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# CHILDREN AS RESEARCH PROTAGONISTS !

## Rights - Based Research by Children

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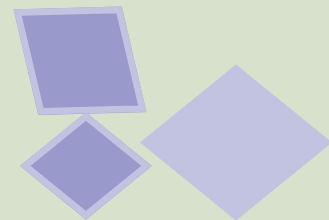
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# CHILDREN AS RESEARCH PROTAGONISTS!

## Rights - Based Research by Children



THE CONCERNED FOR WORKING CHILDREN  
2008

# 1

## PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION



Nandrolli is a small hamlet in Keradi Panchayat<sup>1</sup> of Udupi District, a remote village located on the Western Ghats in Karnataka, India. It has 75-80 families and a population of 400 to 450. The village is typically agrarian, cut off from the advancement of modern technology. It lacks proper roads and

transport, communication systems and other infrastructure. Alcoholism was a way of life and a major issue in this Panchayat. Especially the women and children suffered on account of alcoholic abuse. Besides licensed vendors, liquor was sold in vegetable and grocery shops, on cycle and under the trees.

The abuse of alcohol created tensions and disharmony in the family and community.

Children of Keradi who had faced lot problems talked to each other and decided that they had to find a solution to this menacing problem!

They decided to take the help of their Makkala Panchayats to take up the matter with the elders of their village.

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1. A Panchayat is a cluster of villages with a population of approximately 3,500 to 10,000.

*In our day-to-day lives, we come across different problems that we may wish to address, or there are many situations that we wish to change.*

*For example, it could be the problem of alcoholism (as in this story), child marriage, bad school forcing children to drop out, a stream running through the hamlet which children are not able to cross across etc.*

*There could also be situations that we wish to change or improve, like*

- Girls being abused on the streets,*
- Poor children not getting attention in the hospital*
- People living at the extreme edge of the village not having access to the village pond.*

## 2

### DEMAND ACTION, BUT CHILDREN ARE IGNORED !



In the monthly Task Force meetings with the adult members of their Panchayat, the members of the Makkala Panchayat pointed out several times that there were too many arrack (local liquor) shops in the village that had to be closed down. Sadly their demand fell on deaf years.

But they did not give up. They raised their demand again before the adults during the Gram Sabha<sup>4</sup> in 2002. Once again, the Panchayat was unmoved.

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2. Children's Village Council, or parallel government of children, set up in Karnataka state. It was started by the facilitation of Bhima Sangha and CWC. It is forum for all children to participate in decision making and governance at the Panchayat level.

3. The Task Force is a structure created by the facilitation of CWC. It is a tripartite body composed of government officials, representatives from the community and businessmen/employers, and is the decision making body in the Panchayat. Elected representatives of the Makkala Panchayat and Bhima Sangha are members of this body.

4. Children's Village Council meeting with the concerned officials where in all the children of the Panchayat discuss and raise issues that matters them and their community, in order to arrive at speedy solutions.

*As children did in this story, we often make several attempts to find solution to problem.*

*In such situations it is possible that we are strongly moved by our impulses and emotions. But we may not have sufficient understanding of the problem or enough information based on which we can develop plans to address the problem.*

*Why did children in the story fail to convince the local government or other key adults in the community to deal with the alcohol problem? One of the main reasons was that they were not sufficiently informed about the problem and could not challenge the adults who jeered at them with a strong argument backed by appropriate information.*

Undeterred, the members of the Makkala Panchayat raised the issue again in the following Task Force meeting. But again it was brushed aside saying, "What is your problem? Some people drink; we cannot stop them, its their personal matter. We cannot close down the shops because they have licence from the government." They further said that the law permitted stocking up to 10 packets of liquor.

When the adults said, "After all only a few people drink", the children had replied, "That is not so. Many people drink and it's a big problem." The adults countered, "Then tell us how many people drink?" The children were silent, because they had no information. The adults closed the issue with an advice to children 'You children should not drink'. This lack of response by adults was a blow to the children.





# 3

## UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM BETTER



In the following Makkala Panchayat meeting the children discussed and had a better understanding of the adults' apathy than before.

They realised that 'lack of appropriate information was the cause of our failure'. They agreed that the only way to deal with the issue was to **have information** about the problem and then present their case strongly.

The big question before them at this point was 'How do we get **in-depth information** about the problem of alcoholism in the **village?**'

Children discussed it, keeping in mind the other times when they had managed to collect information in an effective manner. At the end of the discussion, they had arrived at an interesting plan.

*When we do not have sufficient information about the problem or the situation that we wish to address, how can we go about getting the appropriate information?*

*There are various ways to do that.*

*One of the best ways is to **do our own research and manage our own information!***

***What is research?***

*Research is the act of generating information about any subject.*

***What is participatory research?** If the individual/group of individuals about whom the research is conducted, participates in the implementation of the research (not as information provider), such research is participatory research. The level of participation may vary from merely collecting the information, analysing information, planning the research, planning the entire research process, etc.*

***What is Participatory research?***

*In a participatory research where in the*

*researchers themselves take the decisions or influence the decisions regarding all aspects of the research, **is rights-based participatory research.** So any participatory research to be truly rights-based, the researcher takes vital decisions related to it. These decisions may be related to the choice of the research topic, the participants in the study, research methodology, the use of information, etc.*

***Who takes the decision to carry out research?***

*In a rights framework, the decision to do research ought to be made by that group of individuals who are affected by a problem/situation, and who want information so that they can act on the problem/situation, on the basis of the information they collect.*

***Who determines the subject to be researched in a rights-based research?***

*The research subject is determined by those who are affected by a problem and who wish to access information based on which, they can act on.*

As the first step, children **discussed** the alcohol problem in their meetings. They identified it not only as an individual or family problem, but also as a community problem, affecting the entire village.

They also **collected several case studies** of drunkenness and the problems caused as a result in the village. Based on their findings they analysed why alcoholism was a major issue of concern for both children and their communities.

They said that alcoholism was the cause of a lot of disharmony and violence at home and loss of income. "We are not able to study at home", "we do not get money for tuition fees, books and stationery", they said. In some houses, children said they do not even get sufficient food. "We are teased by other children and teachers saying 'your father is an alcoholic'".

During their analysis of the adverse impact of alcohol abuse, children pointed out that it caused many health problems, injuries and death. "There is unnecessary expenditure on medicines and doctors on account of alcoholism, families get into huge debts." They also identified that girl children do not get good bridegrooms due to the alcoholism of family members," etc.

Children also went to the Gram Panchayat office and the local primary health centre to check if there was any data on the persons or families consuming alcohol. But they could not get any information.

*The subject selected for the study could be a problem that affects the people, or any other subject, which generates appropriate information for them; and such information helps them to take informed decisions.*

*Problems affecting children or subjects on which children want information could be many, such as alcoholism, violence, school dropout, child labour, children in armed conflict, etc. How do we decide which of the subjects should be researched into first?*

*In such a situation we should **prioritise** the issues/subjects to be studied, considering factors such as:*

- 1. number of individuals affected by the problem;*
- 2. acuteness/intensity of the problem;*
- 3. urgency at which the solution is to be implemented;*

- 4. ease at which the problem can be solved;*
- 5. cost of implementing the solution;*

*As part of the research that we conduct, we must first try to understand the problem using all the existing information. This could be done in various ways:*

- 1. Discussion among ourselves*
- 2. Informal talks with people who you think may have information on the research topic.*
- 3. Looking up information at sources such as the office of the Local Government, village library, etc.*
- 4. Reading any written information that is already available (research done previously by others). Studying the already existing information on the subject that we are going to do the research is called **secondary research**. Secondary research provides us with the foundation for the rest of the research.*

*Such information at the initial stage of the research is critical, for the following reasons:*

- *To plan the strategy for the study;*
- *To plan the methodology for the study;*
- *To plan the methods, tools and materials for the study*
- *To determine indicators (detailed content) for the study.*



## STRATEGIC PLANNING – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

After their initial discussions and understanding, as there was no data at all available on the extent of alcoholism in the village, they decided to collect information on the number of people who drink and the amount of money that was spent on alcohol. They decided that they would collect the information on their own.

The children again spent a long time discussing and devised a **methodology** for collecting their information.

They decided that under the pretext of their 'Clean the village' campaign, they would clean the surroundings of the main 'arrack shop' in the hamlet. They were sure that this strategy would get them the required information.

Their research method was to count the arrack sachets strewn around the arrack

shop. On the first day they cleaned up the entire area surrounding the arrack shops in Nandrolli. Once all the sachets were cleared, they continued their cleaning activity, not only for one or two more days but for an entire week.

They also made sure their counting included a festival day and a Saturday, which was the payment day for all the factory workers and labourers.





### ***Research Methodology***

*For doing our research we should have a clearly and scientifically thought out plan. Research methodology is a clear plan of how we carry out the research.*

*For example, in the story, children of Nadrolli decided that they would carry out their research in the pretext of a 'village cleanliness campaign' and count the used sachets, for 7 days. These seven days would include a payment day (Saturday) and a festival day. The other methods of information collection they would use included checking for existing information at the Local Government office and Public Health Centre, observation of drunken behaviour, informal talks with children affected by alcoholic problems, etc.*

*Research methodology would include choice of the research subject, geographic scope of the research, research participants, time schedule, methods to collect information, etc.*

*This methodology will ensure that we get accurate and scientific information.*

***Who determines the research methodology?*** *In any rights-based participatory research, it is the researchers who determine the methodology for the research. If we are doing a research, we ourselves should be determining the methodology for the research.*

***Sampling:*** *is the process of selecting units for the purpose of our study. For example, in the story, the units for the study are the 7 days during which children collected and counted the arrack sachets. From 7 days of counting, they arrived at the number of packets that the people of the hamlet consumed for the whole year. So in the story children counted on a Saturday and a festival day as well, when the quantity of alcohol consumed could be a lot more than other days. So also they counted on weekdays, when the quantity consumed may be less.*

*In this way, all the units that will be chosen for the study should include all the variations that may be possible.*

*To illustrate with another example, when we do research on absenteeism of children from school, we should collect information from school going children, out of school children, long absentees, children who may be disabled, children of different age-groups and among all of them girls and boys.*

*Systematic sampling is important because it is from the information received from a few children that we generalise for the whole village.*

### ***What is research method?***

*While research methodology is the plan for the entire research process, research method is the means of collecting information. It indicates the how/using what' information could be collected.*

*We could seek information from research experts about the different existing research methods so that we could adopt and/or design appropriate research methods for our study.*

*For example, we can go to the friend's wedding by different methods- by bus, car, motorbike or walking; we may use combination of these - walk a bit, then catch a bus, after which we may hire a car to reach the venue quickly. Each of these has advantages and disadvantages. In research too we can use different methods to collect information.*

*Some of them are discussed below:*

***Observation:*** *Observation is a basic method for collecting information. This is one of the most used methods of obtaining information. Observation is an act of noticing events and processes as they happen or state of things as they are.*

*For example, we can observe, how a bird flies or how an accident takes place or how a person talks; we can also observe the condition of a road, the geographical layout of a land, etc.*

*In a research, we need to be clear what we need to observe. For this we need to have a list of things or processes that we need to observe. Such a tool is called **Observation Checklist**.*

*Our observation has to be documented, either in writing or pictorially. Observation can provide us **quantitative** and **qualitative information**. Quantitative information is information that is quantifiable, mostly in numbers. For example, number of children in the classroom, total income of the family, etc. Qualitative information relates to the quality of something; for example, level of information of adolescents on AIDS, extent of my difficulty in carrying out my work, etc. available.*

***Focus Group Discussion:** We engage in discussion with people almost every day. Focus Group Discussion is a method of collecting qualitative information through a structured discussion. This discussion is always with a group of people. Ideal number for a focus group discussion would be 8-10 persons. The group of persons that we are discussing with should be carefully selected based on the subject we are studying. This will ensure that we get the views of all the people concerned. For example, when we are conducting a study on children's difficulties in going to school, our group for the discussion should consist of both boys and girls, school going children, school dropout children and children who have never been to school, disabled children and children of various age groups. This will make sure that views of children with different backgrounds and views are integrated into the research. This will ensure the information generated is non-biased and representative of all the cross-sections.*

The tool used for conducting focus group discussion is a **checklist**, which will contain all the questions/points to be discussed with the group. The researchers must make sure that all the points in the checklist are discussed within the time

While one of the researchers lead the discussion, another must be assigned to document the discussion meticulously. While conducting focus group discussion, the research facilitator must make sure to create a friendly environment and ensure that all the participants get an opportunity to share their views.

**Survey:** Survey is used mostly to collect quantitative information. The tool for collecting information in survey method is called **survey schedule or questionnaire**. The schedule or questionnaire must be prepared carefully, which should include all the questions to which we want information.

While conducting survey by or with children the survey schedule must be illustrated, so that they can easily understand the contents of the schedule.

**Mapping:** Mapping means demarcating any kind of information pictorially. It may be map of resources in a village, like wells, schools, day care centres, ration shops, rivers, forests, paddy fields, houses, etc; it may be map of distance between two places; it may be places frequented by a child every day, etc. Mapping could be used in various studies such as to study children's transport problems, to understand agricultural pattern in the village, etc.

**Interview:** Interview is a one to one conversation/discussion between the researcher/s and the individual who provides information. In an interview method there is only one information provider.

*We use interview as a method to collect information in our daily lives. Our conversation with people is a process of interview. However, in research, interview is systematic and is guided by a questionnaire or checklist of what one wants to know. Interview provides us mostly qualitative information; however it can also be used to collect quantitative information.*

*We may design our own methods depending upon the subject that we are studying.*

**Load Count:** *We can use this method to understand the extent of weight that children carry in a study researching into transport and mobility problems. We could stand at the street junction where most children carry loads to the factory, shop or dairy. We could take a count of every child who carry a load, categorise by male or female and weigh the load and document the weight of the load they carry. This provides us with detailed quantitative and qualitative information on the load carried by children.*

**Triangulation:** *In any research we could use more than one method. For example, we may use mapping, focus group discussion and survey in a research study as we decide appropriately. We use multiple methods because only through one method we may not get all the information about the subject we are studying. Secondly, by using multiple methods, we can also cross check the information we have collected through different methods and correct if there are any errors. This method of checking information is called triangulation. In this method we closely compare the information we collected through the different methods and check if all of them match.*

*There are many methods of information collection. We could also design our own methods depending on the kind of research we undertake. The methods that we design on our own can be made very interesting, playful, interactive and participatory.*

# 5

## THE RESEARCH

So each day morning children collected all the empty sachets of arrack surrounding the arrack shop and counted them. While on some days, especially the festival day and Saturday, they got more number of packets compared to other week days.

Finally they took the average of all the 7 days' count. They found that an average of 300 packets of arrack are consumed per day. Then they made their calculations.

A packet of arrack costs Rs. 11.00. Three hundred packets cost Rs. 3300.00. This worked out to Rs.99, 000.00 per month and Rs.11, 88,000.00 per year. This was a huge amount for only a small hamlet with a total population of about 400 to 450 people.





## ***Information Collection, Correlation, Analysis & Drawing Conclusion:***

***Information Collection:*** can be done by using any or a combination of the methods listed above. We could also design our own methods. For example in this story, children's research method was 'collecting and counting the arrack sachets' strewn around the arrack shop by those who drink. They carried out the counting only after they had cleaned up the area surrounding the arrack shop and hence creating a base-line data of zero.

*In the initial stages of their research in the story, they had also used group discussion among themselves, observation of drunken behaviour, and their own experiences of encounter with drunken people in their families or community. They also had collected stories of drunkenness from other children.*

*Researchers must ensure that they collect information accurately and that they*

*document the information meticulously.*

***Correlation:*** when different pieces of data collected from the research are appropriately connected together we get meaningful information. This process is called correlation. In a research on 'children's absenteeism in school' different pieces of information such as, '24 boys, 18 girls, 3 months', makes sense when correlated as, 'Of the total 200 children interviewed, 24 boys and 18 girls were absent from the school for 3 months'. Hence appropriate correlation of data is very important to get meaningful information.

***Analysis:*** when relevant pieces of information are put together, we will get a new understanding. It establishes the link between the information collected and the issue/problem that we are studying. This process of deriving larger meaning/understanding of the different information collected is

called **analysis**. Analysis helps in connecting the subject being researched with other issues and understanding larger problems.

For example, different pieces of information from the research such as 'there are 40 children who are long absentees from the school', 'three summer months in the village are extremely dry'; '60 families face water scarcity', and 'many families migrate for work' when correlated appropriately and analysed we get to know, the linkages between children's absenteeism from the school, dry period, lack of employment and migration, which provides a lot of new information.

**Drawing Conclusion:** The analysed information from the research helps us arrive at certain conclusions about the problem that we are researching.

Conclusions indicate the reasons/causes for the particular problem that we are studying and establish a relationship between the problem and possible solutions. Conclusions that we draw help us to arrive at appropriate strategies to deal with the problem.

For example, in the above example, we can draw the conclusion 'children may not absent from school for long during the summer months, if their families have better access to water and they get appropriate employment. This will prevent them from migrating for work.' Such information helps us to arrive at action plans for change.





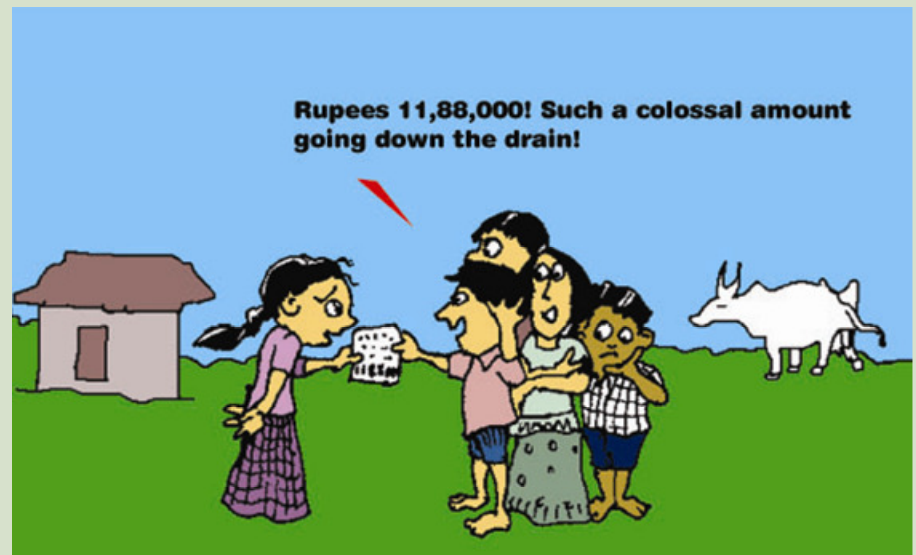
# 6

## STRATEGY FOR COMMUNICATION

In the meantime, children had gathered the information that some of the alcohol shops in the Panchayat were run in buildings owned by the Panchayat, and so the Panchayat earned income in the form of rent. The Panchayat also received revenue from licensed arrack shops in the form of taxes. Also some of the alcohol shops were run by elected members of the Panchayat themselves.

Further, few of the alcohol merchants were from the 'upper caste', who had a lot of money and influence. Thus the children learnt that most of the Panchayat members and key people were not likely to be supportive to their cause. Therefore, they decided to keep this information a secret until the right moment came their way.

They knew that the Taluk Panchayat member, Nagappa Kotari, was very sympathetic to their cause and so the children shared their information with him and with one of the Coordinators of CWC. At this time the Irrigation Department invited Bhima Sangha for a tree-planting programme.



*Once the researchers collect the information, they ought to share the information with various stakeholders. They include: Researchers must share, review and discuss the information among themselves and fill in if there are any gaps.*

*Present and cross check the information with the information providers; share with them the conclusions drawn and possible solutions suggested; the information providers would be able to rich inputs into the conclusions and suggestions.*

***Share the information with strategic partners,** as in the case of children from Nandrolli, with strategic individuals. Share the information with those key people, who we think would be supportive; they will play a key role in implementing the strategies. They may include even government officers, teachers, etc.*

*It is likely that there will be people who will resist publicity of the information gathered, because it may affect them negatively.*

*So it may be better not to share the information with such people initially. We should determine 'who the information should be shared with, at what time it should be shared' according to the context.*

*The most important consideration for this is to **identify who the 'power centres' are.** That means, identifying who has the power to make or influence the decision that we want. In a home situation, the power centre for decision regarding money matters may be the father where as the grandfather or uncle may be the power centre to take decisions regarding marriages.*

*In the same way, for different issues, within a community, there may be different 'power centres' and it is important to identify them. Having done that, the next step is to plan to 'influence' the power centres and to make sure they are able to see the viewpoint that is being presented based on the information gathered.*

*For example, in some situations, it may be important to share the findings of the study with the concerned officials and the local government who are responsible for taking action/implementation. In certain situations, it may be better not to mention the information to the government, until a lot of public support is gained.*

*We need to be very strategic when we share the information with the power centres, so that our attempt does not backfire. For this, we should prepare a good presentation of the most important/appropriate information to be shared with them. We would have to also identify the best way to communicate that information.*

*Would we like to go and 'talk' to the power centres directly? Would we like to talk to the newspaper persons so that they can write articles in favour of our views - which in turn may influence the power centres?*

*Would we like to have a drama that depicts our information and present it before a large audience, which would include the power, centres? These are the kinds of questions we need to ask when we plan our communication strategy.*

**Public Support:** *Taking the support of the public is very strategic to build a campaign. They may be women's groups, youth associations, labour unions, farmers' cooperatives, or other children's organisation.*

*Communication of information generated by the research has to be very cleverly and intelligently planned, so that we are able to build maximum support and optimum result.*



# 7

## ADVOCACY STRATEGY

It was 15<sup>th</sup> August, the Independence Day celebrations. The function was organised in the main school of the Panchayat. Children from all the schools in the Panchayat, Panchayat members and all the political leaders, bureaucrats, parents and quite a few of the community members had gathered for the function.

The children had made sure an invitation had gone to the Executive Director and others in CWC and member of the Taluk Panchayat, who they had already taken into confidence.

During the programme they took the opportunity to present the findings of their study to the entire gathering. They also explained how they collected the information and the jeer they had earlier received from the Panchayat for the lack of information.



*Through effective communication it is possible to advocate for the changes that we want to see happen.*

***Advocacy** is the act of negotiation and winning over concerned stakeholders towards finding solution to a problem or changing a situation and getting them to act on the same.*

*Just as different methods of research have advantages and disadvantages, so do different communication and advocacy methods. They also have different cost factors that we may have to keep in mind. For example, making a film about our study may be very powerful, but it is also going to be very expensive - so we may not choose to do a film.*

***Advocacy strategies** that we use could be various, such as one to one meeting, conference, media reports and articles, report in the TV, street play/role play/drama, illustrations, posters, street exhibitions, processions, radio, using folk dance/folk —*

*theatre, puppetry, story telling, strike, dharna, etc. It is very important to make sure that all our advocacy strategies are peaceful and ethical. We may use any of these strategies either singly or in combination.*

*The type of communication and advocacy strategies that we use would vary according to the issue, the audience and the place.*

The Taluk Panchayat members, the head-master, teachers, other invitees and the entire village were shocked by the information shared by children. What had been most striking to the adults was that the amount of money going down the drain due to alcohol consumption was almost 3 times that of the Annual Budget of the Panchayat!

The entire adult gathering felt ashamed that they had not been aware of these facts that had been brought to their notice by children.

There was an unanimous public response demanding that the concerned authorities take the matter seriously and take stringent and immediate action.





# 8

## USING INFORMATION TO FIND SOLUTION

The Panchayat took a decision that with immediate effect, all unlicensed sale of alcohol would be stopped. No more sales through vegetable shops, on bicycles or under the trees!

It was decided that the Panchayat would issue notices immediately to all shops that were selling alcohol without license.

The Panchayat President aware of the existing 'resistance' from some of the influential 'sellers' asked the Makkala Panchayat to submit a written Memorandum to the Panchayat for action.

The Taluk Panchayat member and a few others supported the Makkala Panchayat and actively campaigned against the abuse of alcohol in the Panchayat. As an outcome, all

the unlicensed selling was completely stopped; knowing the extent of money that they were wasting, most adults cut down their alcohol consumption! Today there are no alcohol shops in the Keradi Panchayat!

This study by children in a small hamlet formed the basis of their advocacy to influence not only their Panchayat but many neighbouring Panchayats as well.



*Using information generated by the research to solve the problem, or improve the situation is the reason we started the research.*

*If only we use the information from our research to find solutions to the problem that we research, will our research be of real use.*

*It is a part of the ethics of our research to ensure that the information that generated from our research is used to solve our problems.*

*It is unfortunate that quite often researches that are done remain at the level of information only and do not get translated into action or solutions. It is no doubt research leading to information is useful. But in rights-based participatory research it is essential that the information is used to improve the condition of the affected, about whom the research was done.*

*As we discussed in the beginning, in rights-based participatory research, the research is*

*conducted by those affected by a problem and who want to bring about a change. Hence in this kind of research, the researchers have very critical role in ensuring that the information is used towards problem solving or bringing about change.*

*Implementing solutions will vary according to what the suggested solutions are. Some solutions, which are in our control, could be implemented by us. For example, filling the potholes on the street in front of our school is something that we can do.*

*There are other solutions, which the school authorities may be able to do. For example, constructing a toilet/playground in the school compound. Other solutions could be implemented only by the Local Government, District, State or National Governments. We ought to categorise our list of solutions as to who will be able to implement the solutions.*

*Therefore our advocacy will have to be planned accordingly.*

Information is power  
only when it is used !







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