Site Visit Report for Brick Schools Managed by Kumarappa Institute of Gram Swaraj (KIGS), Jaipur, Rajasthan in the Chaksu Area of Jaipur

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Organisation: Kumarappa Institute of Gram Swaraj (KIGS)
B-190, University Marg
Bapu Nagar
Jaipur 302015, Rajasthan

Representing KIGS: Dr. Amit Kumar, project director

Representing Asha: Doris Hofer, Asha Zurich

The brick schools are not KIGS’ only project. There are various other sustainable projects in natural resources management, income generation, etc. Often, these projects then continue by their own without the help of KIGS. Currently, Amit plans to have a new project of educating underprivileged people about their rights and helping them to deal with government online facilities. He is currently looking for funding for this.

The brick schools funded by Asha were the first ones, but many more schools have since been opened in other areas which are supported by other project partners.

The site visit was planned, i.e. it was not a surprise visit. I met Amit in the institute and we immediately took off to the Chaksu or more precisely Garudwasi area where we visited five schools at the following kiln sites:

- RBK (two schools)
- Kamal
- Aman
- IBC

I understand that the staff of all the schools knew we were coming, but we decided during the visit how many schools we were going to see depending on time.

The aim of this project is to provide non-formal education to the children of the kiln workers. The subjects are Hindi and maths. The work of the families is contract based. They usually arrive in October / November (after Diwali) and leave around May. However, this can vary much – we met a boy whose family had just arrived in February. It is also not certain that the same families return to work at the same place every year. It is therefore not possible for the children of these families to go to formal schools.
The families set up simple houses in the immediate vicinity of the kilns, and the schools are also just situated a few steps away. This way it is really easy for the children to attend school. There were only a few children who had visited the schools in previous years, and they clearly had profited and already knew how to read and write. In general I felt the children are quite motivated – some of them proudly came to me to show me their workbooks. I estimate the average percentage of girls to be nearly 50%. There are usually two classes in each of the buildings which are separated into two rooms. Classes are divided into two groups, i.e. one teacher teaches grades 1 and 2 in one room and another teacher teaches grades 3 to 5 in the other. Smaller children usually accompany their elder siblings to school and play there. There are some 23 students taught by one teacher on average.

KIGS closely works with Pratham Rajasthan. The teachers prepare for each lesson by completing a control sheet of what they are going to teach per day. A supervisor checks on this regularly and makes corrections if necessary. ASER tests are done with all children on a monthly basis. This way, the teachers can immediately react to any shortcomings or needs of the children. Given the short time the children are able to visit the school this is the most efficient way to ensure they will have a maximum benefit. I was planning to maybe do some of these tests during the visit, but when I learnt these are done regularly, I did not see any use in having any additional ones.

The teachers are not recruited from the community but come from outside. There are regular teacher trainings in collaboration with Pratham. As the schools are only there for the working season of the kiln workers, the situation for the teachers is somewhat difficult. They need to organise additional jobs for the summer season, and therefore it is not guaranteed that they will be available in the following winter season to teach at the brick schools. KIGS has been trying to fill the gap but this issue remains a challenge.

In the 5 schools I visited 80% of the teachers were women.

KIGS initially organised parent meetings but found that the participation was really low. Therefore, the teachers are now going to see the parents. The frequency depends on the requirements. Teachers will see parents of children who do not visit regularly or have problems more often. The parents are not contributing to the school activities, as their main purpose of coming to the site for the season is to work and earn their living.

The buildings which Asha funded are simple brick buildings divided in two rooms. They have a large opening in the front without door and have some little square openings in the rear wall to allow circulation of air. The only fixed equipment are a blackboard and a metal cabinet for storing school material. The students sit on rugs on the floor. The students of the lower classes use slates to write on and the students of the higher classes have note books. The smaller children have colouring sheets or books to learn how to hold a pen and to write. When we arrived one class was using a tablet which has programs provided by Pratham (funded by another project partner). Asha had funded a laptop and projector but these are not used very often. Electricity cuts make the use difficult. Amit thinks out of the box and experiments with ideas, but sometimes it turns out that some unexpected difficulties get in the way.
Very few children were wearing the school uniforms funded by Asha. The uniforms had a big effect and helped increase the attendance of school immediately. However, many children do not return the next season because their parents go to work elsewhere and many new children arrive. In addition, some children had simply grown out of the uniforms or the uniforms got torn. I understood that new uniforms had been ordered recently and were about to be received.

I also asked about food and sanitation – there were no toilets or water taps to be seen. Amit said they had experimented with providing food for some time but found that food then turned out to become the main attraction for the children to come and school became secondary. Regarding sanitation, it is difficult to have any fixed constructions on site as the families are only there temporarily. Constructions require maintenance which seems to be out of scope. The same applies for school tables and benches, as they need to be stored during the summer.

After the site visits we went back to the KIGS offices where I also saw the account and the folder containing payment receipts. Amit was very communicative and ready to share any information which I liked to see.

In summary, I believe that the project is genuine and tries to optimise the benefit that the children get in a very special situation dictated by the life style of their parents. It would obviously be very difficult to track the development of these children, but Amit believes that they are given a basis at the brick schools on which they may be able to build a different life.

Some more impressions: