



Report from the field

GRASSROOTS: Profiling Chetna Vikas' field work with CCF

Field date: March 7, 2008
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Report by: Tanja Kisslinger *

Today we set out early in the Chetna Vikas four-wheeler in order to accommodate a full day agenda – field visits to seven different villages across Dumka District. The objective was to profile the education and livelihood initiatives of the multi-faceted Christian Children's Fund (CCF) program in which Chetna Vikas has been a partner since 2005. Specifically, Chetna Vikas partners with CCF in order to improve the well-being of children and vulnerable families in 27 rural villages of Saraiyhat Block, Dumka District, Jharkhand. With holistic focus, the CCF program aims at improving overall health, sanitation, nutrition, education and livelihood conditions and opportunities for village children and their families.

In particular, the CCF program prioritizes the following:

- Establishment of Early Childhood Centers ("Balwadis") to provide health and nutrition services to all children under the age of 6 years.
- Improvement of all educational facilities available.
- Provision of health and nutrition education to all mothers, primary caregivers of children under 5, and expectant / nursing mothers.
- Promotion of livelihoods and agriculture.
- Facilitation of community organization, people's participation and local self-governance.
- Facilitation of the correspondence relationship between international child sponsors and CCF sponsor children.

Our plan was to spend the first part of the day visiting four separate Balwadis Centers (BWCs). BWCs are like the government-run Anganwari Centers (AWCs) (i.e. preschools), except that they are organized and run by non-government organizations (NGOs). Today, we would visit BWCs in Maheshkhanda, Bhagwanpur, Malda and Loharikunda villages of Saraiyhat Block, all of which were established and are supported by Chetna Vikas. Notably, BWCs are often established to fill the gap in a village or community where the government has not provided an AWC, or the AWC is too far away for many children to travel. Additional key features of the BWC model are:



- The community itself is engaged and capacitated to undertake the actual construction of the building to be used for the BWC.
- The BWC teachers are selected and trained by an Education Coordinator who works with the supporting NGO. The BWC teachers also receive training under the overall CCF project.
- The NGO's Education Coordinator plays a key role in providing regular feedback, coordination, curriculum and methodology updates to each of the BWCs under her supervision.

Even as our vehicle approached the BWC in Maheshkhanda Village, I was struck by the open, airy structure of the center itself, wherein the young children were seated around the perimeter on the concrete base. Although this design seemed pleasant on a warm, dry day like today, it is apparent that the community has yet to complete the roof and walls of the Maheshkhanda BWC to better accommodate the pending rainy season. As we disembarked the vehicle and walked toward the centre, the children sang out in unison, "Prannam!", a respectful greeting offered by youth to those who are older. The BWC teacher, standing in the center of the platform, had been teaching the children about hygiene and cleanliness when she spotted us and urged them to say hello.

During our brief visit in Maheshkhanda, I learned that the BWC teacher uses pictures, diagrams and learning materials supplied by Chetna Vikas to teach fundamentals such as numbers and the alphabet, as well as general health, hygiene and nutrition. The BWC teacher also holds regular meetings with the children's parents, in order to help them understand and support what their children are learning with respect to hygiene and nutrition. In this way, the BWC attempts to address some of the important, underlying causes of health and sanitation problems in the CCF target villages, including lack of awareness / knowledge, unhygienic "traditional" practices, improper food selection and preparation, and even superstition. The BWC teacher explained that before attending the preschool, many children and parents do not know the importance of, nor do they perform the basics of, daily bathing and tooth cleaning.

From Maheshkhanda, we proceeded a short distance to the neighboring village of Bhagwanpur. There, we were ushered into an enclosed, but spacious, clean and inviting BWC that was brightly painted and decorated with children's art on the walls and hanging from the ceiling. The teacher showed me a large container in the corner of the room in which a variety of Chetna Vikas supplied learning materials and resources are stored. As I appreciated the learning conducive environment of the Bhagwanpur BWC (especially when compared to the scant Maheshkhanda BWC structure), I wondered about the possibility of using this center as a "model BWC" with which to motivate other communities when undertaking the design and construction of their own BWC...

Approximately 15 young children were seated around the perimeter of the Bhagwanpur classroom, engaged in their own writing / drawing activity. The teacher explained to me that there were more than 10 children absent today, and that this type of irregular attendance is a common problem around the time of festivals and holidays. Apparently, parents take their children out of school in order to travel to nearby celebrations or villages, and then can be quite casual about the time they take to return home and ensure the child is back into regular classes. In fact, this sense of parental disregard for BWC education and routine would prove to be an important, recurring theme today – one that would become quite clear in the very next village.



At Malda Village, we were ushered into a tiny room, wherein more than 20 children and the BWC teacher cramped into a space barely large enough for 10! Apparently the community hasn't yet completed construction of the Malda BWC, and so they are using a tiny room in a villagers home as a make-shift classroom. Unbelievably, this BWC typically serves a total of 35 young children; however, again, children were absent due to a recent holiday. It goes without saying that, despite the BWC teacher's valiant efforts to decorate the small room with children's drawings and learning materials, this room is entirely inadequate space for a BWC, and for any kind of effective preschool learning and play activity.

With the Chetna Vikas Education Coordinator as my interpreter, I managed to speak with the Malda BWC teacher, a bright, dedicated young woman. She expressed concern about the increasing lack of community motivation around children's education in general and about the BWC in particular. Villagers are hesitant about the role and value of education in their children's lives, given that such learning doesn't play a role in the long-term village "way of life". In particular, villagers are unwilling to send their girl children to the BWC, since most young girls are ushered into a life of marriage and servitude by the age of 12. The Malda BWC teacher explained that this "traditional village mentality" has even affected her ability to make effective progress during monthly meetings with her student's parents, when she tries to better help them support their child's new health, hygiene and nutrition activities.

As we made our way out of Malda toward the village of Loharikunda, I reflected on the challenges of traditional village life for the BWC model. In particular, I was increasingly troubled by the status of women and the practice of girl child marriage, and how this was diminishing the potential of such young children. In fact, our next and final BWC visit presented yet another opportunity to encounter the issues of community apathy and gender inequality as pressing concerns for BWC efficacy. At the same time, however, this final visit also planted an important seed of hope...

The Loharikunda BWC itself is a well-equipped, well-resourced and effectively displayed structure, and the students engaged in their dance and learning activities with enthusiasm. However, this BWC also lacks an appropriate roof, and has yet to be suitably prepared for the rainy season. Moreover, the Education Coordinator explained that, overall, the Loharikunda village is "typical" in its tendency to cast young girls into the roles of wife and mother. Thus, it is still resistant to educate girls and girl child marriage continues to be practiced, whereas there is a general level of acceptance about education for boys.

Just as we were about to depart, a small group of Loharikunda villagers gathered around the BWC; they had spotted the Chetna Vikas "Health Coordinator" who had stopped by to greet us. In fact, this health-related initiative, which includes village-wide awareness-raising, health treatment and immunization services, is another facet of the overall CCF program. The villagers who stopped by expressed an interest in more, and current information about diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. In and of itself, this was an encouraging event... I realized that the strength of the BWC model comes from its association with the overall CCF program. As a holistic, multi-faceted undertaking to improve the well-being of vulnerable children and their families, each tenet of the CCF program is supported by the awareness raising and mobilizing initiatives of the others. As such, the ability to spark a desire for increased knowledge among



rural, traditional villagers, whether in the area of health or education, is an important achievement upon which much can be built.

On this positive note, and with our day half done, it was time to “jump tracks” – moving from the CCF education sector to the livelihood initiatives of the CCF program. Specifically, we were headed toward the Livelihood Economic Enhancement Program (LEEP), a CCF sub-project being piloted in several villages including Haripur, Dhankutta and Patharia. The rationale for CCF livelihood programming is readily apparent in the project operational area, where villagers depend almost completely on rainwater agriculture and daily labor for their livelihood. Due to low rates of rainfall in recent years, a lack of irrigation facilities, and low, undulating landscape, agriculture production in most rural communities is insufficient to meet family food needs.

At the same time, families largely dwell in single-room mud huts with thatched or tiled roofs. The living standard is poor due to economic deprivation and there is an urgent need for village access to safe drinking water. Moreover, village living conditions are unhygienic due to the absence of sanitation facilities at the village level. As a result, child health is generally poor, and rates of malnutrition and mortality are high.

As the landscape around us slowly opened into wide, dry, dusty expanses under the heat of the mid-day sun, we reached Haripur Village. We parked the vehicle and set out on foot toward the “wasteland orchard” established just 7 months ago in an area adjacent to the village itself. My initial dismay at the dusty soil and brown grasses was short-lived. Almost immediately, I was overwhelmed by an inspired appreciation of the accomplishments by Haripur villagers in this so-called “wasteland” (as with all CCF initiatives, LEEP beneficiaries are capacitated to undertake the agricultural work to be done themselves). In fact, the Haripur orchard has been well-planted with mango, guava and pulses, and new sprouting promises fruit within three years time. A generous greenhouse has also been erected, enabling optimal temperature and warmth for the melon and eggplant seeds being grown within.

Standing in the open orchard, the land all around me showed evidence of the dedicated efforts of Haripur villagers to transform “wasteland” into viable and life-giving soil. Intensive land-leveling has been done to promote irrigation, a lift irrigation system has been established to water the entire orchard, and deep water pits have been dug to capture and store rain water. In addition, vermi-composting (i.e. the creation of natural fertilizer by manure and worms) is being practiced effectively, enabling the organic (as opposed to chemical) fertilization of the orchard produce. While all of this seemed to be a remarkable undertaking and accomplishment, I was further impressed to learn that this single “wasteland orchard” currently supports 17 beneficiary families in Haripur!

From Haripur, we continued toward Dhankutta, once again crossing dry, dusty expanses of barren land that reveal none of its incredible, hidden potential. Just outside the village, we stopped at a nearby, two acre LEEP “experiment” in wasteland mixed cropping. In a confined area, the villagers had planted a variety of tomatoes, arhar (i.e. a type of daal), mangoes and squash. As we walked through the crop, the Chetna Vikas LEEP Coordinator, Gokul Yadav, pointed enthusiastically at the numerous, well-formed tomatoes that hung heavy on the vines. He noted that this mixed-cropping experiment was only two and a half months old, and he had not expected this kind of result from the tomato plants in such a short time.



Sharing Gokul's excitement about the unexpected, early success of the Dhankutta tomato plants, I pressed him for further details about the experimental crop... I learned that this single, two acre area provides life-sustaining nourishment to two of the 17 families living in Dhankutta. When I asked about plans to extend the crop to benefit additional families, I was disheartened to learn that a simple lack of LEEP resources prevents the two acre experiment – success notwithstanding – from being expanded. On this news, I looked somewhat forlornly at the “sea” of “wasteland” that surrounded the small experimental crop. I didn't see “wasteland” at all anymore... I simply saw a vast amount of untapped LEEP potential, a dusty surface that longed to offer up its gifts in food and agricultural livelihood to an entire village in need.

Finally, we headed toward Patharia Village, our final LEEP project site, and our final field visit for the day. The Patharia LEEP initiative is, once again, an inspiring, multi-faceted undertaking that includes: construction of a water storage tank system (to irrigate the crops and sustain the villagers); varied planting of mangoes and guava; and intensive vermi-composting. In fact, it was because of Patharia's numerous vermi-composting beds that I learned about the significance of this initiative. Whereas villagers previously used chemical fertilizers for cropping, vermi-composting has enabled them to achieve benefits in health, plants and fields simply by moving to a natural fertilizer. Moreover, Patharia villagers are able to sell their organic fertilizer at the village market (for five to 10 Rs per kg); thereby providing an additional means of income and livelihood.

As our vehicle lumbered, at last, back toward Deoghar, I reviewed my field notes and slowly sorted through the thoughts and emotions that had passed through me today. As with each of my field visits to date, witnessing Chetna Vikas' work “on the ground” is as inspiring as it is frustrating. To see the transformation of lives and situations that might otherwise be considered “impossible”, is inspiring. To see this potential thwarted and stopped in any way by issues of human / financial resource, is therefore immeasurably frustrating. Perhaps, as evidenced by Chetna Vikas' own tireless efforts, it becomes most important to simply continue – one day at a time – with the work to be done, using the skills and knowledge and resources already at hand. After all, beyond this, the greatest potential lies in sowing simple seeds of awareness...

Findings / Recommendations:

- At the Maheshkhanda BWC, the teacher explained that she was pleased with the new platform structure that had been provided by the community, since it was much larger than the room she had previously been using. However, she did note that the roof was not yet complete, and that this would be a problem in the rainy season. She did also note that there was no “play ground” space available for the children around the BWC structure.
- The Maheshkhanda BWC does not have a large storage box in which to keep the children's learning materials and artwork / projects.
- The ratio of BWC students to teacher (20:1) at the Maheshkhanda BWC seemed appropriate as a “maximum”. To exceed this number of students would compromise the quality of education and attention that the teacher is able to provide to individual learners.
- The Bhagwanpur BWC provides a large, clean well-resourced space for learning and activities, including a water drinking facility outside the front door, and a large box to

contain and store supplied learning materials. The room was also effectively decorated with displays of the children's artwork on the walls and from the ceiling. This BWC could be demonstrated as an effective "model" for other communities to strive for when building their own BWC.

- The Malda BWC is currently operating in a tiny room within the house of one of the villagers. The center itself has not yet been built by the community members. As a result, the BWC teacher is currently attempting to teach more than 35 children in a room that should hold no more than 10. There is definitely insufficient space for effective preschool learning and playing at the Malda BWC, and this needs to be addressed promptly by providing further community mobilization and awareness.
- In particular, the Malda BWC teacher explained that there is an overall lack of motivation and understanding on the part of the community with respect to the role / value of child education in general. The community is hesitant about the education of children, since they do not see how / why this is relevant to the traditional village life. In particular, the community expresses disinterest in education of girl children, even at the BWC level, since the practice of "child marriage" is still widespread in rural villages. Again, there is an urgent need for further community education and awareness at Malda.
- The Loharikunda BWC is a large, open-air structure with adequate spacing; however, the teacher noted that the incomplete roof and absence of walls will present difficulties in the rainy season.
- There seemed to be several children older than age five attending the Loharikunda BWC. This should be followed up with village parents.
- Although the Loharikunda BWC is generally accepted by the village, it seems there is a concern here similar to Malda, that the traditional roles of village women (i.e. wife and mother) will ultimately deflect any potential or advancement made by young girls who receive education. As with other villages, there seems to be an ongoing need for more intensive community awareness raising and mobilization.
- There was a notable interest by the Loharikunda villagers in having access to more information (and the latest information) about HIV/AIDS and malaria, and other health issues. Although the RCH workers are well-trained and do their best to visit each community with updated information as much as possible, it seems this is a resource issue. Consideration should be given to increasing and enhancing (and regularly updating) the BCC and IEC materials made available by RCH in each CCF village.
- Overall, it is a key feature of the BWC that the community is involved in building the center itself. This kind of proactive engagement of the community in establishing an educational facility is both empowering and enlightening – it "creates the opportunity for dialogue" about the need for education among young children. It also opens the door for villagers to consider evolving toward a new, alternative "way of life" for their community.
- Two critical components of the BWC model are: (1) regular meetings between the BWC teacher and the children's parents; (2) general community meetings. This type of extended



communication is vital to ensure that: (1) the seeds of health and hygiene planted in young minds help to dispel traditional superstitions and behaviors that cause villagers to suffer poor health; and (2) the education of young girls is translated into continued empowerment and equality and abandonment of practices such as child marriage which reinforce the life-long subjugation of village women.

- The strength of the BWC model comes from its ability to mobilize the community on a larger scale and to intervene in certain traditional aspects of village life. Thus, perhaps Chetna Vikas might consider a targeted “campaign” or “event” of some type to occur in CCF project villages that provides a direct opportunity to table the issue of child marriage as a problematic practice. This type of campaign would reinforce the overall objectives of the BWCs.
- The LEEP-based transformation of “wasteland” into food-producing, life-sustaining, and livelihood-promoting ground is an incredible achievement – one that cannot be over-stated in an environment such as rural India where so much of the impoverished population are suffering because of their reliance on rain-fed agriculture.
- Are the current successes of various LEEP initiatives regularly and effectively communicated and shared with CCF? Would CCF consider an expansion of LEEP? Is it possible for CCF to allocate additional funds to LEEP?
- Given that LEEP currently uses only three Chetna Vikas staff member, it seems that the program requires additional resources. Is it possible to add Chetna Vikas own staff and funding to LEEP?
- In particular, LEEP initiatives such as wasteland orchards, lift irrigation, land-leveling and vermi-composting are effectively transforming the lives of its beneficiaries, in terms of health, and income generation. Is there a network of NGOs in India which Chetna Vikas could join in order to communicate these achievements and to link their work to others doing similar projects? Perhaps this network would provide an avenue for Chetna Vikas to disseminate the ideas and methodologies of LEEP to other like-minded organizations. In this way, even if LEEP itself does not receive further funding and is not expanded, the successes and learning from the project can be disseminated to other needful parts of the country.

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*Tanja Kisslinger worked with Chetna Vikas in Deoghar from January to April 2008 as a Communications Advisor Volunteer, focused on documentation, publishing and establishing organizational brand identity. Tanja's photos, which accompany her field reports, are available as online slideshows at: [www.chetnavikas.in](http://www.chetnavikas.in)*

