

INDIA

At 60 ChildFund has many plans



Ann Lynam Goddard in a child-friendly school in Tamil Nadu

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IN 2006, a team from ChildFund India visited a government school in Bihar's backward Jamui district. They were appalled by what they saw – a ragtag bunch of 30 children in a dilapidated school building with a dispirited teaching staff. The school, which apparently had 200 children on its rolls, was just another moribund structure languishing in a far flung area.

ChildFund India stepped in. "We decided to support the school by improving its quality. We did a lot of planning with the government district authorities and local teachers. Fortunately, the headmaster of the school was a very motivated individual and now with political change there are 350 children in the school. Last year, two children got a first class in the Class 10 exam. So things are changing on the ground," says Dola Mohapatra, national director of ChildFund India with pride.

It is success stories like these that ChildFund is celebrating on its 60th anniversary in India. Their team believes this is a timely moment to reflect on their strengths, the areas they could do better in and the way ahead, says Mohapatra.

The statistics speak for themselves. Way back in 1951 ChildFund took over a boarding school for orphans in Kerala. Today, the NGO is a beacon of hope for over 1.5 million deprived, excluded, vulnerable children and their families. In partnership with 76 NGOs as well as community-based organisations (CBOs) and government agencies, ChildFund India works in 85 districts of 14 states and one Union Territory.

ChildFund's programmes focus on infants, school going children from six to 14 years and

youth between 15 and 24. The interventions are in health, education, livelihood education and training for youth, response to emergencies such as natural disasters and protection of children from violence, exploitation and abuse.

However, support does not extend to the children alone. Over the last 50 years, ChildFund India has broadened its reach. The team realized that creating islands within families and communities was not the answer. The route it took was to mobilise and empower communities by forming parent committees, youth groups and children's clubs. Currently, ChildFund has helped to form over 6,000 women's groups with around a million members. "These are not just self-help groups. We regard women as agents of change because they are able to come together, access resources and raise their voices whenever there is a need," says Mohapatra.

ChildFund India makes a 12 to 15 year commitment to the children and communities it works with in the form of financial, technical and institutional building assistance. Local people are involved in the design and implementation of their programmes, says Mohapatra.

He emphasizes the importance of building confidence, hope and resilience among marginalized and deprived communities. "Invariably in vulnerable pockets we find hope and resilience are the biggest casualties. We have succeeded in building

that. In 60 years we have reached out to at least 100,000 families who are well established. They have not fallen back into poverty. We have helped 10 million children to complete their high school education. We have also produced many doctors, engineers, army officers and aviation experts from amongst these children," he says.

Such work requires a lot of investment in resources, time and energy.

"It takes time to build confidence in the people we work with," says Mohapatra.

ChildFund works closely with the government. Their aim is to strengthen government facilities like anganwadis, schools and ASHAs. ChildFund does this by improving infrastructure, training workers and even running schools or other facilities until they achieve efficiency and can be handed back to the government. All this requires establishing a rapport with government officials and frontline functionaries – no mean task by itself.

However, as ChildFund India completes 60 years of its operations in the country, dark clouds hover in the horizon. Ann Lynam Goddard, president and CEO of ChildFund International who was recently in India to join the celebrations says that future funding to ChildFund India could be in

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jeopardy with imminent cuts in the US budget and the increasing focus by overseas government and private funders on Africa.

A dramatic increase in local funding will become inevitable, she says. The effort will be to replicate the successful strategies of ChildFund branches in Brazil, Mexico and Thailand. "These countries have developed an understanding of the market and introduced marketing initiatives that work," she says. The NGO has set up a separate marketing department at its US headquarters in Richmond to develop appeals and plans for raising funds for its international



Dola Mohapatra

operations.

But replicating fund-raising strategies adopted by other countries may not be easy in India where religious causes attract the most funds. Only 10 percent of middle-class Indians contribute to social causes, estimates Mohapatra. This situation is aggravated by the deep rooted ambivalence of the middle-class towards NGOs. The average Indian does not extend financial support to the needy at an individual level, so there is scope to build on that and attract funds at the institutional level, he says.

Good governance is an issue which could attract funds. ChildFund and Voluntary Action Network India (VANI) have embarked on an initiative to build model policies which could be adapted by civil society organisations. This may encourage government, companies and individuals to extend greater support to local NGOs. ■