

**Adolescents in Remote Rural Regions:
Needs, Barriers, and Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency and Wellness**

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Abstract

Driven by our sense of social responsibility, we at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences created a community-based mother and child care service center. We observed that many young people (specifically ages 14-24) were neither engaged in education nor employment opportunities. We learned there was a need for a comprehensive system for informal education for young adults, imparting skills in a feasible, low-cost, and sustainable way. We then created a system to begin this work. Young people were given resources to learn to sew and were awarded certificates after completion of the program. Currently, we are working to help young people cultivate additional skills, including farming.

Background

Driven by our sense of social responsibility, we at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences created a community-based mother and child care services center in the Melghat region of the Amravati district. It is located near the community where the medical institute is situated, in Maharashtra province of India. This step was taken because of the high malnutrition rates and maternal and perinatal child mortality in this remote rural region. The region also faces extreme poverty, access problems, and a lack of infrastructure and resources.

We had already created a multispecialty health facility with around-the-clock health services in the same area.

In the course of providing community-based mother and child services, we observed that many adolescents were neither studying nor working in the field. Instead, they were sitting, chatting, and playing games like tipcat and marbles [Figure 1]. There are harmful results of young people not having access to education or employment opportunities. Far too many girls face early marriage, exploitation, and violence. And often, boys fall into dangerous habits like over-consuming tobacco and alcohol.

We saw an opportunity to encourage adolescents to foster wellness and development in themselves and their community. As we continued to engage with the community, adolescents shared they were interested in learning skills that could help them generate income but did not

know how to do so. Because of this, we decided to look into this aspect of community development—as economic development and education are essential for the health and wellness of all segments of society.

We made an effort to act on doable and sustainable initiatives that are useful for adolescents and their communities. With the right guidance, we felt that the young people we spoke with could learn skills for income generation, help themselves and their families, and promote wellness. They could surely be encouraged to grow into productive, healthy adults.

First, we checked in with them about their needs. If we were to provide a meaningful service, it was essential we learn about their wishes and what they wanted to learn. Field assistants collected information with the help of a pretested tool employing one-to-one interviews. They were asked about the skills they wanted to learn. Overall, we collected data from 1,046 adolescents (717 girls and 329 boys). 65% of boys wanted to learn sewing, 28% beautician's skills, 4% mechanics, driving, car painting, masonry, and engineering, 2% incense and candle making, and 1% other skills. 66% of girls wanted to learn sewing, 29% beautician's skills, 2% incense and candle making, 2% waste and recycling, and 2% other skills.

We were surprised by how similar and limited the adolescents' interests were. For example, very few girls wanted to learn mechanics, driving, car painting, masonry, or engineering. Overall, hardly anyone considered the economic potential of the resources locally available like waste paper, waste linen, wastewater, leaves, flowers, mud, wood, and bamboo.

The next step was to build a comprehensive system for informal education for adolescents. It was vital that we could impart high-value skills in a feasible, low-cost, and sustainable way. So, after the information gathering phase, we created a system to help adolescents and young people learn skills. We began offering sewing classes and providing sewing machines to the community. We also provided books and play items for younger children [Figure 1]. Young people who have completed the sewing course have been given numbered certificates with the teacher's signature. They can use these certificates to get financial support to fund their own sewing machines under a government program for small-scale industry for unemployed youth.

We are also attempting to teach other skills, including farming fruits and vegetables, which would help with economic development and reduce malnutrition. Learning about modern agricultural practices will also help people in rural areas create a sustainable culture around farming. Unfortunately, many villagers do not own land, and even fewer can grow crops.

Financial barriers often limit access to education and training for young people in rural areas. So, the field of vocational training in remote rural regions needs greater innovation to improve the quality of life and economic wellbeing of young people living in isolated and sparsely populated areas.¹ Therefore, we agreed that whatever the subject, training needs to be based on the requirements outlined in “Modeling of Communication Behavior and Transfer of Technology through Institutional Innovations.”²

Mahatma Gandhi, a great man from India known as “Father Of The Nation,” once said that India's strength was in its villages. Decades back, he advocated for developing skills to generate income and reduce poverty, promoting livelihood opportunities for wellbeing in rural communities. Rural skill development is an essential pillar for health and growth but is often ignored and looked upon as non-scalable in some areas of the world. This deprives young people

in these regions of quality education. Additionally, with limited financial support and poor infrastructure, this leads to the migration of many young people to urban areas.

It is a considerable challenge for the government, private sector, and educational institutions to rise up and advance projects to make our youth more employable and ensure there is no mismatch between demand and supply. Proper identification of skills and challenges faced by young people in rural areas is critical. We must continue to learn what works to promote and sustain skill development. This means documenting the measures taken to boost employment in rural areas in both agricultural and nonagricultural sectors and discovering the skills which are foreseen to be in high demand. The private sector must actively participate and introduce technology-enabled skill development initiatives.³

Overall wellness must also be centered in both process and documentation. Furthermore, skill development activities need to be cost-efficient to ensure long-term, sustainable development. Finally, it must also be directed towards improving gender equality and social inclusion.

Persisting Challenges

A challenge ahead is shifting the mindsets of adolescents and young people to value the practical, accessible, and sustainable skills their communities need. Furthermore, we need more out-of-the-box thinking, especially when it comes to education and finding ways to prevent physical and sexual violence and exploitation.

Figure 1





End Notes

1. Lal B, De D, Goswami G. “Modeling of Communication Behavior and Transfer of Technology through Institutional Innovations.” *Journal of Global Communication*. 2012;5(1):52-61.
2. Tandon, Chandni. “Gendered Barriers to Secondary Schooling for Young Women: The Case of an Urban Slum in Delhi.”
https://thesis.eur.nl/pub/13236/Chandni%20Tandon_Chandni%20Tandon%20SB1322%20Final%20RP_1485.docx.
3. Anbuthambi, B., and N. Chandrasekaran. “Impact of Skill India on Rural Youth—A Perspective.” *ICTACT Journal on Management*, ISSN (2017): 2395-1664.