Empowering local youth to improve socio-economic status of Katkari tribe
Palghar District, Maharashtra

Strengthening Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan and National Service Scheme
ABOUT THE PROJECT

In partnership with Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India, United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the project ‘Strengthening Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS) and National Service Scheme (NSS)’ aims to provide catalytic support to the Youth Volunteer Schemes in the country and facilitate greater youth participation and voice in peace and sustainable development programmes. The project has been initiated to promote innovation in volunteerism among youth in India and strengthen existing volunteering infrastructure, particularly NYKS and NSS. A total of 29 UNV District Youth Coordinators (UNV-DYCs) are deputed in 29 districts, i.e. one district in every state, to work on NYKS and NSS programmes and to strengthen youth volunteerism in line with national and international good practices.

GOOD PRACTICE CONTEXT

The Thane-Palghar region in Maharashtra is home to the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), the Katkaris. The most deprived of the scheduled tribes, the Katkaris are discriminated against in terms of physical and social exclusion by the other tribes. Katkaris are landless workers, the ones who do have land cultivate crops like rice and ragi (finger millet) for household consumption during the rainy season which spans four months. The rest of the year, the tribe, sans any other source of livelihood, migrates in search of work, ending up as bonded labour on brick kilns, where they are exploited in all possible ways. At the work sites, the migrant tribal labourers do not have access to quality living conditions, health care or rations nor are their children enrolled in the nearest government school as mandated by the government. While adivasis across the country are typically displaced by development projects, the Katkaris are driven to leave their homes due to crushing poverty and complete lack of traditional employment as well as entrepreneurial opportunities. Given extreme poverty and displacement of families, malnutrition is rampant in Palghar district. Around 600 children died of malnourishment in Palghar district in 2016 alone. Jawhar and Mokhada are the worst affected blocks in the district. Although schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Public Distribution System, Antyodaya Anna Yojana and Amrut Ahar Yojana have been implemented specifically for the marginalized, their benefits do not reach the Katkaris and other tribes in these remote areas due to poor implementation as well as the community’s lack of awareness.
STRATEGY

Over the past one year, the UNV-DYC has focused her efforts on reducing malnutrition and preventing malnutrition deaths in Palghar district, especially Jawhar and Mokhada blocks, by working with local youth activists to ensure the Katkaris, are linked with the government’s employment and nutrition security schemes.

The UNV-DYC devised a two-pronged strategy to address the crisis of malnutrition in the region:

- **Economic Security**
  - Link with MGNREGS to stop migration and displacement
  - Increase purchasing power

- **Improved Health**
  - Refer acute malnourished children for treatment
  - Address nutritional needs of pregnant and lactating women and children (0 to 5 yrs)

- **Increased Education and Awareness**
  - Keep children, especially adolescent girls, in school
  - Discard regressive practices like underage marriage

The UNV-DYC with NYKS
Thane-Palghar district, Maharashtra

Hindaprabha Karve

Identify acute malnourished children and refer them to a care centre, and create awareness in the community about causes and ill-effects of malnutrition

Explore ways to stop outward migration and displacement of the Katkaris by linking them with existing employment generation schemes in their district and facilitating skill development in income generating activities
1. Identify acute malnourished children and refer them to a care centre, and create awareness in the community about causes and ill-effects of malnutrition

- The NYK youth volunteers conducted a survey of 123 AWCs across Jawhar and Mokhada blocks, talking to AWWs as well as the beneficiaries to assess how many children had actually died of malnourishment. Through the survey, the team identified 18 severe acute malnourished children who were then enrolled in a local NGO’s Child Treatment Centre for malnourished children and are being followed up on by the volunteers.

- One of the most active youth groups in the area, the Yuva Samaj Pramodan Rangbhoomi, performed street plays/skits in the villages to spread awareness on the link between underage marriage (prevalent in the tribe) with maternal anaemia, malnutrition and child mortality.

- The youth volunteers visited government schools and engaged with adolescent female students to sensitize them on the ills of underage marriage through street plays. The volunteers engaged with key community influencers like teachers and encouraged them to be more proactive in preventing underage marriages.

2. Explore ways to stop outward migration and displacement of the Katkaris by linking them with existing employment generation schemes in their district and facilitating skill development in income generating activities

- The UNV-DYC and the youth volunteers found that the tribal community wasn’t aware of the provisions under the MGNREGS and hence, was not exploring job opportunities in their own area. The team worked with the district administration and local civil society organizations to ensure effective and transparent implementation of MGNREGS, starting with getting job cards for the labourers. The team went door to door in the villages across three blocks and filled MGNREGS forms for the labourers, based on which job cards were issued. The team covered the three blocks of Jawhar, Mukhada and Vikramgad in around three months, resulting in 5,000 tribals getting job cards guaranteeing them employment.

- In terms of exploring additional income-generating activities, the UNV-DYC has initiated a four-month Skill Upgradation Training Programme (SUTP) on tailoring for tribal women in the area.
IMPACT AND ROLE OF YOUTH VOLUNTEERING

Mobilization of youth volunteers

Over the last one year, 16 youth volunteers (including five paid volunteers) have been mobilized to work in the Palghar district. The UNV-DYC has registered 58 new youth clubs in Thane and Palghar district, 20 of which are in the tribal belt. The work around addressing malnutrition and linking beneficiaries with the MNREGS was spearheaded by two dynamic youth leaders, Ram Das and Asha, respectively, under the guidance of the UNV-DYC.

Linkage with MNREGS

The NYK youth volunteers, under the leadership of Asha, in collaboration with the district administration, have been able to reach out and help get job cards for 5,000 labourers across three blocks in the district. While the work generated through MGNREGS since October 2016 has not been enough in volume to satisfy the community’s financial needs, it is a beginning in getting the Katkaris to halt their temporary migration, which could have a long-term impact on the socioeconomic and health status of the tribal community, especially in improving the nutrition status of the children of Palghar. The NYK youth volunteer team also visits brick kiln work sites to ensure that the children of the tribal labourers are enrolled in the nearest government school as per the Right to Education Act and thus, are not vulnerable to child labour activities.

Community-level awareness on causes of malnutrition

The Yuva Samaj Pramodan Rangbhoomi youth club led by Ram Das has staged several awareness interventions such as sensitizing adolescent girls and key community leaders influencers as well as staging street plays to counter a major driver of malnutrition in the area – underage marriages. The community is gradually becoming aware of the negative impact of underage marriages on the health and wellbeing of the adolescent girls and the children they give deliver at a young age. The importance of healthy diet for pregnant and lactating mothers is also reinforced through the Anganwadi Sewikas.
Parvati Yashwant Khadke, community member who has got a MGNREGA job card recently

We don’t get much work even though we have signed up for NREGA. But it is better than sitting at home and living on nothing. The money I earn is used in household expenses. We need work all round the year to be able to educate our children and ensure they eat healthy.
WAY AHEAD

Efforts of the NYK youth volunteers in Palghar district have triggered change within the Katkari community in terms of increased awareness of socioeconomic and health issues as well as their rights and entitlements as a PVTG.

The UNV-DYC plans to follow up with the Gram Panchayat and district administration on creating shelf jobs (potential employment opportunities identified by the community themselves) for the Katkaris, which will ensure localized livelihoods and stop outward migration of the tribe. Apart from collaborating with the State Rural Livelihood Mission and line departments on the livelihood needs of the community, the UNV-DYC plans to explore alternate income-generating activities, for instance, training the women on stitching newborn kits that can be supplied to hospitals in the area. The district administration plans to engage the NYK youth volunteers to strengthen outreach, mobilize the community and source their feedback on the efficacy of government schemes. The insertion and proactive participation of youth volunteers in local government bodies will be critical in ensuring that the Katkaris’ struggle for social inclusion and justice is no longer ignored.

*All Images from Project: Empowering local youth to improve socio-economic status of Katkari tribe. Palghar District, Maharashtra, India (UNDP 2016)
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