

## Village Service Trust – our activities April 2015 to March 2016

### Women's development

VST supports its partners' work with women's self-help groups (WSHG) and their umbrella organisations, known as federations. The aim is to develop the capacities of federations such that eventually they can function independently. The federations are represented on a district body, TMPI - Tamil Nadu State Women's Movement (formerly Theni Women's Movement). This organisation has 10 federations as members.

VST has funded activities designed to strengthen the capacity of TMPI and its member federations. TMPI has functioned effectively and has continued to reach out beyond Theni district by taking up issues from other districts and networking at state level. TMPI collected subscriptions from its member federations and received a grant from the Global Fund for Women. Member federations took part in training sessions and awareness programmes arranged by TMPI on subjects including domestic violence, girl child rights, child marriage, micro-enterprise and campaigning on gender issues. TMPI conducted campaigns in the district on domestic violence, child marriage and other issues gaining local media coverage. At state level it participated in campaigns on child marriage and alcohol abuse.



A rally for International Women's Day organised by TMPI

Federations and village anti-violence committees addressed more than 200 cases of domestic violence, child marriage and sexual harassment. TMPI monitors the progress of 2,800 micro-entrepreneurs. Technical training for dairying and azolla fodder cultivation was provided.



Women's milk societies are functioning at two villages, Keelapoosaniyuthu and Pasumalaitheri. They established a marketing tie-up with a government agency AAVIN. The 25 members send 400 litres of milk each day to AAVIN, earning Rs.26 per litre, Rs.3 more than the other milk societies in the villages.

Federations and self-help groups continued to mobilise credit for micro-enterprise, and assist individuals to obtain documentation needed to access government welfare benefits such as old age pension, disability benefits, domestic toilets, and free rice. More than 3,000 women participated in a life insurance scheme that also promotes school attendance.

### **Arunthathiyar programme**

Dalits face extreme levels of discrimination and caste-based violence. In the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the project area, there are three main sub groups of Dalits. Arunthathiyar are the 'lowest' group and are often called the 'Dalits of the Dalits' since even other Dalit castes practise untouchability upon them.

VST funded work by Arunthathiyar activists in Theni district. This group recruits and trains volunteers who help identify cases of caste-based violence and discrimination, as well as people in need of welfare benefits and education scholarships. The group is networking with others in the state on issues such as manual scavenging and obtaining reserved government jobs and college places for Arunthathiyars.

The group formed village development committees in 28 Arunthathiyar communities and provided training on reservation of jobs and college places, the law on manual scavenging, mill work by teenage girls and the caste violence law. A number of cases of caste discrimination were taken up and help given in obtaining welfare benefits and village facilities. A number of young people were assisted to access free higher education. A sanitation workers forum was formed in Aundipatty with 90 members.

Eighteen new Arunthathiyar women's self-help groups were formed. Rs.1.7 million was mobilised in credit for such groups.

### **Child rights**

VST contributed to a project run by its partner Arogya Agam that aims to secure the rights and education of almost 4,000 Dalit, tribal and HIV-affected children. These children face discrimination in accessing medical and educational facilities and often drop out of school.

A total of 130 HIV positive children were monitored and advised on health care. Training and support was provided to 36 Child Rights groups with 785 members. The groups addressed issues

such as school dropouts, caste discrimination, higher education scholarships, child labour and child marriage.

Over the five years this programme has seen big increases in the numbers of Dalit, tribal and girl children staying longer at school and going on to higher education.



Members of a children's group take part in a competition

### **Indigenous communities (tribal people)**

The Palliar Tribal Children project aims at sustainably improving education, livelihood, health and self-esteem for Palliar tribal children through “child focused community development”. Fifteen villages with a child population of 440 are covered. The project aims to obtain government benefits for communities and individuals such as housing, roads, visiting nurse, clean water supply, and welfare benefits. A particular focus is on overcoming challenges that lead to poor school attendance.

The project works through children's groups, village development committees and women's self-help groups.



A forest hut where a tribal family live

### **Health**

VST provided funding for various health programmes: Arogya Agam's in-patient facility and fieldwork for people with leprosy, HIV and tuberculosis; and Vasandham's TB control project.

Arogya Agam worked closely with the District Leprosy Office, detecting cases and monitoring patients to try to prevent disability.

Theni district network of positive people was supported by VST to monitor and assist people living

with HIV and Aids.

Arogya Agam and Vasandham identified more than 300 cases of tuberculosis, monitoring their treatment in collaboration with government health services, and referring cases for HIV testing. Some cases of multi-drug resistant and one case of extreme drug resistant TB were found.

VST helped fund Arogya Agam's medical ward which serves people with HIV and Aids, TB and leprosy. Some 527 patients were treated and others referred to government hospital.

### **Projects**

VST funded some central costs of Arogya Agam and Vasandham, such as staff salaries, administrative expenses and other project overheads. VST also funded part of the cost of replacing a jeep at Vasandham.

### **HIV and high risk sexual behaviour by men**

This project is supported by a grant from the Mercury Phoenix Trust, supplemented by funding from VST. It builds on work with "safe sex role models" – young men engaged in risky sexual behaviour who are trained and motivated to change their behaviour and that of their peers. This year the project worked through 76 volunteers and was in contact with 2,560 men at risk. The work is being extended to new areas in the district, and to men who have sex with men. So far 42% of those contacted have begun to use condoms more regularly.

### **Positive women's networks**

This programme aims to reduce mother-to-child HIV transmission and reduce mortality and morbidity rates for infants born with HIV. It is funded by Positive Action Children's Fund with additional funding from VST. It aims to achieve sustainability by establishing networks of positive women to carry on the activities in the long term. It operates in eight districts of Tamil Nadu.

It seeks to ensure that when positive women give birth, the deliveries are conducted following the best practice for positive mothers. It will monitor infants born to positive mothers to ensure HIV testing and treatment for HIV+ children.

In its first full year the project trained 120 volunteers who identified and monitored 206 positive pregnant women. There have been 154 deliveries and 148 live births; all were given anti-retrovirals. So far no babies are HIV+ but only after testing at 18 months can we be sure. The volunteers were trained on increased knowledge of PMTCT services, importance of ART, couple counselling/ family counselling, delivery plan, family planning, feeding practices for a baby, importance of early infant diagnosis, reducing the stigma and discrimination against PLHIV and referral and linkage with government services for accessing government welfare schemes.

The project also monitors children with HIV, providing small cash grants to assist 710 children to attend government HIV treatment centres. HIV positive children are supposed to go to the District Government Centre at least every six months either for routine testing. Those started on anti-retroviral drugs should collect and take these drugs every month. All children should take early treatment for any infection or other problem. The government services are free but some children do not access them for lack of bus fare or money for food or because the guardian has to work or does not realise the importance of adherence to these principles. Many of the guardians are infected with HIV or are aged grandparents.



Deepa, centre, who is HIV positive, with her mother, left, and a volunteer who provides support

### **Community based organisations**

VST contributed funding for Arogya Agam's work with SARA, an organisation of transgendered people that seeks to protect the rights of, and improve the livelihoods of its members.

A priority is prevention of HIV among transgendered sex workers, and similarly with female sex workers in TMPSS, a sex workers' CBO. The project works through 20 "peer educators" who distribute condoms and ensure regular medical check-up, which includes HIV and STI testing. Special counselling and care is given to sex workers infected by HIV, but new infections have become rare. More than 900 sex workers were tested for HIV and 320,000 condoms were distributed.

VST also assisted Theni District Network of Positive People by funding field workers who follow up and assist people living with HIV (PLHIV). This work includes tracking people lost to follow-up, taking advocacy action in cases of discrimination against PLHIV, and ensuring PLHIV obtain government benefits to which they are entitled. TDNP+ works in close cooperation with Arogya Agam's HIV children's programme and its medical ward.

### **Nilgiris tribal drop-out project**

This project to promote school attendance by tribal children in Nilgiris district is funded by a grant from the Marr Munning Trust. Our partner for this project is the Nilgiris Wyanaad Tribal Welfare Society. The project is part of the Tamil Nadu government's residential special training centres scheme. The scheme takes drop-out children from dysfunctional families for a residential course to equip them with skills needed to rejoin school. The aim is that after 15 months of catch-up education the children will be able to rejoin school in a class appropriate to their age. The project succeeded in readmitting 354 drop-outs to school and trained 160 young volunteers to continue promoting school attendance.



Tribal children who have dropped out of school receive catch-up education