

HUT Vidyashram site visit report, Meera Sitharam, July 2016

Raja graciously provided the 1.5 hour (each way) transport for me and my two girls (now 16 and 13) from parents' place to HUT. In addition, Raja was nice enough to bring my 16 year old a second time to the Vidyashram to hand out to the kids prints of photos she took from the first trip.

Transmitting Charity Navigator's mandate to AfE, I had asked Raja to think about a "theory of change" for HUT Vidyashram, where they are on their journey and how they want to measure their progress. During my visit, we talked a lot about this, in addition to looking at the Vidyashram children's educational and health records, and talking to the main staff member who supervises the operations at HUT Vidyashram.

Concerning Theory of Change, Raja's longterm goal is to provide high quality, progressive education to both the Vidyashram kids and to the kids in another school for low income kids that is run by his family. I.e., education that would help these poor students jumpstart social mobility and realize their full human and community potential and result in future highly capable motivated and effective citizens, independent thinkers, entrepreneurs etc.

I offered an alternative possibility of quantity as opposed to quality, and bi-generational social mobility as opposed to jumpstarting social mobility within a generation: i.e., instead of focusing on high quality education for a few, reaching a large number of kids and offering them a decent education and chance to a livelihood and stability, so that their kids, i.e., the next generation can achieve its full potential.

Since there were many doctors in many districts whose work with HIV and AIDS patients had been supported by the Tamil Nadu AIDS control society previously, there must be many likeminded people like him that had close ties and the trust of positive peoples' networks and to very poor HIV/AIDS affected children. Given his success at mobilizing the local community to provide support, perhaps he could lead a cooperative pilot effort by those doctors to apply for a large pot of funds (I gave him some examples of foundations that might be appropriate to apply to). If the project is successful, hopefully the government takes over.

Unfortunately, I did not get a chance to visit the classes, although my children spent their entire time there. We did take the children out to explore the nearby hills and had a good time there.

The overall state of the Vidyashram:

There were no major changes to the overall operations since the last time.

Since the infrastructure improvements last time, there has been no further change except for the installation of solar panels.

There are continued small scale donations from locals in the form of meals etc., approximately 10-15 lunches a month.

Several groups of French volunteers visit at various times and continue to help out.

Although the staff turnover is on the high side, there are some steady staff members who provide continuity. And as mentioned before, the older children who are still residing at the Vidyashram now help with the running.

The number of children has increased.

Several new children have joined the early grades this year. There are approx 105 children staying at HUT, including some who are staying there past their 8th grade and attending the local school, as well as others who are attending a technical institute, or higher secondary school. In addition, HUT keeps track to some extent of some kids who have joined a degree program, are at a government hostel, and as the district Collector's special school for kids who performed very well in the state's 10th grade exams. Several kids who finished 8th grade, are, however, back in the care of relatives.

The children appear cheerful and are doing relatively well in school (as Raja's yearly reports of 10th grade exam results shows).

Many of the older kids who now play an integral part as part time staff in the running of the Vidyashram are aware of the crucial role the Vidyashram played in their lives and the community it continues to provide them, and want to give back once they achieve some modicum of financial stability.

Overall, it is impressive and heartwarming to see what the Vidyashram has achieved in the 8 or so years since its inception.

Concerns and Suggestions:

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(1) Growth

As the number of children increases, there has to be a commensurate increase in facilities, and staff who pay adequate attention to their nutrition, physical and emotional health, training to take care of their personal hygiene/health as well as education.

Although the older children (past 8th grade or so) look relatively robust, the younger children are fragile looking and much smaller than average for their age. This could be because they

were born in poor conditions to possibly malnourished or sick mothers and suffered malnutrition as infants and toddlers before they arrived at the Vidyashram. In any case, the budget should be adequate to ensure good care.

(2) Staff who are able to take initiative and make decisions.

At the moment, there seems to be a single resident senior staff member capable of taking initiative and making decisions in Raja's absence. This will result in inevitable impatience, stress and fraying of trust and respect in relations. It is crucial that other staff are rapidly trained to take ownership and clearly demarcated, but higher level of responsibilities. Please see related item on Tracking below.

(3) Tracking

HUT bitterly regrets the death of Suresh, a HIV positive child who had been raised in the Vidyashram

for many years, after he was entrusted to the care of his uncle and grandfather in his native village.

I came to know this year that another girl (not HIV positive) died after she left Vidyashram for her village.

The cause of death was not clear. Apparently she had had some gastrointestinal issue and then she passed away on her way back from visiting the hospital at Trichy. One of the children who came from the same village put the death down to some superstitious cause "possessed by 2 ghosts and a yogi."

It is crucial that HUT starts tracking **all** children who leave the Vidyashram.

If the tracking procedure is put in place before they leave, this will not be difficult.

If they require funding for a full time staff member to do this job of keeping track of the kids (establishing direct contact at least once every 15 days with the child AND the guardian), then they should request it.

*This tracking is important both to ensure the alumni are doing ok, as well as to maintain a community and network of alumni who give back, **and some may potentially return as staff**, which is important for the long-term sustainability of the Vidyashram.*

(4) Psychosocial monitoring

Due to cases like Venkatesh, the brother of abovementioned Suresh, whom I met last time (he was not to be seen this time) and who is definitely not thriving educationally, it is important for Vidyashram to continue having yearly outside visits by a psychiatrist or at least a psychologist. Even for the other kids, the overall emotional fragility of the kids' home situation mandates it. Trichy Senthil's brother in law has been doing for the past few years, but not in the past two years. HUT should take the effort to maintain this practice. I have been told this year that he is not willing to continue his help since he now has a government job and is hesitant about signing off on any informal report. It is important to find a replacement.

Such an annual visit is important to ensure that the resident counselor's training and instructions are renewed and refreshed.

(5) Code of conduct and Visitor Policy

As we know, the Vidyashram has developed a clear code of conduct for the behavior of students towards each other and for the behavior of staff towards the students.

(a) With the high turnover of staff, this code has to be refreshed regularly.

(b) The code should be expanded to cover the behavior of staff toward each other.

(c) Also, I suggest a clear visitor policy, both to prevent any chance of abuse, as well as to ensure visitors are monitored by staff especially during interaction with children and that the visitors are given clear guidelines how they should conduct themselves.

There are many types of visitors besides the regular staff.

(i) parents and guardians (ii) people who are visiting the staff (iii) working-hours volunteers, site visitors etc. (iv) volunteers who help after working-hours (v) overnight visitors

(6) Taking inhouse opportunities to train the kids in practical skills

Thanks to the French visitors, the kids have some participation in a local vegetable garden and in installing and maintaining a greywater conservation system.

However, more such opportunities are being missed. They must be seized.

Although the original need was to install solar hot water and steam generators to reduce cooking costs, what they have done is installed solar panels. That is ok, but it was not clear how much power they were generating.

Also, I saw a lost opportunity in that they had been installed without taking the opportunity to train even those Vidyashram students who were studying for an electrical technology diploma.

Those boys were ignorant about

how the power was generated, how the wiring was done, how the storage (battery) worked, how the ac/dc conversion was being done to run ac appliances, if any, etc. which is a pity.