Working with Communities: Learnings from Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Work

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For almost two years, the pandemic wrought havoc with lives and livelihoods around the world. Countries, communities, families and schools had to learn how to cope with the crisis at hand. Like with many other organisations, the pandemic has been a crucial turning point for Pratham. New challenges have emerged alongside chronic old problems.

It is important to remember that even before the pandemic, school enrollment levels were very high in India, but learning levels were very unsatisfactory and persistently low. For example, available estimates from 2018 indicate that less than 30 per cent of children in rural India were at grade level in Grade 3 based on data from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2018. Even after five years in school, nearly half of all children had yet to acquire the ability to read simple text fluently or do basic subtraction problems. Although the average number of years of completed schooling has been rising over time, even after eight years of compulsory schooling, a significant proportion of young people were not adequately equipped for further learning in school or for life. Two years of school closures have made many of these problems worse.

For Pratham, our response to the crisis has evolved over the last 24 months; the initial period of complete lockdown, subsequent waves of the pandemic, including the brutal second wave, uncertainty over schools re-opening and fears about continued economic disruption – each of these phases have taught us many lessons. We have learned to reach children and communities in different ways and to engage students and young people with new methods.

At a time like this, it is even more crucial to look for community-owned, local solutions, delivered at a fraction of the costs of wholly externalised interventions. By engaging a variety of actors, sufficiently empowering them through simple and low-cost solutions, and incentivising participation

through access to relevant learning and growth opportunities, it is possible to leverage communities for impactful interventions delivered at scale as we look to build back better than before.

Here are some lessons from Pratham's work with communities over the years, especially since the pandemic.

What helped mobilise volunteers at scale remotely?

Pratham has been implementing community-focused programmes since 1995. Enabling young parents to help their children, mobilising youth volunteers to champion initiatives, and engaging village leaders in community interventions lie at the core of Pratham's programming. Over the years, teams have experimented and developed ways of encouraging community participation, mobilising unpaid community volunteers and sustaining this involvement over time.

One of the biggest lessons from the pandemic has been the realisation of how much others can and want to do to help children learn, grow, and thrive - especially community members like youth, and family members like parents and siblings. Over time, Pratham has worked closely to engage and inform local communities and schools about challenges and solutions, particularly those that pertain to education and learning. Despite difficulties and constraints, a big leap occurred during the pandemic whereby mothers and youth came forward to actively work with children to engage, motivate, and support their learning.

What can be achieved through volunteer engagement?

Reliance on a community often raises questions about the quality and sustainability of interventions and their impact. It is imperative to do quick reviews to ensure you are targeting the actors most motivated and willing to contribute and develop specific strategies to sustain their engagement.

In February 2021, Pratham teams conducted what was called the "Reach and Learning Exercise". At the time, the incidence of COVID-19 seemed to be abating, and it was important to carry out structured visits to a sample of Pratham communities to understand how children had fared in the past year regarding their schooling status and learning levels. A sample

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of 270 villages and communities were visited across the country. These were locations where Pratham had already been running programmes pre-Covid. Data was gathered from approximately 20,000 children on whether they had received any inputs from Pratham since lockdown began in March 2020. Inputs included phone messages and participation in any Pratham-facilitated children's group activities, including classes. For younger children, it included involvement of their parents in mothers' group activities. Data suggests that children who received more inputs (messages, neighbourhood activities) gained slightly more in terms of basic learning than those who received fewer inputs. Also, children who were part of Pratham's volunteer classes in the community had overall better learning levels than children who did not participate.

In 2022, Pratham used the summer period (May-June) as a good opportunity to help primary school age children "catch up" on reading and basic math (especially children who were in year IV-VI). The focus was on catchment areas where Pratham teams had a presence. Across 19 states, almost 60,000 volunteers conducted learning camps in approximately 30,000 communities. Over half a million children were reached during this six-week campaign. A lean measurement framework was introduced to ensure simple but reliable tracking of the impact of this work. After the campaign, the proportion of children who could read at least a paragraph increased by 38 percentage points, showcasing a significant improvement during the 24-30 days of camps run by volunteers.

How can this work be sustained over time?

School children will continue to need substantial support with returning to school and rebuilding learning, making the role of these youth volunteers critical. These volunteers belong to the same socio-economic background as the children, and after a year and a half of lockdowns and limited mobility, are looking for opportunities that can help with their own growth and development. It is possible to offer Education for Education (EfE) programmes that provide remote education and basic skill development courses to volunteers in exchange for helping younger children with education in their neighbourhood.

As part of Pratham's EfE programme, volunteers who give time to educating children in their community are offered a very basic course in digital literacy and readiness. The course is available to volunteers and parents who are interested. After registering on Pratham Digital's YouthNet portal, a participant completes the course via online content and assignments. The course covers basic digital skills and knowledge like internet behaviour, WhatsApp, email, Zoom and how to access portals and upload data. This is the first step towards introducing more such courses to the youth in the communities. During the aforementioned Summer Campaign, interested volunteers were given a practical Digital Readiness Course in return under the concept of EfE.

Initial feedback has been promising for the various pilot programmes of the contextualised courses and support systems already underway nationwide.

What does the future look like?

Pratham works on scale and constantly thinks about maximising reach and impact with minimum cost. This philosophy and operating style are based on the belief that we have solutions that can address some of the major problems in foundational literacy and numeracy gaps in India today. Hence it is critical to constantly work on mechanisms and pathways that can help to rapidly spread the know-how that we are developing. Since 2022, Pratham's core strategy with communities involves outreach and instructional work carried out by trained local volunteers who go beyond Pratham's core area of intervention to help reach additional communities in the catchment area using Pratham's teaching and learning practices – allowing the spread of Pratham's solution beyond our current geographical scope at very little additional cost. The fact that it is driven through community partnerships also builds durability and sustainability by creating a social structure that can remain without external inputs.

Building on our deep roots and growing networks in communities, and leveraging technology for continuous communication and sharing of content, Pratham intends to significantly explore and expand the geographical reach of our work through community connections. ■