

Project FORWARD Virtual Site Visit and Project Updates - March 2024

A conference call was conducted with the project partner and coordinators from FORWARD on October 15th 2023 which serves as a virtual site visit for the project for the academic year 2023-24. The project steward has been attempting to get an in-person site visit completed since 2023, but has been unsuccessful so far but we have commitments from some local volunteers to complete an in-person site visit by May 2024.

Conference Call Attendees:

From Asha Uflorida:

1. Shivashankar Halan
2. Ravi Venkatraman
3. Mamta Naidu
4. Vishal Vignesh
5. Anand Radhakrishnan
6. Yogesh Deshmukh

From FORWARD:

Mathuram Shiamalababy, Founder & Director of FORWARD (Forum for Women's Rights and Development)

Date of call: 10/15/2023

Minutes of call:

Background

The call started with Ms. Shiamala baby providing a general introduction to the project and its background. Most of the volunteers on the call were already familiar with the project details, so Ms. Shiamalababy focused on covering some recent updates and general functioning of the project. Overall highlights from the background is highlighted below:

- FORWARD was started by Ms. Shiamalababy in early 2000s to support the rights, development and progress of women in the villages on the outskirts of Chennai. Herself a domestic abuse survivor, Ms. Shiamalababy identified a need to serve this particular community of villages which were plagued with multiple social evils like alcoholism, child marriage, domestic violence, lack of women empowerment and child employment.

- To specifically address the issues affecting children in this area, FORWARD started conducting evening learning sessions at centers situated within these villages starting in 2006 supported by Asha UFlorida. Asha UF has been supporting this project since then and is our oldest project to-date.
- The working model is to run these evening learning centers that operate from 5-8 pm during weekdays in these villages and provides supplemental education, awareness, nutritional supplements and support overall holistic development for these children. The centers are primarily focused on helping students continue to stay in school (avoiding dropouts), provide support and encouragement for pursuing higher education, help avoid child marriage and child labor and also raise awareness around social evils with the children and their parents.
- FORWARD until 2023 has been operating 13 of these evening learning centers. Now, starting this year, understanding that the funds from Asha UF are limited, have reduced their budget ask to only support 8 of these centers.

Questions from Volunteers

1. The centers have been reduced from 13 to 8 in the budget ask for this year. What happened to the other 5 centers that were operating previously?

The reduction in the centers is a response to Asha UF volunteers having let us know that their donations have reduced and they will not be able to continue supporting all 13 centers at the same budget requested in previous years. This is a hard decision for us as a project but we are now trying to focus our resources on the 8 areas that most need these centers. The good news is that in the 5 villages where we are no longer officially running the centers, the villagers themselves have come together to run the centers at some capacity in these past few months. While the quality of the centers and level of support is not at the same level as what it might be if we FORWARD was officially running these centers, it is still heartening to see that the villagers understand the benefit of these centers and are willingly spending resources to keep these centers alive as much as possible.

These villages are still definitely in need of these centers, there is still a very strong appetite for these centers to function in these areas. In fact we routinely get requests from many new villages where we are currently not running these centers to set up new centers. We are unable to keep these centers alive mostly because of the lack of funds.

2. Does FORWARD receive funds for the support of the education programs from anyone else? Have you approached or tried to secure funds locally?

FORWARD does not receive funds from any other organization for support of the evening learning centers. We have attempted securing funds from many sources including other NGOs, government schemes, corporate social responsibility programs (CSR) and also local philanthropists, but have come up empty handed. Even if anyone is interested in making a donation it is for a one-time contribution and not for sustained

support of these programs. The only sustained and significant financial support we receive, which has made these learning center program possible, is from Asha UFlorida. So we are definitely indebted and also dependent on Asha's support for the existence of this program.

3. What is the qualification of the teachers leading the centers?

The teachers are typically 10th/12th standard graduates, with a couple of the teachers having obtained a college degree. The teachers do not necessarily come with strong academic skills when they join FORWARD and the centers are not expected to provide academic coaching alone. Instead the centers function as conditioning centers that support holistic development and the teachers are trained by FORWARD rigorously on how to support this holistic development. As you can see from the budget, we spend significant resources to gather the teachers together every month at our FORWARD office and provide them coaching, support, encouragement and skills training so that they can effectively lead these evening learning centers.

4. What is the role of the educational program coordinator whose salary is supported through the budget?

The coordinator visits the centers at least twice a month to make sure they are functioning properly, and addresses the needs of the centers and teachers. He also makes sure salary/honorarium is paid to the teachers, educational material is available and the Saturday programs are conducted without fail. The coordinator travels using a two-wheeler to each center, since the centers are very far apart from each other, he can only visit each center 2-4 times per month.

5. Have students who graduated from the centers come back to help teach or motivate the students in these centers?

Yes, we see excited participation from people who have graduated from our program to come back and speak to the students. We also have multiple instances where students graduating from the program have served as teachers temporarily for the centers. We definitely have many of the students from these centers, especially those who have gone on to join professional or vocational courses, come back to share their experience and motivate the current students in these centers.

Project Updates for 2023- 2024

Updates are listed here in reverse chronological order with latest updates listed first.

International Women's Day 2024

As part of International Women's Day , FORWARD had a great celebration in Melathur, one of our working areas. It was a great occasion for rural women, children and local leaders to

participate and enjoy the day. Asha students are still in their examination mood. We strengthen them and counsel them to face the tests boldly. After their public examinations, we are planning for their Get - Together in Tambaram.



FORWORD students Public examination -update - Mar 1st 2024

The senior students are writing their public examinations. The public examination for higher secondary 2nd year has started today 1st of March 2024.

Higher secondary first year students will have their exams beginning on Monday, 4th of March. 10 th Standard students will have their examinations starting on 26th of March 2024.

Ninety two (92) of our asha students are appearing for their public examinations in 2023 - 24.

FORWORD supported them in their studies, encouraged and empowered them. Fountain pens, ink bottles, scales and pencils were provided with , to make the students write their exams without any fear and with self confidence. We hope and pray that all the students will come out very well with good marks.

All of them will have their examinations over by the middle of April 2024.





Republic Day Celebrations at FORWARD - Jan 26th 2024



Pongal Celebrations - January 2024

We are enjoying the bliss of Pongal and Tamil New year 🎊.

Asha children and the community of Vilankadu celebrated Pongal on 14 th of January in a simple and traditional way. It was a day of Gifting also as new sarees, dhotis and bed sheets were distributed to the elderly and deserving community members.

Vilankadu is the remote village, secluded from other areas having no public transport facility till now. I remember your visit to this area some years back, when Sudha was an Asha educator.

Now her Student Usha is handling the Evening education Centre. The community members are very poor and the position of the elderly is pitiable.

Asha education center has brought a strong change in the lives of the children of Vilankadu. The first generation Earners are coming up in life. Since,there is no opportunity for their future in this village, as the community members are landless agricultural coolies, the educated students go out for jobs.

The younger children are in need of asha support to organize and educate them. This is where our intervention becomes meaningful and needed.

Children enjoyed the day by Celebrating Pongal, eating and performing dances.





New Year Wishes from project FORWARD students and teachers



Review and planning meeting on 12th Dec 2023 in FORWARD

On 23rd Dec 2023, Asha for education educators had review and planning meeting conducted by Mr. KA Mathew (Educationalist and social audit trainer). All the teachers from 8 centers actively participated and benefited.

Session 1: Sharing of experiences in the study centers and best practices.

Session 2: Planning for 2024 and motivational training was conducted.

Educators gave her commitment to give their best for the wholistic development of children in their respective centers.

Lunch and new year gifts were given to encourage their service.





Gandhi Jayanthi Celebration 2023 by Asha students

On 2nd of October 2023, Asha for education children celebrated Gandhi Jayanthi in their respective centers under the topic "save nature save life".

Fruit and shade trees were planted, and students took oath to follow the values of Gandhi Ji to practice non-violence and peaceful living.



FORWORD

Date: 02.10.23

Day: MONDAY

Asha for Quality Education

-Thandavarai

HAPPY Gandhi Jayanthi

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