Brief Project site visit report – MICDA school

Sunil Laxman, 23rd Jan 2018

Project name: MICDA school

Location: Vidyut sevapuram. Nearest towns: Tirupati and Puttur, AP.

Project partner: Dr. Subbaramaiah

Project steward: Keerthi S

Background: This project has been supported by Asha (SV, and mostly Seattle) for over 15 years. Of this, I had been a steward of this project for ~10 years, from around 2003, till around 2013. The school fits within a larger backdrop of many projects by Dr. Subbaramaiah, centred around several formerly “landless” laborers (who had been on this cleared forest land for a long time), for whom he fought for and obtained legal land rights and helped build their settlement. These details are there in the older project reports.

The school was started ~18 years ago, mostly with Asha support (SV and Seattle). At the time, it had 100-150 children, all of whom are scheduled caste/tribe, for classes 1-10. It has many years of exceptional performance, and many outstanding results in this time. However, the past 5-6 years have been very difficult for the project from many fronts. These are:

1) Severe health issues for Dr. Subbaramaiah (which we have discussed before). Currently, he is in very poor health, with severe stress induced diabetes, and the partial loss (amputation) of his leg (with loss of many toes). This severely restricts his mobility, and ore.

2) Extreme continuing difficulties faced with the local administration. There are multiple issues with all local level officers, and constant harassment.

3) Changing socio-economic conditions in the village. Many of the residents have given away their land, to take up other petty professions, or be part of the illegal/semilegal brick making industry that has boomed in this land (ruining the land).

4) Compulsory registration of kids after primary school (i.e. grade 6 onwards) in nearby government schools. These schools are not good at all, and the children there would prefer to remain in the MICDA school, but these are now government policy, so have to be enforced. Although these schools are 5-6 km away (only) the terrain is rough, and the road bad, so kids don’t walk there. Instead, the government has made them residential schools, and there are some problems due to that, but that is the situation currently.

Current status and visit report:

I visited the school on 23rd Jan 2018, with Saikrishna (Dr. Subbaramaiah’s son, who has just finished his engineering degree in Chennai). Dr. Subbaramaiah was currently in hospital (see below).

The school had to renew its recognition in 2015. Dr. Subbaramaiah was put through extreme stress to get the recognition awarded again. This cost multiple “fees”, costing over 50000 INR, and the receipts of which are included (also as photographs in this report). Many times this was denied for petty reasons, causing him to have to run around the various offices, and further deteriorating his health. He is currently undergoing extended treatment (post multiple surgeries) in Chennai. Finally, the recognition was given till 2020, but only for classes 1-5.

Currently classes 1-5 are operating.

Staff:

Currently there are only two teachers, one all purpose admin person who handles all issues (who has been with the school for many years now), one handyman cum watchman, and two cooks/cleaners for the school. They also prepare the mid-day meals. This is the minimum number of staff with which you can manage in this area, and I fully support the need for this staff.

Children: There are now ~35 children in classes 1-5. The numbers are between 6-13 kids in each class. The overall attendance for this year is very good, averaging ~80% for most kids. ALL kids come from SC/ST backgrounds, and below poverty line backgrounds. The mid day meal (rice, sambhar and rasam) has been absolutely critical for them.

All children are distributed between just the two teachers, who cover all subjects between them. There is some learning, overall basic reading and writing capability is ok. Compared to a few years ago, it is not as good (it was exceptional back then), but it is not bad. Most kids above grade 3 could read, write, with one or two quite proficient (all in Telugu). The teachers are doing their absolute best, given that they each handle classes 1-5 all at once.

The school originally had hosted classes 1-10, all in separate rooms. But now, with few staff, they use only 2-3 of the classrooms for all children (grouping across ages). This is ok largely. The kids are very happy to be in school, the atmosphere remains good (and much better than their homes), the school is very clean and has lots of play areas.

Condition of the kids: Most kids are from very poor backgrounds, so many remain malnourished and poorly clothed etc. So the mid day meal is quite important. Dr. Subbaramaiah’s son Sai, along with his college classmates, donated school bags and slippers for all the kids (the bags remain great, the slippers mostly gone!).

Notes: The project has suffered a bit over the past two years. Asha’s involvement has not been adequate, and this year’s budget for example has still not been approved. Dr. Subbaramaiah has had to take out several loans etc to manage to keep the school going (paying salaries, bills, food). This is not sustainable.

Recommendation: Strongly recommend that the school is kept going for this year (ends in May). I think Asha should cover all this years costs (as put forward in the budget).

Also, there have been huge costs associated with getting back the required recognition and safety certificates (see some attached photos). This is despite the fact that this is by far the best school building and campus for anything in the greater area (far better than any government school). It’ll be nice if Asha Seattle can support some of these costs (>Rs. 50000).

Other notes: There has been a very long standing request to build a partial compound wall and gate. This is because there is a small shrine inside the forest beyond the school and village. This seems to periodically attract some crowds, many of whom at night drink/cause small trouble around the school (and try to camp on school premises). This problem has been there for ~10 years. Instead of a full wall, a partial wall along the road might suffice (see photo). Instead of Asha supporting these costs, it’ll be fantastic if this can be crowd sourced (I would guess 4-5 lakh to build this wall).

Future: It will be impossible to get another re-recognition in 2020. I do feel this school should continue for one more year (next academic year), after which it can be phased out. The main costs are the staff, and mid day meals. I can try to see if support for books, reading material, uniforms, bags can be met by crowd sourcing (can ask people I know here). But I would recommend that Asha support those core costs for one more year, in addition to this year.

After that, I have suggested the following: The venue is fantastic, has great rooms and a nice building (with water, electricity, bathrooms and more). It can be a great venue for holding/conducting workshops, training programs etc, perhaps bringing together other Asha partners. There are several in fact in the greater area (around Madanapalli, Chitoor etc which are not very far). Can folks in Seattle consider this? Dr. Subbaramaiah is quite open to this, and would like this school building to be used well.