

## Field Notes # 1

### Teachers at the frontline of COVID-19 response

#### 1. Context

Thousands of public (Government) school teachers have been at the frontline of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Across all the states we work in, teachers have helped to get a real sense of on-ground situations and the response that was immediately needed. They have been among the first to identify children and families in need and connect them with those who could provide help. They ensured that help reached the right people at the right time especially those in the remotest of villages and in the most difficult situations.



A short description of the work done by teachers in Rajasthan illustrates this.

#### 2. Teachers leading the way

As soon as the national lockdown was announced, the government of Rajasthan began to involve all government school teachers in the response to the pandemic. Teachers were asked to regularly connect with their students over the telephone and via *WhatsApp*. Many teachers were designated as Booth Level Officers to conduct ward-level household surveys to identify people who had travelled back from COVID-19 hotspots, were symptomatic or were unable to access ration from fair price shops. They were to prepare a list of such people and hand it over to the *Tahsildar* of the area who would then arrange for required facilities - transportation for those to be quarantined and food/dry ration for those unable to access the Public Distribution System (PDS). For these, help from local NGOs and donors was sought.

We work in 11 districts of the state - these are home to some of the most disadvantaged communities in the country. The systemic involvement of teachers in the State's response to the pandemic enabled us to react quickly and uniformly across all districts.

Stories from two districts, Barmer and Jaipur, help us understand the breadth and depth of teachers' efforts.

Located in western Rajasthan, **Barmer**, is the fifth largest district in the country, by area. It shares a border with Pakistan and includes a part of the Thar desert. Other than migrant workers coming to work at oil rigs, Barmer is home to several dalit, tribal, nomadic, and pastoral communities. In villages around the border, people displaced by the 1971 war live, secluded from the rest of the district.

The district has 17 blocks and we have teams present in 7 of these blocks - Baytu, Barmer, Balotra, Siwana, Dhorimanna, Shiv, and Chohtan. These are large areas with gram panchayats spread over more than 10 kms on an average. Due to the lockdown, the movement of our teams was restricted. The widely-spread habitations and the restrictions meant that we were dependent on teachers to reach assistance to the ones who needed it most.



We reached out to teachers and Panchayat Elementary Education Officers (PEEOs)<sup>1</sup> to identify families in distress, verified these with the respective authorities at the collectorate, sub-divisional magistrate, block development office or gram panchayat to remove duplications, procured and supplied required relief kits to the teachers to be distributed.

It was only through teachers and other functionaries that we were able to execute this response effectively. Baytu and Gida need special mention. Due to the collective efforts of the Chief Block Education Officer<sup>2</sup> (CBEO), PEEO and teachers, we could cover all 320 villages here. In these two blocks alone, more than 50 PEEOs and 150 teachers made it possible to reach more than 9000 people in deep distress. In Siwana block, there are 29 gram panchayats and more than 130 villages. With only one member from our team living there, it would have been impossible to cover the breadth of the block in such a short time without teachers being at the forefront of this effort.

*The Kalbeliyas are a nomadic tribe of Rajasthan. Their traditional occupation is of catching snakes and trading venom. But now their tradition is illegal, and hence they sustain themselves by dance performances, for which they have gained international fame, along with trading iron utensils or working as daily wage labourers.*

*They have been pushed out of life, out of livelihood and forced to confine themselves on barren fringes in their make-shift, easy-to-displace 'deras'. One such camp is in Sarli, 30 kms off Barmer city. The sudden lockdown made them completely inaccessible. Neither were their names on the PDS list.*

*The PEEO of the panchayat, while collecting names of people who needed aid in that village, happened to chance upon their camp. He was shocked at how these people had been living in the desert heat in these barren lands with no trees to even give shade, leave alone food. He immediately gathered resources to get them aid.*

The task to draft the list of families in need involved multiple steps, clear parameters with a complex algorithm. Every teacher had to come up with a certain logic for deciding the order of priority of aid distribution and convince the community to follow the same. One such experience was when our team visited a slum to distribute ration kits to 25 families. In total, there were 30 families, all rag pickers. Those whose names were not on the list objected and demanded aid for themselves. So, the team decided to visit their houses and found they had already received aid from elsewhere. The team was amazed at the accuracy of the list handed to them by the teacher; clearly his heart and mind both were in this task.

With the support of over 2000 teachers, 200 PEEOs and 8 CBEOS, our team has distributed more than 13,000 ration kits to over 55,000 people of around 1000 villages in 8 blocks of the district.

**Jaipur**, the capital city of Rajasthan, lies to the eastern border of the Thar desert, surrounded by the Aravalli Hills, forming a gateway to the desert for the rest of the country. The city is busy throughout the year, flocked by tourists and migrant workers. Therefore, when the pandemic hit and the lockdown was announced, there was a sudden vacuum created especially for people who

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*In public education system of Rajasthan,*

<sup>1</sup> Panchayat Elementary Education Officer is a principal of senior secondary school in-charge of schools in a gram panchayat.

<sup>2</sup> Chief Block Education Officer is a district rank official charged with responsibility of one education block in the district.

had limited resources, such as nomadic communities, artisans and performers, workers in the hospitality sectors, handicraft and textile units who were mostly migrants.

Teachers who began getting in touch with their students soon discovered that many of them and their families were in deep distress. Many children had not eaten for days. Their pregnant mothers had nothing to eat. There was no milk for the new-borns. Widowed mothers were struggling to buy food to feed their children. Grandfathers and grandmothers were suffering without medicines. The teachers felt the pain as well as the helplessness which moved them to go beyond their call of duty and help. Hence, began the entire movement of teachers calling their students, understanding their needs, drafting a list, procuring relief kits, walking through densely packed 'kachchi bastis' and distributing them.

*The life and livelihood of the Mirasi community swings around singing songs in praise of their patron-in-the-moment at their auspicious occasions. But today they were purging their souls by keeping 'rozās' in the ominous air of COVID-19. The existing ration was finishing. The cooked meals got over before they could break their fasts at 'iftar' with no option left to eat at 'sehri' in the early hours of morning.*

*Somehow, young Rahbar from the community managed to reach the ears of the teacher in-charge of the area, who then arranged adequate dry ration for the families.*

Sanganer City, which is a textile hub and has a huge migrant worker community and Jaipur West, which has multiple slums, cover most COVID-19 affected areas of the city. Therefore, from our conversations with teachers, we knew that the situation on the ground was desperate. Since our movements were restricted due to the lockdown, we proposed to supply dry ration kits through the teachers; it was immediately accepted. They were the ones ferrying ration kits from our centres to the distribution point; some did it on their two-wheelers in the scorching heat of the desert summer. And soon, teachers from other areas also started contacting us for support.

Till date, we have worked directly with over 300 teachers in Jaipur to contact students from 73 government schools and have distributed over 16,000 dry ration kits, while ensuring that all the teachers working on the ground had adequate safety kits for their own protection.

While the widely-distributed communities were a challenge in Barmer, the densely-populated communities were a challenge in Jaipur. In both cases, ensuring that help reached everybody in need would have been impossible without the teachers.

### 3. Teachers going above and beyond

Things were no different in other states - we have had similar experiences in place after place that we work in. Several thousand public school and anganwadi teachers have collaborated with us across states we operate in to get humanitarian aid across to some of the most vulnerable.

It would, however, be incorrect to say that all their responses were through or because of us. We have come across many instances of teachers taking individual initiative to address distress.

A teacher in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, mobilised the self-help group of which she was part and other youth volunteers of her village to crowd-source ration for the families of migrant labourers forced out of jobs due to factories shutting down in her village. A head teacher in Ballari, Karnataka, took the onus of supporting a group of auto driver families by providing ration and auto gas. He also

provided ration to families living with HIV and in leprosy colonies, and readymade food to stranded factory workers in the locality; his efforts, with help from friends, reached around 250 families. Similarly, a group of teachers in Pauri, Uttarakhand came up with the idea of crowdsourcing funds during a discussion, to support street hawkers and migrant students stuck in the town due the lockdown. At Sangareddy, Telangana, a small group of anganwadi teachers came to know about a group of twenty migrant worker families from Gujarat were in distress due to the lockdown and loss of work. They took rice and tomatoes from their homes, made packs and distributed them to these families. Along with this, they also stitched cotton masks and distributed them to sanitary workers, high-risk beneficiaries, and stranded migrant worker families.

Crisis reveals character. The way we have seen teachers respond in this crisis has reaffirmed our own faith in public (Government) school teachers. They connected with their students and their families and came up with innovative methods to reach them effectively. Some of them got into it because of their official duties, while some of them did it on their own accord. All of them went well above and beyond their call of duty to ensure help reached those who needed it the most.