

Global Alcohol Policy Conference 2011

Young citizens address alcohol abuse

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With inputs from Anupama Suresh Babu and Roshni Nuggehalli

The Concerned for Working Children, India

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This article draws on our experiences of working with children from rural communities in Karnataka, India, who exercise their Right to Self-determination and are pro-actively addressing abuse of alcohol, among other issues. Through their innovative participatory research they have gained heightened awareness about the impact of alcohol abuse in their communities. Challenging popular assumptions and myths related to alcohol abuse, they have developed strategies to address this hitherto taboo issue with great sensitivity. They critique the State Alcohol Policy, as they see it unfold in their own communities. They have contributed to the State's recognition of children as 'citizens of today, not tomorrow' and to the creation of a new paradigm of decentralised policy development as well as social monitoring in which the affected group plays an active role. The praxis underpinning these experiences can be universally applied.

Background

'He is our father!' These simple words, spoken by a few children, about their alcoholic parent, in 2002, in a remote village of Karnataka, have had a very profound impact on the way we at the Concerned for Working Children (CWC) view the relationship between alcohol abuse and children's rights. They have gently guided us to our strategic approach to address alcohol and substance abuse in partnership with children.

These words are quoted from a conversation that Nandana Reddy¹, our founding Executive Director had with a group of children at Keradi Panchayat², located on the hills of the Western Ghats. The occasion was the first ever children's own Grama sabha, during which about 1000 children of the Keradi Panchayat were formally meeting their local government representatives as 'citizens of the village' and presenting their issues and seeking redressal to their problems. This was the first time in the history of India where children were claiming a space in local government and it set off a series of developments that have had historic implications on children's citizenship in the country. While these developments were part of later history, the actual conversation of 2002 and the immediate thoughts they generated are presented here in Nandana's words:

He may be an alcoholic, but he is still our father

A group of children representing the various wards of the Keradi Panchayat were putting together their demands to the Keradi Gram Panchayat prior to the Children's Grama Sabha

¹ Nandana Reddy is the Director Development of The Concerned for Working Children

² The Gram Panchayat is the lowest level of administration in the system of local government. The term Panchayat refers to both the geographical and administrative units, as well as the elected body, which acts as the local council. A Panchayat is composed of a cluster of villages and several Panchayats constitute a Taluk.

Meeting. One of the issues they had decided to raise was the issue of alcoholism. I, who was acting as the 'devils advocate' asked them why it was an issue for them. Many people in the village drink," they said. I said, "so what? That is their problem." Then they gave me several examples such as "the men folk come home late"; "they spend money on liquor"; "they fall all over the place". However, the "they fall all over the place" was a recurring theme. I said, "How does that bother you?" So they said, "you do not understand, they fall all over the place, on the road, in the bus stop!" I repeated my question once again.

They looked at me for a while and then they said, "but it is so embarrassing, they fall on the road and we find them there".

I again repeated my question. "But why should that bother YOU?"

Now the kids said "but they get hurt and then the family has to spend money on doctors and medicines and then there is less food at home. They also come home and shout at their wives and children and school children find it difficult to do their home work".

Then I said that those families and children should raise this issue not you.

The kids considered this for a long time; they were looking at me as if I was stupid or something. Didn't I understand that they were talking about their own fathers? That it was embarrassing to be told by your friend or classmate that your father was lying on the road? That if he got hurt they had less to eat?

I apologised but said that I still did not understand, why not let him lie there a few times that might teach him a lesson?

Now the kids were really puzzled. How could I be so dense? They all answered in unison. "We cannot do that, he is our father!"

I have always experienced the concern that children have for others, especially their family, but this was a revelation for me that even when their parent was obnoxious, abusive and causing them and their families great hardship; they still loved him. They were concerned about him and embarrassed for him.

The strategy that the children of Keradi later developed³ to have liquor shops banned in Keradi demonstrated the same concern and affection. It was a strategy where no individual 'lost face', where no one person was targeted and no family used as a specific example.

It is this capacity of children to strive for a unanimous decision of all the stake holders, without labelling any one group as the 'bad guys' that enables them to succeed in their struggles.

We have a lot to learn from them!

Nandana Reddy, Director Development, The Concerned for Working Children,

³ Please refer to the Keradi Case study which is annexed.

CWC, alcohol abuse and children's rights

Our organisation, the Concerned for Working Children is a Private Development Organisation committed to children's rights, political decentralisation and civil society participation of the most marginalised communities based in India. (www.workingchild.org). Currently we are also a member of the Alcohol, Drugs and Development (ADD) an international network, facilitated by the FORUT, Norway and through ADD, are also members of the Global Alcohol Policy Alliance.

The children we work with are among the millions of young people worldwide affected by the abuse of alcohol, either as direct or indirect victims. Sometimes, they themselves become dependent on alcohol abuse, placing themselves and their loved ones in the line of bodily as well as emotional harm and distress.

In the recent past, globally, alcohol and substance abuse are increasingly being seen through a 'rights' lens and a 'gender' lens and both are very encouraging. Children still are not considered significant players in this equation yet. Very few children related organisations (Exceptions such as the Juvente in Norway are extremely few and far between) have made the connection between children's rights and alcohol abuse. Even when this is done, alcohol abuse is still seen merely as a 'protection' related issue where children are concerned. It is acknowledged that harmful drinking by adults, or by themselves, threatens the welfare, safety, growth, development and psychological well-being of children. Often the connection ends there.

In a socio-cultural setting where - uncontrolled drinking is frowned upon, yet highly prevalent; where there is decidedly inadequate affirmative support to those addicted; where talking about alcohol abuse openly is a taboo yet its impact public - the realities and myths related to alcohol abuse get entangled with each other and children have very little knowledge or understanding about how to deal with it, either in their personal or public lives.

Though they are affected by it, efforts to encourage children's own protagonism and proactive action in this area are nascent, if at all. While there is no denying that adults, as parents and care-givers, as teachers, as doctors, as officials and elected representatives of the government - all have the responsibility to protect and care for children against alcohol abuse and its aftermath, there is an overwhelming need to identify and facilitate children's own roles as active subjects. While recognising their vulnerability, some even more so than others, they cannot be considered helpless victims.

CWC's work transforms children who are often treated as passive recipients of developmental interventions into active decision makers and protagonists. This applies to all aspects of their lives, including responses to unjust or unhealthy practices such as alcohol abuse. We believe that children have the Right to Self-determination (as enshrined in the Human Rights Convention) and in order to realise it they have the Right to seek, receive and impart information related to their lives as is appropriate to their needs, age and abilities. Often, it is extremely important for children to realise their Right to get organised as groups

so that they are able to stand strengthened against strong adversaries and carry out effective collective bargaining, with protective mechanisms against backlash. This is especially important when they address sensitive issues, such as illegal alcohol sale and alcohol induced violence. This paper shares few such examples, which are an amalgamation of the impact of our work of over three decades.

The journey so far

CWC has played a critical role in facilitating children's participation in local governance. Since 1995, in collaboration with the Bhima Sangha⁴, CWC initiated the Makkala Panchayats⁵ (literally, 'children's local councils') in 56 Panchayats in the state of Karnataka.

Makkala Panchayat is a democratically elected body with representatives of different base groups of children such as working children, children with special needs, children from migrant communities and school going children. It functions as a structure that enables a sustained and close interaction between children and decision-making bodies in order to inform and influence local governments in a consistent manner. It also ensures that children have opportunities to take part in decision making processes within their Panchayats.

In 2004, the State Government of Karnataka, one of the southern states of India made several attempts to build capacities of the local governments to embark on a decentralised planning process as part of national process for developing the 10th Five Year Plans of India. In some geographical areas, the State Government requested private developmental organisations in the region to provide assistance to the local governments.

In this context, CWC was requested by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Udupi District Panchayat⁶ in Karnataka to support the 56 Village Panchayats of Kundapur Taluk to develop their own plans. CWC accepted the invitation, with one caveat – that was the demand for high level participation of children in the planning process. The Panchayats did not hesitate to admit that they lacked the expertise to involve children in such a process, but extended their total support to our proposal.⁷

The output was remarkable. About 20,000 children were involved in the planning process. Their plans were comprehensive and substantiated with statistics and data. Groups and issues, such as the problems of the disabled, environmental concerns and issues related to mobility and transport, were covered for the first time in a five year plan. They also recorded the history of the village, degradation of resources, made maps of their Panchayats that were accurate and informative and in many cases, proposed solutions as well. The adults, especially the members and staff of the

4 A union of, by and for working children in Karnataka facilitated by CWC, with a membership of over 13,000, striving for the realisation of child rights.

5 The Makkala Panchayat is Children's Village Councils set up in Karnataka jointly by Bhima Sangha and the Concerned for Working Children. It is forum for all children to participate in the process of decision making and governance in the village. In the Makkala Panchayats, all the children of a village are able to join and are urged to participate, bringing their issues/concerns to this council and developing action plans.

6 India has a three tier local government and the District is the highest of them. The Udupi District covers 3 Taluks which in turn comprise of 147 Village Panchayats.

7 Children impact on local governments, Kavita Ratna, Paper presented at the International colloquium on children and governance, New Delhi, 2010

Gram Panchayats were astounded and in many cases shame-faced as the plans that the adults had drafted were very poor in comparison. As a result, by and large, the children's plans became the official plans of the Panchayats. But more than that, it has rejuvenated the Panchayats. The officials and elected representatives seem to be sensing a purpose and relevance to their work. They see their Panchayats in a new light and they have gained a deeper understanding of the Panchayat's needs and concerns. The gap between the local government and the people has diminished. (Reddy and Acharya, 2004)

One of the outcomes of this process was that children of 10 of the Panchayats identified issues related to alcohol abuse as one of the significant problems affecting their lives. They began to discuss about it openly and frankly. They sought for and gained information about health and social risks linked to alcohol and tobacco abuse. Children drew a lot of strength and courage from the work of the members of the children's Panchayat of Keradi who used an extremely innovative research process to highlight the issue of alcohol abuse in their area. The 'Keradi case study' is annexed to this paper.⁸

Their new found knowledge was put to use in different ways by children – with their own inimitable charm and empathy. While some of their strategies were focused on their own homes, some had far reaching impact on their communities. In some cases they even protested the selling of tobacco and alcohol in their villages, making adults aware of their ill effects as well as making them accountable for their aggressive behaviour under the influence of intoxicants.

A child in Mettina Hole village, after requesting her father many times to stop drinking, finally carried out a hunger strike to successfully compel her father to reduce drinking. Yet another family, lead by the children at home, in the same village, took over home management to curtail their father's access to money from local money lender – so that he had limited amount of money to spend on alcohol

An adolescent, a new entrant to CWC's Regional Resource and Professional Education Centre, Namma Bhoomi (where about 100 children from highly marginalised communities access appropriate education each year) was addicted to chewing tobacco. All the information that was shared with him about the ill effects of tobacco did not seem to make any difference. At one point, the members of the Children's Panchayat⁹ at the centre had a chat with him and told him 'Any time you feel like having tobacco, come to us and we will give you sweet jaggery¹⁰ to eat instead of tobacco'.

He started doing that – and every time he came to the dining area for his jaggery, children took turns to talk to him and spend time with him – and the jaggery only became a side-story. Within weeks, the boy was totally weaned off tobacco. In retrospect, we could see how he basically longed for company – and his new friends helped him to get over his need for tobacco. The information he received about sustained use of tobacco – with some

8 Annexure 1

9 The children attending the RRC elect their own representatives to form their Children's Panchayat which is involved in planning and monitoring the RRC.

¹⁰ Sugarcane is heated to form this sweetener used in Indian cooking.

worrisome photographs added to his tobacco abstinence – but they were not the main elements.

The power of mobilisation and information

It was around this time the State Government of Karnataka came up with a strategy to ban the sale of arrack – the least expensive of alcoholic drinks, while permitting the sale of the more expensive Indian and foreign brands. This strategy, they claimed would ensure that the poor did not drink! Children who reviewed the impact of this strategy were extremely critical of its impact – which they recorded in their study. But they continued to feel that they did not have sufficient information to argue their case adequately.

In order to argue their case in an informed manner and to develop strategies, they had to collect appropriate information on this issue. This led children in 3 Panchayats¹¹ (Paduvari, Hallihole, Madamakki) of Kundapur Taluk in Karnataka to carry out a research on the impact of alcohol consumption and the implication of arrack ban. For children's organisations, the first step was to gain a deeper understanding of the problem by collecting appropriate information. Through their study they also wanted to prove and publicise the fact that children are capable of such a study and to also inspire other children to follow suit.

Initially children developed criteria for the selection of child researchers and on its basis, identified the child researchers. CWC conducted the training workshop for children during which children

- Identified objectives of the study
- Developed the indicators for the study
- Developed research techniques and tools
- Finalised methodology (research methods, type and numbers of respondents, detailed plan of implementing the study etc.)

Over a period 6 months, children carried out their research, collected and collated the information and then analysed them.

One of the four research tools children used to conduct their study on Alcoholism was 'Resource mapping'. They decided to map all the locations where alcohol was being sold/supplied legally and illegally. When they commenced their mapping, they had to face some uncomfortable questions from adults about what was being mapped. Children immediately realised that if they mapped only access points related to alcohol, the adults in the community, especially those who access and those who sell alcohol, could easily identify what children were up to and were likely to create hurdles for their research. After discussion, they came up with the plan to include religious places, educational institutions and infrastructure on their maps, so that if questioned, they could explain how they were mapping certain resources in the village. This plan proved extremely successful.

¹¹ The term Panchayat refers to both the geographical and administrative units, as well as the elected body, which acts as the local council. A Panchayat is composed of a cluster of villages, and several Panchayats constitute a Taluk.



For them, one of the important learning was that people who abuse alcohol are not ‘bad’ people (while they were always empathetic to their own family members, this was a collective realisation also about those they did not have a personal relationship with), but it is their behaviour under the influence of the intoxicants that is bad. They listed that that among alcohol users, there were three categories, based on the after affects of alcohol use. There were some who were abusing alcohol who become aggressive and violent as a result of it. There were also some who were alcohol dependent but not necessarily violent or abusive (they could be lethargic and spaced out but they did not harm others), yet their habit was bad and had negative impact on their lives. Then there were some who did consume alcohol moderately or occasionally who were neither addicted nor abusive on account of their drinking. They felt that each of them needed a different kind of support or help, and could not be clubbed under one category.

They also felt strongly that those who abuse alcohol should not be discriminated against because they said ‘they too are close to us. And discrimination will only drive them to even more negative behaviour’.

Children were able to challenge some of the popular assumptions and myths held because of the information emerging from their study. Based on their data about alcoholics accessing several sources for alcohol, they realised that merely shutting down liquor shops was not an effective strategy. They had detailed information about the increased number of ‘foreign liquor’ bottles that were being carted out of hotels and of alcohol related expenses going through the roof as the poor were turning to expensive drinks which they could ill afford. There were some incidents where the expenses of the drinks did discourage the new drinkers, who cut down their drinking, but the more habitual ones continued to drink as much, while driving their families to increased hardships.

Children repeatedly pointed out based on their observations that ban of alcohol and prohibition of sales alone did not have the desired effect; instead they were more likely to lead to increased frustrations and desperation.

Further they said that de-addiction camps in isolation were not enough to sustain a person’s efforts to stop his/her addiction to alcohol based on the number of adults they learnt about who had attended such camps but had reverted to drinking excessively after a while because they had no support locally.



The young children who were part of the study now have very detailed information about the ill effects of alcohol abuse and are quite articulate about not getting into a situation of such dependency and difficulty for themselves. At the same time, they are now seeing the others who are addicted with a much better understanding and concern than before. They especially empathise with other children who belong to families grappling with alcohol abuse.

Children went on further to challenge the general presumption that alcoholism causes poverty. Children said that often among the poor, it is poverty and related frustration that leads people to consume alcohol. Children also said that alcohol consumption is not only among the poor, but also among the rich and affluent. They ridiculed the argument saying if the theory was correct, all the rich people who drink should be becoming very poor and the poor who don't drink should be growing very rich! As a group they reached the consensus that drinking is not only the reason for poverty.

Excerpts: Report of the Children's Research Consolidation Workshop, 2010

It is evident that as a result of their engagement with this study, child researchers have been able to take a close look, not only about the issue of alcohol but also several other connected issues in their community.

Engaging the local governments

Children of 56 Panchayats of Kundapur, during their major research towards the Five Year Planning process had identified alcohol abuse as an issue for urgent action. Plans related to addressing the issue were included in the official plan of the local government.

Children have repeatedly brought up issues related to this at the Children's Grama Sabhas¹², and the meetings of the Children's Panchayats and school children's organisations. CWC held several discussions with the members of the various children's organisations as well as with the Panchayat on how best to address the issue of illegal alcohol and provide support systems for alcohol dependents and their families. As a result, the local governments of Alur, Madamakki, Balkur, Keradi, and Belve have passed official resolutions recommending for the closure of illegal and spurious alcohol shops that have been significantly responsible for the problems faced by children and women.

Children's presentation to the Local government, Madamakki

According to their plan developed at the research consolidation workshop, children of Madamakki Panchayat developed a role play to demonstrate the problems faced by those addicted to alcohol and to highlight the fact that they too should be given respect and understanding – and that the society needs to change its mind-set towards them.

Children put up this play in Makkala Grama Sabha on January 25th, 2010. The Child Development Programme Officer (CDPO), Nodal officer for the Panchayats, District Panchayat Member, Taluk Panchayat members, President and members of the Grama Panchayat, teachers, members of the School Development Committee and the Sub Inspector of police were among the audience.

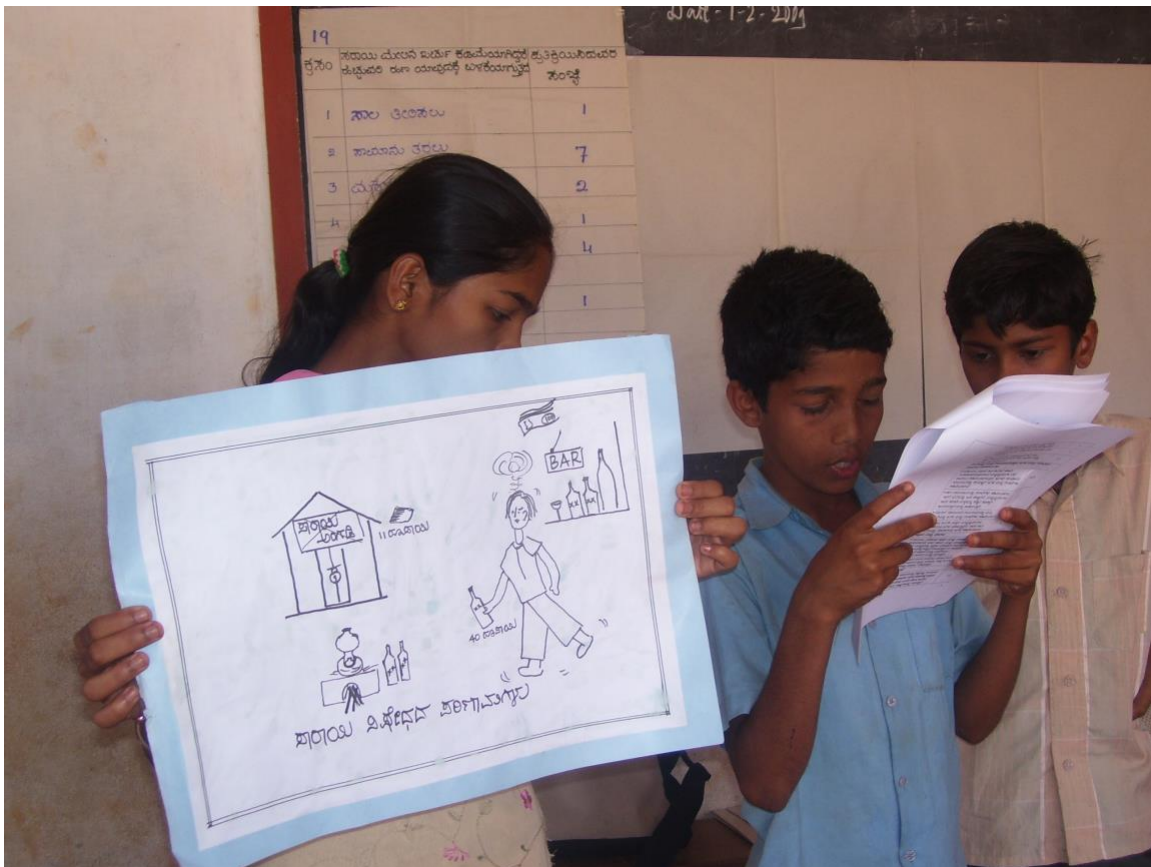
Responding to the play, the CDPO said 'Children have put up a great role play, which speaks from their heart. It has a very important lesson for each one present here. We adults usually admonish and beat the alcoholics. But the children's play has presented a totally different point of view. It shows their deep concern for the alcoholics as well as their sincerity to bring about a true change in them. It is important for children to also talk to their own parents as they are capable of also influencing them positively. In the adults'

¹² Which had been mandated as compulsory for all the 5600 Panchayats of the State, by 2006

Grama Sabha too people complain about alcoholism, but other than closing down shops, they do not offer any other solutions. But the children's role play clearly says that all those who drink are not 'bad' people and they need help to change'.

He then turned to the police officer and questioned "You, police, arrest people who drink, now what do you have to say?" the Inspector responded 'We usually arrest the alcoholics and fine them for hundred rupees and keep them in custody for a day'. After their release they are even more tense about having lost their daily wage and clamour for even more drinks. But children's play shows how we need to approach them differently. Taking to them and counselling them will certainly reduce drinking – much more than arrests and beatings'.

A common thread running through their research related discussions has been children's strong sense of ownership over their findings and internalisation of the research tools they made use of. During this process, they have made new friends and established links with other community based groups, especially formed by women and youth.



Awareness related to addiction has improved in the community as an impact of our work, there is an increased empathy regarding addicts. Hence, women and children are able to understand that people addicted to alcohol or intoxicating substances require consistent and strong support to overcome their dependence. This is also creating an environment where people who are alcohol dependent are not always looked down upon. Women and children

are increasingly able to see the problem of addiction from the point of view of those who are addicted and are discussing ways to assist them in a pro-active manner.

Red Ribbons – Holding Local Governments Accountable

The ethics of rights-based children's participation dictate that children have ownership of their information, research and how they use it. The research and advocacy process should not threaten children's safety and security. One main requisite for rights-based children's participation in local governance structures is proper social monitoring. It is imperative that the information is publicly available to all children and the community, and that the process of identifying issues and solving them in local governments is monitored and tracked properly.

Red ribbons for child participation

This need for monitoring and tracking of children's participation to further validate their involvement in Makkala Grama Sabha resulted in the development of a new mechanism by the children of Maravanthe Panchayat. Children decided to tie red ribbons on a tree located at a prominent location in their Panchayat. Each red ribbon signifies a problem and as each issue is addressed, the red ribbon will be untied and a white ribbon, signifying resolution, tied instead.

This is a very powerful way to inform the community of issues raised in the Panchayat, and also to put pressure on the local government about the prevalence and urgency of unsolved issues. In several Panchayats, the red ribbons are gradually being replaced by white ones. Children of other Panchayats have added modifications to this social monitoring mechanism. In one Panchayat, children prioritised their issues and have tied bigger ribbons issues they consider more urgent or important, (such as alcohol abuse or dangers from stone quarrying) which helps to identify issues that need more urgent attention. In another Panchayat, it was noted that the size of the ribbon was not enough of an indicator and the issue itself was written on the red ribbon to identify problems which were still pending resolution.

Enabling children to develop mechanisms for participation

This mechanism of monitoring is very significant in that it has been completely developed by children themselves. It is also a way in which children can appropriate public spaces. Such an appropriation of public spaces by the children helps to reduce their vulnerability and gives them ownership of their information and research. The whole community is witness to their efforts and any attempt to threaten the children would be open to community scrutiny. Similar monitoring mechanisms have been used in Yedathare Panchayat, where children from a very marginalised section of the community used their information to present their problems to adults in adults' Grama Sabha and worked towards resolving issues using the Kempu Patti mechanism.

Excerpts: Red Ribbons – Children's own way of holding Local Governments Accountable, Anitha Ranjani Sampath, CWC, 2011

These experiences and achievements have been possible because of our own organisational interventions related to the issue have been comprehensive and are part of an extensive sustained programme that has a strong grass roots as well as advocacy component.

Despite the significant achievements and learning, challenges abound.

Challenges faced at the community level

Through these processes, there has been noticeable opposition faced by children and women who are part of this movement from alcohol vendors and few alcohol dependent adults. Children and women of their households have been most affected by these reactions that are expressed in different ways. Also some of these illegal alcohol shop owners also provide groceries to families on credit – by withholding this ‘favour’ they have ‘punished’ those who resist unrestrained sales of alcohol. There has also been significant pressure on children and adults from local politicians and leaders who have a stake in liquor sales to end their efforts. Some of the adults have received threats of violent action through anonymous letters and telephone calls, though no children have reported this. Attempts to humiliate women and adolescent girls by making derogatory remarks related to their character, morality and behaviour have also been noted and resisted. Men, whose family members are involved in the movement, also face pressure from the influential local alcohol lobby people who ask them to ‘control’ their women. We have also seen incidents where those who support the sale of liquor encourage the alcohol dependants to assault and harass the women and children of their homes who are active in this movement.

Yet, these pressures have been largely countered as the movement involves children and women who are organised and is seen to be in the ‘right’ and because the members of the movement have at no point stigmatised those with alcohol dependency.

Way ahead

Informed and organised participation is the key to effective protagonism of children, especially those who are most marginalised. To enable this we need to facilitate children to gain an understanding about their own rights, as individuals and as citizens. We need to empower them to analyse their situation and the basic causes that lead to the violation of their rights including alcohol abuse. We need to equip ourselves with child rights friendly tools to inform them about the affect of different abuses and addiction, including alcohol addiction and to build their capacities to acquire, analyse and use information effectively.

There is also a need for us to design effective programmes for children and youths to ensure that they do not become addicted to alcohol. We also need to analyse the culture, beliefs and the practices regarding alcohol consumption in the communities. If these practices are violating children’s rights they need to be questioned and challenged while also coming up with creative alternatives.

The spirited dance of Albadi

Kudubi is ethnic group costal Karnataka in India mostly dependent of agriculture for livelihood. They have a very special festival called holi, a harvest festival during which men, youth and children wear colourful costumes and visit different households across

several villages. In each home, to the reverberating beats of a special drum, they dance and sing about their family gods and narrate episodes from Indian mythologies.

This programme involves walking very long distances, in elaborate costumes and the dancing is physically demanding. It has been a practise for the participants to drink alcohol, with physical exhaustion given as the reason. This practice in the recent years has come to mean very heavy drinking and sometimes indecent behaviour towards women. It had reached a point when the women, totally fed up, began to object to their men taking part in the celebration.

12 years ago, the youth of Albadi village initiated their own dance group, and they discussed about the problem related to excessive drinking. They made a decision that henceforth, no member of their group would drink during the festival, and if anyone felt they could not dance without drinking, they could stay out of the dance group. Their women supported this decision, The older adults, some of them not happy with the decision, reluctantly joined them. The group was extremely successful and people in the surrounding villages began to talk about it. Now, 34 other groups follow this lead to an alcohol free holi celebration.

Children need to have the collective strength as well as knowledge, skills and tools for accessing, analysing and using information to make logical and constructive interventions on their own behalf and also to advocate for effective solutions with policy makers. For this to happen, there is a need for organisations working with them to ensure that structures are created through which children can interact with local governments and ensure that their needs and aspirations are reflected in the planning process of the governments. Through this both bottom up planning as well as social monitoring can be ensured – to realise meaningful participation of all citizens, the cornerstone of a true democracy.

Organisations also need to form strategic alliances with other like minded community based groups, institutions and agencies to work towards a child rights friendly state policy on alcohol. As demonstration models, people friendly programmes that reduce alcohol abuse need to be designed and implemented to reduce the alcohol abuse, in partnership with children and well documented so advocacy for main-streaming can follow.

As organisations, there is a need to come up with comprehensive strategic plans that complement each other. For example, CWC's 'honourable voter' campaign geared to strengthen democratic decentralisation and clean politics, engaged citizens of 21 Districts of the State where 20,000 citizens openly declared 'my vote is not for sale' and refused to be corrupted with either money or liquor and made history.

There is also the need to be engaged with the State to advocate for the development and implementation of alcohol policies that are pro-people (not pro-alcohol industry) with special emphasis on the impact of alcohol abuse on women, children and such other most vulnerable communities. They need to carry out assessments related to the magnitude of the problem of alcohol abuse, establish sufficient number of centres with adequate qualified staff, to treat and guide alcohol addicts at local levels with empathy for their family members.

The State must be compelled to identify larger issues that drive people to alcohol abuse, such as lack of employment opportunities, lack of social security nets, forced migration, discriminations based on gender, ethnicity, region and religion and to address them systematically. They need to regulate the promotion and sale of alcohol products, enact and implement strong laws to control and monitor the alcohol industry and provide adequate resources and information to local governments to plan and implement programmes for those addicted to alcohol.

End note

Our experiences have helped both children and adults in the community realise the capacity of children – both as individuals and as members of collectives to be active members of this movement. There has also been a clear recognition that there is need for comprehensive action – to acquire specialised skills to engage with people and children with alcohol dependency. One of the most important issues that children have brought up is the need to respect persons who are alcohol dependent and recognise that they need help to get over their addiction. These needs are also individual specific and so require individual attention and specialised care and response. In some areas, where success has been achieved, the need to find ways to ensure that the positive status quo is maintained remains.

There is recognition in the local governments that they cannot consider alcohol abuse as an issue outside their purview. The need to document data related to the consumption of alcohol in the community is now openly acknowledged. There is also a more conscious attempt to understand the social monitoring systems that existed/exist in the communities to keep alcohol abuse and alcohol induced abuse in check – so that they can be reviewed and strengthened.

For children and other members of the community to be active players in the movements against alcohol abuse they need skills and knowledge to conduct their own research on issues that impact on their lives including alcohol and drug abuse. For all active players, including children, there is a need to build appropriate capacities to sustain the momentum of the movement over long periods, especially when on one hand tangible successes take a long time to achieve and be visible and on the other, there is several resistance at the individual level as well as the community level.

In this entire discourse, it has been apparent that it is not right to only look at individual behaviour and choices, but place appropriate blame and responsibility on the Alcohol lobby, the state policies that promote aggressive marketing of alcohol and other dependency creating substances along with all other macro issues that promote abuse of alcohol either directly or indirectly. In this regard, the need to understand the external environments and to use the opportunities they provide optimally and to develop strategies to overcome the constraints cannot be stressed enough. In order to impact on these, there is a need to learn to mobilise, to advocate effectively, to influence appropriate power centres, to have access to support services, to develop different strategies in partnership with children and to enable them to realise their Right to Self Determination in all aspects of their life.

Kavita Ratna

With inputs from Anupama Suresh Babu and Roshni Nuggehalli

The Concerned for Working Children

Annexure: Keradi Story