CHAPTER – VII
ACTION PLAN OF NGO’S IN COMBATING CHILD LABOUR IN SANGRUR AND BARNALA DISTRICTS

In developing economies, attention is being accorded to the issue of child labour both at the level of policy framework and research. The involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in this sector is about a decade old, but it has been steadily gaining momentum, partly on account of the availability of funding for child labour programmes. However, only a handful of NGOs have achieved recognition in this field at the national level. The number of organisations that have succeeded in demonstrating a sustainable and wide-scale reduction in the incidence of child labour is even smaller. Estimates of child labour in the age group of 5-14 years vary according to the definition of child labour used by the agency compiling the statistics. While recent statistics indicate some reduction in the overall incidence of child labour. But the numbers are still alarmingly large. Given the scale of the problem, the question arises, how far NGOs succeeded in eliminating child labour?

Attempt has also been made in this chapter to examine the role of two NGO’s namely Rationalist Society of Punjab and Umeed Khanna Foundation which are operating in the Sangrur and Barnala districts respectively in curbing the problem of child labour in Punjab particularly in the districts of Sangrur and Barnala. The success of these NGOs is influenced by a variety of background, overarching considerations ranging from the buoyancy of the economy to the
availability of resources and the prevailing legal and institutional frameworks. These factors are largely outside the direct control of NGOs but they both circumscribe and constrain their activities.

THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The Constitution of India provides a sound framework for tackling the issue of child labour.

Article 14 states that, “No child below the age of fourteen years shall be employed to work in any factory or mine or employed in any hazardous employment”.

Article 39 (e) directs state policy to ensure that “…the health and strength of workers ... and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizens are not forced by economic necessity to enter a vocation unsuited to their age or strength”.

However, this positive environment has not been converted into an adequate legal or institutional framework for eliminating child labour. Government legislation on child labour is piecemeal and does not reflect the dimensions of the problem nor a determination to deal with it. The focus is mainly on prohibiting the most hazardous forms of labour and on regulating conditions of work in sectors that are considered less harmful. Family labour is left outside the purview of the law, which remains silent on the status of countless children who replace or supplement family labour on the farm, in domestic chores and in the informal sector. This situation is worsened by the fact that implementation and enforcement of the meagre legislation that exists
is extremely limited. A prime example is the continued existence of bonded labour – for adults and children – despite the Bonded Labour System Act of 1976 which frees all bonded labourers, cancels the debts against them and orders their rehabilitation by the state.

Another striking aspect of child labour policy is that it co-exists or runs parallel to the education policy with little cross-reference or discussion between the two. In fact, the objectives of the two often clash. For example, universal elementary education has remained a goal, however elusive, of government policy and India is a signatory to the Declaration of Education for All by the year 2000. However, discussions on policy measures to implement these goals have largely taken place without reference to child labour. In fact, by condoning child labour in non-hazardous industries and within the family setting, the government may have built in a mechanism to sabotage its own objective of universalizing elementary education.

A similar example is provided by the Non-Formal Education Programme, which is a key element in the government’s strategy for achieving literacy targets. Instead of making a sizeable proportion of the child population literate, this programme may in fact have served to legitimise child labour and keep children away from formal schools, thereby perpetuating the problems associated with non-enrolment.
The reluctance of the Union Government to undertake programmes to eradicate all forms of child labour – hazardous and non-hazardous and provide universal elementary education is attributed in large part to the shortage of resources at the national level. M. Sudarshan Ratna expressed the view that less than one per cent extra of GDP is required to universalise elementary education. While this is a substantial amount, and would require some reallocation of resources, it is well within the realm of the possible. The failure to make the necessary commitment can only be attributed to a lack of political will rather than to any real shortage of resources.209

In this scenario, NGOs become the cheap alternative for assisting government in reaching some of its goals for eliminating child labour and universalising education. While this provides NGOs with a steady source of income, it also constrains their work, as financing for this sector is limited and government grants may be tied to the provision of certain kinds of services such as the delivery of non-formal education to working children, or the setting up of alternative schools in areas that lack such facilities.

The bulk of non-governmental funding for child labour and education projects is provided by international NGOs. These donor agencies have their own mandates, their own strengths and weaknesses, and their own constituencies. Funding for child labour

and education projects generally follows current trends that are reflected in frequent changes in programme strategies. Also, the programme cycle may span only 3-5 years with the NGO having to take the responsibility of looking for other sources to continue the project activities. The funding strategies of individual donors will inevitably curtail or enhance the ability of local NGOs to deliver sustainable, long-term and coherent programmes for child labour and education. Differences in emphasis and philosophy of donor agencies will be mirrored in the work of NGOs and will determine the outcome and impact of their programmes.

**MEANING OF NGO**

The role and place of voluntary organisations has been a subject of debate in the developed as well as the developing countries. The term ‘Voluntarism’ is derived from Latin word ‘Voluntas’ which means “will” or “freedom”. Harold Laski an eminent British political scientist defined “Freedom of association” as a recognised legal right on the part of all persons to combine for the promotion of purposes in which they are interested.\(^\text{210}\) In the U.N terminology voluntary organisations are called voluntary non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These are also identified as voluntary agencies (Vol.ag) and action groups (AGs). In organisation theory, voluntary organisations have been characterised as non-authoritarian, commitment producing entities that rely basically on the normal and idealistic values shared by the

organisation members. David C. Sills identifies voluntary association as a group of persons, organised on the basis of voluntary membership without state control, for the furtherance of some common interest of its members.\textsuperscript{211} C. Smith and A. Freedman consider the voluntary association as a structure formally organised, relatively permanent secondary grouping as opposed to less structured, informal, ephemeral or primary grouping.\textsuperscript{212}

According to William Beveridge, ‘A voluntary organisation, properly speaking, is an organisation in which whether its workers are paid or unpaid, is initiated and governed by its own members without external control’.\textsuperscript{213} Definitions given by Mary Morsis and Modeline Roff are also similar. The only addition that Modeline Roff makes is that these voluntary organisations should depend in part at least, upon finding support from voluntary resources.\textsuperscript{214}

Voluntary associations express the spirit of free life which makes democracy ‘the most cherished way of organising patterns of living and thinking”. Voluntary organisations differ from non-official agencies in many aspects. Voluntary organisations are spontaneous in their origin, non-officials agencies may be sponsored by Government. Non-official organisations have been set up to organise welfare

services in areas where these do not exist. The examples of voluntary agencies are All India Women’s Conference, Indian Red Cross Society, etc. Project Implementing Committees appointed by Government, though constituted primarily of voluntary workers, are not voluntary agencies but are known as non-official agencies, since these agencies do not come into existence voluntarily but are sponsored by the Government. These organisations may not be able to rouse community’s popular support, since they are not based on democratic foundations and should, therefore, not be equated with voluntary agencies.\textsuperscript{215}

The definitions of a voluntary organisation given above bring out its following main characteristics:

- It is registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1880, the Indian Trusts Act, 1882; the Cooperative Societies Act 1904 or the Joint Stock Companies Act, 1959 depending up the nature and scope of its activities to give it a legal status;
- It has definite aims, objectives and programmes for their fulfillment and achievement;
- It has an administrative structure and a duly constituted management and executive committee;
- It is an organisation initiated and governed by its own members on democratic principles without any external control; and

• It raises funds for its activities partly from the exchequer in the form of grants in aid and party in the form of contributions or subscription from the members of local community and/or the beneficiaries of the programme.\(^{216}\)

**Objectives of NGOs**

• To generate the income and employment of parents as a prior condition to eliminating child labour.

• To focus on changing deep-seated mindsets and attitudes about child labour and education.

• To give a voice to the working children and to organize them so that they can demand better working conditions for them.

• To provide bridge courses after school.

• To generate awareness among the parents and children about education and rights of children.

The NGOs use different strategies in their efforts to eliminate child labour or ameliorate its effects. They have a distinct philosophy, and consequently, a clear entry point and areas of emphasis. Two NGOs- The Rationalist Society Punjab in Barnala District and Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur Districte playing a very important role in eliminating the problem of child labour in respective district.

The following strategies are most frequently used by the Rationalist Society Punjab in Barnala District and Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur District.

• Mobilising and creating awareness;
• Spreading education;
• Providing pre-school education;
• Facilitating child participation;
• Developing income compensatory strategies;
• Assuring work and income security for parents;
• Facilitating intrahousehold adjustments; and
• Advocacy for legal and institutional reform.

MOBILISING AND CREATING AWARENESS

Both NGOs subscribe to the view that wide scale changes are required through the mass mobilisation and empowerment of the intended beneficiaries. The Rationalist Society of Punjab launched campaigns in Barnala District and Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur District to mobilise children, parents and communities and created awareness about child labour and education. They adopted a variety of means such as village meetings, theatre, rallies and door-to-door campaigns to achieve this objective. It is widely recognised that such campaigns are successful only if the momentum generated by them can be sustained beyond the initial event.

The mobilisation effort undertaken by the Rationalist Society of Punjab in Barnala district and Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur district motivated the parents to send their children to schools. The mobilization efforts were taken by both the NGOs in their respective districts with community involvement on the issues of child labour
and education long. Both these NGOs made efforts to involve already existing structures such as Village Education Committees, Women’s Groups, Youth Groups and Village Panchayats. These groups were revitalized with an objective to provide them responsibility for protecting children’s rights. These groups created by the Rationalist Society of Punjab in Barnala District Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur District played a very important role in mobilizing and creating awareness among illiterate parents to protect their children against exploitation.

**SPREADING EDUCATION**

Compulsory education has been a prime policy instrument in the struggle to eradicate child labour in nineteenth century Europe, the United States and Japan, and more recently, in parts of the developing world, including Kerala. While the Union Government has been slow to use this approach.

Both Rationalist Society of Punjab in Barnala District and Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur District have taken up the provision of education as an important plank in their strategy for combating child labour. However, there are major ideological and practical differences between the two NGOs on at least three counts.

- The first relates to whether they see education as a fundamental right or not,

---

The second variation is in the form in which they deliver education, i.e. formal, non-formal, bridge course or vocational.

The third refers to the role they see for themselves in delivering this service.

The mandate and philosophy of each individual NGO, as well as of their donors, will no doubt determine the stand that they take. This will, in turn, influence the nature of their lobbying and advocacy work as well as their field practice.

At first glance, it may appear unnecessary to question whether education is a fundamental right or not, but a review of the literature and ongoing debates reveal considerable controversy on this subject. The position that is taken in relation to this question will have direct implications for the strategies that NGOs devise and the role that they carve out for themselves.

Rationalist Society of Punjab in Barnala district takes the view that education is a fundamental right. It stressed on the need for providing elementary education compulsory to all the children. But this view is not shared Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur district. It argued that making education compulsory would be tantamount to punishing poor families who are dependent on the labour of their children. The quality of education in mainstream government schools and the lack of resources to provide universal coverage are mentioned as further justifications for not making education compulsory. A more extreme corollary to this position maintains that children also have
the right to work and to organise. It argued that school is not the only arena where children learn; they can acquire life skills at the workplace as well. But the view expressed by Umeed Khanna Foundation is not acceptable. But it may gain ground on account of getting linked to international movements of working children and because of the pressure generated by certain quarters of the donor community.

A variety of educational services are offered by these two NGOs in their attempt to provide an alternative to child labour. They provide full-day schools that mirror the mainstream formal system in many respects. But these schools are regarded as non-formal on the grounds that they offer the primary school curriculum in a compressed time frame and their teachers are less qualified and are paid lower salaries than government school teachers. They demand that such schools must be funded by the Government. The rationale for setting such schools is to improve school access to the children of educationally backward areas of Barnala and Sangrur districts. These NGOs also demanded that more conventional non-formal programmes such as evening classes and on-the-job literacy classes for working children should be offered.²¹⁸

Both the NGOs also laid emphasis on running residential bridge courses to prepare drop-outs, out-of-school children and erstwhile working children for entry into the formal school system in the class

²¹⁸ It is important to mention here that non-formal programmes such as evening classes and on-the-job literacy classes for working children are operating in the State of West Bengal.
appropriate to their age. This can prove to be a very successful strategy in easing the transition of working children into the educational system. It is important to mention here that such a strategy has been adopted by the Andhra Pradesh Government as well as by NGOs such as MV Foundation, Pratham, CINI-Asha and Lok Jumbish.

These NGOs also provide vocational training for older children who are either unable to make the transition to formal school or who wish to learn a marketable skill. The courses range from carpentry, cycle and motor cycle repair and maintenance to artisanal skills and are usually accompanied by some form of literacy training. However, the number of children who benefit from this kind of hands-on training remains limited, largely on account of the costs associated with staffing and running such courses. Both the NGOs could offer vocational training only to a small number of children because of lack of funds.

Given the dependence on external funding, these NGOs find it difficult to take a strong stand on the role that they should play vis-à-vis government and other players in the delivery of educational provision. They are running primary schools even while simultaneously professing that this should be the responsibility of the government. Both these NGOs held the opinion that NGOs should not replace the government but should restrict themselves to playing a supportive and facilitative role. Both NGOs have the mandate to
universalise primary education in their respective target areas and have achieved a measure of success in doing.

PROVIDING EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

It is well-known that Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes—ranging from child care for the age group of 0-2 years and pre-school for 2-6 year old—facilitate the entry of children into primary school and are associated with higher literacy levels, among other longer-term benefits. In addition, they make an important contribution to releasing siblings from childcare responsibilities and allowing them to attend school. Where suitable provision is not available, infants may be left in the care of older siblings, generally girls, who are frequently little more than children themselves.219 Despite the obvious need for ECCE facilities—to ease the transition to primary school and release siblings to enter school—this has been an area of low priority so far, in terms of both policy formulation and resource allocation.220 With a few exceptions, even NGOs working on child labour have been slow to use the provision of ECCE services as a strategy for the elimination of child labour.

219 Where sibling care is not available, mothers may be forced to take their children with them to workplace and in extreme cases, to leave them unattended. Sometimes, even more drastic measures may be required. It is reported that women working in the sandstone mines of Rajasthan frequently give opium to their babies to keep them quiet so that they can work undisturbed. For details, please see Rekha Wazir, “Some Reflections on Child Labour in Jodhpur District”, Indian Journal of Gender Studies, March, 2002.

The Rationalist Society of Punjab in Barnala district and Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur district have developed a network in scheduled caste localities in some selected villages of Barnala and Sangrur districts, where such services were previously lacking. This has proved to be an invaluable step in its objective of achieving universal primary education in both the districts. In fact the success of this initiative has encouraged both these NGOs to extend its mandate to include universal pre-school cover for all children as well. These two NGOs played a very important role in meeting a much felt community need. They also carry the message of education to the slums. They prepare children for entry into the formal school system, prevent future drop-outs, and provide a forum from where the health and nutritional status of children can be monitored and corrected.

**FACILITATING CHILD PARTICIPATION**

It is alleged that child work can empower and benefit the children (as opposed to child labour that is harmful). Child work give strength to the children for increased participation of children in deciding their own futures and destinies. In this context, participation can be extended to mean that children have the right to decide whether they want to work or go to school. Children are seen as active agents, indeed as ‘partners’, and not just as passive recipients, and are considered to be capable of making decisions concerning their lives. The organisations that support this view generally do not favour calls for making education compulsory nor for imposing an outright
ban on child labour as this would amount to punishing the child workers and their poor families. They contend that the problem of child labour has been hugely exaggerated by fund-raising departments of development organisations, journalists and the media to serve their own purposes\textsuperscript{221}. According to them, depicting the harmful effects of work on children only serves to victimise and exploit poor children and their families.

Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur District believes that child labour can be beneficial to children as it provides them with a means of escaping dire poverty and improving their own situation as well as that of their families. While Umeed Khanna Foundation is committed to the eradication of child labour in the long run, it works to empower children who have no option but to work at present. To this end, it focuses on the ‘protagonism’ of working children, i.e. on the need to involve them actively in designing and developing solutions for themselves. Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur district has played an important role in organizing working children, so that they could protect their rights and participate in local decision-making processes. The members decide their own agenda, priorities and action plans. One of the activities they have undertaken is to develop their own definition of work and to decide what is good and bad work—i.e. work they can and cannot do. This exercise then forms the basis for deciding the interventions that are needed at the

local level for dealing with work that is considered ‘harmful’ by the children.

**DEVELOPING INCOME COMPENSATORY STRATEGIES**

Income compensatory strategies are a response to the belief that family poverty is directly responsible for the persistence of child labour and poor educational outcomes. Payments to children and their families are suggested as a means to compensate them for the loss of income incurred on account of withdrawing their children from labour and enrolling them in school. No Indian agency offers an income replacement scheme on the Bolsa-Escola model developed in Brazil, wherein a cash transfer of one minimum wage is made for one year to families below the poverty line who enrol and keep their children in primary school\(^\text{222}\). This remains one of the most powerful examples of income compensation, but despite its significant potential to eradicate child labour and alleviate family poverty, its impact remains limited in terms of scale and sustainability. This is largely due to the difficulty in finding the resources to extend this programme to reach the entire population of poor families and for the entire duration that their children are in primary school. These problems would be equally relevant, and perhaps even greater, in a country like India.

At present, there are a variety of income supplementary schemes that provide incentives in cash or kind to encourage school

---

enrolment and prevent drop-outs. These range from cash stipends, scholarships, free uniforms, books and teaching materials to mid-day meals and nutritional supplements. Such schemes mainly cover the costs of education rather than compensate for the loss of income incurred on account of withdrawing children from labour.

In a global survey of income compensation schemes conducted by Anker and Melkas, the respondents expressed concern about corruption and cheating, particularly where cash transfers are concerned. Although the majorities were positive about the impact of such schemes, many felt that they would not be sufficient in themselves to keep children in school and would need to be accompanied by more comprehensive strategies. Concern was expressed about creating dependency and taking away initiative from poor families. The sustainability of the programme was also mentioned as a major problem as it was noted that children tend to return to work when the benefits are withdrawn.

ASSURING WORK AND INCOME FOR PARENTS

This is a variant of the above strategy but with a difference, Instead of compensating families by making a transfer to them in cash or kind, the aim here is to assist them in securing work and income.

---


224 The results of this survey have limited utility as they are based on responses to questionnaires by 51 organisations, the majority of them being NGOs, offering child labour programmes. They reflect the perception of these organizations about the utility of such schemes. The results are not based on an empirical analysis and evaluation of the operation of income compensatory schemes on the ground. However, they do offer some useful insights.
This is done in a variety of ways: through self-help schemes, group savings, rotating loans and micro-credit programmes, assistance in setting up income generating activities and organising adult labour to demand minimum wages and better working conditions. This is a more empowering process than giving hand-outs as it strengthens the ability of poor families to take control over their own lives. This approach is beginning to gain currency with NGOs who feel that their efforts to eradicate child labour will bear fruit only if they are able to help parents to address one of the root causes of their poverty. At present, there are no systematic evaluations of the effectiveness of this strategy in reducing child labour. It would be safe to assume that efforts to assist parents in securing micro-loans to develop viable sources of income would be subject to the same problems and constraints that beset micro-credit programmes in general. In addition, where these schemes are not linked consciously to the issue of child labour, they could have the unintended consequence of increasing child labour.

Both Rationalist Society of Punjab in Barnala district and Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur district have succeeded in bypassing some of these problems by making the economic activity conditional on the withdrawal of children from labour. These NGOs have highlighted the problems faced by work with migrant labourers in Punjab. They fought for giving minimum wages, better working
conditions and release from bonded labour. They are encouraged to start self-help groups and save even small amounts of money.

**FACILITATING INTRA-HOUSEHOLD ADJUSTMENTS**

Efforts involving intra-household labour diversification, consumption and expenditure switching, and savings and assets restructuring, have been widely observed in the context of sudden fluctuations in the incomes of poor households, whether in the context of structural adjustment, natural disasters or loss of family labour due to illness or death. All these point to the resilience of poor families in their struggle for survival. This view is supported by Chandrasekhar's study of child labour in the match industry of Sivakasi-Sattur in Tamil Nadu. He argued that the abolition of child labour in this industry would neither lead to industrial distress nor cause problems for individual families. In fact, it would result in higher earnings for adult workers. Both the NGOs- Rationalist Society of Punjab in Barnala district and Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur district used this resilience as a resource in their efforts to encourage families to give up child labour in favour of education.

Both these NGOs have been successful in withdrawing children from labour and incorporating them into the mainstream through the formal education system in the scheduled caste localities in the villages. This has been done without any compensation in cash or kind to the families of these children. Follow-up studies of the families
of these children show that poor parents make adjustments to compensate for the loss of income and labour incurred by sending children to school. In some cases the children continued to work but reduced their work hours to the time available during holidays and before and after school. There is also evidence of work sharing. The tasks previously undertaken by the children were now shared between the family members. Some changes have been noticed in the gender division of labour, with fathers taking on some of the tasks traditionally associated with women. Parents also increase their wage work and diversify their income sources. In some cases, family income had actually gone up as parents had sought better-paid jobs in order to support their children through school or because adult wages had gone up due to the unavailability of child labour. Changes have been reported in consumption patterns as well with families spending less on festivals, entertainment, alcohol and luxury food items.

**ADVOCACY FOR LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM**

The social movements of the day have historically played a major role in advocating for the eradication of child labour. Legal reform to make education compulsory and to restrict the minimum working age accompanied by adequate provision of schools and strict enforcement of laws has accelerated the process of change.

Both the Rationalist Society of Punjab in Barnala district and Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur district along with other civil

---

society institutions, are in the forefront in creating awareness about child labour and advocating for changes in policy at present as well.

At the national level, a large number of NGOs played a historical role in compelling the Union Government to pass eighty sixth amendment bill to make education a fundamental right. At present, there is no counterpart nation-wide movement for legal reform in the sphere of child labour. However, several NGOs are involved in advocating for the abolition of child labour through their membership of forums such as the Global March Against Child Labour and the South Asia Coalition Against Child Servitude. A few NGOs distance themselves from these groups on grounds that they cannot participate in activities that go against children’s work. Instead, they work towards increased participation of working children through their involvement in the International Working Children’s Movement.

Both Rationalist Society of Punjab in Barnala district and Umeed Khanna Foundation in Sangrur district are more active in their advocacy work at the local level and undertake a wide range of activities in this regard. At the most basic level, this involves creating awareness among local communities about child labour, education and existing labour laws. They also engage with the state government in lobbying for legal and institutional reform and better implementation of existing legislation. Some of these initiatives, such as the enforcement of laws regarding minimum wages, abolition of bonded labour or compensation for work-related injury, do not apply
directly to children but are part of the move to improve the economic and living conditions of poor families so that they can withdraw their children from labour. Others are more directly relevant to children. For example, they may seek the extension of existing legislation, such as the Factories Act, to cover sectors such as mining where child labour is rampant but which do not come under the purview of the law at present. Others take a more confrontational stance, for example by seeking penalties for employers of child labour or instituting legal proceedings against employers who hire children as bonded labour.