

Conference Call with Senthilkumar Gopalan

Subject: Payir and Fellowship Application

Date: December 5, 2015, Saturday

Time: 9.30 pm – 10.45 pm

Venue: Conference Call

Attendees: Apoorva Mohan, Devesh Chugh, Durga, Gayathri Balakrishnan, Gayathri Srinivasan, Ramya Sivakumar, Ravi Venkatraman, Senthilkumar Gopalan (Payir), Shivashankar Halan, Yogesh Deshmukh

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Introduction of Payir project:

- Payir started to create a holistic approach to development in villages 12-13 years before. Friends joined when the idea was being shaped.
- Everyone associated with Payir has grown over the years - holistic change for better education, improving the livelihood and increasing person-person interactions in rural communities.
 - o Started in panchayat with 4000 people.
 - o Little help for healthcare was available.
 - o Access to education beyond middle school was not widespread and equitable.
 - o Livelihood options were limited. Few occupations that villagers were employed in.
- So, first initiative was increase employment opportunities. Village participation was the key. Ownership has to be with the community. Payir is not supposed to be by one or two persons. A lot of progress in this and nearby areas. There is still a scope for a lot of improvement.
 - o The district administration as well the Payir team realized that they could extend beyond the initial villages. But along the way, Payir could not continue with its holistic approach and not replicate the same model from village to village. There was a special focus on differently abled children. It was felt that the middle and high school children were reached, but still holistic changes were not continued.
- Success at the Perambalur district level for the past 3-4 years can be identified as the growth of the entire Payir team. This is critical for continuing the success of Payir in the future.

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Brief overview of the non-formal learning centers.

- Objective: To develop local leaders.
- Good progress for the first few years; the effort involved 15-20 children. Over 10-15 years, Payir's goal is to have them evolve into local leaders.
- When Senthil Sir was not able to spend the time with the teachers and the local team, the local community did not seem well-equipped to keep the distinction between a normal public school and a non-formal school.

- RTE enforcement led to local authorities questioning the non-formal system.
- There were efforts to discourage the general public for participating in such a mode of education. Senthil Sir himself started having doubts about the process.
- SW engineer originally from the local village who works in Dubai, started working on the IT program. Jayakumar jumped in to support the ongoing efforts.
 - It was important to realize that change was bound to happen and the local leaders could incorporate changes to the run the non-formal centers to grow the initiative in a somewhat different way than the original approach.
 - Possibilities include an own curriculum, experience firsthand leadership-related activities in the outside world to learn much more than book knowledge and the prescribed syllabus.
- Struggles over the last 2-3 years to make the participants and teachers to accept the fact and convince them that the different learning process does make an impact.
- Still struggling for recognition of the school. Don't think that RTI is the route to find out why the school is not getting recognized.
- Teachers need to be better trained to deal with the children.
- Dropout reduction: The initial intervention program to reduce the dropouts dramatically and keep the children in the school for the entire duration of the day.
 - Identify the slow-learning children and take special efforts to bring them up to the mark. They surveyed the entire district to find out that 30-35% of the Perambalur district has seen levels improve. Dropout rates have reduced dramatically because of the intervention program.
 - Qn from Devesh: What's the methodology to identify a child as a slow learner? 4 to 5 stages on identifying a slow learner kid. First stage could be to identify whether they can read or understand smaller words, they can do basic math operations, etc. Next stage tries to find out whether they can form sentences, etc. So on, every next stage tries to find more about the children. It was found that the family situation may cause the slow-learning within a kid.

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Nutrition Program:

- Nutrition Levels: About 3 years ago, a very large percentage of the students were malnourished. One of the steps taken was to provide the breakfast to the students. It was realized that success rate of 10-15% could not be reproduced year after year. The supplemental nutrition program helped to greatly improve the success of the educational program. A plan was submitted to the State Planning Commission to seek their support for one of the blocks out of the 4 blocks. Classes 9 through 12 show that the girls' grades and overall levels have improved for almost 3000 of them.
- The program increased attendance and nutrition levels.
- The success was accepted at the State Planning Commission.
- Girls are faring much better than boys in the last 6 months.

Next year's plan for the Nutrition Program

- Budget has been approved for 300 days by the government. Govt. focus of the on programs will be slow until after 3-4 months of the election.. Till then, nothing much would happen in the state. It is important to convey the sources in the present or next government to fight for the release of the money allocated for the next year.

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Fellowship process

- So far, Asha UF has supported the education and nutrition programs at Payir.
- The presented proposal/application and any edits done therein by the Asha UF board was discussed.
- Payir is a pretty well-known and understood project throughout the entire AoE. Application needs to focus more on the future plans and goals which would add a bit more weight to it. It is important to provide biennial updates along with the priorities for the next 6 months – 1 year. All this information helps to structure the application in a better fashion before being presented to the central team.
 - o 1. Expand the progress from Alathur block to the other blocks to impact the lives of children. Expectations are not being met in terms of getting the children of next generation ready for local governance and reduce corruption.
 - o Nutrition, health and hygiene will have a good focus in the immediate future.
 - o 2. There is a need to emphasize the importance of Payir's work to be taken and led by local leaders other than Senthil.
 - o 3. Important to convey the significance of the nutrition beyond just consumption but more along the lines of health and hygiene. The focus on education, not only in terms of school education, but more about human relationships, rights and duties and emphasizing each one's role within their neighborhood and society.
 - o Food: Focus on food habits, cultivation methodology.
 - o 4. Letting the livelihood opportunities grow based on local priorities with lesser inputs from the central Payir team.
 - o 5. Panchayat-level government: To determine the role of Payir and community leaders in the local governance at the panchayat level.
- The aim is not to experiment with projects as part of Payir since there are no resources to have trial and error. Instead efforts are focused on preparing the students with basic skills. Sometimes the project planning done initially has to alter at run time and improvised; how on the ground situation can be very different than what was initially anticipated e.g. sex education.

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- Summary: Payir addresses challenges that are faced all over the country. There are a lot of lessons to be learned from this project which can be applied to similar efforts on a larger scale.

- Sustenance sources: Before marriage, the rent and food was provided by the trust. Personal travel was funded by himself or through help from friends. Preethi now takes care of healthcare and other activities via the salary of Rs. 6,500 from the trust. Most of the day-to-day needs are somehow being managed. No savings at the end of the day, or to try out anything different in life. Life in general is a struggle on a day-to-day basis.

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- Fellowship application would be updated to correctly reflect the ground realities, as well as to get the ball rolling w.r.t. central team. It is entirely possible to alter the application later and send to Senthil Sir for review. It was agreed that Payir has also been a learning project all along as to be cognizant of the evolving circumstances. It is essential to highlight the mentoring and leadership role played by Senthil Sir in the overall success of the project.