



# 2020-21 ANNUAL REPORT

**ASPIRE**

# THE SILVER LININGS OF COVID-19

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# Acknowledgement

This report is a product of the research and communications departments at ASPIRE, India and has been written and designed by Shameen Alauddin and Kartika Bhatia. The content and figures have been verified by our research officer Maheswata Das, Shameen and Kartika.

The report was supported by contributions of our field staff — Keonjhar district coordinator Ravi Kumar, Odisha coordinator Arvind Toppo, LEP coordinator Amarish Dandsena, Sukinda and Danagadi block coordinator Naresh, Kharagpur programme coordinator Kardhar Narayan Murti, and Noamundi and Jagannathpur block coordinator Racharla Venkat. A sincere thanks to our Secretary Dayaram for his valuable inputs and our 1000+ plus staff without whom this report would have not have been possible.

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## Attribution

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## Translations

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# Beginning of 2020

2020 was planned as a year of expansion and growth. In July 2019, we scaled our education program to cover 11 new blocks and 4 municipalities in Keonjhar district, essentially covering every household in the district. An ambitious household census was launched in January 2020 to assess the education status of all 600,000 plus children in Keonjhar. The findings from the household survey would help us universalize access and eliminate learning deficits for all children.

Then Covid-19 hit and most of our planned activities got disrupted. The following big activities were hit the hardest:

2400

children to be housed in our long-term residential bridge course centers

2446

government schools in 11 new blocks to receive teacher trainings and SMC orientation

ICDS

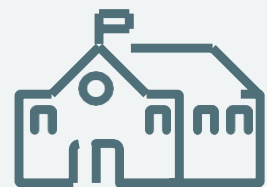
intervention in all 20 blocks of Odisha and Jharkhand

32

primary schools in 8 older blocks to receive teacher trainings for grade 3 and 4

600,000

children to be surveyed in 11 new Keonjhar blocks



Work with middle and high schools in 8 blocks



# Realignment of goals

We realigned our goals to mitigate the anticipated negative impact of the lockdown on children, community and schools.

We shifted our focus on the following:

## Supporting

local government in their efforts to curtail the spread of Covid-19

## Providing

safety nets to the population against food insecurity and economic crises

## Tracking

Children to prevent their fallout into child labor and child marriage

## Maintaining

the CLFZ status of blocks which have achieved it

## Creating

a model of distance learning suitable for children living in areas with low to none digital access

## Taking

advantage of the newly strengthened relationship with the sarpanch and PRIs to launch local governance capacity building initiatives

# 2597

children to be supported in preparation for secondary board exams

# Covid-19 relief efforts

We received appreciation letters from the block administration for our relief efforts and for our joint-collaboration with panchayats to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

92,178

people facing food insecurity were given dry ration

Helping SHGs prepare  
25,77,185

hygienic meals, using masks, distancing and hand wash and delivering it to last mile families in remote areas

416

gram panchayats and 5 municipal corporations we supported in the setting up working of 601 temporary quarantine centers for migrants

15,484

MGNREGA aspirants were helped in getting Job cards to counter financial distress caused by a halt in economic activities

24,467

workers at 434 work sites in 152 panchayats are involved in pond desilting, road repairing and construction, and rain water harvesting

Covid-19 awareness campaign in 20 blocks of Odisha and Jharkhand

# Learning during Lockdown



Only 14% children in our areas had access to smartphone or internet. Faced with such drastic digital divide, we decided to cover the rest 86% through physical home visits. An innovative self-directed learning program was designed where learning modules were re-crafted to engage child alone, at home, using internet and resources in her local environment.

A weekly learning cycle is set up, where teacher touches base with every student twice a week. Every week, our pedagogy team sends a task to the teacher digitally. Teachers visit children to help children with the tasks on their first visit, and assess the work on the second. Further, samples of work are shared with the pedagogy team for feedback and discussion.



Program reached 32,500 children in 2653 villages in 20 blocks

# Diverse Learning Tasks



95% children participated in the program and rich learning outcomes are visible. Children turned into self-directed learners, soaking up inputs from their environments. They took charge of their learnings and sought out assistance from family and neighbors.



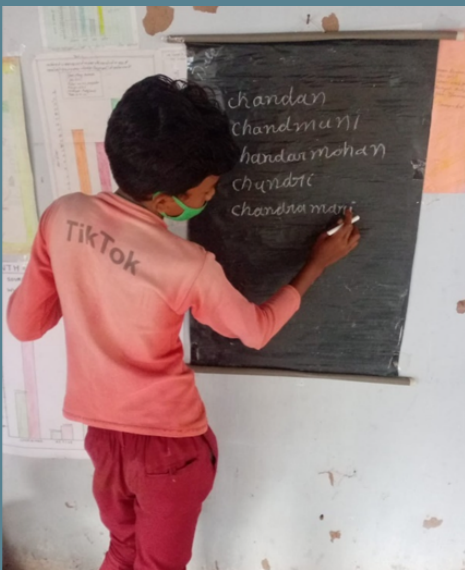
Children made internet searches on giraffe, penguin, whales, Mt Everest etc. Most of them did it for the first time. They sent in marvelous write-ups and drawings. We saw significant improvement in their writing skills. Children jumped the barrier of English.



Math and Science are coming alive. Children are observing nature and things around them. They are picking up science and math outdoors, in the kitchen, on the farm, in daily transactions, and are writing about them.



# Lockdown Learning Expansion



With no visibility of schools reopening even till November 2020, we decided to expand the Lockdown Learning program to cover an additional 100,000 children. Small outdoor classes are now running in 5220 habitations in 20 blocks of Odisha and Jharkhand. 2430 local youth volunteers were hired and trained. They are being supported by 700 ASPIRE teachers.



Lockdown Learning Program reached 130,073 children at the end of April 2021.

# Child Marriages

Without access to schools or distance learning, children are highly susceptible to fall into early marriages. ASPIRE intervened and stopped several child marriages last year, most of whom were by the choice of the children themselves. In the local community, some children tend to elope and once they return, their parents are forced to accept their marriage. It was very difficult to tell children why it was wrong—they would get very emotional, sometimes, threaten to commit suicide. We made them sign bonds that they can continue their marriage after turning 18 years old. The discussions and meetings to stop child marriages would sometimes go on until midnight and last for days.

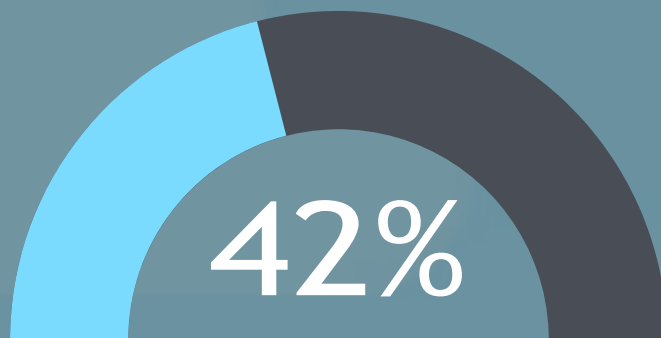
But our efforts were appreciated by the local government. The local MLA of Jajpur district encouraged us to achieve child marriage free zone status. Societal customs do seem to be changing, albeit slowly. Local government bodies like child welfare committee, district child protection unit, school management committee, self-help groups, angandwadi members, and Panchayati Raj Institution, along with NGOs, youth groups and social activists, parents, and socially aware villagers are regularly and actively educating children and the community about the ill-effects of child marriage.





# BY THE NUMBERS

We identified 419 incidences of child marriages between April 2020 and March 2021 in eight blocks of Odisha and Jharkhand



of the marriages were stopped by ASPIRE

Children under the legal age in the 419 cases



An anti-child marriage campaign was initiated in 72% of our GPs in the six Odisha 1000 Schools blocks. 931 meetings were held and in 96% of these meetings, participants took a pledge against child marriage.

In 2 blocks of Jharkhand, candle marches against child marriage were carried out in 43 villages.

# CLFZ Status

Out of 3006 total habitations, 2578 (86%) have been declared as CLFZ in 8 1000 Schools blocks.

Out of 24,036 out-of-school children, 22,376 children have been brought back to school with 1427 still remaining out of school.





## Class Transition

Supporting 1,03,850 (98%) children in transition from pre-primary to grade 1; grade 5 to grade 6; grade 7 to grade 8; grade 8 to grade 9 under Covid-19 restrictions

## Out-Migration

During the lockdown, migration was at its peak and several families moved out of their native villages and blocks into other regions along with their children. We have tracked 1804 children who have temporarily or permanently moved out of their residence.

# Strengthening local government ties

The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown presented us with a unique opportunity to form close ties with local governance actors. While partnering with the panchayat for covid relief work, we build trust and an association with them. This gave us a way in towards initiating a dialogue on governance reforms.

Our main focus was on facilitating Gram Panchayat Development Plans. Article 243G of the Constitution of India mandates every panchayat to propose and implement a set of targeted activities under the GPDP for economic development and social justice by converging and integrating all such programmes of the Panchayat, State and Centre within their geographical area. In our areas, the GPDP process is mostly top-down, where blocks use GPs for plan implementation and not plan generation. In partnership with NGO Unnati, we conducted orientation and trainings with sarpanches and PRI members on GPDP guidelines and preparation strategy in 85% of our panchayats. Training detailed the stages of the GPDP process, highlighting the need to include frontline health and education workers, members of Self-help Groups, NGOs and local citizens and volunteers, in addition to PRI members.



# i) School development plans

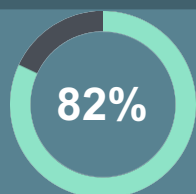
Back in 2015-16, we began preparation of SDPs by orienting and training school management committees (SMCs). We also engaged with sarpanches and PRI members to orient them on the importance of child education. Due to our continuous engagement with local governance actors,

**Rs 69,75,63,648**

has been sanctioned for school education since 2015 in 8 1000 Schools blocks

In Jan 2020, 578 schools in 6 Odisha blocks prepared SDPs for the proposed estimated amount of

**Rs 1,11,89,31,336**



of the 578 plans (469) have been ratified by the gram sabha in 2020, paving the way for accessing government funds

**Rs 19,76,60,094**

has been sanctioned for the 469 SDPs in FY20-21

For FY 2021-22,

In October 2020, 6 Odisha blocks submitted 876 Anganwadi Development Plans (AWDPs) for an estimated proposed budget of 56,36,73,179 INR.

The 11 new Odisha blocks in Keonjhar submitted 490 AWDPs for an estimated proposed budget of 29,00,55,400 INR.

## ii) Anganwadi Center Survey

In 2019, we worked with 200 anganwadi centres (AWCs) where we gave training to AWC volunteers on how they can engage children in AWCs. We gave them puppet-show training and taught them other fun tasks that they can in turn do with children. The response was quite encouraging and the attendance of children also improved from 55% to 85%. We also enabled the activation of mothers' committees, improvement in hygiene and cleanliness and use of innovative teaching learning methods.

For FY21, we had planned to work in 1241 AWCs. This would cover all AWCs in 3 blocks and 100 centers each in the remaining 5 blocks of 1000 Schools Programme.

Due to the pandemic, this process got halted. But we conducted a survey in 68% of AWCs to assess the facilities and services being provided at the AWCs with regards to the norms laid down by Integrated Child development Service (ICDS) scheme, with special emphasis on the children of 0–6 years of age. We found that most of the AWCs did not have toilets and/or electricity and were slacking in infrastructure. It is also known that most children who go to AWCs only do so for mid-day meals.



## iii) The Rangring Story

In Jharkhand's Rangring hamlet around Saranda forest region, our NRBC teacher Francis Munda would walk 20 km every day to teach 53 children, all of whom are first-generation learners.

After this story reached Jharkhand's chief minister and other authorities, they decided to convert not just Rangring but also the surrounding 39 tribal hamlets into revenue villages. This will pave the way for creating community assets in these 40 villages like hand pumps and wells, community halls, among other amenities.

The story of Saranda forest was widely covered by local and national media. Francis Munda was honored for his exemplary dedication as a teacher by Ms. Joba Majhi, Cabinet Minister, Jharkhand.





# Residential Bridge Course Centers

Sudden declaration of lockdown created a challenge of transferring more than 1697 RBC children, safely to their homes. We were challenged to house around 286 orphan and homeless children in our RBCs, while facing continuous pressure from the administration to vacate the RBCs. Ensuring safety of our staff while supporting children and the community was also a key priority.

We began intaking children specially who were shifted from RBCs. End of March 2021, there are 835 children in our RBC centers. This includes some mainstreamed children who are staying with us as schools are closed. Also includes several needy children who we rescued from labor and other difficult circumstances

## **Non-Residential Bridge Course centers**

During the lockdown, we had to halt our NRBC centers. Since relaxation on the lockdown, we have resumed the classes gradually. Out of 2717 NRBC children in 11 Signature blocks in Odisha and Noamundi block in Jharkhand, 56% have been mainstreamed in FY20-21.

# New Research Partnerships

In partnership with University of St. Andrews, Scotland, we are running an impact evaluation of a governance capacity building intervention on the quality of GPDP and the funding sourced for education through it.

With the management department at St. Andrews, we are doing a qualitative study of SDP preparation in two gram panchayats to explore how training of SMCs and PRIs impacts their strategy practices. This research provides a timely analysis of decentralized, open forms of strategy in tackling a strategic meta problem, i.e. quality education provision. For both of these projects, we have received funding from UK Research and Innovation Grant.

The household census, which had commenced in Dec 2019 across Keonjhar district, stopped during the pandemic and will be resumed in Aug 2021. We have added a short module on 'learning during lockdown' to assess the learning challenges faced by children.

# Staff Capacity Building

We organised a series of webinars where experts and practitioners from various fields provided their insight on a host of topics, such as current affairs, storytelling and held discussions on the same. They provided encouragement to our field staff and guided them in their endeavor to educate children.

Our staff had an opportunity to attend online lectures from various eminent figures such as, Prof. Shanta Sinha (former Chairperson NCPCR), Prof. Pushpendra Kumar Singh (Director, TISS Patna), Hemant Gupta (TSAF), Bratin Chattopadhyay ( Path Bhawana, Viswabharti ), Mr. Subhash Ware, Binoy Acharya (Secretary, UNNATI), Prof. Govinda (Former Vice Chancellor, NEIPA), Kamal (MKSS Rajasthan), K.K.Krishnakumar,(KSSP, Kerala), Bachendri Pal (Indian Institute of Mountaineering), Prof. Irfan Habib (scientist), and many others.



# School Mergers

134 government schools were closed and merged with other schools in our area. During the lockdown, we conducted a survey of habitations around the closed schools to assess the impact of school closures and subsequent mergers.

- 80% of the communities affected by school closure are SC/ST
- 377 primary grade children now have to walk more than 1 km to reach their school, flouting RTE norms. With terrain marked by forests, streams, and unpaved roads, a mere distance of 1 km can become very dangerous for a young child.
- 58% parents said that school closure in their habitation will affect their decision to send their child to the new merged school.



# Media Outreach

For nearly 5 months, Swaraj Express, a national Hindi broadcast channel, ran a series called Boonde Os Ki on our work during lockdown and our attempts to improve the lives of marginalized children in Odisha and Jharkhand.

Date	Swaraj Express episodes
May 23 2020	Child labour during lockdown
May 30 2020	Education during pandemic
June 17 2020	Lockdown learning
June 28 2020	Child marriages during lockdown
July 5 2020	Child trafficking in Odisha's rural areas
July 11 2020	Struggles of mentally challenged children
July 18 2020	Domestic violence against children
July 26 2020	Substance abuse amongst underage children
July 31 2020	Development disability in children
Aug 8 2020	Malnutrition in tribal children
Aug 14 2020	Merger or closure of schools?
Aug 22 2020	Orphan children and their difficulties
Aug 28 2020	Status of anganwadi centres
Sept 5 2020	Tribal forest dwellers



# Thank You

