabilities to understand and cope
- change socio-cultural perceptions and practices that cause setbacks by using sports and other means
- extend wholesome nutrition and healthcare to them
- reduce their vulnerability to substance abuse, petty crime, and physical and sexual exploitation and abuse
- cultivate their life skills to develop a sense of self-worth

- open up several undiscovered opportunities and choices so that they can find a new life away from begging, and
- support the development of stronger bonds of children with their families and refer destitute children to foster care homes/hostels and residential schools

Is the Centre making a headway in this? In the five months of its operation has it lent new direction, and a better quality of life to these children, condemned earlier to a lifetime of begging?

If so, what are the processes that have enabled this? Has the structure withstood? What are the significant learnings/good practices in these early stages that are adaptable to future plans and projects of this nature? What is it that is still needed to aid children live their lives in its entirety, and realise their full potential? What are the identifiable risks, dangers one needs to be forewarned of?

This process documentation in its first chapter undertakes a factual review of these questions by reviewing the lives and specific problems of child beggars living under the flyover, their reasons for begging, and the need for and the role of the Centre.

Chapter two considers the issue against the larger backdrop of child beggars in India, and reconstructs the predicaments of starting up the Centre. It describes the Centre's manner of easing into educational and recreational routines, and seeks to understand why the place appeals to children.

Chapter three expansively evaluates the processes, strategies, progress, support systems, roles of staff and allies, as well as risks at this very nascent stage. Innovative child-centric interventions to embed growth and transformation in children's lives are fleshed out in depth in chapter four, and the concluding chapter is devoted to outcomes and future plans.

This volume also accommodates first-hand feedback of children and families to understand whether they have affected turnarounds in their lives by breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty – or not.

The idea is to simultaneously evaluate whether these children and families have and can positively impact those around them (by encouraging them to breaking the spiral of begging and homelessness), and create a larger community with similar aspirations.

And, staff views have been gathered to reflect their personal accomplishments and challenges, as well as consider their opinions from the reflective prism of systemic strengths and weaknesses.

Poised at the point of inflection, the idea is to gather all data in one place for reflection, analysis and re-examination of strategies at this very early juncture for a more informed strategic and operational framework.

In short, the idea is monitor the process of change and development, understand the 'hows' of implementation, and learn how to adds to strengths, and modify strategies where needed.

In addition, it could serve as a learning document for others, a blueprint for those venturing to implement similar projects. This, as it clears the way for focused improvement opportunities – making the crossing of hurdles already cleared redundant.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGINS: HOW IT ALL BEGAN

There is an infinite number of stories on why so many children of varying ages and of both sexes have been cast adrift to a life on the streets, and one of beggary, at New Delhi's R K Puram's Sector 3 flyover area.

A set of children talk of begging in filial solidarity. Others say it is to share responsibility for their existence. A few claim they need to line up to peer encouragement and street friendships. A smaller clutch maintain it is out of choice, to survive and buy things they crave, and for the spatial freedom they enjoy. And, statistics reveal a large number of them are coerced into begging through intimidation and violence.

Whatever be the reason for their street-connectedness, each one of these children speak of being out of home, and of dispossession in the extreme.

Without exception, they verbalise their acute sense of un-belonging. To the city. To its people. To their families and communities. And, most often, to themselves. The sense that they exist as citizens, and have importance to the city and people around them, they say, is largely missing. They also say they that in their minds they have no definition of themselves.

Born into chronic poverty and illiteracy, or to parents who have been steadily impoverished over the years, or offspring of migrants still in search of livelihoods in an alien city, these child beggars along with their families are scattered in the homeless encampments under the R K Puram Sector 3 flyover. This is a campground of hopeless squalor and un-hygiene.

With sparse family attention (survival being be-all and end-all), few social anchors to tether them, and very little food, clothes, shelter, education, nutrition and health, this floating population of child beggars live insecure lives, reduced to its very basic, with frequent brushes with the juvenile justice system.

This is primarily because their survival behaviour – begging – is illegal. Child beggars are apprehended under two laws. The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959, as extended to Delhi, and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2000 (as modified in 2006).

Children apprehended under these laws are sent to the courts constituted under the Children's Act from where they are directed to be housed in certified institutions, if over the age of five, as they are viewed as children in need of protection and care.

When their parents are apprehended for begging, many of them accompany them to custodial beggar homes as dependents, emerging only when the detention period is

over. This abrupt uprooting could sometimes last for years, and unsettle them from their already uncertain geographic and social moorings.

These children know their adult life will be similarly lived in such marginal and fragile environments. Lives filled with socio-economic disadvantages and discrimination, poor social skills, deep rooted exploitation, abuse and violence, vulnerability to a life of delinquent behaviour, crime and substance abuse, and susceptibility to serious health risks, especially mental illnesses.

A number of empirical studies corroborate associations between begging, homelessness, poverty, mental illness, drug dependency, and inadequate access to housing, income support and healthcare services.

A denial of choices and opportunities, powerlessness, and violations of their dignity would have been the norm for these children had it not been for the collaborative 'Plan India-Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses (SPYM) Day Care Centre Project' that has stepped in to care for, lend dignity, and entitle these children.

'The Plan India-SYPM Day Care Centre Project': entrusting children with a home and an extended family

The lifeline offered by the Centre extends shelter, food, clothing, fostering, good health, education (non-formal and formal), life skills, vocational training, counselling, and a variety of opportunities to child beggars – all these within easy reach, as this non-custodial Centre is a stone throw away from their camping site.

It is really a home ... to the possible.

Project in-charge at the Centre, Shiv Kumar, is eloquent on the role of the Centre: "Our attempts to lift street-active children out of their precarious lives of beggary, and also their families and communities, are aimed towards making them an intrinsic part of the Centre (as full-time residents or active attendees), and having a say in its activities, systems and strategies.

The intent is make the Centre a transformative space, full of energy and vitality so that the inmates can collectively create a safe, healthy, joyful livable place that they can call home.

By forging nurturing familial and community bonds, and enhancing the skills of children we hope to aid them in finding a new life away from begging. A life that has direction, a better quality, and one that allows these urban homeless children to live their lives fully, and realise their full potential," he adds.

This child-centered community development project deftly draws on the self-interest of this community, and uses the appeal of housing – the idea of a home – as a potent

incentive. It is well proved that housing is a strong magnet to bring back people into society, and restore their sense of self.

The creation of a safe and welcoming environment at the Centre more importantly safeguards street-connected children's (and their families) rights and entitlements in both private and public domains. It protects them from abuse and exploitation, and extends to them a place where they are respected, heard, empowered, allowed to harness their core strengths, and take life decisions on their own. Their social well-being, justice and security are hence taken care of, and personalised support is extended to access their rights.

Using a rights-based approach, the Centre works on the premise that all children, irrespective of their economic status, sex, language, religion, caste and disability, have the same rights and are entitled to the same protection.

In essence, by giving them a 'here-and-now' option of a home, a large supportive family, and by building skills and opportunities, the Centre allows street-active children to reclaim their childhood, find and refine their competencies, and get a firm footing for their future lives. The experience is life-altering. As a good beginning makes a good ending.

Families: inherit a supportive social network and better futures for their children

At the same time, the Centre also gives a new lease of life to families. Parents (a majority of whom are daily wage labourers) now have the choice to live at the more secure environs of the Centre, and leave their children in the attentive care of the Centre's staff as they attend to everyday work (without worrying about their safety or fears about their relapse into begging).

Sensitising and working with families is a big part of this effort. This is because children share deep and vital bonds with their parents, despite it being problematic for many, as they are forced to beg by them, face abuse at their hands or suffer inattention.

The Centre makes efforts to firm up family capabilities of protecting and caring for their children through social support. Mohammad Illias Khas, who works as a mason, and lives at the Centre with his wife and child Hasan who is grappling with disability, affirms the life-support extended by the Centre: "The support we receive at the Centre is both tangible and intangible. We are given a home, assistance, care, companionship and emotional support ... all of which integrate us into a larger social network that is hugely restorative."

The greatest gain for families is perhaps the inheritance of better futures for their children as with each passing day the youngsters gain educational, social, interpersonal, and leadership skills.

There is now a real hope that these children can be un-consigned from a lifetime of begging. And, live the life they imagined in their dreams.

CHAPTER TWO

GROWING THE PLAN INTERNATIONAL-SYPM DAY CARE CENTRE

How grave is the problem of child beggars in Delhi?

Revelations of a 2014 situational analysis of child beggars in Delhi bring deep disquiet. Its findings say there are a large numbers of child beggars in the city, whose numbers are on the rise. A majority of them have been induced into begging either from infancy or when very young, and many of them lack homes, familial support, basic amenities, education, and even control over their earnings. And, worryingly, more than half of them are substance abusers.

Titled '*Begging for a Childhood*,' and undertaken by the Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights, National Capital Territory, the survey (that has used rapid head count survey and in depth interviews of 605 child beggars) has uncovered these startling realities:

- there are 5,727 child beggars in Delhi; of whom 64% are boys, 33% girls, and 3% babies in arms
- the maximum numbers of child beggars (71.6%) are between 10 and 15 years of age
- 388 child beggars (64.1%) are boys and 217 (35.9%) girls
- 147 (24.3%) children were initiated into begging by their parents or relatives since birth; 80 (13.2%) started begging when they were between one and five years; and 336 (55.5%) child started begging between the ages of six and 12
- a large majority of children are migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan; 54.2% migrated with their family due to poverty or deprivation in their village, and some children migrated by themselves on account of abuse/violence at home; death of either or both parents; being disowned by parents; fear of being caught after stealing; and the lure of city life
- a majority of the child beggars 406 (67.1%) stay with parents, while 140 (23.1%) live alone or with friends

- while the majority of them 401 (66.28%) have sheltered accommodation like constructed houses, *jhuggis*, and night shelter, a third of them live in open spaces, deprived of the basic facilities like drinking water, bathrooms, and toilets
- begging takes place at religious places followed by bus stops, trains, metro stations, traffic signals, residential areas, under flyovers and subways, and markets
- earnings of these children vary from less than Rs. 30 to over Rs. 250 per day; most of them tend to give either all or most of their earnings to parents/caregivers, keeping only Rs.5-20 for snacks or transport for themselves, and
- the majority of them, that is, 402 (66.45%) are illiterate never having gone to school, and 307 (50.7%) out of 605 children are addicted to one or more intoxicants

Source: Begging for a Childhood, Analysis of Child Beggars in Delhi, Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights, National Capital Territory of Delhi, 2014,

http://delhi.gov.in/wps/wcm/connect/doiit_dcpcr/DCPCR/Publication/Begging+for+A+Childhood-+Analysis+of+Child+Beggars+in+Delhi

Child beggars: detached from social relations and policy attention

The report critiques the State for the neglect of child beggar's rights to care and protection despite clear commitments to this to all manner of children in the Constitution, and in the UN Convention on Rights of Child ratified by India in 1992.

It pins blame on the lack of clear distinctions between the categories of 'child beggars', 'labour' and 'street children'.

While there are affirmations of children's rights within the National Policy on Children 2013, National Plan of Action for Children 2005, Resolution on the National Policy for Children 2013, Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009, and Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act 2006 - the issues and needs of child beggars have not been singled out for attention or care and protection.

The welfare programmes of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, and the National Child Labour Project also bear testimony to this neglect.

Understandably, the report has urged the foregrounding of priorities for child beggars. As a good number of these children expressed willingness to go to school, study and acquire skill training, appropriate education, both formal schooling and skill training, have been called for.

Demands for access to basic necessities (safe shelters, food, clothing, safe drinking water, sanitation and education); services of doctors, counsellors, and social workers; localised target oriented community based programmes (at points where child beggars congregate mainly with their families); and counselling for parents (to spare their children for education and skill development since a majority of children stay with their families) have also being made.

Growing pains: facing up to the challenges of allowing children's their personhood and realising their full potential

It is these very concerns and confronting realities that motivated Plan India and SPYM to transform the existing *Rain Basera* (night shelter) at R K Puram Sector 3 flyover area into a Day Care Centre for child beggars and their families in December 2015. The motive was to open up a 24-hour residential facility.

Its location was deemed ideal due to its proximity both to the camp of the child beggars and the SPYM headquarters (that made resource mobilisation that much easier).

At this juncture, it would be pertinent to note that while the government's Integrated Child Protection Scheme refers to the concept of open shelters (community-based safe spaces where children can play, study or engage in creative activities in a safe environment), there just aren't enough of such shelters in the city.

Aware that despite the good intentions of the Centre (of giving these children many of their rights ... be it to survival, health, nutrition, protection, education, development, rights, participation, and future employment), choices cannot be imposed on individuals, the Centre's outreach staff and counsellors took on a challenge. The task at hand being to convince the families to send their children to the Centre, and perhaps find a home here.

Against the city skylines in this part of capital that show off high rise buildings and concrete flyovers, the living spaces of child beggars and their families stand in sharp contrast. Their inhabitations are run down, open to the onslaught of nature's elements and the city traffic, with no water, toilets, sanitation or security of any kind. Eviction is a real fear, one that runs parallel to the turmoil of survival.

Yet amidst the fetid confines of their hovels the one luxury these people have and treasure is their freedom of movement. It is critical to their existence. The staff's first task was to ensure that the families recognised that presence at the Centre would not take away this liberty of spatial freedom or restrict them in any manner.

It was by no means easy. Breaking down their resistance to change and motivating them to adopt new lifestyles was challenging. As begging is viewed as a 'serious' business that is hugely lucrative, living within or marking attendance at the Centre did not seem that appealing or useful to this section of people. It just meant time away from begging and money. It inevitably raised tempers and suspicion.

Staff persistence (as community participation is at its core), however, finally paid off. Repeated interfaces with families (with dialogues revolving around the idea of a real 'home' for them at the Centre, three full meals for their children, caretaking facilities for them while they were at work, healthcare for ailing infants and children, and improvements in the quality of their lives) worked to weaken misgivings.

Explains Paramjit Kaur, the counsellor at the Centre, who plays a key role in this exercise, “Curious families began coming in. First just to inspect. And, then to spend a few hours, interacting with the staff, and availing the healthcare and other resources of the Centre. The moving in happened gradually and is still work in progress. Families move in only when they are completely convinced that the benefits of the move outweigh their earnings and unfettered lifestyles.”

The Centre persists with families as it is not possible to change so many ideas about the natural needs of children without mixing up a lot of parents. The ongoing relationships with parents is kept alive.

There have been cases when parents have asked for a sum of money to send their children to the Centre. The Centre handles this making clear that such barter will not be tolerated. Such parents are told that they are the custodians and co-travellers in their children’s journey, and the Centre’s role is merely to guide them to a better future away from begging.

Lives made anew

Big shifts are often signaled by small signs.

Today, as per the Centre’s current records (as on March 2016) there are a total of 78 children inmates – six in the under three age category; 35 in the three-six age bracket; 19 in the seven-10 category; 16 in the 11-15 age group; and two in the 16-18 age group. Around 20 families stay here permanently, and 12 families who live under the flyover send their children to the Centre.

The staff continues to make efforts to develop rapport with families, and support them in overcoming hurdles that hamper their move to the Centre. “This is key to gaining community acceptability as without their support and acquiescence, children’s presence at the Centre will be hindered,” say Sadakat Hussain and Himanshu Joshi, who actively spearhead outreach efforts.

Encouragement rides on the fact that one child’s ability to find his/her way out of the imposed social and economic confines unfailingly leads to a trail of other families joining the Centre and following a similar route. The hope is that this will eventually fuel a larger collective change within the community, which in turn will trigger a mass social change.

Broaching issues of education, skill building and counselling step by degrees

The issue of education, skill building, and counselling for children at the Centre has been broached unhurriedly and by degrees, both with the families and the children. This is a deliberate strategy as these children have a real fear of being hemmed within classrooms schedules, having lived a free, unfettered life all these years.

Using this as the entry point was dismissed as a bad idea, one that would have badly backfired as children's loathing for regimentation would have spread disaffection and disinterest.

Unravelling the importance of education – how it equips children with learning, confidence, self-esteem, social benefits, employment, earnings, entrepreneurial skills and access to networks that can transform their lives and the lives of others – has been undertaken steadily with a clever slant.

It has been done without making the endeavour of learning seem formidable or arduous. The trick has been to lean on the fun elements of learning, using non-formal and unorthodox ways in the initial stage. And, once the children have settled into this learning-by-doing method, assessments of the levels of children are undertaken to get them into age-assimilated groups, formal studies, and eventually into schools.

This process still holds sway. Once the children enter the Centre and accept it as their home, their resistance to a structured way of living and learning begins to wear off.

Needed: a situational analysis and needs assessments of the children under the flyover to catalyse and embed change

The Centre makes sustained efforts to understand the plight of these child beggars and their families better in order to address their needs far more effectively.

The outreach staff are currently making efforts to gather a medley of information on this community by attempting a survey.

Their questions relate to: the number of families who continue to live under the flyover or in slums around the area/their reasons for this/number of families who have come to Delhi from outside and how/number of members involved in begging within a family/the alternate occupations they follow (if any)/earnings from this/method and mode of begging (singly or in groups)/money earned through begging/bribe money paid to beg at a particular spot/hours spent in begging/problems faced while

begging/willingness to give up begging/children's keenness to study in schools/number of meals they have in a day/what do they eat at every meal/who tends to them when they are sick/do they abuse substances/what kind of drugs do they use/what civic amenities do they have/do they have identity papers...

What makes children inmates take to the Centre and stay on?

Coordinator Shiv Kumar identifies the creation of a child-safe environment as the glue, one that has cemented deep bonds

“As both Plan India and SYPM’s work are grounded on child-safety, care and protection we have effectively created an ambience at the Centre where children are consciously kept away from harm and abuse of all kind. Our staff are competent in their care and protection duties and not use harsh words or behaviour, physical force or cross children’s personal boundaries. They address the concerns of the children, answer their queries, and act against those who have caused harm. They also act on the feedback given by children and are not afraid make changes in their own work. The fact that they have a voice, one that is taken seriously, is what keeps children happy and determined to stay here.”

Counsellor Paramjit Kaur agrees that the child-nurturing environment is the biggest draw

“The Centre’s cheery surroundings with swings and slides at the entrance, the airy classroom with eye-catching posters, tree-lined exteriors, the general sense of bonhomie within the living quarters, and the loving attention of the staff attract the children, and draw them here.”

The freedom to study in the way that children want, and at the pace they are comfortable with, minus the rigid classroom routines is a huge plus, according to Sanjana Narotra, life skills educator

“An onlooker will perhaps be shocked to see that our classroom bears no relation to a regular school classroom. For one, we do not have chairs and tables just dhurries. On occasions, one can see some children studying while lying upside down, one taking the lead to do this as others follow. Some others studiously sit in corners, finding private spaces to write. A group may nosily interrupt classes and be disruptive, while another set may be sullen and withdrawn. We as teachers are however trained to be kind and indulgent to this kind of behaviour. This is because these children have never known rules and discipline and the concepts we teach will not be accepted with ease or learnt without resistance. If there is no understanding or tolerance of this fact on our part then it is futile to attempt to teach them.”

The affection of the staff, their receptive and non-judgmental attitude, and their genuine desire to help children calms the inmates, and elicits their trust, says caretaker Jaikumar

“Today, the children have come to regard us as family – a huge accomplishment, considering the fact that these children who come from volatile environments do not trust easily and are restrained with their affections.”

The fact that the young children are given t-shirts, notebooks, and pencils; and those going to school are given shoes, socks, water bottles and bags is a huge incentive, says Poonam Shukla, life skills educator

“Children feel important, wanted and part of a larger community. Feeling validated and given an identity in this manner roots them to this place which for them is now home.”

CHAPTER THREE

CHANGED LIVES, CHANGED LIFE PATHS

“I have always been in awe of children who go to school, live in homes, lead a regular life, and move with purpose towards a future. I never imagined this for myself. It seemed improbable, and laughable, even in my wildest of dreams. Yet today I have been gifted this very life. I actually study, make daily plans for homework, and even think of a different kind of future, something that would have been unbelievable in the past,” says 12-year old Kejum.

How has the Centre enabled such a crossover in this child’s life, and in that of many others? A simple yet straightforward explanation is: lives have been replenished because the policies and procedures of the Centre are oriented to address the child’s needs. And, take their rights, care and protection seriously.

The processes involved in changing lives is recounted here in detail specially to understand what has been accomplished, and what as yet needs to be.

Gaining confidence of the families and bringing them and their children into the Centre’s fold has been the initiatory step of this transformation. When families express willingness to stay with their children, they are first registered and their details recorded. Then their children are each given a unique identity number to mark their entry. Efforts are underway to maintain detailed family history records to streamline entry processes.

Each family is given bedding rolls, blankets, and other basic necessities. Children too receive t-shirts, bags, books, sharpeners, shoes, toothbrushes and paste, among other items, and are provided with safekeeping lockers.

In the Centre, which doubles up as a night shelter (as it is a *Rain Basera*), men are expected to sleep in the existing classroom at night; single women have a separate living room; and families with children occupy another room.

There is separate area for cooking and open cooking stoves are provided to families who normally cook using their own utensils. There are four toilets and water is provided for drinking, and also to wash clothes. Attempts to get a water connection from the Delhi Jal Board are on.

A day in the life of a child at the Centre

A typical day at the Centre proceeds somewhat like this. Outreach workers arrive under the RK Puram Sector 3 flyover at 9 am to gather children who have not moved into the Centre. This process can be easy on days, gruelling on others. While there is willingness on the part of many children to come along, there is a withholding on the part of others.

There is also another peculiarity to contend with. While children will accompany the workers to the Centre on some days, they will not on others. Their reasons vary. Sometimes they will have no reason. Whim and caprice take precedence.

The outreach workers ensure to use this time to open up conversations with the families who are not part of the Centre, and with those families whose children attend classes at the Centre but continue to live beneath the flyover. They address their queries and concerns, and keep the persuasive talk of enrolment at the Centre on.

When the children arrive at the Centre, the first hour flies by in a flash. Under the supervision of teachers and a few mothers who live there, the children brush their teeth, bathe, and wear their fresh t-shirts. Then they are ushered into classrooms. A roll call ensures. This is useful to gauge absenteeism. Classes begin at a leisurely pace at 10 am.

The children begin with prayers, and at 10.15 am they are inducted into yoga. This energises them to begin the day on a positive and structured note, calms down their anxieties, and fosters bonds with classmates.

After a fifteen-minute session, they are given breakfast and fruit. Children have been taught to wash their hands before eating, and then clean their plates after eating. They have also been sensitised to stacking their plates in order, once washed. If the plates are found unclean, the helpers rewash them.

On creative diversionary pursuits

Teachers kick start the day with non-formal education in the form of creative diversionary pursuits that they plan ahead with care. Children are first taught in Hindi for an hour, followed by fun exercises in English.

The teaching focuses on familiarising them with alphabets, numbers, words, songs and poems. Charts, posters, pictures and the TV are used as teaching aids. The quiz format and humour is often used to keep their attention going.

There is no blueprint as of now for teaching. But teachers breathe creativity and an element of enjoyment into each class to keep the learning easy and animated so that children don't disengage. They also ensure that they teach in a manner that children understand. This is ensured by repeatedly asking them to recount what they have grasped.

Inculcating life skills, which encourage positive and adaptive behaviours by facilitating children to develop and practice psycho-social skills, and function effectively in social environments, is woven into these classes.

Lunch is served at one pm. Children once again wash their hands before eating, clean their plates after eating, and neatly stack them plates. Stringent efforts are made to provide balanced diets that are both tasty and nutritious to enable the children's physical and cognitive development.

The Centre puts a lot of thought into meal plans as many of these children used to beg for food. For many families living here the lure of healthy food for their children is a huge incentive, and keeps them grounded at the Centre.

At two pm, they then go into a half hour art class where they experiment with a variety of materials and everyday objects to make creations of their own. They normally watch TV till three pm.

Time for fun and games and bit of study

The time between three and four pm is reserved to read, encourage children being readied for regular schools to get familiar with work sheets, and help children already in schools with homework. The last hour for children is spent in play. Children spend an agreeable time outdoors playing volley ball, badminton or with a ball and bat, or play carom or Ludo indoors.

At five pm, the morning staff leaves and night caretakers take over the duties. The children are fed dinner at eight pm, and if there is extra food it is distributed among parents. All the weekdays more or less follow this pattern, Except for Sunday which is a holiday where only caretakers are in attendance.

For the children these routines mean whole days of activity and whole days without begging.

Minor and major obstructions in need of redress

While these routines seem systematic and neatly bound, in reality, there are a few creases in need of being ironed out. The need for balance is being felt when trying to accommodate the needs of the children of varying ages who come to the Centre.

The teaching timetables recorded above accommodate children between three and 15 in separate groups. Teachers do make attempts to teach children in age-assimilated groups so that the teaching is relevant to them. But this is not always possible and sometimes they have to be taught as a group or separated as best as possible. This does create mix-ups at times.

Two, there is also the need to adjust to the needs of little children (one to six years) who attend *aganwadis* and return to the Centre; around 15 children who go to regular MCD schools in RK Puram Sector 3 (and return at one pm); and those who attend classes at the KHOJ premises, an NGO partner, in the neighbourhood (around 15-20 children are picked up by a bus daily in the morning at 10 am and returned by noon or one pm. As attendance is voluntary here, the children decide on which days they want to go – or not go).

Staff hence have to manage the challenge of merging all these students into a routine once they are back without disrupting the other children's schedules. While on an average on any given day there are 40 children in the morning, the numbers increase when these children from these three places show up. This process too stirs up confusion at times.

A very real danger (that is all too real) is the possibility that these children will get drawn into the begging dragnet all over again, which means a negation of all progress achieved thus far. Yet it is a risk that needs to be taken. As they say nothing ventured, nothing gained. Strategies need to be thought through to stymie this relapse.

Staff roles and responsibilities

The Centre's staff current comprises project in-charge; three men and women caretakers during the day; three men and women caretakers during the night; three life skills educators; one librarian; two outreach workers; one counsellor; and several cleaners.

Their competence lies in their ability to work within a child-informed and child-protection framework with love and compassion, placing the interests of the child above all else, and opening children's minds to new aspirations.

The staff lend direction to children in matters of personal conduct, hygiene, appearance, social skills, behaviour management, school routines, and work habits. And, their influence is evident by the fact that children see them as role models and imitate their behaviours.

Most important, they provide culturally competent care (by understanding each child's needs, their socio-cultural and economic realities; exhibiting zero tolerance to discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, caste, religion or sex; ensuring that threatening, bullying, physical abuse and using abusive language with children is not tolerated under any circumstance; and by not foisting their own ideas and beliefs on them).

The staff say while they are able to tide along comfortably now, challenges will arise if many staff are on leave simultaneously (given unforeseen and unavoidable circumstances) and when the number of children increase. SPYM does have replacement staff at hand and efforts are on to set in place contingent plans.

If the number of children exceeds the capacity of the Centre, there are plans to send them to other day care centres or the *Rain Basera* in Chattarpur.

On the many allies and partners: co-travellers in the Centre's journey

On two days of the week, volunteers from the organisation Magic Bus, introduce new ideas, attempt to break gender stereotypes, and bring attitudinal and behavioural change through the concept of '*sports for development*'. Games are used to get children to open up to new thoughts and ideas, and change socio-cultural norms that are harmful to them. Young volunteers also come to teach children of varying ages and cater to their learning needs.

The Centre also offers healthcare for the children and women in coordination with Tejus Asia, Saket. This is organised once a week to follow up on immunization schedules, and attend to sick women and children. In addition, a mobile health unit under the aegis of the Directorate General of Health Services, Government of Delhi, visits twice a week to

check on children's illness and dispenses medicines. *Aganwadi* workers also drop in at the Centre, but their visits are irregular and erratic.

The Centre works in close partnership with the Delhi government as the *Rain Basera's* fall under the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board. It follows their rules to ensure efficient upkeep of its premises.

The classroom and sleeping quarters have elaborate checklists to ensure hygiene, cleanliness of surroundings, safe drinking water, water for bathing and washing clothes, electricity, ventilation and useable toilets. These check listed rules also ensure the availability of mops, cleaning materials, dustbins, brooms, toilet brushes, mugs, buckets, foot mats, washing powder, dish cleaners, glasses, plates, and jugs.

There are also elaborate rules on fire safety (classrooms have fire extinguishers), first aid, staff rosters and attendance registers, staff uniform rules, record keeping of inmate details, inspection of premises, maintaining visitor registers, and how to store mattresses, blankets and personal belongings.

Provisions for tube lights, halogen lamps for effective lighting, TV, cupboards, chairs and tables have also been made.

Dispute resolutions that get acrimonious are resolved by calling in the Delhi Police. Though such unsavory fights are sought to be avoided, and the staff attempts to douse tempers, there has been the need to summon the police in cases where the violence could not be contained. The Centre is aware that dispute preventive measures need to be stringently put in place in anticipation of possible violence in the future.

CHAPTER FOUR

ENGAGING, CONVINCING AND INSPIRING CHILDREN

The current child-centric interventions at the Centre might seem highly unusual and non-standard but they have been effective to help children engage, learn, and express themselves. And, many have been integrated within the formal schooling system.

How so? An understanding of the basic premises of the Centre's interventions can provide a few explanations.

Shaping strategies on the basis of core beliefs and presumptions

It was evident before setting up the Centre that textbook teaching and stern discipline would not find favour with these learners. Contextual learning (filled with delight and animation), on the other hand, could sift through ways of easy and quick learning, thus stepping up the willingness to imbibe, and accept new ideas.

It was also perceived that in the place of strict hierarchies, control, and regulation, flexible freedoms within a firm compass (so as not to escape all rules) would work better. It would open up spaces for exploration and learning among children, and foster healthy and responsible behaviours among them.

And, it was also understood that while staff acknowledgement of the harshness of children's lives was a pre-requisite and very necessary, it was equally crucial for them to hold out lifelines of hope and affirmation for the future.

The happening of learning, the great equaliser

How is learning, the great equalising force, then carried forward at the Centre using these tenets?

It happens along the way of energised games, songs, rhymes, colouring sessions, art classes and quiz – in a 'learning-how-they-wish' process – with a good measure of diversionary creative group processes (subject to adaptation and change) thrown in to infuse interest.

This method of motivational teaching allows for an explorative understanding of the concrete and abstract, and accentuates cognitive growth processes (sharpening attention, language use, memory, perception, problem solving, creativity, and thinking).

The teachers explain this. They say they pick on an idea. Say, for example, the number one. Children are familiarised with the concept using single objects. The whole day is spent identifying a single item be it a banana or a ball or a fan using song, dance or treasure hunts. By the end of the day the children have got their heads around the concept of one, and are abuzz with the excitement of what they have learnt.

Of course, traditional learning is not altogether abandoned. Children are made to learn the alphabets and numerals, yet in a manner that is far from routine. This is because a meaningful learning process can happen only when children have an actual interest to know and understand, are supported in the explorations of their interest, and when they are given the opportunity to learn how they wish.

In a novel move, children are made to take turns to lead the class. This makes them want to come across as aware, and in the know of the subject. It unconsciously ignites their attention and interest in learning, and in assimilating ideas.

There is a library that children are encouraged to visit. Loveleen, the librarian, says, “Children often flip through pages with a great degree of interest, and even ask to borrow the books to read. It is a great way to inculcate curiosity in new ideas and introduce the habit of reading in them. We are keen to increase the number of books, and will certainly invest in age-appropriate reading material.”

Teachers essentially see teaching as a dynamic two-way process: where both teachers and students are in a process of learning from each other. And as explained earlier, the teaching is contextual where children are taught to learn from their surroundings. The education revolves around encouraging children’s critical thinking and problem-solving skills, an imparted in the language they are at ease with at a pace that they grasp learning.

The attraction of long term economic benefit for children in terms of learning vocational skills is also built in so that they can learn to help themselves.

On impediments and stumbling blocks

Disruptions are frequent. It is most often unwarranted, but to be expected. It comes in the form of unruliness, spats, churlishness, and contrary behaviours among children. Parents, too, often walk in to fetch children thus interrupting classes.

Teachers are prepared for all this, and use gentle firmness to deal with it. They try to divert or re-engage the child using a different method. The use of physical punishment, harsh words, or threats is an absolute no-no. “Earlier children would refuse to sit down in a class. We have come a long way since,” they say.

Tackling difficult and disruptive behaviours, and with the backtracking of children on changed behaviours are challenges teachers expect to deal with long term. They say that they have “the temperament, patience and professional ability” to deal with it.

The boys in the 14-18 age group are particularly hard to deal with as many of them abuse substances, gamble and are set in their ways. Ways to work around them need to be evolved and thought through.

Assessments: a barometer of their capabilities and potential

As the children settle down to their daily day to day exercises, an assessment of their levels of understanding is undertaken to segregate them into groups. This allows teachers to take on smaller groups, and give them personalised attention.

In particular, it allows for attention to early child development. Children of the ages of three and eight experience the most rapid period of growth and change during the human lifespan. Segregation of children into manageable groups allow teachers to be mindful of the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical processes required to support the development of these young children.

Apart from being watchful of these children's development in the classroom, they ensure family nurturance. Talking to parents and sensitising them to the fact that they need to be part of the child's learning and growing process, sharing in their little triumphs and defeats, is undertaken in earnest.

Readying children for the real world: one of real classrooms and schools

Readying the child to transition into the formal schooling system is a far more challenging process. It means bringing these children up to speed with the rudimentary skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. It calls for the devotion of time, and ensuring a degree of preparedness among them to handle school curricula, timetables, discipline, rules and regulations, punctuality, and social interaction with other children (who come from a different background, one that is far more stable).

In reality, this means equipping them with a fresh set of social and emotional skills.

Mainstreaming of children into formal education also means the staff have to aid families and children in the formal processes of gaining admission. This entails ensuring, they have proofs of identity and residence, the birth certificate of the child, and can successfully complete the paperwork required to gain admission.

Once the children are admitted into schools, the staff undertake the task of helping them with their homework on a daily basis, and helping them cope with exams as well. Around 12-15 volunteers come every Sunday afternoon, for an hour or more, to aid in this process and pitch in with additional inputs. **Today, around 20 children have been admitted to regular municipal and government schools.**

Ensuring regular assessments to monitor the growth of children is seen to be another key and vital function.

Exertions to find the individual strengths of each child, and help them tap into them (so that they can use them to their own advantage, as well as their coping mechanism) is undertaken constantly at the Centre. Changes made by children at the Centre are valued deeply. This is because what may look small to an outsider is actually a significant change that the child has attempted.

Career counselling and training of students in vocational skills – so that they understand the idea of setting goals, acquiring training and jobs, leading independent lives, and gaining economic self-sufficiency – is an indispensable part of staff duty. Efforts have been made to help children enlist into courses of hotel management, retail management, spoken language, and computer literacy.

Using glee and gaiety to skill children

The use of culture, song, art, dance, craft activities, and sport is frequent. The Centre on most days resounds with the sounds of merriment as children sing and dance or watch volunteers playact. Crafts and colouring exercises are huge favourites with the children, and their imaginative creations are on display in the class notice boards and in the office room.

These activities have a host of uses. Acting as therapeutic mediums, they bring good cheer; extend children's capabilities to understand and cope with life's contrarities; cultivate their life skills and sense of self-worth; forge bonds between classmates; develop social and community bonds; open children's minds to the idea of plurality and diversity; embed new ideas; and instill attitudinal and behaviour change.

It seems complicated and unrealistic, but it is rather simple and effective.

Take the simple case of the use of everyday objects by children in their craft classes. It helps them understand its everyday use. But used differently, it can be turned into something wholly unexpected. Such discoveries distill new meanings and possibilities for them. It teaches them that their immediate environment and experiences can help them experiment and modify situations for the better.

It also teaches them to think on their own and come up with ideas, leading to the building of a sense of self, purpose and value. As it is a group activity, this also firms up friendship, camaraderie and trust. When a variety of such activities coalesce to reinforce these concepts, children also are inducted into attitudinal change.

A number of festivals – of all religious faiths – are celebrated to knit children into a unified socio-cultural circle so that they partake of each other's beliefs and faiths.

Changing minds, changing lives

Introducing new ideas and behaviour change is often attempted using the method of '*sports for development*'. A set of plastic cones, discs and a ball are used for instance to point out why children should go to school. Children are first asked to place three plastic cones at a distance of 10 yards of each other. They are then made to place six discs in line with the head of each cone at a distance of five yards. The children are taught each disc is a goal post. The first stands for learning at school. The second for academic brilliance. The third for new skills. The fourth for merit and achievement. The fifth for a good job. And, the sixth for a bright future. They are then asked to choose a disc from where they would like to get at the cone with and topple it.

Clearly this is a game in the child's mind but it cleverly settles the idea of setting goals, and moving ahead in life within the child's worldview.

Similarly, the ball, discs and cones are used to teach children about the perils of unclean hands. These discs now stand for negative concepts like bacteria, illness, hospitals and medications. The result: children at the Centre are all familiar with the need to wash their hands – a huge change in attitude and behaviour – to avoid unpleasant aches and pains in the stomach, and a variety of undesired illnesses.

Active use of counselling is extended to ensure the physical, psychosocial, and emotional safety and health of children, and so that they can build a sense of control over their lives, and move towards resilience and empowerment.

Issues like aggression, bullying, violence, anger, sadness, attention seeking, self-inflicted harm, stealing, gambling, and sexual explorations are tackled in these sessions by the counsellor, in individual and group sessions with children.

Counsellors also deal with adolescent girls' separately and talk to them on a one-to-one basis on menstrual hygiene, reproductive health, and how to handle domestic violence (in case they happen to be silent victims if it).

Coping with children who have disabilities is also part of this effort. Children who grapple with disability are enveloped within a circle of care and their special needs are sought to be addressed. Children in the Centre are also sensitised on how to deal with these children who are differently-abled and be mindful of their needs and sensitivities. The Centre at the moment however is not equipped to handle such children with the care and attention they need, and this is an area that needs to be strengthened.

Children allowed an opinion, a voice

While affecting improvements in the infrastructure, and ways of functioning and teaching at the Centre, children's voices are heard and their opinions are taken seriously.

The reason is evident. As a Centre for children, it is their voices that much count and their needs that must be addressed.

Hearing their voices

Six-year-old Janina, says, "I love to read, play and stay at the Centre."

Ruksana, eight years old, says, "I like art classes, and am happy to be here. I am keen that people see what I have created."

Shezadi, six years of age, says, "I know how to count to 25. Today I led the class and my friends repeated the numbers after me."

Saijum, an eight-year-old, says, "I have happy to learn and use my notebooks and pencils."

CONCLUSION

The shape and spirit of the Centre as we know it today grew organically from a germ of an idea to stop children from begging and return their childhood to them. As the early seeds have begun to take root and grow, a source of energy, and a climate of change has set in. This pilot project may advance to other projects and new areas of work in the near future.

Today, seventy-eight children who used to beg have are beginning their lives anew. Many younger lives will be reawakened to newness soon.

The Centre's merit lies in its flexible, amorphous, and inclusive style of functioning. It allows for an interface and overlap of many processes, as detailed in the document. The

phased planning of activities and sustained follow ups in each one of them is a major reason for its success, and its ability to embed change in the lives of these children.

And, the adherence to the children protection and care principles – in pulse and spirit – explains its wide acceptance by children. As the Centre also recognises that children must be able to participate in matters affecting them and be empowered to speak up for the fulfillment of their rights, children feel a strong connect with it.

We have recounted how change is happening, and why. A quick recapitulation of the outcomes of the Centre – the small tipping points achieved for children who beg – would show:

- life-changing reformations in the lives of 74 children who have quit begging
- provision of a new, loving, safe, nurturing home for them
- the growing of supportive extended families for them, and warm nurturance by the Centre staff
- an appreciation of efforts and changes made by child, be they small or extraordinary
- a say in the running and systems of the Centre (a crucial breakthrough for children as their opinions are taken seriously)
- improvements in their literacy, numeracy, life skills, and vocational capacities
- entry into schools and non-formal education programmes
- improvements in their quality of life, health, nutrition, social skills, social acceptance and emotional well-being
- a bolstering of their rights, dignity, identity, and self-worth
- extended capabilities to cope with challenges through counselling, and perceptible attitudinal change as they now understand why they should not beg but go to school instead
- an increased zest and vitality for life among them as they have found their purpose in life for now (schooling)
- the gaining of an understanding on how to set of goals and move to achieve them through self-reliance
- the experiencing the gains of career counselling, new opportunities, and contacts
- shared grounds for children and families resulting in strengthened community bonds and efforts to educate children

Both Plan India and SYPM are keenly aware that these gains, and such moments of joy and wellness for such children, cannot be hustled and brief. Children cannot be allowed to regress into their past lives of deprivation and disillusionment. They cannot be allowed to surrender to despondency and fatalism. It is possible they do as the reasons for their earlier miserable-ness, the systemic inefficiencies, exist.

Yet the issue of templating a wider, deeper and more permanent change to their lives can happen only after strategic plans are drawn up for the next five or ten years (that takes stock and address all uncertainties complexities), and by the rallying many different actors and organisations and pooling of their resources together.

And, today, even as baseline information for future assessments is being gathered, and attention to specific contextual factors is being sharpened, some concrete and immediate plans for the immediate future have emerged. They straddle multi-pronged, coordinated and comprehensive measures that include:

- investing in several other initiatives of this kind to assist many other children escape the drudgery and deprivations of begging for survival (*see box*)
- initiating tie-ups with NGOs to build skills and capacities of children in a variety of areas, and also to open up employment possibilities post education
- attempting to piggyback on existing initiatives of NGOs to gain from their wide outreach
- building capacity of key stakeholders through training
- understanding how to better engage families and communities in the social inclusion process of their children
- gaining a better understanding the realities of street children who beg through longitudinal research following them from childhood to adulthood to design effective interventions of care and also understand how structural inequities can be addressed
- initiation of fortnightly *Bal Sabhas* to accentuate children's understanding of their rights and entitlements, so that they are empowered to make decisions in their daily lives
- evolution of a streamlined curriculum for these children based on pre-tested formats that have displayed efficacy
- moving from basic to advanced levels of teaching and learning in a systematic manner
- ensuring mechanisms to deepen levels of understanding among children, as well as establish evidence-based patterns to assess levels of understanding
- developing leadership skills amongst them
- enriching reading material in the library
- roping in more qualified resource persons to undertake activities and trainings

- induction of more counsellors
- conducting a needs assessment of disabled children, finding innovative methods to address these needs, and ensuring qualified counsellor support
- streamlining the maintenance of records at the Centre
- putting in practice the learnings from surveys conducted
- extending spiritual discourses to help children find their inner calm and balance
- deepening sensitisation to issues of gender equality (as childhood is a dynamic period where issues of gender and gender norms are ingrained and become established)
- putting in place dispute preventive measures
- making plans to accommodate children elsewhere when the Centre's accommodating capacity is exceeded
- ensuring a better health infrastructure and regularising the visits of the *aganwadi* workers
- undertaking systematic reviews to evaluate the efficiency of this model
- documenting learnings and good practices to design better interventions, and
- enlisting public sensitisation to the stigmatisation and discrimination of children in the streets

BOX: Growing branches

The offshoot of this pilot programme will be the proliferation of other such programmes very soon around the traffic signals of Munirka, Nizamuddin, Defence Colony, and the Lajpat Nagar flyover. The efforts of the partners will be to reach out to 700 children (in a year) who beg, and aim to prevent at least 400 of them from begging.

It will, of course, mean getting them into similar environments of nurturing and care, and mainstreaming them into *aganwadi* centres and schools. These new programmes stand to benefit immensely from the learnings of the pilot programme and build on its strengths to sharpen outcomes.

Who will be the children targeted at these Centres? Again they will be children who are forced to beg by their parents/guardians; and also children who are forced to beg by individuals (may include gangs, local goons, friends, and extended family members), and children who beg on their own (children orphaned, deserted, runaways, trafficked, and drug-users).

These areas have been consciously chosen for the huge concentrations of child beggars. In Munirka there are roughly 50-60 children who beg at any given time, in the Nizamuddin *darga* area there are 60-70 children who are close on the heels of visitors who throng to the place to offer prayers.

In terms of infrastructure, the focus will be on:

- Developing better approach roads and paved exteriors at the Centre
- Mounting cleanliness drives in and around the area
- Provision of little sit-in areas within tree-lined corners

- Encouragement of wall paintings to brighten up the ambience
- Ensuring water connections that provide safe drinking water, and a water cooler for the inmates
- Construction of a kitchen, and the
- Cleaning up of the neighbouring park that lies beyond the boundary of the Centre so that children can have a green playground

This is our story so far. We in partnership with the children and their families have taken huge leaps of faith. This process documentation has attempted to capture the seeing through of many elements by the Centre, and the changes being made (and considered) to lower risks, and meet the aspirations for the future. And also our learnings so far.

We hope it conveys our sense of excitement at the potential and opportunities this model holds out, both for us and for others who wish to tread on the path of freeing children from begging for their survival.

But we have a long way ahead to build a society which respects promotes and protects child rights and dignity, as it does their best interests. Sustainability is a major challenge for the Centre as it entails providing these children with appropriate support so they can enjoy their rights into youth and adulthood. This also means multi-sector and long term investments into socio-economic, legal, financial, and policy support.