

GOVERNMENT—NGO PARTNERSHIPS AND BEYOND: THE EXPERIENCE OF CHILD LABOUR ERADICATION PROJECT IN KARNATAKA¹

V. ANIL KUMAR

For attaining successful outcomes on social issues such as child labour, there is a need to go beyond GO-NGO partnerships. In doing so, it is imperative to include the local self-government institutions and also engage broader publics and public action. This article discusses the role of NGOs and stipulates the responsibilities of state government and different line departments of government of Karnataka at district level. It delineates in detail the nature of partnership between NGOs and government and broadly outlines the functions of local self government institutions in eradicating child labour and ameliorating the lot of children employed in hazardous vocations and their rehabilitation.

THE SCLP—the State Child Labour Project of Government of Karnataka— envisages partnership between various governmental departments and the Non-Governmental Organisations or NGOs in its efforts to eradicate child labour in Karnataka. The partnership of these two actors is central to this project. In this article different aspects of the nature of Government Organisations (GO)-NGO partnership have been explored in three districts of Karnataka namely Kolar, Bellary and Davanagere. The article examines in detail the role of NGOs, government departments and the major positive and negative aspects of the relationship between the Government and NGOs in implementing the Project in the above mentioned three districts and attempts to draw lessons for similar collaborations for achieving developmental ends in similar contexts in other Indian states and elsewhere.

¹This article is based on an evaluation project titled 'Institutional Design for Elimination of Child Labour: A Study of State Initiatives of Eradication of Child Labour in Karnataka,' sponsored by the Department of Labour, Government of Karnataka.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognised in the development discourse in general and with regard to the eradication of child labour in particular that governmental and non-governmental partnerships play a crucial (the State Child Labour Project of Government of Karnataka, India) too envisages partnership between various governmental departments and the NGOs. The partnership of these two actors is central to this project and forms the fulcrum around which the project moves; we here study the partnership in three districts of Karnataka namely Kolar, Bellary and Davanagere.

The Role of the NGOs

The structure of the SCLP is designed to give an active and central role to NGOs. In the three districts of our study, Kolar, Bellary and Davanagere, 31 NGOs have been interviewed that have implemented the SCLP. The NGOs are supposed to play a key role in identifying, rehabilitating and mainstreaming the child labourers. These are discussed below.

Identification of Child Labourers

The process of identification of child labourers is the first step in the process of eradication of child labour. The NGOs mentioned herein had to take various steps in the process of identification. The identification is done by NGOs in co-ordination with line departments of the government. The major ways by which identification was done are: (a) door to door survey; (b) raids on the work places; (c) informal contacts and earlier work experience; (d) concentration on specific localities; and (e) concentration on specific stake holder groups that suit the ideology of the NGO.

Door to door survey of the localities where the child labour is likely to be prominent is one of the main ways by which the NGOs have identified child labourers. *Firstly* the NGOs identify the sectors in which child labourers are likely to be prominent and conduct door-to-door survey in those areas. These are sectors like the automobile garages, silk reeling centres, beedi rolling households, hotels, puffed rice production mills or mining areas. NGOs have done this with the help of government departments.

The *second* step taken by the NGOs is raids on the work places. Often NGOs have conducted the raids on the work places in order to rescue child labourers with the help of other line departments of the government such as the labour inspectors, police and revenue officials. This is the toughest aspect of the process and NGOs face resistance from employers, parents of children and at times children themselves in the process.

The *third* way is through informal contacts and their earlier work experience. This has been particularly so with the NGOs working with

women's groups called Self Help Groups (SHGs) where the SHGs have been quite instrumental in identifying the child labourers. The prior experience of NGOs in different projects of government and donors was quite helpful in identifying localities/sectors.

The *fourth* way is by concentrating on specific localities in which they are concentrated. For example the girl child labourers of beedi rolling and silk reeling industries. In similar fashion the slum areas in which another NGO found most of the children working.

The *fifth* method is to concentrate on specific social groups such as SCs (Scheduled Castes) and STs (Scheduled Tribes). During the course of our fieldwork we have come across NGOs, which predominantly concentrated on Dalit children.

The NGOs also faced some problems in the identification of the child labourers. *Firstly*, often there is no pre-existing census of child labourers; and even if there is one, it is not available to NGOs. *Secondly*, there were numerous threats by the employers and businessmen who employ the children towards the NGOs. Identification is risky and even fraught with much physical risk for NGO staff. Another major problem is the determination of age of the child. Often the medical department doctors do not accompany the team that goes to identify and rescue the children; and the children and employers, and also the parents, report the children as above 14 years of age and do not come under the Karnataka Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986.

Rehabilitation of Child Labourers

Rehabilitation of child labourers according to the SCLP is primarily through residential Bridge schools, where the children are imparted education to enable them to join the mainstream schools. Almost all the NGOs that we visited had Bridge schools and they had already mainstreamed at least one or two batches of children. The standard period of stay of a child labourer in a residential Bridge school, according to the SCLP, is one year. After one year the child is sent to government school with or without a hostel. During the period of Bridge school NGO imparts education mostly based on Chinara Angala² Study materials, including books are supplied by the education department. Some of the NGOs also impart vocational skills. But the education that the child receives in a Bridge school is basically oriented to join him in a regular school than prepare him for taking up a trade. Two other aspects that we would like to discuss *vis-a-vis* rehabilitation

²Chinnara Angala literally means 'children's space' this term is used to mean a crash course used in informal education for out of school children. The crash course and the study material produced for it are widely used by NGOs working on child labour.

by NGOs are: one, food and nutrition during the Bridge school and two, the duration of rehabilitation period.

The majority of the NGOs believe that the funds provided by SCLP for food and nutrition are inadequate. *Secondly*, the amount that is provided is based upon bills that are submitted after the expenditure. This reimbursement process makes smaller NGOs suffer much in providing nutritious food to children. Institutionally the NGOs are small entities that do not have much social capital to mobilise resources on their own. The same is the case with providing teaching and accommodation facilities. More important problem is that of duration of rehabilitation. The NGOs are of the opinion that one-year period for rehabilitation is inadequate to inculcate a mental and attitudinal change in a child; rather it should be for three years.

Mainstreaming³ of Children

There are three kinds of problems in mainstreaming of children: one, the getting admission into government schools with hostel; two, retaining of children in government schools; three, maintenance of children in schools that are non-government, for-profit schools. The first problem arises from the fact that in majority of government schools the number of residential seats is not commensurate with the number of children that the NGOs seek to mainstream. The second problem is that the children keep coming back to the NGOs due to non-availability of hostel facility in some mainstream schools. It is the responsibility of GO-NGO partnerships to ensure that the mainstreaming is sustainable and children continue in school and do not drop out to go back to work.

II. THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND LINE DEPARTMENTS

The line departments play a crucial role in the identification, rehabilitation and mainstreaming of child labourers. Under 'Section 17' of the Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act almost all the line departments at the district and sub-district levels are responsible for the eradication of child labour. The idea apparently is to synergise all these departments in the cause of eradication of child labour⁴. The line departments are supposed to operate under committees to eradicate child labour. The officials of the revenue department supervise these committees. Besides these departments, the

³Mainstreaming³ of child labourers according to this project has a limited meaning of joining them in regular government run schools at appropriate levels of education.

⁴The major departments that come under this 'Section 17' are: the Departments of Labour; Revenue; Education; Police; Social Welfare; Women and Child Development; The Municipal Departments; Public Health; Sericulture; Industries and Commerce; The Department of Backward Classes and Minorities, etc.

SCLP has its own project office and Project Director with some NGO, legal or social work background who monitors the NGOs. We have, during the course of fieldwork, held detailed interviews with the three Project officials of the three focus districts of Kolar, Davanagere and Bellary. Views of these officers are noteworthy because they come from outside the standard official departments and are trained in either legal or social work professions. We have also interviewed officials from other Departments. What follows are the views of all these officials at district level.

OFFICIAL VIEWPOINT AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL

Kolar District

The officials in Kolar feel that firstly there is a problem at the level of identification of NGOs for the programme itself. Following the prescribed rules of the SCLP, NGOs are selected for the programme after a public advertisement and based on their previous record. But in practice, sometimes, local political pressures are also prevalent in the selection of NGOs.

From the official point of view, unlike from the NGO viewpoint, there are no problems regarding the financial aspects. Officials feel that the NGOs submit bills of expenditure incurred once in two months and on the basis of which officials reimburse them. However, some officials feel that some NGOs show clerical salary without having a clerk; over reporting of children, etc. Officials monitoring the project feel that the actual numbers of children shown are at variance with the actual children rehabilitated.

The labour department officials, the revenue department officials and the project officials and of course the NGOs feel that the task of identifying and rescuing the children is the most challenging one. Even physical threat is prevalent to the Project Director of the SCLP. In one case in Kolar one of the industry people beat up the Project Director of the SCLP, and also the police constables that accompanied her.

The inter-departmental coordination is a recurring theme in discussion with officials at different levels. The officials at the district level who are deeply involved with SCLP and are in the process of engaging the line departments feel that while the NGOs are contributing to the alleviation of child labour, there are major problems in co-ordination with government line departments. The revenue, labour and police departments are co-operating but other departments such as the medical or even the education department are not co-operating much. The long list of departments, which are supposed to pro-actively engage in the process of eradication of child labour, often do not get engaged in the process as much as they are supposed to.

Three more issues that prominently figured during the discussions with the district level officials in Kolar were (i) the process and duration of rehabilitation, (ii) the kind of education and training imparted during the rehabilitation, and (iii) the question of public awareness. Firstly the district level officials unanimously opined that the rehabilitation of child labourers should be based on residential Bridge schools. However, the officials at the district level disagreed with the SCLP norm that these Bridge schools should be of only one-year duration. They prefer three to five years.

Secondly the nature of education provided in Bridge school was stressed upon by the district officials. The present system follows largely the Chinnara Angala system for which books are provided by the education department. According to the officials, vocational education is not part of the curriculum in all Bridge schools which is imperative to mainstream the children and inculcate confidence in their minds.

The last and most important aspect of child labour is that of public awareness. The SCLP does hold specific mention of and budget for public awareness but in practice we did not come across much generation of public awareness in the implementation of the project. The officials hold the same view. They say that public awareness is particularly important in two concrete senses: one, public awareness in a broader sense of mobilising larger collective interest in the problem for public, collective action and two, to mobilise material support for programmes such as SCLP and particularly for the needy NGOs that are implementing the project. For both these purposes involving the local communities is important. So is the involvement of local self-government institutions. Some of the officials highlighted cases where resource provision for Bridge schools to some extent was met by the local municipal councillors. This is more by way of plates, books, biscuits, etc. And the officials felt that presently there is no awareness at the level of municipality and gram panchayats. There is widespread belief in the academic and policy circles that effective provision of education facilities would go a long way in solving the problem. Late Myron Weiner (Weiner, 1991) made a strong case for the argument and the argument gained certain strength over time. Following this we have conducted interviews with the officials of the education department and below we present the discussion.

According to the education department officials in Kolar, the first step that they take is to conduct a survey identifying all the drop-outs. As a follow up of the survey the education department attempts to implement all its schemes to get the drop-out into the school. The education department has seven schemes for drop-outs. For example they have Chinnara Angala programme for 60 days. But the education department officials are candid about the limitations of these schemes and say that after these programmes the children drop out again and go back to work.

According to the education department officials efforts are on to mainstream the children; and in this direction 14 Education Guarantee Scheme Centres have been set up this year in the district. The department is also opening tent schools; particularly for children of migrant labour families. The duration of tent schools depends on the stay of the migrant children. The further efforts of the education department are many and some of them are the following: 10 bridge residential schools; seasonal schools in residential areas of minority communities; home-based education for the handicapped children; transportation facilities to children in far flung areas; residential schools for girl children; remedial teaching to children falling behind in their performance; and providing aid instruments for physically challenged children. The education department officials' list of schemes is impressive including provision for drinking water facility to each school; provision of toilets to each school; besides the programme of mid-day meals in government primary schools.

Concerning issues such as the teacher- pupil ratio and the presence of the number of woman teachers among the total number of the teachers the officials claim that the present teacher -student ratio is 1:26 in primary schools in the Kolar district.

Bellary District

In Bellary district the issues that come up in interviews with the officials related to the Project are of different order. The questions that come up are basic and are about what is the extent of prevalence of child labour; in which sector; who are the actual employers, and how best to deal with them. The latter pertains to the issue of inter-departmental coordination and cooperation. What are these issues?

The district level officials in Bellary say that they are aware that there is a high magnitude of child labour in the district, but they do not know the exact number. According to the SCLP project guidelines, a scientific survey has to be conducted regarding the prevalence of the child labour in the district but no such survey is conducted. However the project officials put the number around 4,000. In 2001 a survey was conducted and the total figure identified was 4,185. The NGOs working in the district put the figure at above 50,000. And on the other extreme, the labour department inspectors in the district put the figure at a few hundred. There are three things to be considered here. *Firstly*, in Bellary district most of the child labourers work in unauthorised mining of iron and manganese ores, therefore there is urgent need to ascertain the actual number because the mining activity can be hazardous; *secondly*, it is also difficult to ascertain, and therefore requires particularly harder effort, because most of the families which work in the mines are nomadic migrant labourers .

The child labourers are mostly from SC and ST communities. With particular reference to the hazardous industries in Bellary, the SCLP officials say that mostly the children are from minority Muslim community. The migrant labourers in Bellary live in temporary tents at the sites of mining. The living and working conditions of these labourers is bad and child labourers from these mining industry families need urgent rehabilitation.

One of the questions raised in the discussion with project officials of Bellary pertains to the inter-departmental coordination. Particularly the Project Director of the SCLP feels that inter-departmental coordination would have improved substantially had some workshops and discussions between the line departments and SCLP officials taken place right from the beginning. Particularly in a district where the number of child labourers continues to be uncertain, and probably growing, a thorough discussion of the survey in the initial stages would have set up a benchmark for action for all the concerned governmental officials and not least the SCLP officials and implementing NGOs. And it appears that the problem of inter-departmental coordination and cooperation is an issue not just for this district but other districts as well.

There is an interesting insight emerging from the discussions with the SCLP project officials and this concern the definition of child labour. As mentioned above the extent of child labour can be definite only when the definition of the child labour is certain for all the officials concerned. One definition is that any dropout should be treated as child labourer, and this is a broader definition of child labour. But the other and the Department of Labour officials definition is that only the child labourer certified as such by the labour inspector is a child labourer. It appears that the Labour department sees the issue from enforcement point of view whereas the SCLP officials and NGOs see it from the angle of broader definition of child labourers. The SCLP officials feel that in the present situation of Bellary very broad definition of child labour is needed. This issue has wider consequences for partnerships between governments and non-governmental agencies.

Another major perplexity with the project officials is lack of the communication and linkages between the district project office and the State level offices located in the State capital Bangalore. Is there a steady flow of information, communication and guidance between the State level office and the district offices? Is the project regularly guided and monitored from above? The district level officials complain that the State level officials have not guided and monitored the project periodically and sufficiently. The SCLP officials and other district level officials feel that there should be a review meeting at district level periodically, at least once a month, on the progress of the project involving all the officials.

Much like in Kolan the question of inter-departmental coordination is also a problem at Bellary. The Project officials and other officials feel that there should be a constant and consistent co-ordination between the deputy commissioners, project directors and the officials of the labour department. It would be erroneous to say that no such coordination exists though the level, effectiveness and seriousness of cooperation and coordination required is below the magnitude and urgency of the problem.

There are other issues, such as: (a) the need to improve the public awareness and education component of the project, and (b) the nature of training/education to the children during the rehabilitation.

Davanagere District

The discussions with officials relating to the project in Davanagere can be clearly stated in terms of the mandate of the project: (a) identification and rescue, (b) rehabilitation, (c) mainstreaming, (d) public awareness, and (e) training to different stake holders. The district level officials spoke candidly about the situation regarding all these five aspects. As we see the problems faced and the opinions formed of district officials are more or less the same as that of Kolar and Bellary though they vary in degree from issue to issue. Regarding the latter two i.e., generating wider public awareness and enlarging the coverage of training to all the stakeholders, the views of Davanagere officials are same that of Kolar and Bellary.

The noteworthy fact about Davanagere district is that it has the advantage of having a UNICEF/NORAD project with office of its own in the district. And Davanagere also had a very pro-active set of officials in Labour and other Departments. It has also been observed that the officials in the Labour Department and other departments are responsive and pro-actively oriented to the problem of child labour. While these were the advantages in Davanagere, the odds were also high. The district town itself has the notorious 'Mandakki Batti' (puffed-rice industry), which has the support of powerful local politicians.

Concerning the rehabilitation in the Bridge schools the district officials say that the children often feel dejected to join Bridge schools leaving behind their family. Some of these working children have only one parent i.e., mother, and they miss their homes a great deal. According to the officials, the residential Bridge schools are running well and the NGOs take good care of children. The NGOs give each child their personal necessities like a comb, tooth brush etc., the SCLP provides two pairs of clothes, and the education department provides books. The NGO also provides recreational facilities for the children. For a period of one to two weeks after joining the school the child is allowed just to play and after that the child's name is put in the school attendance rolls.

Regarding the mainstreaming part, the district officials of Davanagere say that in the process of mainstreaming backward class, SC and ST children get hostel seats to the extent of 65 to 70 per cent. The rest are joined in private schools; or the NGOs try to rope in sponsors to enable the children to study in private schools. The officials say that insufficient hostel seats in schools are the major drawback in mainstreaming.

Much like in Kolar and Bellary the district level officials in Davanagere also feel that there is much to be done to create public awareness. The SCLP officials in particular feel that in order to improve the programme, they badly need public awareness and education campaign. Presently there are some grants for awareness campaign within the project, but according to the project officials these are not enough. The district officials feel that they need more allocation of funds and more active awareness campaign for the public education purpose.

Finally, one aspect that the officials in Davanagere stressed upon, unlike their counterparts in Bellary and Kolar, is the importance of trainings. They strongly feel that the members from grama panchayat, taluk panchayat and zilla panchayat and also the MLAs need to be trained on the issue of child labour. Trainings are needed for these persons at least once a year. Youth, through youth clubs, in villages and towns need trainings as well. Joint trainings involving NGO and GO personnel are preferred.

III. GOVERNMENT- NGO RELATIONS IN SCLP

As mentioned in the beginning, the NGO-Government relationship is the fulcrum around which the project moves. How are the relations between NGOs and the government?

The Major Positive Aspects

Firstly, as per the project, the major responsibility of the eradication of child labour rests with the NGOs and the role of government is to support them in identification, rehabilitation and mainstreaming. In all these aspects the relationships between the government and the NGOs are to a large extent positive and successful. Institutionally, though the government procedures happen to be rigid, and NGO functioning happens to be flexible; these aspects have not come in the way of identification, rehabilitation and mainstreaming of child labourers.

There is good amount of trust between the NGOs and Government officials of various departments and though the relationship is unequal, and the Government expects the NGOs to be at the receiving end, there is not much evidence of total break down of the relationship. The listing of child labourers, the raids on work places and the rehabilitation and mainstreaming

are all done with the help of labour, revenue and other officials.

The Major Irritants in NGO -Government Relationship

As noted earlier the NGOs are particularly unhappy with the amount of money made available to them per capita/per meal; this they feel is below the market prices of food commodities. *Secondly*, some of the NGOs feel that there are procedural problems and delays in the reimbursement of the expenditure. As most of the NGOs implementing the project are small, they are incapable of mobilising resources in cash or kind on their own. The third problem is the insufficient hostel seat for the children to be mainstreamed. To make this project successful and sustainable, the government and the department of Education must address to these problems or else it will turn out to be a damp Squib.

IV. GO -NGO PARTNERSHIPS AND BEYOND

In the foregoing we have discussed the different dimensions of GO-NGO relationship in SCLP and the relationships between different departments of the government. At the very outset it must be said that the inter-departmental coordination is a major issue and it needs to be sorted out at the earliest. When official departments coordinate well among themselves they can coordinate with non-governmental agencies better. Since this project emphasises so much on GO-NGO cooperation this aspect is crucial

One aspect of improving the effectiveness of GO-NGO relationship in order to enhance the co-operation, trust and confidence between NGOs and Government is to conduct joint workshops at the district and taluk panchayat levels. Another aspect is to involve district and taluk panchayats in the project. At present, the involvement of panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) in the project is minimal. There is an urgent need to involve panchayats at all levels and municipal administration in addressing the problem.

Likewise the training component of the Project could be improved. NGO staff and the government functionaries related to the tasks have to be trained in the laws, Acts and issues involved in the problem of child labour.

The major point that we argue for in this article is the generation of public awareness and public action. Our field interviews at different levels with officials, children, parents of children, NGOs staff and leaders have repeatedly shown the need to improve the public education and awareness component. Since all the electronic means are now available, these means of communication can be made use of even more positively for sensitising the citizens and officials; besides these there are also forms of popular communication such as folk theatre, puppet shows etc., with which the message can be conveyed. In the ultimate instance on issues such as child

labour it is the awareness of the problem and public action, in the broadest possible sense that matters.

Child labour is a localised phenomenon with local specifications and particularities. In order to understand this locale-specific problem of child labour and to alleviate the problem there is a need to involve local governance institutions, local publics and local civil societies. This requires local support and partnerships as well. Local self-government institutions both panchayats and municipalities have great potential to contribute to the eradication of child labour in the form of local information, communication, and local monitoring and in terms of mobilisation of local resources. This potential has to be utilised fully for better implementation of the projects on eradication of child labour.

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