Tamil Nadu Education Project

Report 2023-24

UnionAID

Better Work, Better World

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Project background and objectives

Dalit and Tribal workers who are members of unions and cooperatives organised by the Tamil Nadu Labour Union have high hopes for the futures of their children. They want their children to have the opportunity to choose their own future and not be trapped into caste based occupations and poverty as they have been. However, Dalit and Tribal children face caste based discrimination at school and poverty at home.

The continued funding from NZEI Te Riu Roa for this project has been vital in delivering positive outcomes for the Dalit and Tribal children and their families.

The objectives of the project are to:

- stop early school dropout
- enhance the standard of education among Dalit and Tribal Children
- prevent girls' early marriage and encourage their higher education
- address the disadvantage faced by Dalit and Tribal children
- provide a safe, supportive and enjoyable learning environment
- foster a positive attitude towards learning

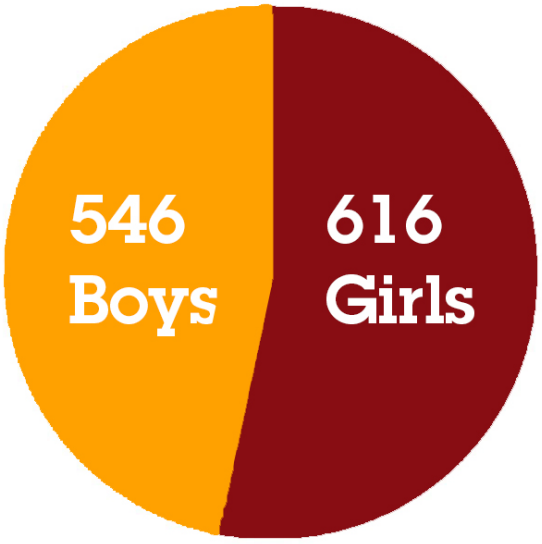
What happened in 2023-24?

The 12 months from April 2023 to March 2024 were largely a continuation of running the centres under the model developed over the previous years. No new centres were developed during this time but the number of children regularly attending increased slightly.

All sixteen centres across different locations run a similar model. The evening classes run from 5:30 – 7:00pm Monday to Saturday with a focus on homework support and building on lessons taught in public school classes. In addition to homework, the tuition masters supplement lessons with writing poetry and stories on Dalit and Tribal history and culture. Arts and culture are celebrated on specific national holidays with art competitions or plays put on for the local community.

Snapshot highlights

1,162 children in Education Centres



74 children went on to Higher Education

Objective 1: 16 supplementary Evening Education Centres are operating

From 2023-24, the project operated in the existing sixteen evening education centres. These centres are very basic in terms of infrastructure, typically a community park, temple or other donated space. The main investment is an experienced tuition master. These are often former students or university graduates, who receive initial training and then ongoing support and collaboration from the other tuition masters.

The focus of the centres is typically on helping the children with homework and additional tuition based on their regular school lessons. The tuition masters engage with teachers at the regular schools as well as the students and parents to identify areas of learning that will benefit from extra tuition. Common areas of focus were communication and reading skills, writing and enhancing memory skills as well as creating an interest in maths and some basic sciences.

Name of village	Girls	Boys	Tuition Master Name
Ambethkar Nagar 1	46	39	Mrs. Thangamuneesari
Kariyapatti	37	39	Mrs. Hemalatha
Ambedkar Nagar	49	38	Mrs. Kaleeswari
SangayaKovil Street	47	45	Mrs. Rajakumari
Simmakkal	28	23	Mrs. Prabhadevi
Muniyappan Nagar 1	49	39	Ms. Meenakshi
Muniyappan Nagar 2	41	34	Mrs. Deepa
Vaikkalkari	74	-	Mrs. Sangareshwari
Komaspalayam	-	79	Mr.Selvam
Puliankulam 1	37	41	Miss. Swetha
Puliyankulam 2	38	28	Miss. Udhaya
Sempukudipatti	35	24	Mrs. Suganya
Silukkuvarpatti	38	28	Miss. Nagammal
Jakkampatti	27	24	Mrs. Paveena
Vilpatti	49	41	Mr. Rajendren
Samakkattu colony	21	24	Mrs. Backiyalakshmi
Total	**616**	**546**	**Total Students 1162**

Objective 2: Children regularly attend the Evening Education Centres

By the end of the 12 months project in March 2024 a total of **1,162** children were regularly attending the evening education centres. Regular attendance is typically considered as attending the centres 3 – 4 times each week.

Over half of the children attending the centres are girls. Most of the centres are co-ed, except for two centres (Komaspalayam and Vaikkalkarai) which exist in one large slum. The parents suggested having two separate tuition centres for boys and girls with a male and female teacher respectively in each would be the best approach.

Objective 3: More Dalit and Tribal Children go on to Higher Education

Identifying outcomes of the project are challenging due to the lack of baseline data and te difficulty following up children after completing their compulsory schooling. The TNLU reports that none of the children attending the centres dropped out of regular school during the year.

A total of 74 of the older children from the centres were reported as planning to go on to higher education in 2023 – 2024, with 51 planning to go on to college and a further 23 children stated they planned to undertake a technical study course.

Other project achievements

- Students gained talents in extracurricular activities and special training was given to encourage participation.
- Children increased understanding on social issues like environment protection, gender equality, ill effects of consumption of liquor, child labour issues, water scarcity and water saving methods, the need for planting trees, environment hygiene and community health issues.
- Self-confidence was gained through discovery of hidden talents and skills.
- The children expanded their general knowledge and motivation by reading newspapers and debating children's issues.
- Students participated in a successful petition appeal to elected representatives for drinking water facilities and toilet facilities for boys and girls. This created awareness about the civil rights of children.
- Access to technology remains a barrier, however students were supported to use new technologies with the provision of equipment and internet access. New child-friendly guides were developed for online resources to improve accessibility.

Case study: “The Sweetest and happiest evenings in my life” – Miss Ajitha

I am Ajitha, studying in 10th standard at the government-run school in Perungudi. Last year, my family moved from a nearby village to a rented house in the village of Perungudi.

I have two younger sisters who are studying in 5th and 8th standard at the same school as me.

My parents are daily wage earners. My mother works in a restaurant doing vessel cleaning, food serving, and floor cleaning, earning Rs. 400 a day. If for any reason she cannot go to the restaurant, we lose her daily wage of Rs. 400.

My father is an agricultural worker who occasionally goes for agriculture-related work, earning Rs. 600. He gives this money to my mother to take care of us three. He loves us deeply. However, his mental stability is not normal; during such times, he goes to work, walks around the village, and talks to himself. We cannot question him during these episodes. Unfortunately, the public often mocks him as a 'loose man', and when we go out, they refer to us as 'the children of that loose man'. Because of this, we rarely leave the house after school.

Recently we have been mentally distressed and unable to connect with our neighbours, focus on homework at home, or attend school regularly. At school, we do not interact or speak with others and feel very lonely and unhappy about my father's condition. We find it hard to explain his mental state to others.

In this difficult situation, a school friend who lives on my street invited me to join an evening education children's centre run by TNLU. I enrolled and found joy in playing with the toys at the centre. The tutors at the centre are very kind and give special attention to us three. We are happy to be interacting with other children and participating in various events, sports, speeches, singing, and extracurricular activities both at the regular school and at the children's centre. I have gained skills in communication and have been awarded certificates and prizes.

The children at our centre are thrilled to participate in quizzes, sports, and various competitions. My sisters and I are also happy and feel that the children's education centre is the sweetest and happiest place for us.

We express our gratitude to the Tamil Nadu Labour Union for establishing the children's centre, which brings happiness to me, my sisters, and all the children in our area. I also thank my tuition master for taking special care of children like us.