

Case Study

Children's Panchayat in Karnataka

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, the emphasis on giving children an opportunity to express their opinions on matters of their concern has gained momentum across the world. In India, several civil society organisations are working for the active engagement of children in urban and rural governance. One such organisation, The Concerned for Working Children (CWC) in Karnataka, is effectively leveraging the decentralised democratic set up of the country by creating spaces for children within the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The organisations has thus far created several *Makkala Panchayat* (Children's Councils), in rural Karnataka that act as a forum of and for children.

Beginning in 1995 with five *makkala panchayats*, today there are a total of 56 *makkala panchayats* working in parallel with *gram panchayats*. These children's council were conceived to work closely with *panchayat/village* council in order to create sustained impact. Members of the *makkala panchayat* have developed their own rules, and follows democratic and proportional representation system comprising of various interest groups including working children, school-going children and children with disabilities. The *panchayat* uses various research tools to identify the needs and assess the issues that are important to children in their communities. As part of the process, children have been conducting their own surveys, drafting their own five-year plans and negotiating solutions with the *gram panchayats*. Often, the issues are related to education, working children, health, or infrastructural needs.

A tripartite Task Force, consisting of *makkala and gram panchayat* representatives, government official, elected representatives and community based organisations has been set up to link the *makkala panchayats* with the *gram panchayats*. This Task Force takes forward the issues at the government level and acts as a pressure group. In 2006, CWC's efforts were acknowledged at the state level when the Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Department in Karnataka, issued an order to make it mandatory for all *panchayats* within the state to provide children a platform for putting their concerns in front of elected representatives at special children's *Gram Sabhas* (annual meetings). With this order, the process that was first initiated by CWC was institutionalised.

The engagement of children in governance processes through *makkala panchayats* is resulting in a range of positive effects on children and the communities they are a part of. Children's participation in the political process has created awareness among the village communities about children's ability and potential to act as agents of change. Children are now treated as social assets who through their interactions with and role in the *makkala panchayats* are being trained for the future. *Makkala panchayats* are strengthening children's role as social actors.

Children are becoming aware of their rights along with gaining knowledge of their responsibilities and duties.

Methodology

The Governance Knowledge Centre (GKC) documents best practices in governance in India in support of further replication. For this purpose, select initiatives that are significantly contributing towards the betterment of public service delivery are identified by the GKC research team. The team conducted extensive secondary research using credible web sources to establish the suitability of *makkala panchayats* in Karnataka as a best practice. This research reflected the manner in which these *panchayats* are strengthening children's role as social and political actors. Operating in conjunction with the local Gram Panchayats, these children councils have made village governance in rural Karnataka child sensitive and inclusive.

Having recognised *makkala panchayats* as a best practice, the next step was to identify the key stakeholders and interview them to gain a deeper insight into the operation and impact of the initiative. Information for this best practice documentation has been gathered through secondary research and primary research methods. In-person interviews were held with the Concerned for Working Children team.

Efforts have been made to provide objective information in the document. However, since only the implementers of the project were interviewed, there is a possibility of the percolation of subjective bias.

Background

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 identifies the basic rights children across the world are entitled to and recognises them as active citizens in governance. For the realisation of this role, the UN Convention highlights the importance of giving children an opportunity and a medium to express their opinions on any matter affecting them.¹ Based on this belief, many organisations are working towards mainstreaming child-sensitive governance across all sectors. In India, civil society organisations are working for the active engagement of children in urban and rural governance.

¹ UNICEF. <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>. March 23, 2012

Although the nature and scope of an urban polity makes the process of involving children in all matters concerning them highly challenging, the involvement of children in rural governance processes has been largely feasible, more so because of the success of decentralised local governance structure. Organisations are actively promoting children's involvement in devising appropriate solutions by building capacities of rural children to express and articulate their problems among their communities.

A successful example is reflected through the efforts of the Concerned for Working Children (CWC), a civil society organisation based in Karnataka, involved with local governments, community and working children to improve their quality of life. CWC is effectively utilising the decentralised democratic set up of the country by creating spaces for children's active engagement. Following the Panchayati Raj Institutions model, CWC has created several Local Children Councils, known as *makkala panchayats*, in rural Karnataka to act as a forum of and for children.

Makkala panchayats were started by CWC and Bhima Sangha, a union of child workers², in 1995 in collaboration with the Ministry of Rural Development and Decentralisation. Initiated in five village Panchayats in Karnataka, these *makkala panchayats* were conceived as a parallel government of children that would work closely with *gram panchayat* to create sustained impact. It represents an effort to involve children in regular local public decision-making and to improve children's environments by using education, empowerment, and political participation. By 2004, such children's councils were established in 56 panchayats in the state.

In 2006, CWC's efforts were promoted at the state level when the Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Department in Karnataka, issued an order to make it mandatory for all panchayats within the state to provide children a platform for putting their concerns in front of elected representatives at special children's *gram sabhas* (annual meetings). With this order, the process that was first initiated by CWC was institutionalised.

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Objective

Makkala panchayat aims to:

- Provide a platform for children to participate effectively in local governance issues
- Develop leadership skills among rural children and train them to articulate their problems and devise appropriate solutions
- Help children recognise their own rights and rightfully demand them
- Sensitise adults to treat children as active agents in governance

Programme Design

Key Stakeholders

- **The Concerned for Working Children (CWC):** CWC has been working in the area of protecting the rights of working children in Karnataka for more than three decades. It initiated the concept of Makkala Panchayats and provides support and training to children and adults for encouraging and facilitating the operation of such panchayats.
- **Bhima Sanghas:** A union of, by and for working children in Karnataka facilitated by the Concerned for Working Children that has been striving for the realisation of child rights.
- **Ministry of Rural Development and Decentralisation:** The Ministry has been supporting the initiative since its beginning. With their support the initiative has been upscaled across the state.
- **Local government officials and other local NGO's :** CWC actively engages with local government officials and NGO's to sensitize them towards delivering children friendly governance. They are also trained to take matters raised by children's councils seriously. NGO's are specifically trained to motivate and empower children to take on their leadership roles and voice their concerns.
- **Rural Children:** Emphasising on children's ability to voice their concerns and understand their realities, Makkala panchayats act as a medium for the expression of this role.

Organisational Structure

Makkala panchayats comprises of representatives elected by all children between 6 and 18 years of age in the gram panchayat. It follows a proportional representation system with leaders from various interest groups including working children, school-going children and children with disabilities.



Figure: A student submitting her ballot paper during a makkala panchayat election.

Makkala panchayat members have developed their own protocol which consists of rules related to elections, procedures for holding their meetings and for conducting *Gram Sabhas*. Children have prepared this protocol with guidance from CWC as well as on the basis of their own research and understanding of their realities. This process of forming the protocol empowered children by familiarising them with political processes and shaping their initiation into it.

Each *makkala panchayat* is guided by a *makkala mitra*, an adult resident of the village, responsible for monitoring the functioning of the *panchayat*. He/she is elected on the basis of their commitment to children's causes and their approachability to the children. The *Makkala Mitra* also acts as the voice of the children in the Gram Panchayat and an advocate of their concerns.

Training of children

CWC conducts personal development and empowerment training workshops to prepare children for their role as advocates. These workshops provide children with the necessary skills, information, and techniques to reach out to and empower more children in their community. These sessions also reach out to adults in order to explain to them the importance of children's agency and create acceptance about the role that children can play in community issues.

Identifying issues

Members of the *makkala panchayats* use various research tools to assess the issues and needs of children in their communities and obtain accurate information by visiting schools, anganwadis, health centres and other basic service centres. As part of the process, children have been conducting their own surveys, drafting five-year plans and negotiating solutions with the *gram*

panchayats. A children's post box is also placed in every ward to ensure that children who are unable to voice their concerns openly can write their problem and post it. This post box is under the care of *makkala panchayat* member of that ward.

Often the issues are related to education, working children, health, or infrastructural needs. In this manner, children are brought closer to their realities, learn how to express their concerns and advocate it among those in authority.

Expressing concerns

Once the issues have been selected, children's ward level meeting is held under the elected member of that ward in the *makkala panchayat* or the president of the *makkala panchayat* in the presence of all children of that ward. The ward meeting decides on the issues that need to be brought to the notice of the *Makkala Panchayat* and during the *Makkala Gram Sabha* where all children of the village participate. Representatives from the government and the civil society can also be present during the Gram Sabhas.

After the selected issues have been discussed at the *makkala panchayat*, decisions are taken and the advice of the *Makkala Mitra* is sought. In order to create a link between the *Makkala Panchayats* and the *Gram Panchayats*, a tripartite Task Force has also been set up consisting of *Makkala Panchayat* representatives, government officials, elected representatives and community based organisations. The *Makkala Mitra* acts as the voice of the children in the task force when then takes issues forward at the government level and acts as a pressure group.

The children use creative monitoring tools to ensure that their issues are effectively addressed. For instance, children tie red ribbons on a tree outside the *Gram Panchayat* for every pending issue. The ribbons act as a reminder to the *Gram Panchayat* to tackle any pending issue and take appropriate measures.

Funding

The funding for the *makkala panchayats* comes from the Ministry of Rural Development and Decentralisation, Karnataka. The Ministry has actively been encouraging the participation of children in governance in rural Karnataka.

Impact

The engagement of children in governance processes through Makkala Panchayats is resulting in a range of positive effects on children and the communities.

On the community

Children's participation in the political process has created awareness among the local communities about children's ability and potential to act as agents of change. No longer seen as mere dependants children are now treated as social assets who through their interactions with and role in the Makkala Panchayats are being trained for the future. An enabling children sensitive environment is now being created in rural communities of Karnataka. Children's participation in the Makkala Panchayats and Makkala Gram Sabhas has demonstrated their significance to the entire community and revitalized community participation in the region. Children have also inspired adults, especially women, to participate actively in local governance issues.

On children

Makkala panchayats are strengthening children's role as social actors. Children are becoming aware of their rights along with gaining knowledge of their responsibilities and duties. By utilising their participatory potential, they have acquired self-esteem and have been able to comprehend the significance of collective action. Children have become sensitive not only to their own needs but also to the requirements of other children of the community along with being able to understand the day to day functioning of various service delivery processes in the village. Children are collecting accurate information and are not just making demands but also helping in devising solutions for the problems being faced. In this manner, children are becoming significant actors in local decision-making, this is crucial not just for children's development but is also making local governments accountable to children.

Challenges in Implementation

The most challenging aspect in ensuring the success of *makkala panchayats* lies in enabling children to take up leadership roles and to create a level of acceptance among the community of the children's new roles. This requires intensive training of both children and community leaders. Taking this into account, in order to successfully implement the government order for holding annual children *gram sabhas* across the state, CWC is conducting training sessions with school headmasters, local government officials and civil society organizations.

The emphasis on children's participation can also make adult community leaders shirk their responsibilities and become apathetic towards children related issues. Hence, measures must be designed to monitor the performance of adult community leaders on children related issues.

Recommendations

While children are being actively involved in local governance, it is important to ensure that children with special needs are also brought into the fold on children centric governance. It must also be ensured that once specific issues have been highlighted, enough financial resources are allocated for following up on them. This will help in avoiding the postponement of finding solutions on the pretext of shortage of funds. Perhaps, a mechanism can be devised to allocate funds directly to the children's councils. This will also train children in financial management.

While, the concept of *makkala panchayat* is a village-centred programme the needs of urban children should also be included in the process of self-government. The concept of urban children's sabhas should be explored with the help of civil society organisations, city corporations and municipalities.

Conclusion

Karnataka has presented its experience of running Makkala panchayats to the central Ministry for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj and several states like Goa, Tamil Nadu, Orissa etc who are keen to take up a similar initiative. However it is crucial to remember that replicating such a successful model of children's participation in local governance throughout the country will require a high degree of commitment and cooperation among all the involved parties and contextual adaptation.

Research was carried out by OneWorld Foundation India (OWFI), Governance Knowledge Centre (GKC) team.

*Documentation was created by Researcher, **Aditi Dayal***

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Appendix A – Interview Questionnaire

1. What is the motivation behind involving children in governance processes and forming Makkala(children) Panchayats in rural Karnataka?
2. The project started in 1995 in five Gram Panchayats of Karnataka. How many Makkala Panchayats are there today?
3. Who are the main stakeholders in the project? What are their roles and responsibilities?
4. What are the main objectives behind forming such children panchayats?
5. Can you please explain the following in regard to the operation of Makkala panchayats:
 - Framing of protocol
 - Deciding its mandate
 - Structural organisation
 - Selection of candidates
 - Scope of electorate
 - Term period
 - Allocation of seats & reservation
6. Can you explain with the help of an example how a Makkala Panchayat functions?
7. How were children convinced to join this process of local governance?
8. How did Makkala Panchayats gain legitimacy within the existing local government structure?
9. The Makkala Panchayats have been operational since 1995. How have they evolved over the years? Have there been any major changes?
10. What would you say are the major achievements and outcomes of establishing such local children panchayats?
11. What are the major challenges faced in the formation and operation of such panchayats? Have they been overcome? If yes, what measures were taken to overcome them?
12. Are there any major enhancements planned for the future? If yes, what are there?
13. Have there been any efforts on your part to share your experiences and learn from the experiences of other such similar initiatives involving children's participation across the country?
14. Are there plans to advocate the formation of such local level children governance structures at the national level?
15. Can you share any data that reflects impact?