Protection of Children at Risk: Building Coalition and Convergence of Stakeholders

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Abstract

The paper focuses on children at risk, which is by itself a complex problem and envelops a broad category of children. This paper identifies a variety of stakeholders and a wide range of interventions that can be made by participating agencies in protecting the children at risk. The police cannot itself solve this colossal problem, having various manifestations and social implications. Given the multifaceted nature of the problem, an effective joint strategy needs to be developed through coalition and convergence of interventions. The author takes a close look at the existing problem and also explains the respective roles of participating stakeholders, especially the police and the NGOs.

Introduction

Coalition solicits convergence of efforts and provides opportunity to work in unison for a common goal. There are many agencies, both private and public, national and international, aimed at working with 'children at risk' in the country and the world. The need of the hour for these organizations is to work together, so that the wheel is not repeatedly invented. Resources, experiences, and expertise can be shared to aid in developing projects and its implementation that will have the most positive impact for the protection and rehabilitation of vulnerable children. Having a common objective is an appropriate starting point and different organizations have specific areas of expertise, all of which can come together to build a united programme for action. The result of exchanging ideas can elicit public awareness with the objective of evoking a community response.

Coalition is more easily said than implemented. The actual coalition is dependent upon several imponderables in the social sector; the balance of coalition may be easily upset by the emergent needs of social sectors and cross currents of individual partners. This calls for a fully enlightened, transparent and accountable policy, which is being initiated by independent credible organizations so that it could withstand the pressures from divergent interests.

The critical contributions of social sector organizations encompass a wide spectrum ranging from catalysts of social change, community organisations, training, communications, area specific planning and management of service, to monitoring and evaluation.

The mobilization and greater involvement of non-governmental organisations in programmes has increased the potential for accelerating the development process. But NGOs efforts have to be supplemented by other coalition partners who have stakes in the welfare and development of children.

Status of Children in India

The present scenario of the status of children in India is indeed distressing. According to 1991 Census, there were 297 million children in the age group of 0-14 years. Of this, 203 million were in the

age group of 5-14 years, which also happens to be the school going age group in the country. Article 45 of the Constitution clearly spelt out the need for making education free and compulsory up to the age of 14 years for all children within a period of 10 years from the date of enactment of the Constitution. It is known that this provision in Part IV of the Constitution is, after the decision by a Constitution bench of the Supreme Court, in Unni Krishnan, 1993-1 SCC 645, has acquired the status of a fundamental right.

According to the Fifth Education Survey conducted in the later part of the eighties and the results of which were made available in the early part of the nineties, there were about 112 million children in the age group of 5-14 years who were enrolled in the formal school system in class 1-5. About 7 million children were reported to have been enrolled in the NFE system. Thus, a total of 119 million children were enrolled in school and 84 million children were out of school (Mishra, 1998)

An interesting feature of the growth of the Indian population is that every year 21 million children are born in India of whom 8 million die due to various infection and diseases. This means that nearly 13 million children are being added every year to the child population. In 1999, nearly 100 million have been added to the population of children. Of course, many more would have been, by now, out of the fold of the child population, crossing the age of 14 years. However, even by conservative estimates, nearly 100 million children are presently in the out of school category, since more children are being born in families below the poverty line group compared to that in other families.

Children at Risk

Statistics clearly reveals that almost 100 million children in the age group of 5-14 years are out of school. All these children face the risk of deprivation from a normal physical and mental process of development in the most critical years of their life. The crucial question is what are these 100 million children doing if they are not going to school. They could either be sitting idle, loitering around on the street or engaged in some work. In all probability, they would be working. If these children belong to families in distress, they have to earn to support their families. If they are without families and belong to the category of street children, then again they have to earn in order to survive. These children are generally in the category of "nowhere" children. According to an estimate, there are 74.6 million children in India who are in the "nowhere" category (Chaudhary, 1997) Such children are generally found in unorganised slum settlements, on railway stations, beneath fly overs, etc. They spend most of the time on the streets. The main occupations of such children are domestic help, services rendered in tea stalls, road side hotels, small restaurants, shoe-shining, vending, working as porters on railway platforms, cart pushing, news paper selling, working as mechanics or helpers in motor garages, scooter repairs, book binding, rag-picking, scavenging and a host of other activities.

Studies reveal that such children are subjected to the worst forms of exploitation and abuse (Mohsin, 1994) Article 39 (e) and (f) of the Constitution clearly states: (a) that the health and strength of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizens are not forced by economic necessity to enter vocation unsuited to their age or strengths; (b) that children are given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity and that childhood and youth are protected against exploitation and against moral and material abandonment. Article 24 states that no child below the age of 14 years shall be employed to work in any factory or mine or engaged in any other hazardous occupations.

"State parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development". 2. "State parties shall take legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to ensure the implementation of the present Article. To this end, and having regard to the relevant provisions of international instruments, State parties shall, in particular, provide for: (a) a minimum age or minimum ages for admission to employment (b) appropriate regulation of the hours and conditions of employment (c) appropriate penalties or other sanctions to ensure the effective enforcement of the present Article."

Child Rights in India

India has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 and the six ILO Conventions, three of which in the first quarter of the nineties. Apart from being a party to international Conventions and obligations, India has been pursuing over the years, a well-defined policy on the rights of the child. The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Child, 1989 mentions, inter alia, about the rights of the child to survival, protection, development and participation. The Convention has 54 Articles. Article 32 of the Convention states:

 "While fully subscribing to the objectives and purposes of the Convention, realizing that certain rights of the child, namely those pertaining to the economic, social and cultural rights can only be progressively implemented in the developing countries, subject to the extent of available resources and within the framework of international cooperation, recognizing that the child has to be protected from exploitation of all forms including economic exploitation; noting that for several reasons children of different ages do work in India: having prescribed minimum ages for employment in hazardous occupations and in certain other areas: having made regulatory provisions regarding hours and conditions of employment and being aware that it is not practical immediately to prescribe minimum ages for admission to each and every area of employment in India, the Government of India undertakes to take measures to progressively implement the provisions of Article 32, particularly paragraph 2 (a), in accordance with its national legislation and relevant international instruments to which it is a State Party".

Defining a Street Child

It is very difficult to conceptualize a street child or put it within boundaries. Such children carry various nomenclatures in different parts of the world. Efforts have hardly gone into defining such children. In India, they incorporate a large category of children, such as those in especially difficult circumstances, children in distress, children in need, disadvantaged children, deprived children, neglected children in irregular situations, delinquents, latchkey children (Pandey, 1993), child labourers, school dropouts, etc.

According to a UNICEF definition of street children (UNICEF, 1988), such children are those who are vulnerable to many dangers and abuses for the following reasons:

1. The vast majority of such children are on the street for making a living for themselves or their families, so that even if their earnings are meager, street is their work place.

2. They spend large amount of time on the streets because of the low returns on their labour.

3. Most of them make their way in the informal sector as petty hawkers, shoeshine boys and scavengers of raw materials or even thieves or street prostitutes.

4. By the nature of their work and life, they are normally on their own, largely unprotected by adults.

According to another definition, a street child or a street youth is any minor for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and who is without adequate protection (Agnelli, 1986).

The UN Committee for UNICEF observes that of the total number of street children, about 75% are in contact with their families, 20% stay away from home for several reasons, whereas the remaining 5% have no family at all.

Although the concept of street children and their numbers are discussed in terms of their relationships with their families, the generalization of the above statistics done by the UN Committee may not be very true India as a whole. In fact, in the absence of a precise definition of street children, it is very difficult to take up an exercise of enumeration of such children. Agnelli points out that given the approximate nature of the definition, no objective basis for a proper statistical calculation exists (Agnelli, 1986).

The concept of street children is more relevant to the urban areas than to the rural areas. The conditions of poverty and squalor prevalent in urban slums and the plethora of informal sectors activities of low status and income abounding in urban areas are grounds on which the evils of child neglect and child abuse bred and spread, leading to the phenomenon of street children. Moreover, the 'push' factor induced by lack of adequate and remunerative employment opportunities and poverty in the rural areas and 'pull' factor exercised by the possibility of finding work or alternative work in the urban areas and the lure of urban life lead to migration from the rural to the urban areas in search of employment. Such rural-urban migration has been resulting in a profusion of informal sector activities often accomplished by growth of urban slums and participation of children in street-based activities.

The UN Committee for UNICEF categorizes street children into three groups:

1. Children on the Street

Such children have family connections of a more or less regular nature. Their focus in life is still the home. Most of them return home at the end of each working day and have a sense of belonging to the local community to which their home is situated. They are children on the street.

2. Children of the Street

This group is smaller, but more complex. Children in this group see the street as their home, and it is there that they seek shelter, food and a sense of family among companions. Family ties exist, but are remote and their former home is visited infrequently. They are children of the street.

3. Abandoned Children

This group may appear to be a part of the second group and in daily activities are particularly indistinguishable. However, by virtue of having severed all ties with a biological family, they are entirely on their own not just for material but also for psychological survival. They are also children of the street.

This categorization of street children provides more insight into the concept of such children. These three categories can be found practically in all developing countries and, more so, in the South Asian countries, including India.

The basic idea of categorizing children into various groups is to determine the specific needs of each group. This will facilitate in formulating categories for street children as a community as well as for individual categories of street children. Differences in the degree of isolation from home and family will necessitate differences in the kind and nature of service required (Reddy, 1992).

4. Vulnerable children

There are a number of other children who go unnoticed and yet get exposed to hapless situations calling for immediate interventions. These include:

- Street children
- Abandoned children
- Neglected children
- School drop-outs
- Disadvantaged children (marginalised and deprived)
- Handicapped children (mentally / physically challenged)
- Delinquent children (in conflicts with the law)
- Rape victims
- Children of prostitute and child prostitute
- Domestic child labour etc.

Discussions related to the concept and categorization of street children help in identifying some peculiar traits of such children (Pandey, 1993).

1.	Place of residence	street, unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, public places, etc.
2.	Working conditions	exploitative, in terms of nature of work, time and income
3.	Family relationship	continuous, occasional or completely lacking
4.	Vulnerability	highly vulnerable to the ills of urbanization
5.	Protection, supervision and direction	completely lacking

To this list of attributes, a few more can be added (Mohsin, 1994):

(i)	Social status	:	looked down upon with condemnation
(ii)	Perception about self	:	completely lacking
(iii)	Educational status	:	illiterate (barring a few)
(iv)	Application to life's	:	moderate meaningful activities
(v)	Value orientation	:	largely individualistic

These traits can be useful in identifying parameters for future studies related to problems of such children in the third world.

Another definition of street children incorporates four forms of disadvantages (Dallape, 1989):

1. Isolation: in a geographical way, from schools, hospitals and other services and socially, because people do not accept them and they are isolated from informal support networks.

2. Vulnerability: to diseases

3. Poverty: because they have hardly any income

4. Powerlessness: due to the fact that they belong to families, who being poor, are isolated from political power.

All children who are working are at risk, but different categories of children require different kinds of interventions.

Prayas Efforts in Protecting and Rehabilitating Children at Risk: A Case in Point

Organizational Profile

Prayas is an independent, voluntary, non-governmental organization. This NGO was set up in 1988 with initial collaboration with Delhi Police, recognizing the basic premise that the rights and needs of a child are synonymous. The organization, over a span of a decade, established itself as an 'institution' to act as a resource centre for the rights and protection of children, with a capacity to engage itself at the grass-root level. The Institute of Juvenile Justice (an apex unit of Prayas) works in three thematic/strategic areas: Child Rights Juvenile Justice and Child Labour.

The establishment of Prayas has been an example of collaboration and coalition, involving itself meaningful with NGO representatives, activists, academicians and professionals. This NGO brings

together governmental and non-governmental organizations to support activities focussed on the needs of children. Initiatives have also been taken by corporate sectors, associations and youth bodies for extending assistance to child development programmes and for support on issues like sequential and phased elimination of child labour at the national and international level.

In India, child labour can not just be wished away by a blanket ban. Prayas believes that child labour has to be eliminated in a gradual and sequential manner, not just through legislations but also by providing alternatives to the working children. These alternatives include non-formal education, vocational training, food, shelter, clothing, emotional support and guidance.

Objectives of Prayas

- Formulation of a replicable model for the elimination of child labour and Juvenile Justice
- Influencing policy changes in the Juvenile Justice system in terms of a symbiotic relationship between the needs and rights of a child.
- Creating an institution cum resource center for neglected children and Juvenile Justice.
- Social advocacy on child rights and child labour issues.
- Conducting research on the street and working children, child labour, child abuse their demographic and socio-economic profile, designing and evaluating intervention strategies and programmes targeting them.
- Developing a database on neglected children, their needs, and response of the State and civil society.

Four-level Approach

- Facilitate institutional mechanisms, strategic alliances and informal networking amongst NGOs, government agencies and international bodies.

- Building capacity of project partners and its core programme functionaries in various parts of the Capital and outside Delhi to develop a child-oriented holistic vision

- Influencing policy makers through a sustained effort and advocacy programme

- Initiating community-based grass-root interventions to promote and protect the rights of children with social justice to the child and increasing networking with project partners.

Prayas is a founder member of the Delhi NGO Forum of street and working children alongwith 17 other organizations. This Forum meets regularly to discuss project plans and share services. The Prayas' multipartner coalition and partnership approach for children at risk can be used as a model in the country and outside.

Prayas has very good linkages with prestigious institutions such as Delhi Police, Delhi School of Social Work (DSSW), National Institute of Social Defence (NISD), National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD), Department of Social Work at Jamia Milia Islamia University, South Asia Institute (University of Heidelberg, Germany) Tata Institute of Social Sciences and Xavier Institute of Social Sciences and
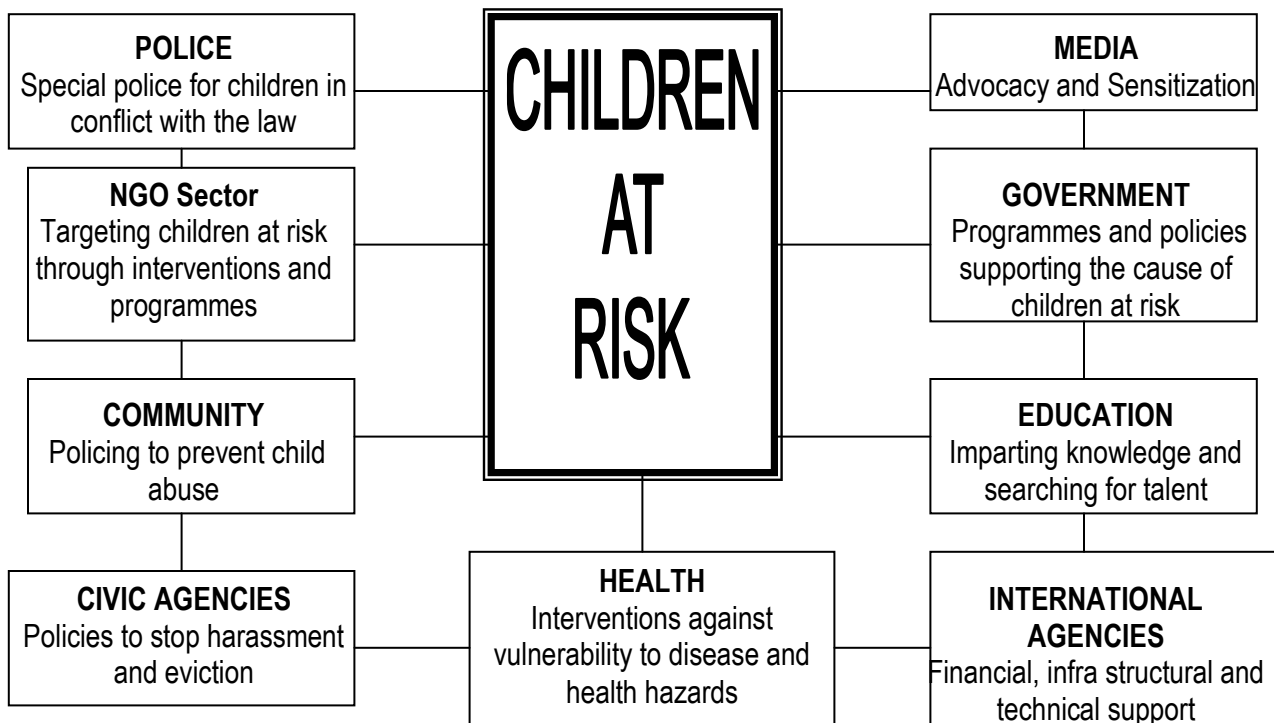
many others. Prayas often holds conferences, study circles, consultations, symposia and also participates in seminars and workshops.

Prayas follows a child-centred and holistic approach to tackle child labour and juvenile delinquency. Though the focus of intervention is the child, Prayas also involves the family and the community. This holistic approach helps make the project viable in the long-run. Some of the main features of this approach are:

- **Identification of Stakeholders**

  Protection of children at risk calls for the formulation of a concerted, co-ordinated and coherent strategy involving different stakeholders. Each stakeholder would have a specific area of operation within the defined strategy. This would help in creating a coalition of partners working towards a mutually shared goal, i.e. to safeguard the interests of children who are otherwise most vulnerable. Working individually and collectively, these partners would converge upon areas of concern, share experience and evolve new strategies.

This idea, presented below, shows how this convergence would work out in practice:

POLICE Special police for children in conflict with the law	CHILDREN AT RISK	MEDIA Advocacy and Sensitization
NGO Sector Targeting children at risk through interventions and programmes		GOVERNMENT Programmes and policies supporting the cause of children at risk
COMMUNITY Policing to prevent child abuse		EDUCATION Imparting knowledge and searching for talent
CIVIC AGENCIES Policies to stop harassment and eviction	HEALTH Interventions against vulnerability to disease and health hazards	INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES Financial, infra structural and technical support

Prayas has identified a whole set of actors who can help directly or indirectly in protecting children at risk:
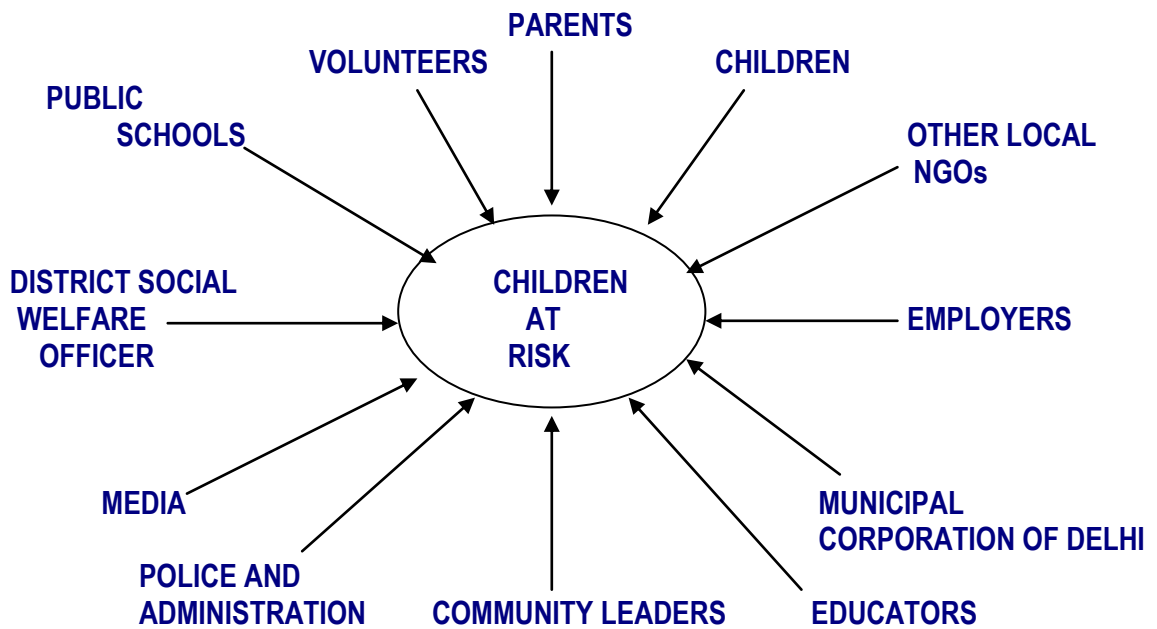
Prayas Intervention Model at the Micro Level
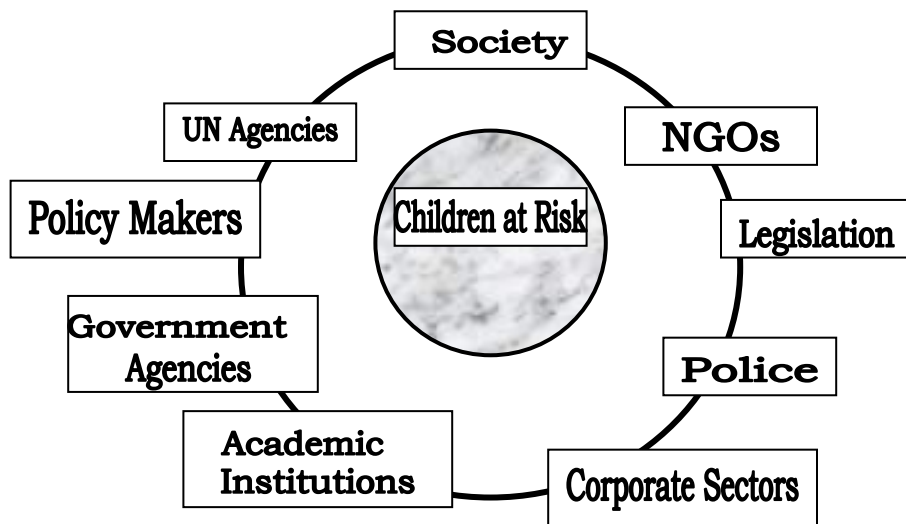
Prayas Intervention Model at the Macro Level

For effective co-ordination to facilitate the convergence process, greater emphasis should be placed on follow-up action. In order to make coalition and convergence practical and pragmatic, the following suggestions could be relevant:

❑ Committees to be set up at the national, state and district levels with a substantial representation of NGOs , government agencies, academicians and grass root level workers;

❑ Transparent communication channels ensuring clear flow of communication between these committees.

Interface with the Formal School System

One of the major activities of Prayas projects is to 'mainstream' the children from NFE centres to formal schools and every year about 1500 children are mainstreamed into regular schools. Prayas organises regular workshops to orient the teachers and principals of these schools to the special needs of street and slum children. In 1999, Prayas was recognised as a special institution and accredited under the National Open School System (NOS). Thus Prayas is now in a position to formally educate its children and award them certificates.

Interaction with Employers

Towards the elimination of child labour in various projects of Prayas, constant efforts are made to keep in touch and persuade the employers to change their behaviour and attitudes towards employment of children. In Jahangirpuri, Prayas social workers persuaded the middlemen involved in rag-picking activities to send child rag-pickers to the NFE centres. As a result, several rag pickers joined the NFE programme.

Sensitisation Programmes for Police

Prayas has gained national recognition for its partnership and integration with Delhi Police for over a decade. Prayas organises regular training programmes to sensitise local police on the needs and rights of working and neglected children.

Partnership with other NGOs

Prayas has adopted a strategy of not competing but complementing other NGOs in their efforts against child labour. Prayas is the founder member of the Delhi NGO Forum for Street and Working Children. This Forum represents 17 Delhi-based grassroots NGOs. Prayas shares its health services to meet the needs of the communities where member-NGOs are operating.

Prayas has organised two national consultations on issues related to neglected children. The two consultations resulted in the publication of documents regarding strategies on how to deal with neglected and working children. The proceedings of the first consultation culminated in the book "Neglected Child: Changing Perspectives".

Prayas holds regular training programmes for educators, vocational instructors, social workers and counsellors to enhance their skills to deal with emerging needs of working children for various NGOs.

Community Participation

Prayas made efforts towards community capacity building among the parents and families, particularly mothers. It realises the fact that the child cannot be isolated from his/her milieu and has to grow within it.

- **Prayas Samudai Samiti** is a committee of parents, children, community leaders and teachers. Local politicians are also invited to attend these meetings. This Committee essentially provides support to the NFE centres in the management of educational programmes and in monitoring children's progress. The Committee provides counselling to dropouts, maladjusted and abused children. Each NFE centre has a Prayas Samudai Samiti supporting it. The members hold meetings at least once a month. They interact with the families of children on a regular basis at a personal level.

- **Voluntary Contribution**: The land for the NFE centres in the Bhatti Mines and Lalkhet Centres of Naya Prayas project was donated by the community and the centres were constructed by *Shramdan* (voluntary labour).

- **Community Initiative-based Project:** Astha Prayas project in East Delhi was set-up by the community through their own initiative. The project is monitored by a Steering Committee comprising community leaders, parents, volunteers and Prayas staff. The project is being run by contributions raised from affluent members of the community and the families of children.

Children's participation

- **Bal Panchayat (Children's Council)**: This Council has been formed with a view to having informal interaction among children in order to imbibe leadership traits and peer group feeling among them. The meeting of Bal Panchayat takes place every Saturday at the NFE centre. The interaction brings to the fore the hidden qualities and talents of children and provides them with a platform to express freely their views. It also provides a scope to ventilate their anxieties and concerns, which act as barriers towards their academic achievements and overall development.

- **Sadan System**: The refers to a system where children are placed in various sub-groups based on their age, sex and mental abilities in the three shelter homes run by Prayas. Each of the Sadans (Houses) is named after national leaders in order to imbibe in the children a sense of patriotism. It helps avoid inter-personal conflict between children of different age groups and sexes.

- **Participation in the activities of the project**: Children, according to their age and capabilities, assist in the classroom management, housekeeping, nutrition programme and

look after younger children. Children from the Homes go to the railway station to convince their peers to leave work and join Prayas.

Social Awareness Campaigns

Prayas spreads awareness about the evils of child labour and the need to eliminate it through:

- Street plays
- Training programmes
- Advocacy, in both print and visual media

Involvement in Developmental Activities

Apart from lack of schooling facilities, child labour exists because parents do not have a regular source of income and no savings. To reduce the family's dependence on the child's income, Prayas has undertaken income-generating programmes for women.

- **Women's Empowerment programmes**: In 1999-2000, with the support of the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 400 women were trained in hand embroidery in Naya Prayas, a project of Prayas based in South Delhi. These women formed self-help Groups.

Innovative Programmes for Coalition and Convergence of Efforts in Prayas

- **Child Rape: A Growing Menace**
  The rape crisis intervention centre, managed by Prayas, in collaboration with the Delhi Commission for Women and Delhi Police was inaugurated by the Lt. Governor of Delhi on 9th March 2000. This project is a reflection of the initiatives takes by various social groups in the field of juvenile justice. Prayas has been meaningfully involved in rehabilitating children who have been victims of sexual abuse through its shelter homes, educational, recreational and health programmes. In this new role, Prayas will be working with the Police and selected NGOs in Delhi catering to the needs of children and juveniles and will also be contributing towards the strengthening of the Juvenile Justice system in the country.

- **Childline:1098**
  Childline is a round the clock free telephone service, whereby a child dialing 1098, can be assured of an appropriate response, by trained social workers. Specialized services include legal assistance, drug rehabilitation, shelter facilities, and special follow-up with the girl child. The Delhi Police have been a partner to help children in conflict with law.Prayas is one of the five nodal agencies of the Child Line Programme for children in distress and is responsible for North Delhi district.

- **Prayas Drop-in centre**
  Drop-in centre and shelter home facilities for 200 homeless and neglected children (6-16 years) has been set up in Jahangirpuri in North Delhi and provided with all basic components of Prayas

model. This centre has been primarily created as a drop-in centre where any child either may walk-in any time or referred for night shelter by concerned agencies or individuals.

- **Juvenile Delinquency and Prayas**

  Focus is being placed on revamping the Juvenile Justice system in the country by taking it out of the purview of criminal justice system and making the system completely transparent. For this purpose, the Juvenile Justice of Act 1986 is being re-examined.Prayas has played a leading role in redrafting the Act.

- **Prayas Observation Home for Boys at Delhi Gate**

  Prayas Observation Home for Boys a custodial home, transferred to Prayas by the government, is an example of an extremely fair implementation of the Juvenile Justice Act. The Home highlights the psycho-social dimensions of the child and deals with every child in a human perspective.

- **Bihar Voluntary Coordinating Agency (BVCA)**

  Prayas has been actively involved in promotion of child adoption activities for destitute, abandoned and neglected children as an institutional partner of Bihar Voluntary Co-ordinating Agency (BVCA) in Bihar. Bihar has been recognized as extremely over populated in terms of the number of destitute children in the country and the state of juvenile homes in Bihar has been found appalling. The Supreme Court of India has notified in its extraordinary gazette in May 1992 that every State should have voluntary co-ordinating agency (VCA) for the purposes of co-ordination and networking of juvenile homes, adoption centres and orphanages. Despite the order of Supreme Court, Bihar does not have any such agency, thereby resulting in lack of proper functioning of juvenile homes in letter and spirit. With the support of a local NGO, East & West Educational Society, Prayas has been instrumental in the creation of BVCA as a recognized body.

  The BVCA has been recognized as the only networking body of both local NGO working with neglected children and State Social Welfare Board. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Govt. of India through its Central adoption resource agency, has recognised BVCA and extended support to promote its objectives.

- **Institute of Juvenile Justice**
  Prayas on account of its rich experience at the grass-root level in the past 12 years, has designed a model for ' protection, care and development of neglected juveniles'. Recognizing its rich experience to promote justice to neglected children through strategic grass-root intervention and partnership approach, the Institute of Juvenile Justice has been set-up under the Government of Norway (NORAD) support. The idea of creating the Institute emerged from the need for the pursuance of developmental objectives related to children's rights and juvenile justice. The Institute is trying to create a center for learning on issues of child neglect and juvenile justice system, with a view to influencing policy changes at the macro level. It has set-up five independent

units- research and documentation, training, resource management, information, education and communication (IEC) and shelter home for destitute girls.

Looking Back and Tasks Ahead

On the basis of successful experience in working with neglected and working children on the streets, Prayas is now poised to become a model institution cum resource center for neglected children and juvenile justice at the national level. In the light of services and interventions piloted, Prayas represents a networking model of various multi-sector agencies to combat and focus upon neglected children in need of care and protection and Juvenile Justice.

India may be one of the few countries in the world where there is no specialized police unit for handling juvenile delinquency. The need for the establishment of the special police wing for managing delinquency cases has been insisted upon for many quarters. After the enactment of the Juvenile Justice Act, 1986,it was hoped that the Central and State governments would introduce significant changes in the programmes and policies related to delinquent and neglected juveniles.

By involving community in the various initiatives underway, the entire programme is geared to becoming self-sustainable in the hands of the community over a period of time. Capacity building is going to receive emphasis now on, with a view to empowering the community.

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