

Balapanchayat under Kudumbashree in Kerala

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Abstract

Child rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN-CRC) are broadly classified into rights of children for Survival, Development, Protection and Participation. The concept of neighbourhood network of children for enhancing child participation in community development process, experimented by UNICEF is extensively implemented under Kudumbashree Mission in Kerala. The three tier system of balasabha, balasamathi and balapanchayat established in the panchayat under the Kudumbashree Mission, are the structured grassroot level neighbourhood network of children for ensuring the development and participation in the rights of children. The prime objective of constituting balasabhas is to prevent inter-generational transmission of poverty through capability enhancement of children. A case study of the balasabhas in Chendamangalm panchayat in Ernakulam district was undertaken to identify the actual performance of the balasabhas. The findings of the study showed that the programme provides opportunities for children to develop their skills and talents as well as ample opportunities for building up better social relationships. This network for the children could be seen as the structural social capital formed in the villages on which children and their families can rely upon to realize the child rights for development and participation. The network is providing a secular platform and an enabling environment for socio-cultural and educational development of the children. The proper institutional mechanism with adequate financial support from local self-governments is necessary to empower these children's forums so that issues and concerns of children are continuously brought to the attention of the panchayats for proactive solutions.

Keywords

balasabha, balapanchayat, child rights, social capital

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Introduction

United Nations' Convention on Child Rights affirms that all children are equal, and have human rights such as the right to food, shelter, health care, education and freedom from violence, neglect and exploitation. The Convention also states that children have the right to participate in decision-making and consideration should be given to their opinions, according to their age and maturity. This means that children and young people have the right to participate in family decisions, in school and class decisions, in faith communities, in their cultural and sporting organizations, and also in local and national governments, in the United Nations and in other international bodies. Children and young people often represent over 40 percent in the societies in which they live, yet they have traditionally been excluded from decision-making all over the world (UNICEF, 2003). Children have the right to freedom of expression, to form and join associations and to seek and receive appropriate information. These rights should empower children to bring about changes in their own lives, to build a better future for themselves/their families/communities and for the society.

Child rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child (UN-CRC) are broadly classified into rights of children for survival, development, protection and participation. UN-CRC endorses that adequate policy framework be developed by member countries to ensure that children are involved in decision-making process and children share power and responsibility for decision-making. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has developed a strategic approach to child participation aiming to stimulate discussion and to provide opportunity for children to enhance their capabilities to address the multifarious challenges faced by children in various parts of the world. The concept of a neighbourhood network of children for enhancing child participation in community development process, experimented by UNICEF is extensively implemented in Kerala as social development programme for children titled asbalasabha/balpanchayat under the Kudumbasree Mission of the Government of Kerala. This network of children could be seen as social capital formed in the villages on which children and their families especially of poor and socio-economic backgrounds can rely upon to realize the child rights for development and participation under the leadership of Community Development Societies (CDS) functioning in local self government institutions in Kerala. The process of democratic

decentralization and subsequent empowerment of local government and allied community based organizations have created the necessary institutional structures to facilitate the local development and empowerment of various sections of the society with special empowerment of the poor and marginalized people of the locality.

Social Capital in Community Development

The concept of community development is widely understood both as a process and as an outcome. As a process, primarily it focuses on the ways and means of teaching people how to work together to solve common problems and as an outcome, community development is often conceived as a positive result of local decision-making and programme development. A working definition of community development includes the aspects of the process and the outcome. "A process: developing and enhancing the ability to act collectively, and an outcome: (1) taking collective action and (2) the result of that action, for improvement in a community in any or all realms: physical, environmental, cultural, social political, economic, etc." (Phillips and Pittman, 2009:5).

A major facilitating factor which leads to community development is generally understood in community development literature, is social capital or social capacity which describes the abilities of residents to organize and mobilize their resources for the accomplishment of consensual defined goals or the resources embedded in social relationships among persons and organizations that facilitate cooperation and collaboration in communities (Mattessich and Monsey, 2004, cited in Phillips and Pittman, 2009: 6).

The social capital or capacity is the extent to which members of a community can work together effectively to develop and sustain strong relationships, solve problems and make group decisions and collaborate effectively to plan, set goals and get things done. The social capital is broadly divided into two categories: bonding capital and bridging capital. The bonding capital refers to ties within homogeneous groups like races, ethnicities, social action committees or people of similar socio-economic status. The bridging capital refers to ties among different groups (Agnitsch et al., 2006. cited in Phillips and Pittman, 2009: 6).

Community Capital

The five types of community capital often mentioned in community development literature are (Green and Haines, 2002, cited in Phillips and Pittman, 2009: 6).

1. Human capital: labour supply, skills, capabilities and experience
2. Physical capital: building, streets and infrastructure
3. Financial capital: community financial institutions, micro loan funds and community development banks
4. Environmental capital: natural resources, weather and recreational opportunities
5. Social capital: the networks of social relations, associations and groups

Even though all the five types of community capital are important for development, the social capital has significant role in placing the community in the right trajectory of community development by integrating all other capital or resources. The more the social capital a community has, the more likely it can adapt to the other types of community capital. The process of community development is often equated with social capital/capacity building which leads to social capital which in turn leads to the outcome of community development.

The development of the community in part includes the building of the community's social capacity and conversely, the level of a community's social capacity influences the way community development evolves for that specific community. Besides the initial effort of building the community, the continuous and ongoing efforts are required in sustaining the social networks formed in the process of community organization development to ensure the goal of a holistic development of the community.

The success of community building efforts is depended on the following:

1. *Characteristics of the community* (community's awareness of the issue/goal, motivation from within the community, geographic attributes, flexibility and adaptability, pre-existing social cohesion ability to discuss/reach consensus and cooperate, leadership, and prior experience of success in community building).
2. *Characteristics of the community building process* (wide speared participation, representativeness, good communication system, minimal competition in pursuit of goals, development of self

understanding, benefits to many residents, right mix of resources, community control over decision making, etc.)

3. *Characteristic of community building organizers* (clear perspectives of the community, sincerity of commitment, relationship of trust and good organizing experience and flexibility and adaptability (Mattessich and Monsey, 1997 cited in Phillips and Pittman, 2009).

Social Capital

The conceptualization of social capital was mainly put forward by Robert Putnam, James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu. Putnam has defined social capital as ‘features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam, 1995:67 cited in Leonard, 2005:606). This notion of social capital as emerging from the quality of relationships among people was further developed by Coleman who viewed social capital as a positive feature emanating from the interactions between and among the actors (Leonard, 2005). Social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions. Evidence shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable. Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society. It is the glue that holds them together (World Bank, 1998).

There are a number of key sources of social capital in the context of social and economic development.

Families: As the main source of economic and social welfare for its members. The family is the first building block in the generation of social capital for the larger society.

Communities: Social interactions among neighbours, friends and groups generate social capital and the ability to work together for a common good. This is especially important for the poor as social capital can be used as a substitute for human and physical capital.

Firms: Building and sustaining efficient organizations like firms demands trust and a common sense of purpose, i. e., social capital. Social capital benefits firms by reducing transactions costs, but can also have negative effects for a firm and society.

Civil Society: Social capital is crucial to the success of any non-governmental organization because it provides opportunities for participation and gives voice to those who may be locked out of more

formal avenues to affect change.

Public Sector: The State and its institutions, is central to the functioning and welfare of any society.

Ethnicity: Ethnic relations come up frequently in discussions of social capital. Whether it is immigration, microenterprise development, tribal nepotism or racial conflict, ethnic ties are a clear example of how actors who share common values and culture can band together for mutual benefit.

Gender: Social networks of women to obtain income and other necessities (World Bank, 2011).

Of the aforesaid sources of the social capital family and local community play dominant roles in building up social capital among the resource poor people. While the family is itself a source of social capital, it is also a “system in a network of mutually interdependent systems” (Bubolz, 1998 cited in World Bank, 2011). Through its interactions with the political, economic, cultural, religious and legal systems, the family not only increases the resources available to its members, it also contributes to the social capital available to promote public good. Social capital generated through interactions between families and other actors within the community increases the resources for families and networks (Hogan, 1998 cited in World Bank, 2011). The level of social interactions among neighbours, friends and members of groups and associations, generate social capital which is especially important for the resource of the poor people to address their multifaceted problems and needs. Social capital can be used by the poor as a substitute for human and physical capital (Collier, 1998 cited in World Bank, 2011). Social capital can have a positive impact on the well-being and prosperity of an entire community, not only on the households with a lot of social capital (Narayan and Pritchett 1997 cited in World Bank, 2011). Social capital increases with use, making it a particularly worthwhile investment. In his study of Italy, Putnam 1993 cited in World Bank, 2011) found that many of the economically and socially healthy regions of the country had a long history of civic engagement but strikingly absent from the weaker regions.

Social capital offers many benefits to communities. Relationships with kin, neighbours and friends are an important safety net, and are crucial for their survival when formal safety nets are absent or inadequate. Trust among community members and their ability to work together for the public good can:

Rajagiri Journal of Social Development

- reduce problems, such as violence and free-riding, by enforcing shared values and norms of behaviour;
- increase business opportunities by providing informal access to credit and reducing transaction costs; and
- improve the quality of education and the accessibility of health services.

Bridging social capital among communities or with members of other communities can mobilize more financing and better services from the State, improve infrastructure, and provide access to wider markets and formal credit systems. It can open new opportunities for the poor people and help their communities grow economically (World Bank, 2011). Community involvement builds a social capital by way off frequent interaction which cultivates norms of reciprocity through which actors become more willing to assist one another, improved coordination and communication facilitate information sharing that increases mutual trust, successful cooperation encourages future collaborative efforts in new areas (Narayan and Pritchett, 1997, cited in World Bank, 2011).

Social Capital in Poverty Alleviation and Empowerment of Women

Even though the process of formation of social capital is applied in all sectors of development intervention, the social capital plays dominant roles in the field of women empowerment and poverty alleviation programmes. The process of building up the bonding, social capital is used in various empowerment programmes of women to improve their incomes, enabling them through capacity building programmes and enhancing their participation in their family as well as in the local community level decision making.

The neighbourhood groups formed on the principles of self help and mutual help, as part of the poverty alleviation programmes in the local panchayats and municipalities in Kerala under the Kudumbashree Mission is branded as an organized movement of women for empowerment and development. Social capital building approaches are used in poverty alleviation programmes of Kudumbashree, which helped the members of neighbourhood groups to transform themselves as active citizens by utilizing the socio-political and economic opportunities of the locality for their own socio-economic development (Kavitha and Parvathy, 2012).

Kudumbashree: Poverty alleviation Through Empowerment of Women

Kudumbashree, the Poverty Eradication Mission of the Government of Kerala was established in 1998 with the mission of eradicating absolute poverty through concerted action by community based organizations of women under the leadership of local self governments in the State. By the year 2012, kudumbashree organization has a membership of about 3.831 million families who are members of 0.215 million neighbourhood groups (NHG). NHGs are federated at the ward level into Area Development Societies (ADS) numbering 18,916, covering 95% of local government wards in the State. The Community Development Societies (CDS) are registered societies at the local government level which function as the apex level federation of the three tier system. At present there are 1,072 CDS are functional in Kerala, formed during the period 1998-2013 covering all the gram panchayats and Municipalities of the State.

The programmes of the mission focus on economic and social development. The former comprises of micro finance activities such as thrift and credit, linkage banking, matching grant and interest subsidy. The provisions under the programme are also meant for establishing micro enterprises and collective farming. Social development activities comprise of Ashraya, the schools for the mentally challenged children named as Budschools (special schools for mentally and physically challenged children), and projects for the welfare of Scheduled Castes / Scheduled Tribes, balasabha, balapanchayats, holistic health programmes and gender self-learning programme. Thus the major focal dimensions of human development attempted for uplifting rural poor by the mission include self-employment, food security, health promotion, creative potential development as well as nourishing the innate talents in children, voice and visibility of the poor through participatory approach thereby preventing inter-generational transmission of poverty. Kudumbashree, 2012)..

The ongoing major programmes of kudumbashree are:

Linkage Banking: The flagship programme of kudumbashree which has helped the neighbourhood groups (NHGs) to augment their existing resources collected through thrift.

Lease land farming: Collective lease land farming to enhance livelihood of the poor families in NHGs by utilizing fallow lands, a move towards the goal of self sufficiency in agriculture production and food security.

Micro enterprise: They are the means for economic empowerment by

creating self employment opportunities to the poor women with a view to increasing their purchasing power.

Ashrya: The programme designed to identify and rehabilitate destitute families and integrate them with mainstream society. It is a comprehensive project to address the various deprivation faced by destitute families in the society.

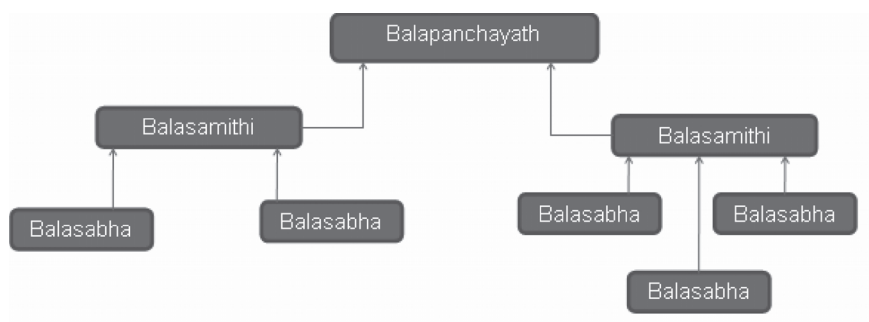
A holistic development of the children, by the strengthening of balasabha, balapanchayat, and by the formation and strengthening of neighbourhood network of children in the villages.

Balapanchayat

Bala sabhas are structured grass root level neighbourhood network of children in panchayats. Each sabha consists of 15-30 children in the age group of 5-15 years. The prime objective of constituting these balasabhas is to prevent inter-generational transmission of poverty through capability enhancement of children. The project was started with the support of UNICEF initially. Kudumbashree initiatives of the balasabha and balapanchayats thus enable to impart voice and power to children hailing from the poor and vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds.

A three-tier system, similar to that of the kudumbashree is envisaged for the effective functioning of balapanchayat. Balasabha at neighbourhood, balasamithi at the ward level, balapanchayats/balanagarasabhas at the panchayat/nagarasabha level and bala parliament at level serve as consortiums for the needs and demands of children.

Figure 1: The structure of balapanchayat



Note: Adapted from Kudumbashree, 2013.

CDS takes care of balasabha/balapanchayatsprogramme with the support of resource persons/faculty on voluntary basis. Cultivating creative potential in children, by providing opportunities to express, learn and develop, identifying and nurturing innate talent that leads to the larger goal of recognition and protection of child rights is the prime objective of the programme. The rights to participation of children include the right to express opinions and to have these opinions taken into account in matters affecting the child's own life and the right to plan an active role in the community through freedom of associations (UNICEF,2003). The balasabha programme of kudumbashreehas created the necessary local level secular structure for children to exercise their rights to participation in a properly supervised environment under local self governments.

The focal points of balasabha programmes are forming small learning groups for experimental and systematic learning, creating opportunities for understanding democratic process, local level participation in conserving environment and enabling children to unfold the intricacies of collectivization. The major activities of balasabha which are convened on a weekly basis are open discussions on current affairs; problems related to environmental protection, healthcare, basic education, sport and games of the locality. Role plays, preparation of study reports and subsequent discussion on the same are carried out in the balasabha meetings under the leadership of the resource persons. Since the balapanchayats/bala parliament aims at bringing children in the decision-making process, a proper guidance mechanism with the help of resource persons is necessary for the success of the programme (Kudumbsasree, 2013)

The formation of the children's groups under the kudumbashree programme was started in 2002 as a follow up of the remedial tuition centre programme initiated by kudumbashree (Jose, 2002). By the year 2004, the movement has grown into a network with 19,977balasabhaswith 332,714 members covering all over the State (Kudumbashree, 2005). The organization of children under CDS has continued in the subsequent years and the Table 1presents the statistics.

As on 30 September 2010, the formation of 51,086 number of balasabhas has been completed with a membership of 88,5301 children At present, 52,127 balasab has, covering 8,95,551 children, are creating glorious dimensions to the endeavor (Kudumbashree, 2013).

Table 1
District-wise details of balasabha: children's NHG as on 30. 9. 2010

| District | No of gramapanchayats | No of balapanchayats | No of balasabha | No of children |
|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Thiruvananthapuram | 78 | 59 | 5900 | 94740 |
| Kollam | 71 | 61 | 2276 | 46245 |
| Pathanamthitta | 54 | 50 | 2366 | 40147 |
| Alappuzha | 73 | 72 | 4612 | 70974 |
| Kottayam | 75 | 48 | 3273 | 57397 |
| Idukki | 52 | 46 | 2277 | 38756 |
| Ernakulam | 88 | 87 | 5215 | 95156 |
| Thrissur | 91 | 46 | 2286 | 43559 |
| Palakkad | 91 | 66 | 4185 | 73038 |
| Malapuram | 102 | 48 | 5910 | 111723 |
| Kozhikode | 78 | 78 | 4910 | 86215 |
| Wayanad | 25 | 17 | 2470 | 32886 |
| Kannur | 81 | 81 | 3019 | 49467 |
| Kasargode | 39 | 39 | 2387 | 44998 |
| Total | 998 | 798 | 51086 | 885301 |

Balasabha Programme in Chenamangalm Grama Panchayat

Chendamangalam is a village in North Parur taluk in Ernakulam district in the State of Kerala with a rich history and the remnants of a glorious past of Muziris Heritage. The locality is blessed with the presence of three rivers, seven inlets, hillocks and large expanses of green plain. As of 2011 census, Chendamangalam had a population of 28,147. Males constitute (13,458) 48% of the population and females 52% (14,589) with an average literacy rate of 86%. CDS of the panchayat comprises of 231 NHGs with a total of 2,700 members. About 30 micro enterprises and 102 joint liability groups (JLG) with 484 women engaged in various agriculture activities are functional under the CDS of the panchayat.

A case study of the balasabhas in Chendamangalm panchayat was undertaken to identify the actual performance of balasabha at grass roots level, working under the local self government institution. The primary

data was collected from four balasabhas of the 18th ward of the panchayat as well as from the CDS office of the panchayat. Thirty-five children who were members of the balasabhas in the 18th ward had participated in the focus group discussion and provided necessary information for the study. The field study was carried out in first week of December 2013.

Results and Discussion

The data collected from the CDS office of Kudumbashree of the Chendamangalam panchayat showed that 25 balasabhas were functional in the panchayat with about 452 children as members of the respective balasabhas in the wards. Balasabhas were active in 11 wards (61% of the total wards) but balasabhas were not formed or not active in 7 wards (39% of the total wards). The balasamathi, the ward level organization of balasabhas were not active due to the less number of balasabhas in the wards (average number of balasabhas is 1-2). The average number of members in the balasabhas was found to be in the range of 15-20.

Table 2
The Profile of Balasabha in Chendamangalam Panchayat

| Ward | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | Total |
|------------------|----|----|----|---|----|---|---|----|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-------|
| No. of Balasabha | 3 | 3 | 5 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 25 |
| Total | 47 | 47 | 99 | 0 | 44 | 0 | 0 | 28 | 0 | 21 | 34 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 14 | 34 | 74 | 452 |

The balasabhas were functional in the panchayat since 2006 with most of the groups were having regular weekly meeting. They followed the formal procedures of keeping the attendance, recording the minutes of the meeting and reading of the report in the meeting and soon. The children were found to be learning the skills required for conducting the public meetings in a democratic manner. The balasabha is conducting regular cultural, sports and games activities for the members which are local avenues for children for growth and development. The gathering is also working as a platform for children to discuss the various socioeconomic issues affecting their locality which is indirectly prompting children's rights for participation envisaged under the child rights conventions.

Table 3
The profile of balasabhas in the 18th ward of the panchayat

| Name of Balasabha | Friends | Anugraha | Bhavana | Varnana |
|--|---------|----------|--------------|-----------------|
| Year of formation | 2006 | 2006 | 2006 | 2007 |
| No. of members | 9 | 31 | 19 | 15 |
| Day of the meeting | Sunday | Sunday | Sunday | Second Saturday |
| Frequency of meeting | Weekly | Weekly | Weekly | Monthly |
| Any common place for the meeting | No | No | No | No |
| Attendance register | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Keeping the minutes of the meeting | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| The report of the previous meeting read in the meeting | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| All members participate in the meeting | No | No | Occasionally | No |
| Discussions are held on social issues | No | yes | Yes | Yes |
| Sports/games/cultural programmes as part of meeting | Yes | yes | Yes | Yes |
| Participation in the Balasamathi meeting | No | No | No | No |
| Any saving scheme | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |

Table 4
Benefits of attending the balasabha programmes

| Benefits for children | % of the children who affirmed that they are benefited |
|---|--|
| Building up good friendship/relationship with others | 88.57 |
| Improvement in self confidence | 83.00 |
| Awareness regarding the social issues of the locality | 71.42 |
| Opportunities to express our abilities/skills | 68.57 |
| Acquired knowledge about current affairs | 60.00 |
| Participation in environment protection programmes | 57.14 |
| Financial help for education | 48.57 |
| Awareness regarding personal health | 45.71 |
| Knowledge regarding agriculture (vegetable gardening) | 42.85 |

The benefits of attending the balasabha programmes by the 35 children who had participated in the discussions are presented in Table 4. The data shows that the programme was helping majority of the members in building up social relationships. The participation in the cultural and other programmes has helped them to improve their self confidence and personal growth. The programme provided good opportunities for children to express their skills and talents. The awareness generation on social issues and participation in environment protection programmes were also identified by majority as other benefits. A good number (48. 57%) of the respondents were benefiting by way of financial aid for education through the balasabha platforms. In general the objectives of balasabaha programme visualized by Kudumabshree Mission are gradually getting realized by the community level networks of poor children in the local self-governments institutions in Kerala.

Table 5
Suggestions for improving the balasabha programmes

| Suggestions for improvement | % of the children who responded |
|---|---------------------------------|
| Funds are to be made available for the activities of balsabha | 62.85 |
| Regular meeting of the balasabha | 54.20 |
| Timing of the meeting is to be suitable for children | 51.42 |
| Programmes which are interesting/useful for the children are to be conducted in the Balasabha | 48.57 |

Children were asked to express their opinions to improve the working of the Balasabha. Majority of the children were requesting some kind of financial assistance from government as well as other civil society organizations including CDS for the effective functioning of the balasabha. Children's' views are to be taken into consideration in the local level as well as State level financial planning and budgeting. Even though provisions are there for allocation of funds for children under local self governments' budget, specific parameters are not set for allocating these funds for the balasabha activities. Regular meeting at a suitable time for the children, with the programme content also suitable for the children is necessary for maintaining the interest of children in participating in the balasabha activities.

Conclusion

Putnam's conceptualization of social capital consists of certain features of trust, namely, reciprocal support, civic engagement, community identity, and social networks and levels of social capital in a community have an important effect on the people's well-being (Morrow, 1999). The notion that social capital can be created and built up in communities where it is lacking and ultimately transformed into other forms of capital (Coleman, 1998; and Putnam, 1995 cited in Leonard, 2005:606) is observed to be beneficial in the empowerment of women and children under the poverty alleviation programmed of kudumabshree. The resource poor women in Kerala are organized into local level networks of women for empowerment and development. Putnam argues that where mothers have supportive locally based social networks, their offspring will benefit 'over and above how rich or poor they are materially' (Putnam, 2000:301). The implication here is that children in families rich in social capital may somehow be compensated for their families' lack of financial and human capital (Putnam, 2000).

The large network of balasabhas formed under kudubashree could be seen as a social capital of children developed in close association with the larger social capital of resource poor women's local organizations which are federated under the Kudumabshree Mission. The social capital formed for women and their children through kudumabshree has the inherent power to withstand the deficiencies of other capital (financial, natural, and labour) and place the community in the right trajectory of development.

The neighbourhood networks of balasabha play supportive roles in the socialization and development of children which primarily should happen in the mainstream educational system. The proper institutional mechanism with adequate financial support from local self-governments are necessary to empower these children's forums so that issues and concerns of children are continuously brought to the attention of the people representatives of the panchayats for proactive action. These networks of children could be better facilitated if the efforts of various civil society organizations for child development and children's forums promoted by various communication media are integrated at micro level for collaborative efforts to promote the development of children under the initiative of local self-government institutions in the State.

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