

Report on a Collaborative Project with Aarohan in Araku Valley

Introduction

Araku Valley, a picturesque hill station nestled amidst the Eastern Ghats in Andhra Pradesh, India, presents a stark contrast between its natural beauty and the socio-economic challenges faced by its inhabitants, particularly women and children. To address these disparities, the members of the social responsibility club of IIM Visakhapatnam- Vatsalya embarked on a collaborative project with Aarohan, a Delhi-based NGO dedicated to promoting child-centred development and sustainable positive changes in the lives of marginalised communities. Our focus centred on financial inclusion, market linkages, capacity building for women, and addressing the challenges they face daily. Aligning our efforts with Aarohan's mission and expertise, we implemented a multifaceted approach to empower women and improve their situation in the region.

Prevalent Environment

The Araku Valley is home to a predominantly tribal population, predominantly belonging to the Konda Dora community. Despite the region's rich natural resources, the people grapple with poverty, illiteracy, and limited access to healthcare and basic amenities. The lack of financial inclusion, market linkages, and supportive infrastructure has further exacerbated their economic vulnerability and restricted their opportunities for advancement.

Challenges

Through our interactions with the women of Araku Valley, we identified several key challenges that hinder their empowerment and economic progress. These challenges can be broadly categorised into socio-economic, cultural and social, and infrastructure and access barriers.

Socio-Economic Challenges

1. **Poverty:** The pervasive poverty in the region limits women's access to education, healthcare, and entrepreneurial opportunities, trapping them in a cycle of economic deprivation.
2. **Limited Income Opportunities:** The need for more diverse employment options confines women to traditional roles and restricts their contribution to household income.

3. **Exploitative Market Practices:** The presence of powerful middlemen in the local market deprives women of fair prices for their produce and handicrafts, further compounding their financial hardship.
4. **Limited Market Access:** The remoteness of Araku Valley and poor infrastructure hinder women's ability to reach markets and sell their products, restricting their economic potential.



Cultural and Social Challenges

1. **Gender Stereotypes:** Traditional beliefs and practices often confine women to domestic roles, restricting their participation in decision-making, income-generating activities, and community leadership.
2. **Health and Sanitation:** Women in Araku Valley also face the significant challenge of limited access to menstrual hygiene products. This lack of access can have profound negative impacts on women's health, education, and economic participation.
3. **Lack of Education and Awareness:** Low literacy rates and limited access to information hinder women's understanding of their rights, opportunities, and financial management skills.
4. **Limited Social Mobility:** Deep-rooted social hierarchies and lack of access to social networks restrict women's opportunities for advancement and participation in community affairs.

5. **Language Barriers:** Limited proficiency in dominant languages like Hindi and English hinders women's communication, access to services, and integration into broader society.

Infrastructure and Access Challenges

1. **Poor Infrastructure:** Inadequate roads, communication networks, and transportation facilities hinder women's access to markets, healthcare, education, and essential services.
2. **Lack of Essential Services:** Limited access to clean water, sanitation, electricity, and other essential services further compounds women's daily hardships and economic constraints.
3. **Shortage of Teachers and Doctors:** The scarcity of qualified teachers and healthcare professionals in the region limits women's access to quality education and healthcare.
4. **Locational Disadvantage:** Araku Valley's remoteness and limited connectivity isolate women from opportunities and resources available in urban areas, restricting their exposure and advancement.



Addressing the Challenges

To address these challenges, we implemented a multifaceted approach that aligned with Aarohan's mission and expertise, focusing on financial empowerment, market linkages, capacity building, community engagement, and infrastructure advocacy.

1. **Financial Empowerment:** We conducted workshops on financial literacy and encouraged women to open bank accounts and access microloans to start

small businesses, generating income and enhancing their financial independence.

2. **Market Linkages:** We explored the possibility of facilitating direct linkages between women producers and potential buyers, eliminating the exploitative role of middlemen and ensuring fair prices for their products, improving their economic returns.
3. **Capacity Building:** We also advocated the need for organizing training programs on various skills, such as tailoring, handicrafts, organic farming, and sustainable livelihood options, to enhance women's employability, entrepreneurial potential, and sustainable income generation.
4. **Community Engagement:** We engaged with community leaders, and tribal elders, to address gender stereotypes, promote gender equality, empower women to make informed decisions, and encourage their participation in community leadership roles.
5. **Infrastructure Advocacy:** We advocated for improved infrastructure, including roads, communication networks, transportation facilities, and access to essential services, to improve connectivity, access to markets, and overall living conditions for women.
6. **Promoting Sustainable Menstrual Hygiene: A Two-Pronged Approach**
 - a. Recognizing the importance of menstrual hygiene for women's health and well-being, Aarohan partnered with a local firm that manufactures biodegradable sanitary napkins using environmentally friendly practices and employs individuals with disabilities, fostering a socially and environmentally conscious initiative. The distribution of these sanitary napkins to women and girls in the region ensured access to essential hygiene products while promoting sustainable practices and empowering marginalized individuals.
 - b. Secondly, we conducted workshops on menstrual hygiene education to raise awareness about proper menstrual hygiene practices, dispelling myths and misconceptions, and promoting safe and healthy habits among women and girls.





Conclusion

Our collaborative efforts with Aarohan have the potential to make significant strides in empowering women in Araku Valley. We expect growing awareness among women about their rights, opportunities, and financial management skills. Their participation in decision-making processes, community leadership, and income-generating activities has increased, leading to a more equitable and inclusive society. While challenges remain, our interventions, aligned with Aarohan's expertise and commitment to social change, will act as a strong foundation for sustainable development and gender equality in the region.

Recommendations

To further accelerate progress and ensure the sustainable empowerment of women in Araku Valley, we recommend:

1. **Continued Support for Women's Groups:** Provide ongoing support to women's self-help groups to facilitate collective action, peer support, and skill sharing, fostering a sustainable network of empowerment.
2. **Skill Development for Youth:** Focus on skill development programs for young women to enhance their employability and prepare them for future economic opportunities, ensuring their integration into the growing economy.
3. **Collaboration with Government Agencies:** Collaborate with government agencies to ensure effective implementation of welfare schemes and policies aimed at women's empowerment, leveraging government resources for broader impact.
4. **Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods:** Promote sustainable livelihood options, such as organic farming, eco-tourism, and forest-based products, to enhance income generation, environmental conservation, and sustainable economic development.
5. **Digital Literacy and Access:** Promote digital literacy and provide access to digital technologies to bridge the information gap, empower women to connect with resources and opportunities, and enhance their participation in the digital economy.
6. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to track the progress of women's empowerment initiatives, identify areas for improvement, and ensure the effectiveness of interventions.

Through continued collaboration, innovation, and a commitment to sustainable development, we can empower women in Araku Valley to reach their full potential, contributing to a more equitable, prosperous, and harmonious future for the region.



Child Development Program in Araku Valley



Date – 1st November, 2023

Place – Araku Valley, Visakhapatnam

Vatsalya, the CSR club of IIM Visakhapatnam, in collaboration with Aarohan, an NGO based out of Delhi, organized a child development program for the tribal population of Araku Valley, Visakhapatnam. The program aimed to provide educational, creative, and recreational opportunities for the children of the community, as well as to raise awareness about the importance of child development.

Activities Conducted

- The MEO, Ananthagiri Sarpanch, and Rani Patel - CEO of Aarohan delivered speeches in which they emphasized the importance of child development, the past achievements and upcoming plans of their respective organizations.



- The school ceremonially felicitated Meo and Sarpanch Ananthagiri who attended the program in recognition of their contributions to the community and support towards better development of the educational facilities.
- Rani Patel, CEO of Aarohan felicitated the teacher at the school for her exceptional service and positive influence on the educational environment of the local society.



Educational Activities

- The children engaged in a variety of educational games with the help of volunteers from Vatsalya. These games helped them to develop their cognitive skills, such as math, language, and problem-solving.





Engaging Activities for Children

- We provided the children with a variety of materials to create their own kaleidoscopes, including cardboard tubes, mirrors, colorful beads, and glue. The children were fascinated by the way the mirrors reflected the beads, creating colorful patterns when they looked through the tube.
- We set up a large play area with a variety of toys, including blocks, an indoor playground setup, and stuffed animals. The children had the opportunity to use their imaginations to create their own stories and play scenarios.
- Art workshop: The children participated in a creative arts workshop where they could express themselves through painting and drawing.

Distribution of stationery and hygiene products

- The children received educational items, such as pencils, books, notebooks, and crayons, as well as hygiene products, such as soap and toothpaste.

Impact

- To improve access to education: Tribal school kids often come from poor families who cannot afford to buy basic school supplies. Providing them with pencils, books, notebooks, and crayons can help them to stay in school and learn more effectively.
- To promote good hygiene: These communities often lack access to clean water and sanitation facilities. Providing the children with soap and toothpaste can help them stay healthy and prevent the spread of disease.
- To build trust and relationships with tribal communities: By providing educational items and hygiene products, we can build trust and relationships with the community. This can help us carry out other development projects in the future.



Impact of the Program

The child development program was a resounding success. The children enjoyed the activities and learned new skills. The parents were grateful for the opportunity for their children to participate in the program. The local officials were impressed by the program and expressed their appreciation to Vatsalya and Aarohan for their efforts.

It resulted in:

- **Improved health and nutrition**

Improved access to essential healthcare services, such as immunizations, regular check-ups, and treatment for childhood illnesses. Provision of supplementary nutrition to children who are at risk of malnutrition, which can have a long-lasting impact on their physical and cognitive development.

- **Increased school enrollment and retention**

Access to early childhood education for children equipping them with basic literacy and numeracy skills.

- **Promote social and emotional development**

Opportunities for tribal children to develop their social and emotional skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and self-regulation. These skills are essential for success in school and in life.

Recommendations

Vatsalya and Aarohan plan to continue to organize child development programs in Araku Valley in the future. They also plan to expand the program to include other villages in the area.

Conclusion

The child development program in Araku Valley was a valuable experience for the children, the parents, the local officials, and the organizers. The program demonstrated the importance of collaboration between organizations and communities to achieve the common goal of improving the lives of children.

