

Children are Citizens Today: Historical Children's Ward Sabha



THE CONCERNED FOR
Working Children

We would like to share with joy and humility that The Concerned for Working Children has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize 2012 by three Norwegian Parliamentarians. This nomination is a recognition of Children's' Right to Participation, one of the most fundamental rights enabling an individual to determine the path of their existence. The credit for this nomination goes to our primary constituency and partners – working children – and the many battles they have fought in numerous forums at home and around the world for their voices to be heard.

We intend to use this opportunity to establish a platform to promote discussion and debate worldwide and hope that such a discourse would result in encouraging policy makers and programmers to take serious note and translate this fundamental right of children into practice. It can help to focus attention on an issue that has been largely side-lined, not because it is not accepted as a concept, but because organisations and governments are still grappling with how this can be translated into practice – how it can be made real for children, especially the most marginalised and deprived.

Very soon after the Nobel nomination, CWC facilitated a live example of children's participation in Bangalore city. In February 2012, for the first time in the history of India, the metropolitan city of Bangalore bore witness to a successful 'Children's Ward¹ Sabha'. More than 500 children including children street and migrant children, school-going children, child representatives of ward-level children's organisations and other marginalised groups of children participated in the Children's Ward Sabha which was conducted by an elected Councillor of Bangalore Municipal Government (BBMP) of Vijnana Nagar Ward, Mrs. Geetha Vivekanand.



1 Ward is the lowest administrative level in a city Municipality. Bangalore city has 198 wards.

Background

Street and migrant children organised as Bhima Sangha² in Bangalore came up with the idea to organise a children Ward Sabha to negotiate their issues with their local government, in order to improve their living and working conditions. In Bangalore, children had been negotiating with the Councillor through their unions and organisations to realise their rights, however the Children's Ward Sabha was envisioned as an opportunity for children to directly participate in their local government. CWC supported the children in this process based on our experience facilitating children from rural areas in Karnataka such as Kundapura, who regularly discuss issues of their concern and negotiate with concerned officers and elected representatives in Makkala Gram Sabhas (meeting of all children of the Panchayat). The Ward Sabha emerged as a critical platform for the local elected BBMP government to listen to citizen's issues and show their accountability towards creating a supportive environment to uphold children's rights. It enabled CWC to work toward the goal of changing the mind-set of decision makers and other adults towards children's participation, through awareness building and actual practice.

Process

Collection of information on issues and problems faced by children in the ward



Child representatives from children's unions, migrant communities and schools across the ward spent several weeks identifying their issues and prioritising them for action. Children chose mapping and focus-group discussion as tools to collect in-depth information about their community. CWC provided capacity building for children in these methodologies and also facilitated the data collection. Children spoke to the community members and collected in-depth information pertaining to their lives and the surroundings. Children were able to identify and note down problematic areas which have been unnoticed by others. For instance, children identified an electric transformer without any guarded gate, which was a threat to 20 migrant families living in tents next to it. They mapped this as a crucial protection issue requiring immediate notice by elected representatives. Through these processes, all children from the marginalised communities had a voice to share the problems concerning their lives.

Children consolidated the issues collected through mapping and focus group discussions with the help of CWC facilitation. The issues consolidated include those relating to education, health, protection, transport and cleanliness that impact both children and adults in the ward. Children

² Bhima Sangha is a union of working children facilitated by The Concerned for Working Children.

chose representatives from amongst themselves to share the problems during the Children's Ward Sabha.

Advocacy with the ward councillor and the mayor of Bangalore

Alongside problem identification, children were negotiating with the elected representatives for ensuring that a Children's Ward Sabha was organised. As a first step, representatives of Bhima Sangha and an adult facilitator met the Councillor of Ward 81, Mrs. Geetha Vivekanand Babu and presented the purpose of organising the ward meeting. Children gained the support from the Councillor to initiate the process. Ward 81 was chosen because children's unions and organisations are strong in this area.

Subsequently, representatives of Bhima Sangha supported by an adult facilitator met the Mayor of Bangalore, Mrs. Sharada, to press for the need of a children's Ward Sabha at local urban government. Finally, after two rounds official meetings, the children's lobbying proved successful with the Mayor approving the conducting of a Children's Ward Sabha. This was a huge step ahead in children's advocacy with the urban local elected government.



Facilitating the participation of school-going children

To uphold the right of every child in the Ward to participate in their Children's Ward Sabha, CWC took a decision to work with school-going children in the ward as well. CWC facilitators visited all the schools, especially the government schools and provided information and capacity building to facilitate their participation in the Children's Ward Sabha. Children shared their problems by writing them down, while representatives from each school was selected to present the problems at the Children's Ward Sabha, make problem bags and posters.

The schools covered were:

- Government Lower Primary School, Annasandrapalya
- Government Lower Primary School, Vibuthipura
- Government Lower Primary Telugu School, Nellupuram
- Government Higher Primary School, A. Narayanapura
- Government Tent School, L.B Shastri Nagar
- Government Higher Primary School, Malleshpalya
- Government Tent School, Vijnan Nagar
- Veerabhadra Matta High School, Vijnan Nagar
- Veerabhadra Matta Primary School, Vijnan Nagar

- Kairali Nikethan High and Primary school, Vijnan Nagar

The process with school-going children was a significant one, since we were able to introduce the concept of child rights to both students and teachers. Building awareness amongst teachers and advocating with them for change were critical areas of CWC's intervention. We plan to continue this relationship with the schools, and it has also opened doors for other interactions. For instance, one school has requested for CWC's inputs and training on gender and sexuality education. These are important connections to maintain for ensuring the rights of marginalised children.

The Children's Ward Sabha

The Children's Ward Sabha took place on 23rd February 2012. Children inaugurated the programme by releasing balloons into the air, signifying the freedom that they are claiming as their right. The child participants were representatives from working children's organisations, children from migrant communities and children from 12 different government and private schools in the Ward. The first citizen of the Ward, the Councillor was joined by the local MLA, Nandish Reddy; BBMP Councillors from other Wards; representatives from BBMP Standing Committees; Mahadevapura Zone Joint Commissioner Devaraj; Nina Nayak, Chairperson of Karnataka State Protection of Child Rights Commission, and others. The Ward Sabha was unlike any government event, with a unique stage arrangement – no chairs, no tables and no podium. Children and adults sat on the stage in a circle, and everyone was at the same level. This set the tone for an inclusive sharing by the children.



The Children's Ward Sabha acted as a critical platform for enabling children's participation in their elected local city government at the ward level. They placed their issues and demands before the Councillor and other elected leaders. With great confidence and self-assurance, children raised issues about cleanliness in their wards, the lack of footpaths for people to walk along the roads, lack of electricity and drinking water facilities in their ward, and the need for better public healthcare systems. They strongly demanded that the Vibhutipura Lake be revived from its current degraded state, which has caused the ground water table to shrink drastically. They expressed this as a sensitive issue, and any alternative for those families living along the lake banks should be reached in consultation with the communities themselves. Children were also very aware of the issues they face in their schools – right from lack of toilets and playgrounds, lack of staff to maintain cleanliness, harassment of school girls as they walk to school and the need to construct more anganwadis and tent schools in the area. They raised a strong and clear demand to their elected leaders and government officials to address these issues.



In addition to raising issues, children also made suggestions on ways to solve them. The MLA Nandish Reddy; Deputy Mayor S. Harish; Ward 81 Councillor Geetha Vivekanand; BBMP Joint Commissioner Devaraj and many other leaders responded to the children's issues. The children were assured more tent schools for migrants and angawadis would be constructed, that all schools in the area would get toilets, and that funds will be released for this. They informed the children that the Vijnana Nagar Ward is scheduled to receive fresh river water within the coming 10 months. The BBMP also made an assurance that all the roads that have been dug up for laying of drainage pipes will be tarred with immediate effect. All participants left the Children's Ward Sabha with the feeling that a model for democratic participation of citizens in governance and social monitoring has been set in place.

Children used the opportunity of this first-ever Children's Ward Sabha, to make a demand for similar Ward Sabhas in all 198 Wards of Bangalore city. Elected leaders have given their assurance that they will look into this matter. The Deputy Mayor, S. Harish said that it is very important for all concerned government officials to be present during these sabhas in order to respond to each and every problems raised by children and to give clear responses to them.

The Ward Sabha concluded with a collaborative wish expressed by children and adults alike for a just and equitable society, based on ideals and values of participatory democracy. Through their Children's Ward Sabha, children from Vijnana Nagar Ward have claimed their citizenship.

Looking Ahead

The process of children's citizenship in urban areas does not end with the Children's Ward Sabha, in fact it is only a beginning. Post the Sabha, CWC organised a meeting with other Bangalore-based NGOs and the Karnataka State Commission on Protection of the Rights of the Child for a debrief of the Sabha and to discuss lessons learnt and ways forward. Issues for discussion included the parameters of children's participation, with a focus on the most marginalised; aspects of replication of the Sabha; reflections on the capacity of the Municipality to respond to children's problems; and how the shared space at the Sabha was negotiated by both adults and children. Based on this in-depth discussion, the next steps for taking forward the Children's Ward Sabha are being chalked out. Specific followup on issues raised by children, as well as larger policy advocacy for children's participation in urban government will be two main areas of focus in the year ahead for CWC.