EMpower

10to19 Community
DASRA ADOLESCENTS COLLABORATIVE

MOVING THE NEEDLE

Making the case for youth protagonism

Contents

Foreword

At the time of writing this, India is on the verge of becoming the world's most populous and youngest country. The governance of this large and diverse nation rests on the fundamental bedrock of participatory democracy. Since independence, India has had a rich legacy of citizen engagement and decentralised governance, as evidenced by the intricate state, sub-state, and Panchayati Raj systems. With nearly 66% of our population under the age of 35, there is a particular emphasis on the participation and leadership of young people in propelling us towards our national social, economic, and developmental goals.

Youth leadership rhetoric—our urgent need for it—and the call to move beyond young people's participation to their active protagonism have become fairly commonplace within civil society. Yet, there remain challenges to achieving these goals: challenges around adequate resourcing, building championship with decision-makers, and equipping organisations and youth groups on how to build systems and tools to facilitate more active youth leadership. As sector facilitators, 10to19 and EMpower, are committed to building knowledge, resources, and championships to move the ecosystem closer to achieving true youth leadership, and this report is an effort in that direction.

We see this report as the first in a series of products that 10to19 and EMpower will develop to help make a stronger case for mainstreaming youth leadership: case studies of organisations and initiatives that have implemented this approach, and resources for organisations and supporters to use in their programming and advocacy. This report, in particular, is a compilation of existing literature on youth leadership-focused approaches and explores some examples and learnings from organisations that have adopted this approach. As we build further on this, we will also focus on the need for risk capital, as well as patient and long-term funding, in order to truly adopt a holistic youth protagonist approach.

We also recognise the need for an ecosystem to document the challenges, difficulties, and realities of adopting these approaches when drawing from global practises and applying them in the Indian context, while accounting for the geographical, cultural, and socio-economic heterogeneity that exists in the country. We also need to build evidence on the sustainability of youth leadership approaches and the institutionalisation of participatory infrastructure to sustain engagement between decision-makers and young people.

We hope this report sparks further inquiry, collaboration, and action to realise true youth leadership and look forward to deepening partnerships towards this shared ambition.

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Director, 10to19 Adolescents Collaborative, Dasra	Country Director, India - EMpower

Introduction

About EMpower

About Dasra

The Dasra-EMpower Partnership

About EMpower

EMpower – The Emerging Markets Foundation is a global philanthropic organization that works with young people, with a particular emphasis on adolescent girls in three interconnected areas critical to youth development: economic well-being, safe and healthy lives, and inclusive learning.

Our vision is to build a world where all young people at the margins, especially girls, have the skills, opportunities, and power to live their full potential. Since its inception in 2000, EMpower has partnered with local organisations in emerging market countries and other changemakers, to enable marginalised young people to transform their lives and communities.

There is no greater expert in the lives of girls than girls themselves. As a result, we aim to boldly, disruptively, and powerfully amplify the voices, experiences, and lived realities of girls as protagonists, role models, and future leaders. We bring over 15 years of first-hand experience and technical expertise in successfully conceptualising and implementing youth-led participatory methodologies from the ground up.

We are one of the co-founders of the With And For Girls collective, a unique collaboration between 11 global funders united by the common belief that girls are agents of change. The first Adolescent Girls Learning Community started in Mumbai in 2012, and today— a decade later—the model is being replicated, adapted, and scaled up around the world. One of the first initiatives of its kind in India since 2018, the Girls Advisory Council comprises girl leaders who represent EMpower grantee partner organisations and advise EMpower on its programmatic work.

About Dasra

Dasra began as a venture philanthropy fund in India, investing in early-stage non-profit organisations. The aim was to bridge the gap between funders and non-profits by educating funders on how to be more strategic in their giving, and helping non-profits use funds in the most optimal way.

We have learned over the course of our 21-year journey that if we want to make a difference in the lives of a billion Indians, we cannot do it alone. For India to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, funders, non-profits, and the government must collaborate, share learnings, and create joint solutions that work. To achieve this impact at scale, our model has evolved to facilitate collaborations between funders, non-profits, corporations, and the government.

Dasra's flagship multi-stakeholder platform—10to19: Dasra Adolescents Collaborative (10to19)—accelerates participatory approaches by bringing together funders, civil society, and government to enable adolescents and young people to achieve their full potential. Overall, we aspire to four outcomes for young people: delayed age at marriage, delayed age of first pregnancy, completion of secondary education, and increased agency and employability. We accomplish this by creating sustainable, inclusive pathways for young Indians to share their needs and recommendations with decision-makers and, as a result gain access to improved public health and welfare services for a better quality of life.

Picture credit: 10to19 Dasra Adolescents Collaborative

The Dasra-EMpower Partnership

Despite girls' expertise and willingness to participate in policy and funding decisions affecting them, there is little investment in youth engagement strategies and methodologies that meaningfully centre girls' voices. We can identify two reasons for this gap: first, a lack of clarity around the nature of programmatic interventions and who should be involved to effectively centre girls, and second, a lack of a collaborative approach among stakeholders in the ecosystem.

Dasra and EMpower come together through this unique initiative, issuing a call-for-action to strengthen collaboration and raise awareness around the role participatory methodologies can play in gender programming and effecting systemic change.

We recognise that we are on a journey, with young people, their families, communities, our partners, our peers, and our funders, to uncover and employ best practices that will enable young people to reach their full potential.

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Context Setting

The big picture

Meaningful youth participation and engagement: The Current Landscape

Picture credit: Project Khel

The big picture

According to UNICEF, one in every five young people aged 10 to 24 is Indian. This makes us "the youngest nation in the world."[1] While the term "demographic dividend"[2] sounds promising, young people in India bear the burden of an entire nation's dreams with limited opportunities and resources to make them come true. Multiple layers of marginalisation resulting from caste, class, religion, and other socio-economic factors compound the severity of challenges that young people face. Add to the mix, an especially skewed gender ratio across critical aspects that shape young adulthood—education, health, and livelihoods—and the picture for young people, particularly girls and women in India, is troubling.

The 2020 Global Youth Development Index placed India 122nd out of 181 countries. The index ranks countries based on five criteria: namely, education, health, employment, civic engagement, and political participation.

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2022 ranks India 135th out of 146 countries, with significant gaps in economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and health and survival of girls and women.

According to the Sustainable Development Goal Index's 2018 baseline report, India is in the "Aspirant" category for Gender Equality, the lowest of four categories in which a country can be placed:

14.2%
of girls drop out annually from secondary school[3]

Female labour-force participation currently stands at **20.2%,** while male labour-force participation is **73.9%**[4]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, at least **78%** of menstruating adolescents struggled to get sanitary napkins[5]

1. "Solutions for Young people of India - Study examining solutions around life skills, employment opportunities and empowerment for young people in India." UNICEF. August 2020. https://www.sattva.co.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Sattva_Unicef-Yuwaah_Solutions-for-Young-People-Report-India.pdf (p-4)
2. Def. The demographic dividend is the economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population's age structure, mainly when the share of the working-age population (15 to 64) is larger than the non-working-age share of the population (14 and younger, and 65 and older). UNFPA.

3. UDISE+. "UDISE+ 2020-2021 Booklet." UDISE+ Publications and Statistics. 2021. https://udiseplus.gov.in/#/page/publications (p-109)
4. PLFS. "Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) – Quarterly Bulletin [October-December 2021]." Press Relase PIB. 2021. https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1823289
5. Wings 2022. World of India's Girls- Spotlight on Adolescent Girls amid COVID-19. Save The Children. 2022. https://www.savethechildren.in/pdfs/WINGS-REPORT_2022.pdf (p-11)

Picture credit: Vaibhav Bhardwaj for EMpower's Girls Advisory Council Launch

Meaningful youth participation and engagement: The Current Landscape

Young people are intimately familiar with their problems and are best suited to solve them. However, their wisdom is frequently unacknowledged and thus untapped. While participation has rightfully earned its place—in global development discourse as a key principle intended to guide the work being done with children and young people—the reality is quite different. There are several programmes in India—designed to benefit young people—but they seldom engage them meaningfully and are more geared toward viewing young people solely as beneficiaries or recipients of services.

So what qualifies as non-tokenistic youth participation? UNICEF's report outlining guidelines on adolescent participation and civic engagement states: "Participation is much more than having a voice. It is about being informed, engaged, and having an influence in decisions and matters that affect one's life–in private and public spheres, the home, alternative care settings, school, workplace, the community, social media, and broader governance processes." [6]

The recently launched funders' toolkit by Elevate Children Funders Group defines meaningful participation as a process that engages children and young people

"through consultation, through shared decision-making, through co-designing programmes, strategies, and initiatives and/or by having access to flexible resources to support their own child- and youth-led efforts." [7]

In 2019, the YIELD (Youth Investment, Engagement, and Leadership Development) Project published the experiences, insights, and suggestions of over 100 people (the majority of whom are youth leaders or adults working with young people) from 20 countries on the importance of youth in AYSHR (adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health and rights) efforts. [8] The research offers some core lessons in the form of "promising practises" towards meaningfully engaging young people:

- purposeful onboarding of young people across diverse groups and sociocultural contexts so that their cross-section is truly representative

- keen focus on actively building the capabilities of young people to unlock their potential

- an environment that prioritises equity and offers support to ensure that young people's contributions are recognised and acted upon

- fostering connections among youth participants and adult decision-makers to drive change
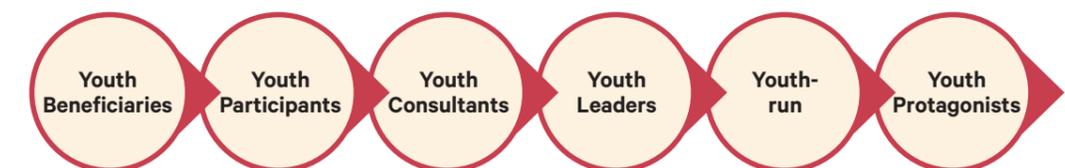
The 10to19 Dasra Adolescents Collabortative follows a spectrum approach to youth participation, adapted from the research and work of UNICEF, WHO and YIELD. This approach recognizes that programs can start wherever we are by recognizingand paying attention to the voices of young people and creating opportunities for them to lead the way. There are different ways to do this, some that many of us are already using in our work in different ways, and some that are ideal and aspirational goals for us to achieve.'

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6. "Engaged and Heard- Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement." UNICEF. July 2020. https://www.unicef.org/media/73296/file/ADAP-Guidelines-for-Participation.pdf (p-4)

7. "Weaving a collective tapestry." ECFG. 2022. https://static.showit.co/file/urRMy20KS_uG7KttsEak3w/145396/weaving_a_collective_ tapestry_ecfg_child_and_youth_participation_toolkit.pdf
8. "Young people advancing sexual and reproductive health: toward a new normal" YIELD. 2019. https://www.summitfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Yield_full-report_June-2019_final.pdf

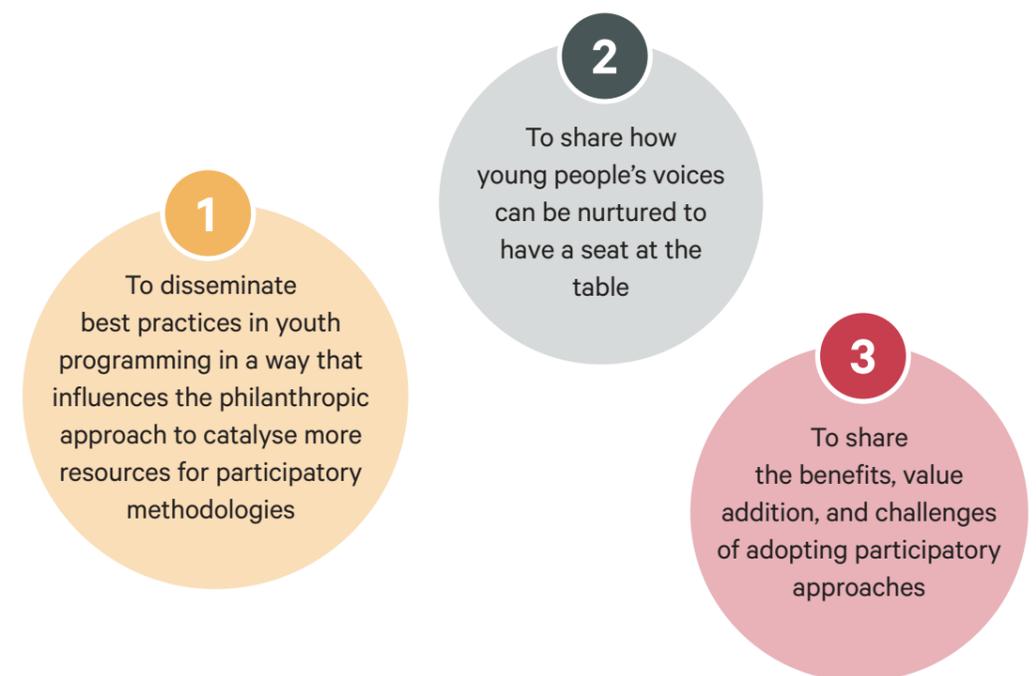Picture credit: Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group

Highlights from the report include

- Roughly 2% of the annual national budget in India is dedicated to youth engagement programmes, initiatives, schemes, and outreach, which leaves much to be desired.

- The ecosystem analysis reveals the following gaps: a limited institutional focus on young people's engagement; overall programmatic misalignment with young people's aspirations; inadequate impact assessment of current engagement models; and insufficient advocacy around the need to capture the young people's opinions in policy making.

- Ecosystem management emerges as the key recommendation for the government, corporates, and implementing organisations.

Now that the stage is set, we will delve into the importance of meaningfully engaging young people in programmes designed for them, and the transformative potential of participatory approaches. Through this report, we will attempt to fulfill the following objectives:

In 2020, UNICEF produced a report in partnership with Sattva,[9] a social impact strategy consulting and implementation firm, to examine solutions for young people in India in the areas of life skills, employment opportunities and empowerment. The report—'Solutions for Young People in India'—provides a comprehensive landscape evaluation across five sectors: Life Skills, Flexible Learning, Career Guidance, Skill Development and Placement, and Engagement of Young People. In terms of youth engagement, the report analyses government initiatives designed to promote civic participation among young people—as well as the work of 25 implementing organisations that use a strong youth-centric lens.

2 To share how young people's voices can be nurtured to have a seat at the table

1 To disseminate best practices in youth programming in a way that influences the philanthropic approach to catalyse more resources for participatory methodologies

3 To share the benefits, value addition, and challenges of adopting participatory approaches

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9. "Solutions for Young people of India - Study examining solutions around life skills, employment opportunities and empowerment for young people in India." UNICEF. August 2020.
https://www.sattva.co.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Sattva_Unicef-Yuwaah_Solutions-for-Young-People-Report-India.pdf

Making the Case for
Participatory Approaches

The time to act is now

An opportunity to rebuild inclusively

What stands in the way?

Footprints of participatory approaches

Picture credit: 10to19 Dasra Adolescents Collaborative

The time to act is now

India is currently experiencing a "youth bulge"[10]—a moment in time—where we must constantly create opportunities for young people to effectively participate in and succeed in the workforce. According to the CII (Confederation of Indian Industry) report, "Harnessing India's Demographic Dividend for Boosting Growth," published in April 2022, young people's education and skill development are among key priority areas to drive economic prosperity. The report highlights how a meagre 3% of the total workforce in India is skilled; it cautions that delayed action on creating jobs, and preparing young people to join the workforce may turn the demographic dividend into a disadvantage post 2050, as the youth bulge tapers.

This report, which paints a bleak picture, is yet another reminder that we must encourage young people to participate and take immediate action to engage them purposefully.

Going down the participatory road

According to the UN's 2010-2011 guide on *'Youth Participation in Development,'*[11] the intentional inclusion of young people in development:

- Strengthens young people's abilities to meet their own subsistence needs;
- Prevents and reduces vulnerabilities to economically, politically, and socially unstable environments;
- Promotes ownership and sustainability of interventions;
- Helps gain entry into target communities and builds trust and social capital.

"Why would we intentionally go about excluding a group that both have the greatest disparities and barriers and also some of the most cutting-edge thinking?"

— Vanessa Daniel, Founder and Former Executive Director, Groundswell Fund, from "Shake The Table - Lighting The Way", 2022[12]

For participation to take root, investment in young people needs to start right from adolescence. Adolescent girls' voices and insights are rarely solicited or considered in any important matter at home, in the community, or in a formal setting—making decision-making, participation, and agency even more relevant. Gender inequality cuts across all forms of injustices that young people face, affecting girls and young women the hardest. Girls' worlds shrink as they get older, and the pool of opportunities becomes shallower.

EMpower's report, "A Window of Opportunity," reviews current programming focused on very young adolescent girls (ages 10-14), culling evidence and best practices from grassroots organisations and girls' perspectives. Beyond recognising adolescence as a pivotal moment in girls' lives, it also identifies the kind of interventions that need investing to increase the chances of programmatic success:

- Meaningful involvement of Very Young Adolescent girls in all aspects of the project—from design and delivery to evaluation and scale—strategies involve including engaging girls in organisational decision-making, participation in programme design and delivery, and partnership as co-researchers, all of which are central to building girls' agency and leadership.

- Engaging communities and family, despite potential resistance: The report emphasises the importance of programmes that cultivate trust-based relationships with families and communities through a range of activities such as street plays, family fun days, health fairs, and school presentations. Programming designed specifically for parents and community members, and individual home visits can help dramatically increase the programme effectiveness by creating a receptive ecosystem for girls.

Although the issues that girls and adults are fighting for are very similar, girls bring new perspectives. Mama Cash and Frida Fund (2021) say, "The work they do and the ways in which they organise can provide important learning opportunities to many other organisations, if girls are given the space to organise with support and respect."[13]

10. "Youth in India 2022" Definition: Youth bulge refers to a demographic pattern where a large share of the population is comprised of children and young adults. This demographic bulge then passes through the body of the total population as a cohort in successive bulges untilas seen now in developed economies the highest shares of the total population are made up of older workers and those of retirement age. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. 2022.

11. "Youth Participation in Development: Summary Guidelines for Development Partners." UN. https://social.un.org/youthyear/docs/policy%20guide.pdf (p-6)

12. "Shake the Table- Lighting the Way," A report for Philanthropy on the Power and Promise of Feminist Movements. Shake the Table. 2022. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/621d77330c0c3a41cd938983/t/627544cb0a940730e4ddc8b0/1651852517481/Lighting+the+Way+-+A+Report++for+Philanthropy+on+the+Power+and+Promise+of+Feminist+Movements.pdf (p-14)

13. "Girls to the front- A Snapshot of girl-led organising." Mama Cash, Frida Fund. 2021. https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/girlstothefront_report_web.pdf

Picture credit: Project Khel

An opportunity to rebuild inclusively

COVID-19 has exacerbated inequalities for young people globally. Even in the face of extreme adversity, and despite the pandemic, young people have been battling obstacles to respond to the needs of their communities. They have assumed roles on the frontlines of the outbreak, and mobilised to support in providing critical relief to those in greatest need.

History has taught us that girls and women bear the biggest brunt in any natural or manmade disaster, even during public health emergencies. COVID-19 has been no different. It has severely harmed the educational attainment and mental, emotional, physical, and sexual health of girls. They have been forced into marriages, to take on increased domestic responsibilities, and to compromise on their hopes for the future. As we envision a post-COVID world, girls once again risk being left behind.

"We are just working and working in the house. No time to study…

My parents don't want me to attend meetings again,

and I am losing my friends."

— 16-year-old Ghanaian girl as part of survey conducted by EMpower one year into the COVID-19 crisis[14]

14. *"COVID: One Year In."* EMpower. 2021 (Survey results from study on firsthand experiences of young people and grantee partners one year into the COVID-19 crisis) https://empowerweb.org/publications/covid-one-year-in-hearing-from-young-people-grantee-partner-organisations-and-programme-officers

Findings from a girl-led study to assess the impact of COVID-19 on girls' lives[15]:

80% respondents mentioned that household chores continued to be their responsibility despite everyone being home during the lockdown

42% girls believed the pressure to marry had increased as a result of economic and food insecurity caused by COVID-19; most commonly, 16-year olds felt this pressure

Due to the digital divide, **66%** of the girls enrolled in school during the pandemic found it difficult to study online

Among those who dropped out, **37%** left school because of mounting household work, **31%** because schools shut down, and **24%** lost interest in school

82% respondents wished they could approach someone for career counseling and employability advice

59% reported that COVID-19 had an impact on their personal or family income

28% respondents had to discontinue skills training

But even as the odds were stacked against them, we witnessed and heard several accounts of girls leading the way during COVID-19. In West Bengal, 1200 girls travelled on bicycles through villages against the backdrop of a cyclone and during an ongoing pandemic as a powerful example of grit. During the West Bengal disaster in 2021, girl leaders rode their bicycles carrying medical kits, risking their own lives to provide essential care. These girl leaders were trained by Nishtha, a grassroots organisation in India's West Bengal that is led by women and girls.

15. "COVID: In Her Voice." EMpower. 2021 [Sample description: 150+ girls aged 10-24 from seven Indian cities] https://empowerweb.org/publications/covid-in-her-voice-a-girl-led-and-centred-participatory-research-study

According to a Mama Cash and Frida Fund report on girl-led organising,[16] girls are increasingly recognised as social change agents, but this recognition does not translate into a proportionate share in international funding directed towards young people. Citing a finding from World Bank's research, the report highlights how "less than two cents of every dollar spent on international aid is specifically directed towards adolescent girls. There is even less data on how much of this aid trickles down to initiatives led by girls themselves."

This moment provides an opportunity to reflect on and address existing gaps and inequities in involving young people—specifically girl and young women. They need to be at the centre of the conversation, both in terms of how programmes are designed and the resources allocated to implement them.

> "There is a perception that investing in youth is expensive. We cannot afford NOT to invest in young people–and it has to be done over the long term. We are looking at a 30-year proposition to change a generation by encouraging and enabling them to engage politically and otherwise. This is key to long-term social justice."

— Young woman informant, from "Young People Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health", YIELD, 2019[17]

What stands in the way?

Participatory approaches require a mindset shift; they diverge from traditional methods of working with youth, presenting a unique set of challenges and barriers to entry. Several frequent obstacles to the adoption of participatory approaches are primarily associated with:

- A lack of belief in young people's ability to make a difference or make the right decisions in their lives

- The belief that active participation is not part of 'traditional' culture and may encourage young people to forget their values, and grow up too quickly[18]

- A fear of putting young people at risk in already difficult environments, and also exposing them to adult manipulation[19]

- The possibility that participation in programmes might be parasitic on young people's existing priorities and commitments

- Praise for girls' work and their activism, which is typically anchored in a positive bias towards adults; this discourse serves to define young people as incapable, partial, and deficient in contrast to the imagined version of an adult: capable, complete, and rational. This makes it difficult for girls to actively participate in their communities safely and positively[20]

- Discriminatory gender norms that influence child and early forced marriages, expose girls to gender-based violence—result in inequitable distribution of domestic labour in households, stall educational attainment—and isolate girls from forming meaningful connections, accessing public spaces, and engaging in life beyond the home[21]

16. "Girls to the front- A Snapshot of girl-led organising." MamaCash, Frida Fund. 2021. https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/girlstothefront_report_web.pdf
17. "Young People Advancing Sexual And Reproductive Health: Toward A New Normal." YIELD. June 2019. https://www.summitfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/YIELD_full-report_June-2019.pdf (p-51)

18. "Engaged and Heard- Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement." UNICEF. July 2020. https://www.unicef.org/media/73296/file/ADAP-Guidelines-for-Participation.pdf (p-62)
19. "Engaged and Heard- Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement." UNICEF. July 2020. https://www.unicef.org/media/73296/file/ADAP-Guidelines-for-Participation.pdf (p-63)
20. "Girls to the front- A Snapshot of girl-led organising." Mama Cash, Frida Fund. 2021. https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/girlstothefront_report_web.pdf (p-24)
21. "Lead Like a Girl: Ensuring adolescent girls' meaningful participation in decision-making processes." Save the Children. 2021. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/sc_leadlikeagirl_english.pdf/

- The NFHS (National Family Health Survey) 5[22] presents worrying statistics spotlighting gender differentials in relation to health, educational attainment, and technological access:

Nearly **60%** of women aged 15-19 years are anemic

Only **72%** of women aged 15-49 years are literate, compared to 84% of men in the same age group

Women aged 15-49 years with 10 or more years of schooling comprise only **41%** of the total women population, compared to **50.2%** men in the same bracket

Nearly **70%** of women aged 15-49 years have never used the internet compared to **43%** men in the same age group, a stark indicator of digital inequality in India

There is also an overlap in some of the challenges faced by implementers of participatory approaches such as:

- "Difficulties in defining, conceptualising, and measuring outcomes of adolescent participation and civic engagement"[23]

- "Inadequate budgets and small grants for adolescent-led initiatives with insufficient room to support preparations and follow-ups"[24]

- "Bullying and harassment of girls and their organisations: a global phenomenon, sharpened by the anonymity of the internet"[25]

Footprints of participatory approaches

Despite the challenges that young people and organisations face when attempting to implement participatory approaches, there is growing evidence of the positive shifts that these approaches can bring about in the lives of young people, their peers, and communities.

UNICEF recognises how participation links to empowerment: "Meaningful participation builds adolescents' self-confidence and self-efficacy as their views are heard and taken seriously. This empowers adolescents to claim other rights."[26]

"The traditional process is so archaic but this participatory [process] is just excellent because [as] young people, we know our problems, we know the challenges we face in our community. So they gave us [a] chance to decide and implement our ideas and also make decisions. Seriously, [the] participatory grant-making process is the best and I think they should continue and involve all youth."

— Grantee Partner, Tara Kur Initiative, from "Evaluation of Youth Participatory Grant-Making Pilot Initiative in Sierra Leone", Purposeful, 2021[27]

According to Dasra's 10to19 Adolescents Collaborative,[28] providing adolescents with the right tools to empower themselves and a supportive environment has the potential to

"Create an overwhelming shift in India's development indicators, with direct impact on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being; SDG 4: Quality Education; SDG 5: Gender Equality; and SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities."

22. "National Family Health Survey 5" http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/India.pdf, MoHFW. 2019.
23. "Engaged and Heard- Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement." UNICEF. July 2020. https://www.unicef.org/media/73296/file/ADAP-Guidelines-for-Participation.pdf
24. ibid
25. "Girls to the front- A Snapshot of girl-led organising." MamaCash, Frida Fund. 2021. https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/girlstothefront_report_web.pdf

26. "Engaged and Heard- Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement." UNICEF. July 2020. https://www.unicef.org/media/73296/file/ADAP-Guidelines-for-Participation.pdf
27. "Evaluation of Youth Participatory Grant-Making Pilot Initiative in Sierra Leone." Purposeful. 2021. https://wearepurposeful.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/SLIDES_FINAL_YOUTH_FRIENDLY_LOW.pdf
28. "10to19 Dasra Adolescents Collaborative 2017-2021 Progress & Lessons Learned." Dasra. 2021. https://www.dasra.org/assets/uploads/resources/10to19_2017%20-2021%20Progress%20&%20Lessons%20learned_Report.pdf

A 2012 literature review undertaken by ChildFund Australia[29] provides rich data on the role of young people's participation in development effectiveness. It also presents evidence of practise on the advantages of child and youth participation, particularly from DFID's (Department for International Development)'s five case studies compiled by their Youth Working Group:

- Improved skills, income, employment (including for socially-excluded groups)

- Improvements in the sustainability of new and existing economic activities

- Improved health (including decreases in sexually transmitted infections and substance abuse)

- Enhanced civil society engagement (including reduced violence and crime)

- Improved social and economic opportunities for young women (linked to later marriage and increased agency)

- Increased investments by young people and their families in continuing education.

When young people—especially girls or women are in charge—hierarchies flatten and organisations become more equitable. When it comes down to evaluating the success of programmes led by girls, Mama Cash and Frida Fund offer a critical perspective:[30] "The ways in which girls measure their success are as diverse as the groups themselves and do not always correspond to adult-centred or donor expectations. The fact is that girls' work responds to their unique and valuable experiences, and so does the way in which they evaluate it. The majority of the girls who participated in our study measure the success of their group on being recognised as experts in their respective fields—by the impact they have on the communities with which they work (whether they rigorously measure that impact or not)—and the empowerment of the girls with whom they work (how they define and measure that impact varies)."

Pravah, in India, begins by encouraging young people to understand and question their own values. The organisation then focuses on instilling in its participants a deep appreciation of human similarity and interconnection. This is part of a psychosocial approach designed to shape youth mindsets and, in so doing, prepare young people to become agents of long-term social change.[31]

Feminist Approach to Technology (FAT), in India, has two programmes: one that focuses on teaching science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) skills to girls and the other on developing girls' leadership skills. The central tenet is listening to girls and letting them lead. The programming is locally-driven, culturally-sensitive, age-and developmentally-appropriate, and also emphasises hands-on, applied learning through project making and delivery. In addition, the organisation encourages girls to participate in advocacy by pushing for policy changes that support gender equity. Many participants eventually embrace a broader advocacy agenda, championing opportunities for girls and young women, overall.[32]

29. "The role of child and youth participation in development effectiveness" ChildFund Australia. 2012.
30. "Girls to the front- A Snapshot of girl-led organising." MamaCash, Frida Fund. 2021.
https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/girlstothefront_report_web.pdf

31. Young People Advancing Sexual And Reproductive Health: Toward A New Normal." YIELD. June 2019.
https://www.summitfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/YIELD_full-report_June-2019.pdf
32. "Young People Advancing Sexual And Reproductive Health: Toward A New Normal." YIELD. June 2019.
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Picture credit: Vaibhav Bhardwaj for EMpower's Girls Advisory Council Launch
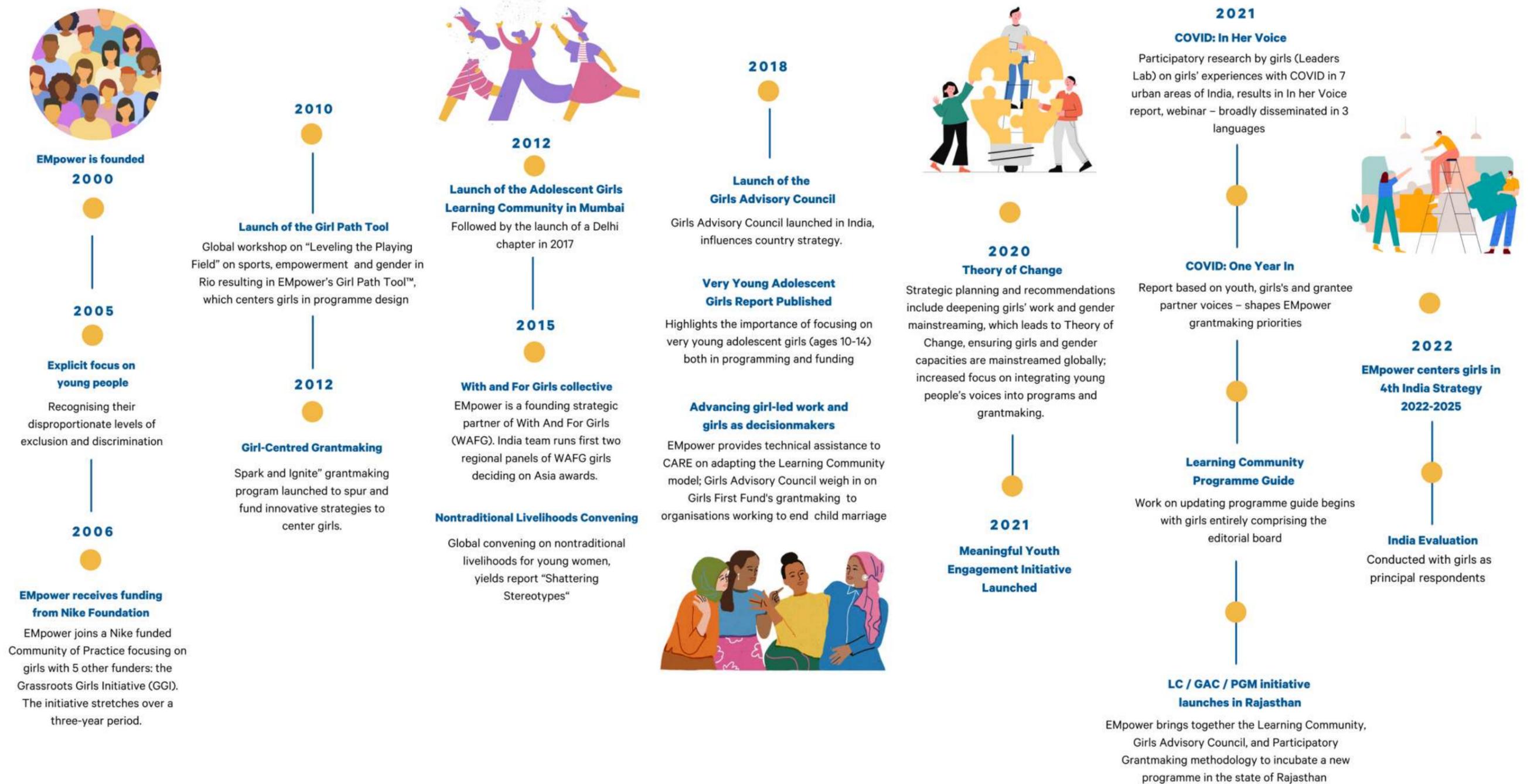
EMpower Journey

Our Timeline

Centring Youth Voices

Grantee Partners Testimonial

Learnings along the way

Our Timeline

EMpower is founded
2000

2005
Explicit focus on young people

Recognising their disproportionate levels of exclusion and discrimination

2006
EMpower receives funding from Nike Foundation

EMpower joins a Nike funded Community of Practice focusing on girls with 5 other funders: the Grassroots Girls Initiative (GGI). The initiative stretches over a three-year period.

2010
Launch of the Girl Path Tool

Global workshop on "Leveling the Playing Field" on sports, empowerment and gender in Rio resulting in EMpower's Girl Path Tool™, which centers girls in programme design

2012
Girl-Centred Grantmaking

Spark and Ignite" grantmaking program launched to spur and fund innovative strategies to center girls.

2012
Launch of the Adolescent Girls Learning Community in Mumbai

Followed by the launch of a Delhi chapter in 2017

2015
With and For Girls collective

EMpower is a founding strategic partner of With And For Girls (WAFG). India team runs first two regional panels of WAFG girls deciding on Asia awards.

Nontraditional Livelihoods Convening

Global convening on nontraditional livelihoods for young women, yields report "Shattering Stereotypes"

2018
Launch of the Girls Advisory Council

Girls Advisory Council launched in India, influences country strategy.

Very Young Adolescent Girls Report Published

Highlights the importance of focusing on very young adolescent girls (ages 10-14) both in programming and funding

Advancing girl-led work and girls as decisionmakers

EMpower provides technical assistance to CARE on adapting the Learning Community model; Girls Advisory Council weigh in on Girls First Fund's grantmaking to organisations working to end child marriage

2020
Theory of Change

Strategic planning and recommendations include deepening girls' work and gender mainstreaming, which leads to Theory of Change, ensuring girls and gender capacities are mainstreamed globally; increased focus on integrating young people's voices into programs and grantmaking.

2021
Meaningful Youth Engagement Initiative Launched

2021
COVID: In Her Voice

Participatory research by girls (Leaders Lab) on girls' experiences with COVID in 7 urban areas of India, results in In her Voice report, webinar – broadly disseminated in 3 languages

COVID: One Year In

Report based on youth, girls's and grantee partner voices – shapes EMpower grantmaking priorities

Learning Community Programme Guide

Work on updating programme guide begins with girls entirely comprising the editorial board

LC / GAC / PGM initiative launches in Rajasthan

EMpower brings together the Learning Community, Girls Advisory Council, and Participatory Grantmaking methodology to incubate a new programme in the state of Rajasthan

2022
EMpower centers girls in 4th India Strategy 2022-2025

India Evaluation

Conducted with girls as principal respondents

Picture credit: Vaibhav Bhardwaj for EMpower's Girls Advisory Council Launch

Centring Youth Voices

We spoke with Aliya Bhaldar and Seema Dosad, both alumnae of EMpower's girl-led initiatives representing two of its partner organisations. Here's what they had to say:

On obstacles overcome, and achievements that bring joy

Aliya: "Being this person who is a football coach and who also works in an ecommerce company and will soon launch her own business, these things are very challenging, especially in my environment. If you come to my [community], you will see girls not getting out of the house… if you have a conversation with some of my girlfriends, they will say what is the use of studying? At the end of the day you will have to learn how to cook, and you will have to get married."

On the importance of parental support

Aliya: "Some people think she's a really good daughter who does everything on her own, but on the other hand, people talk about me as if a girl isn't supposed to do that. A girl isn't supposed to wear shorts, and where are your manners, where is your dupatta, but my mom is so strong that she disregards all of that. And I think because I have someone who is so confident in me, I am really able to work with whatever I like."

> ❝ Meeting people was the best part of this journey for me; I met a lot of people, including a lot of girls, a lot of teachers, mentors, didis so this is the best I have got, and I am proud that I can empathise with you today. Initially I never thought that I could understand anyone's emotions because I am a very practical person. During my childhood, I never used to interact with people. ❞

Seema

The challenges they have to face and not taking 'no' for an answer

Aliya: The only challenge I can think of right now is that I work as a customer support executive for an ecommerce company. And a lot of the time when I am talking to customers, they will say things like "Sir kahan par hain? I want to talk to somebody." They immediately conclude that I am not the right person. They instantly assume that I lack the necessary information. Simply by hearing my voice. And it gets really difficult at times, you know. I have cried because I have all the information a customer wants, but because I am a girl, they assume I might not have all the information a 'Sir' might have. And that really pains me sometimes. It really hurts me when a customer says can I talk to Mr. This or Mr. That. I am like, no, talk to me. Proving that I am capable is the hardest thing, that's the biggest challenge[...] And I believe it will always be a challenge, because I will need to prove myself everywhere.

Seema: "Till date whenever we conduct an activity in public spaces (market, railway station), girls are not allowed to go. Even the nukkad, where the boys sit. The areas where we conduct activities, they don't always let us do it. They don't stop us directly, but they always say ki mat karo don't do it over here. Do it somewhere else. Don't dance or perform a flash mob, you can just do a drama if you want to. In a way they are stopping us and giving us some other choice. But we know that they are trying to stop us because dancing isn't allowed here. But we have to target those places. And we have overcome them. I still face some of these difficulties whenever I am required to participate."

On being a leader

Seema: "I served on the Girls Advisory Council, was a member of the Adolescent Girls Learning Community, and represented EMpower at panel discussions and conferences. I can say I was made the main character over here. Or, we girls were the main characters, because I was the decision maker, my girls were the decision makers. And that was common in all these programmes; it was then that I realised I could decide for myself, I could decide for an entire programme and do things I never thought I could."

The significance of putting young people in the spotlight

Seema: "If youth are not involved in project decision-making, the outcome will be basically incorrect. This is because the information we receive will not come from the people actually facing the problem."

> " Youth are passionate and eager to work. And they have a lot of ideas, like my friends, they all have solid ideas, and a strong desire to change the world. Small organisations that start hiring young people can make a big difference. Because we are the ones facing the problems, taking action will be crucial. We understand how it feels to be in this situation, and we want to change it. So, we will work on it. "

Aliya

The magic of curiosity

Aliya: "Children don't hesitate to ask you questions. But if I am a grown up, I would think before asking you a question. I mean, does that make sense? Will I come across as childish? Is that the right question to ask? Kids don't do that, they have a question they will directly ask you. Secondly, children are very creative; even if you tell them this is the way to go home, they will try to find new ways. But if you tell somebody that this is the road you have to take as a grown up person, this is the road you have to follow, then they will stick to it."

What qualities are strengthened in young people through participatory approaches

Seema: "I believe that optimism is the first quality that a young person should develop. Because when you are involving them in the programme and giving them importance, they become very optimistic about other things as well. We see everything in a positive way. I am the leader over here, I make decisions and collaborate with people. It makes us feel that we can do the same elsewhere. If I am a leader here, I can become a leader elsewhere too."

A message of hope for other girls out there

Seema: "I want to tell all the girls that nothing is impossible even if you are facing some kind of challenge in your home, locality, educational field, you can overcome it. Never stop, always keep going. And if you want help from someone, ask your mentors, parents, teachers, whoever is around you. Don't ever feel shy to take help."

Picture credit: Medha

Grantee Partner Testimonials

Medha

Building a strong network of changemakers: Medha's Alumni team

For the past five years, the Medha Alumni team has worked to provide ongoing support to its alumni community of over 18,000 youth across Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Haryana. Our approach has been to create platforms for young people to connect, share resources and support each other's career dreams. One unique feature of this approach has been to make it more community-driven, by identifying young leaders willing to devote time to solving community issues and creating peer-learning opportunities. So far, we have had over 50 such leaders from diverse regions who have not only led multiple initiatives but also helped the team in increasing visibility and a better understanding of ground-level realities.

One of the challenges we face while creating this network and identifying committed leaders is finding what motivates them to stick together and how to learn from each other's experiences. Volunteerism has become one of our guiding principles, with each of us taking ownership to bring change and create more opportunities for the community to grow together.

When we first started, we had only three people looking at 18 different regions. Soon after, we realised that we required more assistance in order to accommodate a variety of career needs and interests. We experienced a sense of giving back after a student completed Medha's training and we wanted to tap on that interest to reach a wider network. The sense of belongingness and affiliation led us to establish Medhavi Association as an independent entity.

As an anthem in our programme, Young Leaders Journey, we focus on how young people are leaders of today and not tomorrow. We started another initiative, "Weekends with Walter," a community podcast, because we realised that youth and their voices need a platform to be heard, to share opinions and drive change together. Most of the time, youth are not taken seriously, which affects their own self-worth, decision-making, long-term career choices and overall personal growth. By putting youth at the centre of our work and decision-making, we are able to overcome our personal biases and capture the actual needs with new perspectives toward reaching our overall mission.

Vacha Trust

Redefining the experience of girlhood: How Vacha puts girls at the forefront

In 1987, a group of women from the women's movement (Sonal Shukla, Meenal Patel, and Dineshwari Thonse) founded Vacha as a library and cultural centre for women. In 1995, Vacha shifted its focus from women to girls in order to challenge deeply ingrained patriarchal values. It was difficult for women to accept constructive change and realise the need to make interventions at early adolescent age when these ideals and beliefs develop. Additionally, it has been observed that adolescent girls in society receive no recognition and have been an invisible element in society. They were either subsumed into the category of women or children, with no consideration given to their specific needs or rights.

Vacha devised a preventive model of girl empowerment through a non-formal education programme in 25 bastis (slums) in Mumbai and Thane districts. Currently, it is active in 16 such locations. The programme for young adolescent girls began in Mumbai in 1995 in a state-run school where Vacha had its project office. A resource for intersectionally deprived girls started in a state-run school. The emphasis was on empowering girls through 21st-century life skill programmes. The voices of girls are kept at the forefront of all development programmes.

The key objective of this programme is to empower girls to resist gender-based violence and assert their positive rights—right to an education, the right to freedom, the right to access to resources and the right to live life with dignity. To achieve this, two major interventions are being implemented: establishing girls resource centres and building the youth empowerment programme in bastis.

Picture credit: Vacha Trust

The programme enables girls aged 10-20 years to rescript their life and initiate social change through collective leadership. The activities include:

- creating safe spaces for girls in their neighbourhood—community centres, aanganwadi or balwadi, Buddhavihar, temple, low-cost private school premises—depending upon their availability;

- conducting regular sessions and workshops on 21st century hard and soft skills— teaching English, computer, photography—understanding self and community, gender constructs, documentation and research skills, critical thinking, communication, negotiation and resource creation;

- organising field visits to expose them to locally available services and resources—post offices, police stations, municipal ward offices, primary health care centres, banks, railway stations—educational places such as the museum, planetarium, science centre, zoo etc;

- ensuring girls have access to government education schemes and scholarships;

- organising educational film screenings and gender and health fairs and training youth in community actions for social change

Vacha views its work as preventive as participation in this programme enables girls to continue education, thus preventing attrition, delaying the age of marriage and reducing their vulnerability to violence.

Picture credit: Project Khel

In our experience, participants are more receptive to gender ideology when interventions begin at an early age. The activities are held separately with 10-13 years, 14-18 years and 18-20 years. Girls participate in the resource centre programme until they reach 16 and enter the youth empowerment programme, where they are trained and encouraged to form their own youth groups that will mentor and work with the younger girls on community issues.

Our goal is to empower youth to enter the formal workspace and work with their peers in the community to effect change in their community. Working with youth has ensured the sustainability of the programme at the community level, helps build the credibility of the organisation and drives large-scale transformation. Youth participation enriches the programme outcomes through continuous feedback and interaction, allowing us to maintain our bottom-up approach in designing and implementing our programmes. Parents are now more open to the idea of girls' education and their going out of the neighbourhood on picnics or educational visits, and girls are successfully negotiating with their families for their education, mobility, and delaying marriage.

Vacha questions the historically rooted patriarchal values and notions of injustice toward girls and women. Vacha's ethos is driven by rights-based principles of practising equity approach to attain equality. For example—because girls are marginalised by gender and other intersectionalities—Vacha prioritises its resources for girls by providing educational scholarships and ensuring at least 70% girls participation in Vacha's programmes. Vacha includes boys in programmes only when girls have attained some level of leadership and are in a position to sustain their leadership even in mixed groups. Vacha creates safe spaces for women and girls where they can feel a sense of belonging, are free from social pressures/norms, are in their own space and can make their own personal decisions while feeling equal.

Investing in girls' capacities is critical for making their voices heard, redefining girlhood, having a well-informed and productive workforce and addressing the issue of structural violence. Girls' voices can be transformative and combat discrimination if policies that reduce gender inequality and resources are prioritised and resources are directed to programmes that enhance opportunities for women, girls, and their families. This transformation process can lead to revolutionary change but requires a lot of patience and collective efforts.

Multi-sectoral approaches are more likely to be effective than a single intervention. This is because the risk factors for girls empowerment are closely intertwined. For example, a lack of education or access to health services, safety, infrastructure facilities and growth opportunities and multiple vulnerabilities that put girls at risk of early marriage or violence must be addressed together.

Picture credit: Vaibhav Bhardwaj for EMpower's Girls Advisory Council Launch

Learnings along the way

The process is as integral as the outcomes, invest in it

Our first and most critical learning has been to fund the process of participation rather than the outcomes. Participatory approaches require investing time and resources in girls, and providing training and creating spaces for them to lead and make meaningful decisions. When girls are the architects of programmes, they develop the ability to think independently and make decisions, which also translates into how they negotiate their education, careers, and relationships.

Additionally, it makes programmatic sense. When girls are in charge of advising local organisations, it increases the organisations' accountability to the communities where they work, makes programmes more relevant, and facilitates solutions that are rooted in lived experience and wisdom. With girls becoming visible as role models and by changing perceptions of what girls can and should do in their homes and communities, a ripple effect is created that increases the potential for wider social transformation.

Embrace flexibility without losing sight of your 'North Star'

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that needs can quickly shift. While taking the long view is important in developing our organisation's "North Star," we must also ensure that our strategic plan not only allows for, but also embraces, flexibility. This flexibility is what can allow us to be responsive to the advice that we receive from young people and enable us to meet their articulated needs.

Build in feedback loops to deliver with agility

Our agility would not have been possible without continuous feedback loops. What we have learned is the importance of intentionally embedding these loops throughout the programme's life cycle: from conception to design, to implementation and impact assessment. Young people are involved every step of the way.

Safeguarding is non-negotiable

We have recognised the critical importance of safeguarding when working directly with young participants. We are aware that our work may seek to effect narrative change, but it must obtain the participants' full and informed consent, ensure their safety and confidentiality and not cause them any harm.
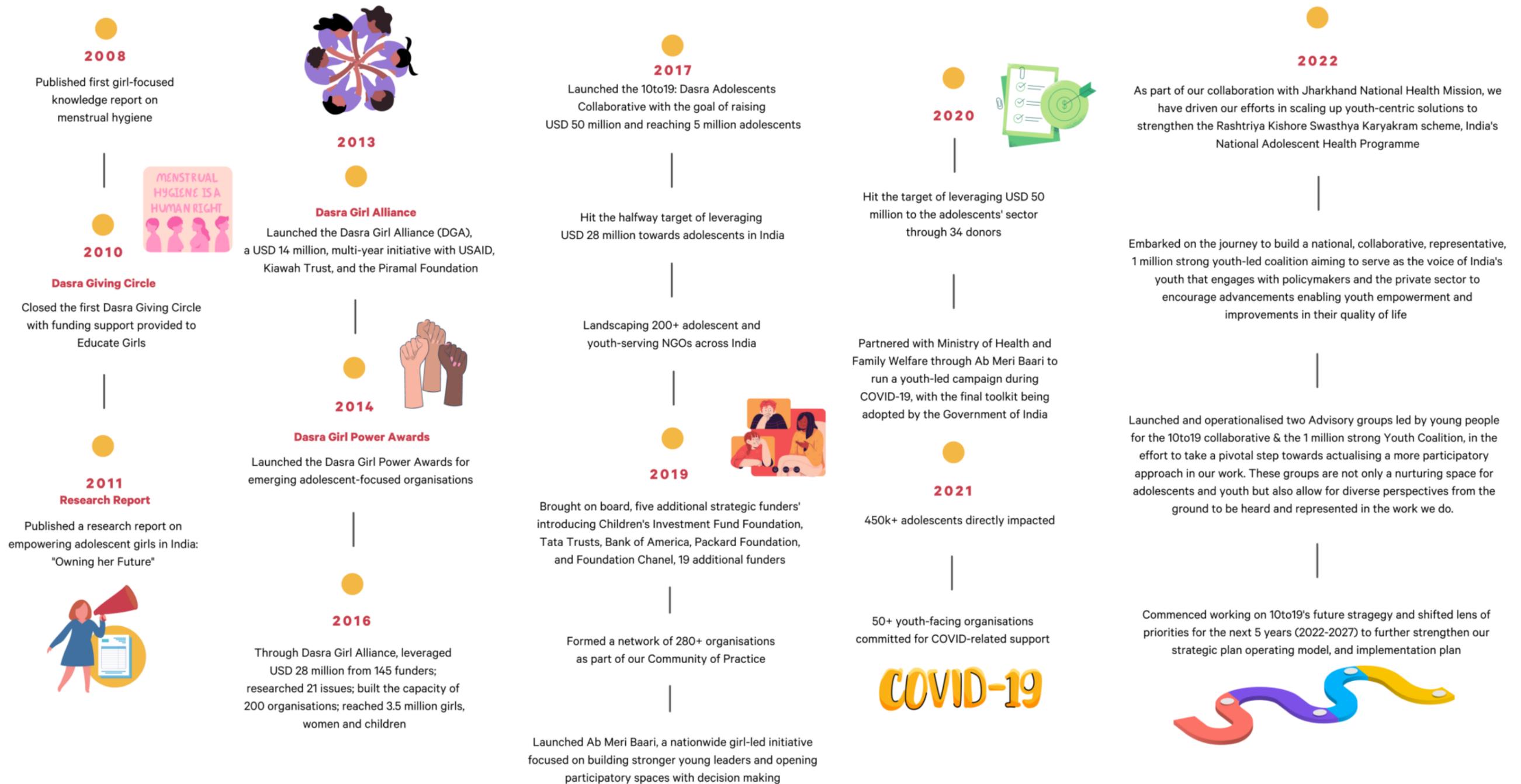
Dasra Journey

Our Timeline

2008
Published first girl-focused knowledge report on menstrual hygiene

2010
Dasra Giving Circle

Closed the first Dasra Giving Circle with funding support provided to Educate Girls

2011
Research Report

Published a research report on empowering adolescent girls in India: "Owning her Future"

2013
Dasra Girl Alliance

Launched the Dasra Girl Alliance (DGA), a USD 14 million, multi-year initiative with USAID, Kiawah Trust, and the Piramal Foundation

2014
Dasra Girl Power Awards

Launched the Dasra Girl Power Awards for emerging adolescent-focused organisations

2016
Through Dasra Girl Alliance, leveraged USD 28 million from 145 funders; researched 21 issues; built the capacity of 200 organisations; reached 3.5 million girls, women and children

2017
Launched the 10to19: Dasra Adolescents Collaborative with the goal of raising USD 50 million and reaching 5 million adolescents

Hit the halfway target of leveraging USD 28 million towards adolescents in India

Landscaping 200+ adolescent and youth-serving NGOs across India

2019
Brought on board, five additional strategic funders' introducing Children's Investment Fund Foundation, Tata Trusts, Bank of America, Packard Foundation, and Foundation Chanel, 19 additional funders

Formed a network of 280+ organisations as part of our Community of Practice

Launched Ab Meri Baari, a nationwide girl-led initiative focused on building stronger young leaders and opening participatory spaces with decision making

2020
Hit the target of leveraging USD 50 million to the adolescents' sector through 34 donors

Partnered with Ministry of Health and Family Welfare through Ab Meri Baari to run a youth-led campaign during COVID-19, with the final toolkit being adopted by the Government of India

2021
450k+ adolescents directly impacted

50+ youth-facing organisations committed for COVID-related support

2022
As part of our collaboration with Jharkhand National Health Mission, we have driven our efforts in scaling up youth-centric solutions to strengthen the Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram scheme, India's National Adolescent Health Programme

Embarked on the journey to build a national, collaborative, representative, 1 million strong youth-led coalition aiming to serve as the voice of India's youth that engages with policymakers and the private sector to encourage advancements enabling youth empowerment and improvements in their quality of life

Launched and operationalised two Advisory groups led by young people for the 10to19 collaborative & the 1 million strong Youth Coalition, in the effort to take a pivotal step towards actualising a more participatory approach in our work. These groups are not only a nurturing space for adolescents and youth but also allow for diverse perspectives from the ground to be heard and represented in the work we do.

Commenced working on 10to19's future stragegy and shifted lens of priorities for the next 5 years (2022-2027) to further strengthen our strategic plan operating model, and implementation plan

Picture credit: 10to19 Dasra Adolescents Collaborative

Let's hear from young people directly!

Centring Youth Voices

You have been an integral part of girl-led initiatives at your own organisation and at Dasra. How has your experience been?

Shukti: I began my journey as a youth leader at 17, and while these opportunities are typically given in a very tokenistic manner, this was not the case for me. I was able to actually collaborate and share my passion for SRHR and listen to stories from people from different states and be a part of their journey. Participating in youth advocacy was eye opening for me. It is crucial to get these platforms and for that to be included in the follow up processes as well—to engage on the ground level and know the process up front.

66 It was more of a learning and challenging process for me. The data presented to us differs slightly from the actual situation. This made me realise the change I really want to see and not just stick to the reports for information. I discovered how deceptive it is and how true reality only comes up when you interact with communities in person. There should be more interactive initiatives for us in this lens. 99

Tanaya

What is the one thing that you are most proud of in your journey as a youth leader?

Shukti: During the pandemic, I led and designed a conference on the national education policy where CSOs and government officials were involved. We wanted to hear their perspectives on the initiative's learnings and challenges. I then created a webinar in which young people like myself discussed our expectations from the policy, which I then documented in an article. We then presented this to the government officials. It was not tokenistic at all and that gave me the confidence that I, as a young person, can lead a webinar like this independently.

Tanaya: I designed a toolkit for menstruation and contraception, and we had to make it visually interesting and engaging without hurting anyone's sentiments. The toolkit is still being used to help people and communities.

When decisions for young people are typically made by them rather than for them, what changes, i.e. what happens when organisations put young people in the driver's seat?

Shukti: When you are actually getting a young person to talk about their challenges, there should be less tokenism and more documentation. Very often, these efforts aren't led very well. However, if you begin this, government officials will have a better understanding of the true situation. Issues won't be brushed over anymore. When young people are present on these panels, there is much more representation from various communities. With this shift, we will also see more structural and significant changes.

Tanaya: These issues are not only overlooked but also ignored. Even when we want to express our issues, we are discouraged by statements like "you are not old enough" or are limited to only few topics that can be discussed freely. Thus, openness with young people's participation is critical for effecting true change.

> " When you are actually getting a young person to talk about their challenges, there should be less tokenism and more documentation. Very often, these efforts aren't led very well. However, if you begin this, government officials will have a better understanding of the true situation. Issues won't be brushed over anymore. When young people are present on these panels, there is much more representation from various communities. With this shift, we will also see more structural and significant changes. "

Shukti
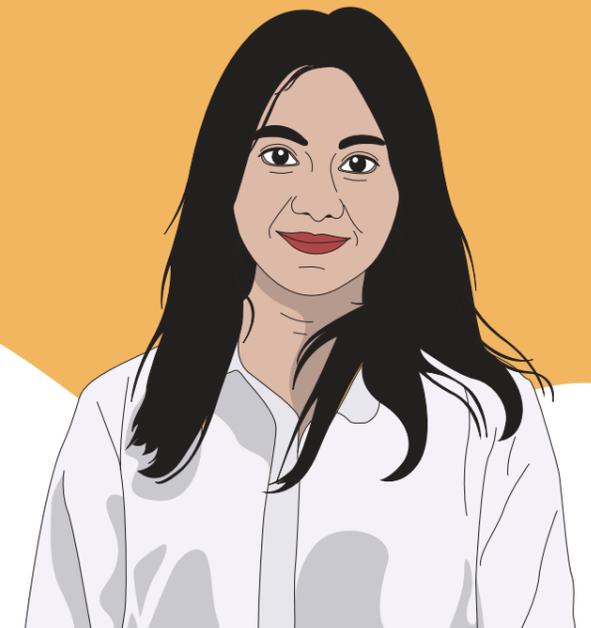
Is there a risk in not involving young people meaningfully in programmes? What is that risk, in your opinion?

Shukti: If we are talking about awareness programmes, for example, contraception, and if we don't involve young people in this conversation, they will not know what these terms mean. So, if a policy is being made without consulting young people, it will be inefficient as it will have gaps and will not address the needs of young people.

Tanaya: We have faced risks, such as not receiving the information we required at the right time, which affected my life decisions. This country's expected growth, as well as young people's lack of participation, will have a significant impact.

What are some of the challenges that you have had to face, as a girl/as a young person who is a leader?

Shukti: There were a lot of challenges for me even though I was in a very supportive environment. Because of my gender, I was not taken seriously by elderly government officials, which made me feel smaller. Boys my age would not receive the same treatment. We have always been made to feel inferior and intimidated because of apparent lack of knowledge. When one speaks on global platforms, your language is also heavily judged. As a young person, I faced all of this when I began my journey at the age of 17.

Tanaya: I've had similar problems as Shukti. Furthermore, whenever I have wanted to speak about issues that were concerning me, I have had people look at me from a protective lens and tell me that I shouldn't speak in that manner. Also, a big challenge has been breaking down existing barriers and societal norms to highlight the actual issues faced by young people.

Picture credit: Vaibhav Bhardwaj for EMpower's Girls Advisory Council Launch

Picture credit: 10to19 Dasra Adolescents Collaborative

Grantee Partner Testimonials

Pravah

Could you talk about your approach in engaging young people and one unique feature about this approach?

When discussing youth engagement, we take a psychosocial approach. The goal is to work with young people through the lens of self-understanding, to examine identity interconnections and how that relates to various social issues, and work on both those aspects by addressing each other. As a result, our work with young people is very intensive. We don't just invest energy and effort for training then but also facilitating journeys along the way. There is extensive engagement with young people on their personal journeys and what they bring into the world.

We also call this the fifth space approach. We conducted this survey with young people years ago to determine what sort of spaces help, support and build them to install change and take decisions. Through this, we realised that typically young people occupy four spaces—schools, homes, entertainment, and careers—where a significant portion of their worldview and values are formed. In general, these spaces do not equip them to make life decisions because they do not provide them the space for decision-making.

What results has this approach borne?

It is difficult to measure results of a psychosocial approach, so we look at tangible actions, such as the projects they have designed and their method of engagement, to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach. We also have methods for collecting baseline and final data,

allowing us to measure shifts or changes based on the results. We had also conducted a longitudinal study; when we work with young people it is primarily to help them develop their capabilities and realise their full potential. As a result, the impact generated by this approach usually manifests itself 5-10 years later. Hence, when we conducted this study, we noticed that about 50% of young people who had gone through these journeys chose to either join the developmental sector or make socially conscious choices. When Pravah adopted this specific approach in 1993, working with young people was unheard of. The last 30 years have been an adventure.

What are the challenges in adopting this approach?

Quantifying change becomes extremely difficult with approaches like this. Even though we really believe in this work—as it builds critical spaces—it becomes difficult to build a case for it.

What prompted you to set off in this direction?

Prior to establishing Pravah in 1993, our founders held corporate positions. In 1993, there was also an outbreak of violence in the country, with many young people involved. They were concerned at the time and wondered how young people could make these decisions. At that time, they spoke to many young people and one of the responses they received was that they were deeply disturbed and upset by what had happened, but didn't know how to deal with it. There was also hopeless apathy. They also spoke to adolescents who seemed to have an opinion but not really a means to engage with what they felt. That's when they began visiting schools in order to foster dialogue and connection. They had also gone into some of the more affluent schools on the premise that these conversations should be had with everyone.

Why, in your opinion, is it important to meaningfully engage young people? And what is the future that you envision? OR in other words, what is the potential impact of centring young people, their families, their communities, the programme, and the organisation?

Because we are all working with young people together, we are all going through a lot of internal growth. One thought that has stuck with me more than ever before is that the decisions we make today will have an impact how the world looks like in 15 years. And the people who make these decisions today, will not be present to see them play out years from now. While that is how the world works, it is very critical to recognise that the young people of today will bear the brunt of decisions taken now, and so they should be involved in the course that the country, the world and the family will eventually take. For the future, we envision intergenerational decision-making. We'd like to see a world where even a 5-year-old is taken into consideration, where no one is thought to be incapable of taking decisions or choosing things.

Picture credit: The YP Foundation

The YP Foundation

Could you talk about your approach in engaging young people and one unique feature about this approach?

For us, it's been 20 years, and as we are all aware, the inception of this space was due to a group of young people who could not find a space for themselves. A space where they would be taken seriously and viewed as people who had opinions that mattered and, where policy and advocacy level conversations would be more robust and fruitful. The one thing that we reflect on is the fundamental definition of young people; so just admitting to ourselves that they are not a homogeneous entity, and each of the intersectional identities that a young person carries is a point of expertise in itself. For instance, themes such as adolescent well-being are closely linked to themes of men and masculinities, comprehensive sexuality education, etc. None of these themes and the work around them can exist in siloes. When we think of issues that a young person might be dealing with or what their needs might be, we often hear things like: they need schools to complete their education or we need to tackle the norms to challenge child marriage. While those are extremely important, and a person's immediate reality must be worked through, the larger narrative must shift to acknowledge the root cause of power differentials that negates choice and agency of certain marginalised identities. While we are challenging child marriage, we must also challenge compulsory heteronormativity. No lived experiences should be invalidated or subsumed within other existing narratives.

What results has this approach borne?

Our thematic understanding has also evolved and grown as a result of this approach; more young people sharing their lived experiences have helped sharpen our lens. This has encouraged us to move away from heteronormative dialogues without isolating ourselves and others from other ongoing conversations.

At a micro level, we get to work with some adolescent girl leaders and our greatest struggle and pride is not attempting to define or re-define what feminist leadership should mean for them, or offering an alternative definition that cannot be challenged or expanded. Individual journeys must be recognised, as must as space for people's individuality within collectives and solidarity networks.

What are the challenges in adopting this approach?

Because we are a youth organisation, it has been difficult to be taken seriously. Whatever opportunity has come our way to include young people on platforms we've taken. We've tried to make the opportunity as useful as possible and tried to occupy that seat. We get to work with a lot of partner organisations and one thing we keep reflecting on is the power differential there too and not feel powerless. There is an awareness that in some spaces we may have more power and it is important to decentralise that as well. It is also critical to be patient during the process, as it is never instant. Waiting it out has always been a little difficult challenging.

What prompted you to set off in this direction?

While the organisation was founded in 2002, we are still looking for platforms where young people can be heard and seen as experts in the present—platforms where we can be inspired by the same mission and vision. Many of us in the organisation who are currently leading different thematic areas are very young compared to other verticals in the sector, so it is extremely personal for all of us well. It is an inward-to-outward approach.

Why, in your opinion, is it important to meaningfully engage young people? And what is the future that you envision? OR in other words, what is the potential impact of centring young people for young people, their families, their communities, the programme, and the organisation?

It is important to engage young people not because they are the future and must be taught, but because something very beautiful is lost when this demographic is not treated as knowledge experts. So, having access to these voices is beneficial to policy, and advocacy spaces that are committed to working to co-creating an equitable world. All of these spaces will benefit from the young people's experiences, so it is critical to meaningfully engage them. Engaging youth will also aid in the healing of existing intergenerational trauma.

Picture credit: 10to19 Dasra Adolescents Collaborative

Learnings along the way

There is more power in collaboration, than in duplication.

Diverse stakeholders in the sector are heavily invested in improving adolescent outcomes from a variety of perspectives. Each brings unique skills, networks and knowledge, which, when aligned, can create a catalytic impact. We can all learn from each other's successes and failures, create stronger gameplans that align with ongoing initiatives, and build on the work that has already been accomplished.

We realised early on that we would add most value if 10to19 were to occupy a unique space in the sector as a field facilitator. The initiative therefore modelled itself to build momentum by supporting others, forging multi-stakeholder partnerships, and facilitating a collective agenda to further prioritise adolescent health and well-being while continuing the united impact of collective action.

Acknowledge and share failures

At 10to19, we regularly reflect back on our work and evaluate our progress through formal and informal means. As an organisation committed to creating a stronger knowledge sharing ecosystem in the adolescent space, we frequently share our programme learnings, insights and data with others. We have realised over time that just as important as sharing promising practices or new insights, is the honest sharing of failures. This is the cornerstone of being a learning organisation and sector. Learning from each other's mistakes can helps us not only create better solutions for the populations we serve, but it can also save us a lot of time, effort and money.

There is great value in the perspective of on-the-ground practitioners & ground-up data when trying to understand impact

At the most scientific level, we have resource-intensive methods and rigorous evaluations like RCTs, long-term observational cohort studies, quasi-experimental studies, determining high impact Practices, Best Practices and so on. However, another way to identify what works, which requires fewer resources and hence, is valuable to carry out internally, is to reflect on one's programme with a bottom-up approach. It is very valuable to understanding impact, when community intelligence, programmers' knowledge and early, intuitive data are prioritised in effectively meeting community needs.

There is need to earmark significant time and effort to enable meaningful youth participation in a programme's work

In its efforts to accelerate adolescent-first approaches, 10to19 recognises the importance of championing the cause of young people, through young people. When we attempt to create more participatory spaces for young people in our programmes and processes, we must account for significant intentional investment and planning to make this happen in a meaningful way. Institutions must take proactive measures to ready themselves for youth participation, including policies and systems that ensure safety, confidentiality and consent of young people at all stages of a project. Additionally, all programme material must be adapted to suit a young audience so they too can absorb information and engage with it effectively. This can include re-articulation in age-appropriate language, translation into local dialect, presentation in a youth-friendly format and so on. Staff members also must be equipped on soft and hard skills required to enable young people to participate fuly. This training could cover aspects such as facilitation, building mutual respect, gender sensitisation, safeguarding etc.

The Way Forward

The tide is slowly turning when it comes to the active and meaningful engagement of young people. The merits of participatory approaches are not lost on organisations working with youth – when implemented with intentionality and deep thinking, they make programmes effective, relevant and impactful. Youth protagonism is a strong example of community-owned and –driven change that can gradually dismantle existing power structures and ensure the sustainability of interventions. We invite you to reflect on and consider the following suggestions:

- Together, we need to make **strategic investments in end-to-end programming for and by young people,** that strengthens their skills, capacities, and preparedness to lead change. It is also **important to remember the complexities that systemic barriers produce for young people,** and that no significant change can come unless we target these barriers.

- We are all at **different starting points in relation to adopting participatory approaches.** In order to truly advance youth protagonism, we need to collectively (I) build momentum by engaging positively with each other, (II) identify the common and unique contextual hurdles that hinder progress, and (III) in cases where the perceived need to embed such approaches is low, help acknowledge their importance and create pathways to take the first step forward.

- When we operate in silos, there is a high risk of duplication of efforts. We can achieve comprehensive outcomes if we **seize opportunities to come together by way of peer and cross-sector collaborations and partnerships between stakeholders.** We must work off individual strengths, find synergies in our ideas, and tap into the existing pool of learnings and wisdom.

- As evidenced in this report, there is no dearth of resources directed towards youth development, but what's concerning is that a seemingly small portion of it flows towards the meaningful engagement of youth people. Participatory approaches involve **a process that needs to be driven by smart philanthropy to enable and sustain narrative changes** where young people are at the center of decision-making. It requires a mindset shift in how we think about funding and resourcing regarding youth programming.

- This report and its findings are in the public domain and **we urge you to use this information to strengthen the case for youth protagonism,** and in increasing uptake of participatory approaches. We are at a critical point in our collective journey, and the time to act is now.

Acknowledgments

EMpower

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Dasra

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Picture credit: Nishtha, West Bengal