

Engal Kural (Our Voice) Protection of children at risk and children without parental care in western Tamil Nadu (2011-15)

Project Aim: To strengthen community based care and protection mechanisms for children at risk of losing parental care and children living in kinship care and provide educational and emotional support to 3,000 children at risk of entering child labour/bonded labour/child marriage.

The Engal Kural Project aims to address the issues facing children at risk of being bonded labour/ child labour in agricultural farms, and girl children specifically those working in spinning mills and working as domestic workers. The project also aims to identify and support children in kinship care and develop community based child protection mechanism to ensure this group of children are safe and secure in the community. A substantial number of textile workers are recruited from the Arunthathiyars, especially in western Tamilnadu. Increased debts and lack of employment opportunities within villages are causing many parents to migrate to urban areas in search of employment. They often leave their children in the care of grandparents. In addition to this, a high number of girls are forced to get married to ease the economic burden on their families. In addition to the girls involved in sumangali thittam, many children are involved in agricultural, factory, and domestic bonded labour, or are at risk of becoming involved in the bonded labour system. The Engal Kural Project focuses on protection and development of these vulnerable groups of children through child activity centres, rescue and rehabilitation, and education of the wider community.

EveryChild India experience:

EveryChild India, under the Engal Kural programme, has been working on the issues of Arunthathiyar children from 2007 focusing on those who are most vulnerable and at risk of losing parental care. This is because the children from this community commonly become domestic workers, children are trafficked for labour, migrate to urban areas for employment and end up living on the streets. The children are frequently victims of violence in these areas. In order to prevent this situation, EveryChild has worked towards promoting community driven initiatives for retaining children in safe and caring environment by establishing community based care models and carrying out the rescue and rehabilitation of children in bonded and domestic work.

Our main focus in the Indian sub-continent is on preventing and tackling violence against the most vulnerable children in society: those who are trafficked, living and working on the streets, or engaged in domestic labour. Therefore, our target groups are primarily Dalit children. Since 2005, our programmes have directly benefited approximately 10,000 children in Tamilnadu and Karnataka States, since last five years, our efforts have contributed in reducing significant number of children being reintegrated from bonded labour/ child labour to mainstream education. In addition, the project was successful in developing community based child protection mechanisms at the village level. In the last few years in Bangalore we have managed to reintegrate almost 4000 children with their families, family-type environments or communities.

Around 5,000 children of Arundhathiyar communities (base line data is being developed).

3,000 families of the Arundhathiyar community, 300 volunteers from the villages, 5,000 women in Thrift and Credit Societies and 500 community leaders.

EveryChild India Engal Kural Partners:

Rights, Education and Development (READ): is a grassroots volunteer organisation working in 75 villages of Satyamangalam taluk, Erode District. READ focuses on providing educational opportunities to Arunthathiyar communities and is currently implementing a bridge school for children rescued from the bonded labour system. **READ** was formed in 2001 to ensure access to quality education to Arunthathiyar communities. In the past few years, READ has increased its organisational focus on preventing children from entering into bonded labour in Tamilnadu, with the ultimate goal of abolishing the system of bonded labour. Over the past four years READ has helped to rescue more than 100 children from bonded labour and runs a special bridge school for the rescued children to support their transition back to mainstream schooling.

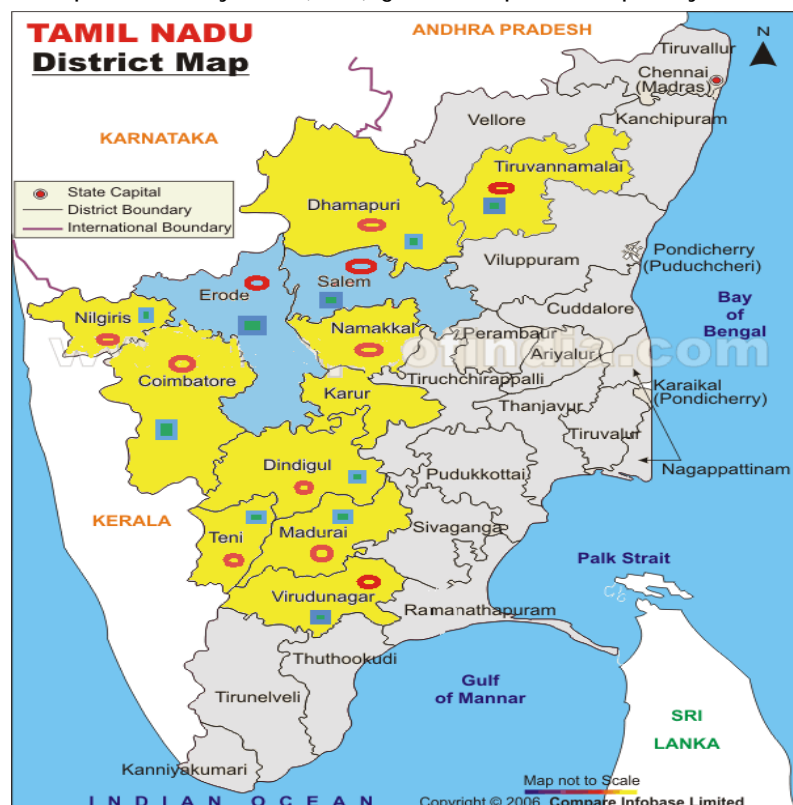
Rural Women’s Development Trust (RWDT): a registered society working in 71 villages of Salem District for the economic development of women through Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Bank Linkages. Additionally, RWDT works to prevent and protect children from Arunthathiyar communities from bonded labour through a federation of women’s groups. **RWDT**, formed in 2001 by Arunthathiyar activists in Salem District, works towards the abolition of the bonded labour system in Tamilnadu through practical interventions, such as rescue and rehabilitation of children involved in bonded labour. To date, RWDT has rescued more than 200 children from the bonded labour system and helped them enrol in mainstream and bridge schools. RWDT has organised over 7,000 women into self help groups and helped link them to bank schemes and economic development activities and initiatives, resulting in many women’s groups

Arunthathiyar Human Rights Forum (AHRF): AHRF, a state level human rights network and forum comprised of 14 CSOs working with Arunthathiyars, will form the central platform for joint action for the CSOs, from which they can undertake advocacy and lobbying with a unified voice, particularly at state, national and international levels. It will also form the focal point for capacity building and training.

Current situation in country

The Dalits represent 18% of the Indian population, numbering approximately 170 million. “Dalit” (Oppressed) is the name which the people belonging to those castes at the very bottom of India’s caste hierarchy have given themselves. Formerly, they were known as ‘Untouchables,’ because their presence was considered to be so polluting that contact with them was to be avoided at all costs. The official label for them has been Scheduled Castes, because if their caste is listed on the government schedule, caste members become eligible for a number of affirmative action benefits and protections. The Democratic Indian Constitution forbade discrimination in Article 15 and set the goal for social justice and equal opportunity by introducing special measures (seat reserved in political representation, quotas in education and public service). But, 50 years later, these principles are still only rarely applied. Social pressure is still very much there, access to education and social services in general, even though a constitutional right, are a luxury.

The economic development at the national level in the last two decades has created many opportunities and challenges. The inequity has been increasing. The displacement of rural / agricultural livelihoods has increased due to larges scale development projects, including Special Economic Zones, which have alienated land from rural people and transferred it in to the hands of the corporate sector. Destruction of rural livelihoods has caused large scale migration of the poor from rural areas into urban slums and forced them to live and survive in appalling conditions. Women and children are the worst sufferers as families are often separated due to economic stresses, trafficking and migration in search of livelihoods. Thousand of children are increasingly losing support and care from the loving families. HIV and AIDS has become a major challenge and many affected children not have positive care choices. The state’s efforts to protect vulnerable children remain weak and under developed. The newly launched integrated child protection system (ICPS) gives a hope if adequately resourced and implemented at a national level, however



the role of civil society organisations will be critical in ensuring this process is a success.

Main problems in the project area/ project rationale

Arunthathiyars are considered to be at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. As other sub-castes have made socio-economic and political progress Arunthathiyar communities have remained disadvantaged and discriminated against. There are over 8 million Arunthathiyars in Tamilnadu and the majority live in the 12 districts highlighted in the map. Arunthathiyars are often still treated as untouchables by the upper castes, including other lower castes, meaning they face discrimination, social restrictions, violence and abuse. In terms of

employment, many Arunthathiyars work on farms, as domestic labourers, scavengers or in textile and spinning mills and are unable to change professions. Not only are Arunthathiyar children faced with these latent discriminations, many are forced to enter into bonded labour to help their families make ends meet, pay for their own marriages, help get older siblings out of bonded labour contracts, or pay off their parents' debt. Increased debts and lack of employment opportunities within villages are leading to forced migration of parents/carers to urban areas for employment leaving the children with grandparents. In many situations these children discontinue education end up domestic servants or become child labour to support aged grandparents.

Desertion of partner is common in this community as it is allowed as a customary practice. Any man can desert his wife and marry another woman. This has led to large number of women headed households and semi-orphan children in the community. In this situation children are left with grandparents or left alone without parental care. As a result, many children run away from home and end up living in streets. In addition to this, a high number of girls are subjected to violence by their employers, are forced to get married to someone many years older than them and there are also instances that children are physically and sexually abused by stepfathers.

In Tamilnadu 60% of Arunthathiyar children are growing up without adequate parental care and are either working as domestic workers, child labourers or as agricultural labourers. Many families are unable to pay for their daughters' weddings and are forced to send their children away to work in textile mills to pay for their own dowries. Children as young as 12 are sent to work in agricultural or textile based bonded labour, and over the past decade factory owners have played upon this need to create a marriage payment scheme called sumangali thittam. Under this scheme jobs are given to young, unmarried girls, mainly between 16 and 20 years old, for a period of three years. On completion of the term, the girls are promised a sum of money (30,000-50,000 rupees), for their dowry. Poverty and a lack of employment opportunities are significant drivers of this scheme, with parents sending their young girls to these jobs to settle loans or pay for their future weddings.

HIV and AIDS: According to organisations working to prevent HIV/AIDS transmission, over 40% of those living with HIV and AIDS are from the lowest castes, including Arunthathiyar communities. Due to economic pressures many families are forced to make difficult decisions: Men who migrate to urban areas to work in construction sites and other employment opportunities get infected with HIV when they live away from families and transfer the virus to their spouses and in some cases women are forced to into road-side prostitution. This in turn leads to children losing their parents. This, in conjunction with low levels of HIV and AIDS awareness and education, means that many family members are too ill to work or are unable to care for their children. As a result the number of children forced to enter bonded labour is increasing along with the number of child headed households.

Project Objectives and Activities

Objective 1: To provide educational and emotional support to 3,000 children at risk of becoming involved in child labour, bonded labour or child marriage per year in 2 Districts of Tamilnadu

EveryChild runs activity centres in Erode and Salem Districts of western Tamilnadu, which act as a community based protection mechanism for children. The centres offer children educational opportunities and activity-based learning to help them learn, protect and promote their rights. Through attendance records volunteers track every child enrolled in the centre and ensure they are attending classes and group activities. These attendance checks ensure that children are not missing out on school in order to work in the mills or worse have been trafficked into the cities. Volunteers who have been trained in child protection and child rights track the children and meet with parents and guardians if a day at the centre is missed. For older children we promote skills development training, as well as career guidance and counselling, to help them leave bonded labour and ensure that they have the best possible start in their independent lives as young adults.

Objective 2: To identify and support children without parental care, namely those in kinship care, and strengthen family systems in 146 villages in 2 blocks of Tamilnadu

The staff of the activity centres target vulnerable children and families, plan individual interventions to help children in kinship care through psychological counselling for children and family enrichment intervention for the families. The project works to develop community based care and protection mechanisms for children living in kinship care and to raise awareness among the communities. Project workers research, identify and link families and children with welfare schemes available from government and non-government for financial support as well for higher education /scholarship schemes.

Objective 3: To educate families, communities and other stakeholders about the risks of bonded labour and the sumangali thittam scheme and the lasting consequences of child exploitation

The project interventions identify Arunthathiyar families, children and families involved in bonded labour and aim to educate them about the laws against bonded labour and provisions to help them break out of the cycle of exploitation. Specifically project staff will educate families and communities on child rights, the juvenile justice system, the damaging effects of child bonded labour and their responsibilities under the Care and Protection Act of 2000. EveryChild India will conduct a research study to evaluate and better understand the impact of the sumangali thittam scheme on girls and communities and to reinforce families' knowledge of child bonded labour and increase their involvement in advocacy against the practice staff will develop communication materials to share the findings of this study. Children from the child activity centres will raise awareness on sumangali thittam and child bonded labour through street plays, songs and cultural activities. Project staff, in conjunction with key community members will strengthen local and regional campaigns on the issue of sumangali thittam and bonded labour by facilitating coordinated responses among key stakeholders including women's federations, the Arunthathiyar Human Rights Forum, labour unions and local NGOs. Such coordinated networking and discussions will raise local level awareness as well as push regional and national politicians to work to implement existing laws and further develop mechanisms to protect vulnerable groups against bonded labour and trafficking for sumangali thittam schemes.

Project sustainability

The project strategy is based on the principle that both government and civil society must be responsible for protecting the rights of every child. It also believes that the Government has the capacity to allocate the required resources for this purpose. However, with child protection issues sidelined in the Government agenda the project aims at influencing relevant Government structures to take full responsibility for effective spending and monitoring, to ensure the sustainability of the changes that the project will bring about. Community-led child-focused advocacy at State level coupled with technical support to both duty bearers and communities will compliment such an effort. Our existing collaborative relations with key government agencies and community structures will help to negotiate and develop formal agreements to secure both commitments to the project and sustainability of its benefits after its lifetime. At community level, activities of the Child Activity Centres will be sustained through capacity building, phased hand-over, and the financial contributions of the women's thrift and credit groups. Finally, EveryChild's successful experience of working in collaboration with governments to strengthen Child Protection structures across the world has demonstrated that four years is an appropriate timeframe for this intervention.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and Evaluation processes and approaches: EveryChild India will be directly responsible for monitoring progress towards planned outcomes using both qualitative and quantitative indicators that will be designed with beneficiaries. Progress will be measured against an initial baseline, by regular data collection using a range of methods appropriate to the target groups. This information will directly improve practice or identify future research areas to inform our understanding to make changes.

Information collection, storage and analysis: Regular monitoring will take place during home and school visits, and use performance reports, business viability plans, loan repayment records, business and skills training appraisal reports, beneficiary meeting and evaluation reports, training appraisals and community impact survey reports. Mid-term and final evaluations by independent specialists using participatory methodologies will inform practice, and measure effectiveness, efficiency, impact, relevance, sustainability and learning.

Monitoring and Evaluation information will be stored in reports and case studies. Monitoring data will be analysed and reviewed by EveryChild India in monthly staff programme meetings and annual strategic planning meetings (informing modifications to implementation plans and budgets) and by EveryChild UK quarterly, via quarterly reports and feedback.

Using findings: EveryChild will promote lessons from communities of good practice and development practitioners in the UK through the EveryChild Children without Parental Care group, the DFID CSO Group on Children and the Keeping Children Safe Coalition. Lessons from research, policy work and other project activities will be promoted through EveryChild's Global Advocacy Strategy which aims to put the issue of children without parental care onto

government agendas throughout the developed and developing world. We will look to involve influential donors such as Comic Relief and DFID in promoting examples of good practice with their development partners. EveryChild's effective programmes team will also promote key lessons across the organisation and overseas partners. In the past EveryChild has produced and disseminated research reports and newsletters, hosted conferences and facilitated learning exchanges to promote learning from its work.

EveryChild India will share lessons learnt amongst staff and trustees in regular meetings and planning workshops. Externally, EveryChild India will share information through various NGO networks, including the Arunthathiyar Human Rights Forum (AHRF) and local government duty bearers. EveryChild India will post annual progress reports and research findings on its website and participate in learning exchanges to share lessons and improve practice, namely with RWDT and READ.

Stakeholder participation (children, families, communities, local government bodies, etc)

EveryChild India will consult children on the changes that they would like to see in their lives and life skills in order to develop outcome and impact indicators, and its child beneficiaries will continue to participate in adapting and improving these as necessary. Baseline data regarding children's lives and life skills will be collected during the initial beneficiary selection process. Changes in children's lives and life skills will be measured through the participatory mid-term and final evaluations. Regular monitoring will also capture changes in children's lives and life skills through the collection of information based on a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators and comparative analysis against the baseline.

Case study

Reena, aged 14 working in a spinning mill in western Tamilnadu, India

Reena is from the Arunthathiyar caste. The Arunthathiyar community in western Tamilnadu is the lowest section of the Dalit caste and are often called the 'untouchables'. This community is poor and marginalised, it encounters discrimination, exploitation at the hands of the upper caste community in the villages. The majority of Arunthathiyars are in the bonded labour system due to a context of extreme poverty. Children are compelled to work in textile mills, on farms or as domestic labourers to pay back huge loans taken by their families to cover basic living expenses or marriage costs. For the past year and a half, Reena and her sisters work in one of the many spinning mills near her house to help support their family. Her brothers attend school. Reena dropped out of school after the fifth grade due to poverty, her mother's pregnancy, sisters working in the spinning mills already and also because she failed in the fifth standard examinations. Her mother and father both work as construction labourers.

Reena's family has a lot of loans. According to her mother, the family currently owes around 20,000 rupees with 3% interest accumulated each year. Since they were having financial problems they went to the spinning mill and met with the owner. They were told about the standard payment and then were asked to provide photographs of their daughters. No other documents were exchanged. According to the mother, the spinning mill Manager told them that they would get 45,000 rupees at the end of three years for each of their daughters' term of employment.

This money could then be used in their daughters' marriages.

Reena wakes up every day and goes to work from 5:00am till 2:00pm. She does all kinds of work including rolling the thread into packets, packaging and loading the finished product. She does the whole 8 hours work standing and never gets to sit down except during her breakfast break. She is also receiving training to make plastic baskets at the factory. After her work she has her lunch and then attends basket making classes. In her free time in the evening she rests and watches television. She lives with 15 girls in one room. According to Reena, there are many girls and women that work in the spinning mill, however she does not know the total number. The youngest girl whom she knows works in the mill is about 13 years. There are two male supervisors and one female specifically for her floor. She has visited her family four times in the last one and a half year. Each time she was given fifteen days leave.

In this case EveryChild Engal Kural Partner-RWDT intervened to counsel Reena's mother to send her to school and continues to meet with her mother and employer to discuss possible compromises to cover the family's debt. RWDT is working to ensure Reena is back in school very soon.