

Improving the quality of primary education through community participation

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Last year **Veronica Sánchez** worked at an NGO in Madhya Pradesh looking at how community action could be harnessed to improve primary education. Here she summarises the recommendations made as a result of the research.



The quality of primary school education greatly influences opportunities later in life. Rural India's primary schools, which cater for six to ten year olds, are in shambles with very [poor learning outcomes](#). The large-scale mobilisation of communities offer a possible way to improve primary schools in villages – particularly in the context of constitutional guarantees such as the [Right to Education](#) (RTE).

In the summer of 2014 I went to India to study primary education with an NGO named PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) in the Betul district of Madhya Pradesh, one of the poorest areas in India. Based on the troubling [ASER report](#) regarding quality of education in remote rural areas, my research explored how community organisations, and specifically women's organisations called self-help groups, can get more involved with their children's education in order to promote better primary education in Indian rural schools.



Image credit: Veronica Sánchez

NGOs and civil organisations like PRADAN have been working with women living in remote rural areas for decades, empowering them through a system of self-help groups. This empowerment is promoted by microfinance and livelihood programs, which enable self-help group members to achieve financial independence, security and self-confidence. Group members are able to express themselves in supportive environment, overcoming factors such as social and gender discrimination and other challenges which act as barriers to claiming their rights. PRADAN and other NGO self-help groups have spread significantly throughout the country in recent years, becoming effective grassroots vehicles to tackle issues beyond those specific to women, such as village development and in this case (it is hoped) children's education.

The research focussed on two sample schools and involved the following:

1. *A qualitative evaluation of RTE implementation in the sample schools.* Primary data was used to gather specific information respect to RTE and learning outcomes from the two sample villages. Secondary data gave us a better understanding of what RTE is and allowed us to evaluate national and state RTE implementation, and to compare the general results with those we found in the sample villages.
2. *The development of the “RTE scorecard”.* PRADAN had found there was no appropriate instrument to assess RTE requirements in a simple and objective way. Our initial evaluation was therefore used to construct a “RTE scorecard”, designed to enable the objective and periodical evaluation of RTE implementation in rural India.
3. *Intervention and awareness.* The RTE scorecard was constructed with government and professional institutions in mind – organisations who would find neutral measures of education useful to their work on a state and/or national level. However, the research process of interviewing and discussing RTE with teachers, children, local and school authorities and self-help group members enhanced knowledge about RTE rights and duties. To support this local level awareness-building, PRADAN constructed a second RTE scorecard, modified so it could be easily used by self-help groups and the community to assess quality and measure progress in local schools.

As a result of this process it was possible to make some final recommendations to achieve the main goal of improving primary education. These were divided into recommendations for the local institutions and/or other NGOs and ones specifically for the self-help group members.

The recommendations for local institutions were necessary because their active support is necessary to involve self-help groups into children’s education, improving coordination between the different members. For example, they need to take a lead on communication and inform local communities about RTE (i.e. raise awareness). They also need to work with local leaders to change people’s expectations and reassure self-help groups and their wider communities that they are not the only ones demanding changes in their schools, and that their complaints are legitimate, allowing them to go from a passive behaviour to a more actively demanding one.

Only with institutional support would be possible to consider the eight specific recommendations that I make for self-help group members on the basis of the research. These are:

1. Self-help groups should help to promote awareness and responsibility regarding primary education among parents providing accurate information about returns of schooling in the labour market
2. Use a modified and simpler version of the RTE scorecard specially constructed for them during this research that enable them to monitor the quality of education delivered in schools in their communities.
3. Keep the village community – i.e. schools, parents, teachers and School Management Committee (SMC) members – informed about RTE implementation results.
4. Ensure the proper creation and operation of the SMC and communicate with them regularly.
5. Promote communication between parents-teachers, with a group meeting at least twice a year, and personal meetings at least once a year.
6. Promote the supervision of attendance and homework
7. Support the teacher’s duties to: i) ensure comprehensive child development and ii) build up a child-friendly environment
8. Finally and no less important, self-help groups should campaign for basic hygienic conditions like proper toilet facilities in schools.

Some might argue that the recommendations seem trivial, but in the rural Indian context they cannot always be

taken for granted. All these recommendations were developed collaboratively and derived from information provided by self-help groups and other stakeholders, increasing the likelihood of adoption.

My research project only focused on two samples so in theory general conclusions cannot be made. However, if we compare the main findings with those of other national reports, such as ASER, there is a high level of consistency. This suggests that the recommendations above could be applied to other rural areas.

This research is a call to local educational NGOs and public institutions to address concerns over education as soon as possible, and facilitate local involvement in ensuring quality education in rural India. While working with the self-help groups I got to know some incredible women, who opened their homes to me and articulately discussed their children's education. This highlighted that the desire to act is there, it is only limited by a lack of awareness about the rights they can legitimately demand.

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About the Author

Veronica Sánchez is a second year MPA student at LSE. She has previously worked for a Chilean NGO called Accion Emprendedora, which works with micro-entrepreneurship in vulnerable areas, and for the Chilean Government in the department in charge of micro-enterprises. Before coming to London she was working in at the centre of public policy at the Universidad Católica de Chile.



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