Minutes: Conference Call with Payir

Attendees: Ravi, Devesh, Shivashankar, Lokendra, Senthil (Payir)

Background on Payir by Senthil: Payir is a project involved in holistic development of Thennur village and surrounding areas. Some of the major areas of involvement are healthcare, education, economic development and employment, watershed management and governance. The project has expanded to nearby villages in areas of healthcare etc. One good news is that some of the models developed at Payir have been taken up at the district level and Payir’s role is that of monitoring and supporting.

Discussion on Intervention Program

Senthil: Programs like nutrition (breakfast etc.), evening coaching etc at the primary have been useful in bringing more children to school. Earlier, Payir teachers used to work full time at individual schools. Now, since there are fewer vacancies, Payir teachers act as support staff at multiple schools. They have expanded to 6-8 grades to improve quality of education. The schools have been highlighted at district level for the work done. They have started helping grade 10 children as well to improve their scores since that is important for schools. Payir has been organizing an interschool cultural and sport festival where 1000-1500 children participate. It is very popular and takes almost takes in 3 months of preparation time.

Q: What are the major challenges with intervention program?

Senthil: It took a long time for the govt. school teachers to accept Payir teachers. There was a need to explain that Payir teachers were there to help and it was seen that their presence helped and actually made a big difference.

The teachers have continuous training. They philosophy of learning is very different from the govt. teaching. For e.g. children face a behavioral change i.e. two types of learning or behaviors towards them; one from their regular teachers and one from Payir teachers. There is a need to learn how other NGOs have established their intervention program. Payir teachers have felt a need to reduce intervention at a subject level and work more on behavioral types classes.

Discussion on the Payir School (previously Non-Formal Education (NFE) center)

Senthil: Originally the NFE center was started so as to provide education by a new model based on rural education to create rural leaders in multiple areas. The conversion of the NFE to a proper was bound to happen some-time due to multiple reasons. The center was facing several difficulties and challenges. Due to the Right To Education (RTE) act, it was almost impossible for NFES to exist. There was a strong push from district level admin as well as from the parents for
the school to be recognized. Also, there was a concern that the children after finishing primary/middle school at NFE, may not be adjust in another school and its methodologies.

Q. What is the difference between NFE and the new school in various ways?

Senthil: Earlier NFE followed the regular school syllabus + Payir’s own course material. Other than normal teachers, local people like merchants, traders etc. were also giving lectures. The children also learnt the rural life in field as well. Currently, the school is divided into nursery and primary school. The syllabus has to be strictly followed. Now, we have to follow the govt. syllabus, especially since there are regular checks and evolutions. Thus, for the time being, the focus is on making sure that the recognition takes place and hence they plan to maintain and follow govt. standards.

Q. Our biggest concern at Asha UF is that we are generally not in favor of supporting just another school. Will the new school be unique and how?

Senthil: At this time, the school is like a regular school. The teaching style is still different but the govt. syllabus is followed. We try and bring small changes only.

Q. What will happen over the next 3-4 years?

Senthil: If it is possible, we would like to bring the holistic education in the school. The locals are always interested in teaching. But for at least 1 year, we will continue as normal school. The teachers know properly how to keep records and satisfy the govt. officials. The teachers also understand Payir’s vision so in some time, they could be changes.

Q. Will the school be up to primary level only or will it be extended as the current students grow?

Senthil: RTE is up to 14 yrs (8th grade). But we will probably remain primary. Payir is looking into vocational streams as well for higher level; for e.g. rural leadership etc. Many time kids drop out and they will benefit from such vocational training.

Discussion on Budget

Q. Given the plan for the school, what do you expect from Asha UF?

Senthil: Other than the salaries, Payir will not ask funding for the school. We might need help setting up the vocational program. A nominal fees is charged from the students which helps a lot.

Q. Why not have a bigger focus on vocational program?
Senthil: There is a lot of attachment with the school and teaching. Payir has become a vision for a lot of people. Also, the teachers interact a lot with the govt. teachers by the intervention program.

Final Remarks by Senthil:

- School intervention program got expanded 16 more school by the District collector
- “Super 30” program: Best students from different schools are chosen (about 120) and are given extra training to help get in elite medical and engineering school.
- A proposal has been sent by the district + Payir to make the nutrition program a pilot program for the state of Tamil Nadu (in this program, kids are given about 500 calories additionally)
- A program for anemic adolescent girls is also slowly becoming a model at a district level.