



International
Labour
Organization

Cooperating out of child labour (Karnataka, India)

BACKGROUND

The IPEC Karnataka child labour Project employs a holistic approach to eliminate and prevent child labour. The Project works at four levels (community, block, district and state). At the community level the Project emphasizes the “family approach”, which means improvement of the families’ socio-economic conditions. This allows and encourages the families to send their children to school instead of to work. Under this approach, various interventions have organized self-help groups for women. These groups would provide improved access to resources, participatory development and self-sustaining social change coupled with additional income generation through skills training. Work at the community level also consisted of training parents and at-risk adolescents in income-generation skills and entrepreneurship. The Project also aimed to prevent the exploitation of workers by middlemen. This innovative action was undertaken through the formation of a labour cooperative society, with the involvement of the trade union partners. This society was registered as “Bidar District Services of Labour Multipurpose Co-operative Society Ltd”, in Bidar in 2008.

ACTION

The implementing agency under the Project organized approximately 1,000 workers (the majority of which were parents and siblings of rehabilitated child workers) and registered them as members of the Bidar District Services of Labour Multipurpose Co-operative Society. This society was founded for the purpose of providing decent employment and has its own service rules and bylaws.

The cooperative society replaced the labour contractor who used to exploit the workers by not paying fair wages. The workers’ cooperative society approached the employers directly and took on contracts to supply the workers. This created transparency in appointments and the entire contract amount collected from the employer reached the workers. Furthermore, it provided members with provident fund benefits as well as health insurance through the Ministry of Labour’s newly-introduced scheme. Presently, around 384 members have obtained jobs through this cooperative society, 252 of them women. Moreover, an orientation training programme is being conducted by the cooperative for its members on the different kinds of work environments and the soft skills needed for the jobs.

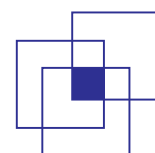
This experiment not only opened doors for the trade union to enter the hitherto untouched informal economy, but also opened avenues for decent work for exploited contract workers.

ACHIEVEMENTS/ACCOMPLISHMENTS

For the first year, the administrative and managerial expenses were 100% subsidized by the Project fund, and for the second year the subsidy was reduced to 50%. From the third year on, the society has to become self-reliant by generating funds by charging a small entrance fee for becoming a member and through small service charges collected from the employers.

Currently all the workers who have become members of this cooperative are earning wages of up to Rs. 3,000 and are also part of the social security schemes. The cooperative has helped to streamline the process and ensure that minimum wages are paid to the workers. The employers now know that if they do not give the workers their due, including mandatory social security benefits, then they can be penalized. This cooperative has provided a forum for marginalized groups within society, who were exploited in terms of wages paid and inhuman working conditions, to get a fair deal.

Good practice





Amina, a Muslim widow with four young children aged 4, 8, 9 and 11, could not make ends meet without the income of her three working children. She was a contract worker in a hospital doing sweeping and cleaning. Prescribed legal minimum wages for such contract workers is Rs.2200 per month with provident fund facility. The hospital was passing on the benefits to the contractor, but the contractor gave her only Rs.1,200. In addition, she had to work for 12 hours a day, seven days a week. Her three children worked in the nearby garage and roadside Dhaba and earned Rs.300 each. With their collective earnings the family could hardly make ends meet. This was not the predicament of just Amina, but rather of many contract workers, as the protection of labour laws has not reached them. However, becoming a member of the labour cooperative changed Amina's life. Getting proper wages ensured that she and her family had enough to eat and now she sends her three children to school.

SUSTAINABILITY

The democratic structure of the cooperative has given its members a sense of ownership and accountability. As the benefits of the cooperative reach the registered members, more people seeking employment are motivated to join, contributing to the sustainability of this practice. The cooperative conducts an orientation training programme for its members that leads to raised awareness of workers rights. Additionally, it helps to educate workers about the soft skills needed for employment. Better earning opportunities (through fair wages and social security) have led to improved living conditions. If replicated, this good practice will further the interests of workers from all sectors, especially agriculture, domestic labour and unskilled jobs by providing them access to a forum where their needs can be vocalized and met.

There are around 600 women members, most of them unskilled. Membership in the cooperative has given them a voice as well as provided them with information on minimum wages, provident funds, health issues, family welfare and not least of all, sending their children to school and not to work - thus contributing to the sustainable development of the community.

To demonstrate its long-term efficacy, the cooperative will have to be managed by experienced personnel who are well-versed in tendering policies, government regulations and market demand. The cooperative should also be linked to training providers so that its members can improve both their technical skills and their employability.

LESSONS LEARNED

This intervention needs support from the system in the form of initial resources, such as individuals trained in the management of the complex commercial and administrative affairs of the society. It needs policy support from the government, as the tendering and procurement laws are often manipulated by the contractors rendering the cooperative society unable to compete with them in the market. The Project is researching these issues and is in dialogue with the appropriate authorities for suitable policy changes regarding this matter.

Geographical location has a bearing on the employment avenues available. Bidar lacks large-scale industries, companies or establishments that need a steady supply of guards or unskilled labour. Sometimes people are not willing to relocate to places away from their hometown.

NECESSARY CONDITIONS

In order for cooperatives to be as effective as possible, the authorities should enforce labour legislation, and those contractors who exploit the workers should be blacklisted from taking contracts. This would allow more members of the workers' cooperative to benefit. Necessary action should also be taken by the authorities to educate the employers to select such contractors who are transparent in their dealings, so that there is a level playing field for workers' cooperatives.

A labour cooperative could be a good solution for a situation in which the parents and siblings of child workers need a forum that will protect their interests and save them from exploitation.

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