

## Preventive child protection in communities-Building capacities of families, communities and governments

### Introduction

*Babu must be 13 years old. He studies in class 8. Tomorrow, he is going along with his neighbor to Shillong to work in the mines.*

*Shernaz looks to be 17 years old. She was married two years ago. Underweight and malnourished herself, she is pregnant with her second baby.*

Every child has a right to protection-to a safe and secure childhood. The Constitution of India, and the UNCRC, and the existing laws in the country guarantee protection to children in India. However, caught in a helpless cycle of poverty, divisions of identity-religion, caste, class, and ineffective governance, childhoods of millions of children like Babu and Shernaz come to an abrupt end.

Child protection interventions in India sit on the sidelines and are designed to reach specific children only after they fall into unsafe or unprotected situations. Interventions are mostly at the tertiary level, reaching children in trouble with specific services, which include rescue, residential care, or restoration back to their families. There are some interventions at the secondary level, reaching children at risk. Interventions at the primary level reaching children before the abuse occurs are mostly absent.

It is known that one of the best ways to ensure prevention is to arrest child abuse and neglect before it starts is by building caring and child friendly communities. Experience from around the globe and in India, suggests that protecting children is difficult and complex. Noted academicians have coined child protection as a 'wicked problem'. It involves challenging traditional beliefs and practices, and addressing political differences. It requires the state, communities, families and children themselves to come together. It requires investment in a robust system-law, systems, services and skilled human resource. However, in India, child protection receives the lowest investment of government resources and has been at a constant low of 0.03% of union budget resources over many consecutive 5 year plans of the government.

Leher is a child rights organization, which believes that every child has a right to a safe and secure childhood, and that government and communities must collaborate to ensure that every child is protected from violence, abuse and exploitation. Leher strongly believes that it is possible to change the status quo. Communities and families who are aware and sensitized to child protection, would find ways to protect their children, and would demand protection services from the State.

Leher aims to focus on prevention at the primary level- communities, government, and for all children. The Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), the flagship scheme of the Government of India, for the protection of children, speaks of creating a protective environment for children. Leher would like to leverage this opportunity to develop a model for community based preventive child protection. Leher has initiated its first pilot district for developing the preventive child protection program in the district of Madhubani in Bihar.*(Please see Annexure II for pictures from the field ).*The project covers 63 villages, 7 GPs in 3 blocks of the district. We now seek partnership and support to scale the program to 4 additional districts in the country, in order to obtain a critical mass of experiences in order for a model for preventive intervention to emerge.

## Purpose

To build capacities of communities, government and civil society organizations to understand the protection needs of children: to anticipate, respond, prevent, and demand protection services for children.

## Program Description

### Key Building blocks of the community engagement program include:

- **Participatory practices:** The use of participatory practices equips communities with skills to critically evaluate their situation mobilize themselves, act and demand for the safety and protection of children.
- **Developing a district level baseline and capacity building:** Involving communities in generating credible evidence and data on the basis of which planning and monitoring would take place. *(Please find a brief summary of findings of 2 child protection need assessment studies conducted by Leher in the districts of Madhubani and Morigaon enclosed in Annexure I.)*
- **Leadership development and capacity building:** Giving communities a voice on child protection issues by nurturing leadership and ambassadors for child protection from key groups in communities which include children, youth, duty bearers, parents and civil society organisations, who would advocate for child protection in their spheres. Through the program a few local NGOs would also be nurtured to develop them as technical resources for child protection in the district.
- **Partnership with government:** Collaboration with the district administration and state government to ensure institutionalization of child-friendly procedure and protocols in public services and programs.

### Activities of the program

The program works at all levels within the district beginning in communities at the village level and then establishing linkages at the block and district level. Children, members of communities, duty bearers, and

elected representatives are active stakeholders of the program. Children’s groups, Child Protection Committees, and Youth volunteers are the mechanisms through which activity and dialogue take place in communities. Activities include awareness and sensitization programs, case interventions, routine meetings of committee and groups, home visits, interactions between committee members and children’s groups with school, anganwadi, and health care centers, mapping activities, planning, audits of services for children, lobbying with the administration for addressing issues related to services etc. At the Block and district level, child protection committees are formed to ensure coordination between various stakeholders to ensure services at the village level. An NGO takes



the role as lead facilitator of the program at the start, and over a period of 5 years it is envisaged that the linkages will be established and the community come into the forefront and will take on the role of monitoring and vigilance.

### Phases of the program

TRANSITION TO COMMUNITY		
I	II	III
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding CP issues- planning +dialogue and discussion +setting up systems               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Advocacy groups</li> <li>▪ Documentation system for reporting &amp; monitoring</li> </ul> </li> <li>• On-going review</li> <li>• Protocol for case intervention</li> <li>• Media sensitization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Routine functioning of Advocacy groups               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ awareness camps</li> <li>▪ case intervention</li> <li>▪ public dialogue</li> <li>▪ media sensitization</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Strategy in collaboration with district administration to scale CP system to cater to the entire district</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Routine functioning</li> <li>• Linkage to district CP system</li> <li>• Public hearing</li> <li>• Public Social Audit of services</li> <li>• Dipstick surveys</li> <li>• Link to local political system</li> </ul>
18 months	24 months	18 months
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leher facilitates &amp;</li> <li>• NGO begins to take lead</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leher monitors,</li> <li>• NGO facilitates &amp;</li> <li>• VCPC + CP volunteers begin to take lead</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leher phases out</li> <li>• NGO monitors &amp;</li> <li>• VCPC + CP volunteers lead</li> </ul>

In the first phase the focus would be on understanding child protection situation in the district and then initiating dialogue, discussion and planning with stakeholders from the village, block and district level on the need and how to address the issues of child protection. During this phase the lead role would be played by Leher and the local partner whose primary role would be sensitization of stakeholders, facilitating processes, advocacy etc. By the time of phase two the child protection advocacy groups would be set up at the village level and the focus would be on ensuring that they routinely function, identify issues and advocate against them through public dialogues, mass meetings etc. In phase three while Leher and the local partner take a step back the focus would be on overseeing that the child protection advocacy groups function routinely on their own and in coordination with local administration & structures at the block and district level to anticipate, prevent and respond to child protection violations.

### Request for support

Leher is looking for partnerships and support to scale up the district community child protection program. The objective is to gather a critical mass of experiences from which a model for community based preventive child protection intervention would be distilled out. The goal is over a period of time to offer an intervention model complete with a set of tools for implementation to the government and other stakeholders for adoption and universalization.

## ANNEXURE I

### Child protection scenario in communities-a summary of findings of district child protection assessment studies in Morigaon, Assam and Madhubani, Bihar.

Two recent child protection assessment studies conducted by Leher in the districts of Morigaon in Assam, and in Madhubani in Bihar, brought out that in communities there are glaring child protection violations which can be easily observed. These include children out of school though records would show that they are enrolled, children working-girls take on a large chunk of household responsibilities-cooking, washing, cleaning, and boys take on employment within and outside the district. 100% communities in Madhubani and 83% communities in Morigaon reported the presence of child labour in their villages. Young married adolescents mothers are common sight. Children start consuming betel nut, beedis, and eventually alcohol from a very young age. The adult community group in 99% villages in Madhubani and 94% villages in Morigaon reported this. General neglect of children is apparent in the large numbers of children in communities who were unclad, unbathed, and appeared malnourished. Physical abuse is a norm, and sexual abuse though prevalent, is not ever acted upon or talked about. In Morigaon in 84% villages the community reported that they do not complain against it. The end of childhood for a child depended on the economic status of the family, the onset of puberty, safety in the community, and the availability of infrastructure to continue education or vocational training. It was not linked to the level of maturity, age, developmental needs of a child or the official threshold of childhood set at 18 years. Parents and community elders are aware that these are issues but accept them as a way of life due to their circumstances of poverty, local culture and tradition, and do not think there is another way. Parents stated that they never received any input on how to care for their children and hence, did not know any better.

It was found that while numerous schemes exist at the community level, members were not aware of all the benefits that the schemes bring to them. Further, none of the commonly found development benefits brought through schemes such as the ICDS, PDS, Mid-day meal, NREGS, Indira Awas Yojna, NHRM directly address the child protection concerns spoken of above. However, minor alterations to the manner of their implementation, coupled with support and involvement of community members can go a long way to ensure the family security and child protection that welfare schemes are meant to provide.

The studies also brought out that the child protection system as it exists for children in the country currently, is only available at the district head quarter. The Child Labour Task Force (CLTF), Child Welfare Committee (CWC), Juvenile Justice Board (JJB) Children's Homes etc. are unheard of at the community level (100%- Madhubani, 100%- Morigaon). Further, communities do not have any knowledge, that there is a system for child protection nor are there any linkages available to connect the village to the district level. It was also found that politics of caste, religion and corruption play a role in dilution of entitlements and benefits. Coincidentally, both districts in which the study was conducted were affected by annual floods, and systematic efforts to build communities coping capacities seemed inadequate.

The District Child Protection Need Assessment Studies conducted by Leher in Morigaon and in Madhubani can be shared on request.

ANNEXURE II – Pictures from the field



A discussion with a teacher during data collection in Madhubani, Bihar



DM, Madhubani, chairing meeting where CP DNA study findings was shared with District and Block officials



Prioritization and planning workshops with VCPC members, Pandaul block



Children's group in Badki Pokhar village, Bisfi block



Training of VCPC on CP and their role as members at Parsa village, Bisfi block