

Case Study: COMICS for Development

Partner: Communication and Development and Learning

Location: Bangalore, India

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Introduction

Comic caption

This story is based on a real-life experience of school-going children from Kachikunta village, in Andhra Pradesh. Presented in a comic format, it highlights the 'lack of infrastructure' in the villages as a factor for pushing children out of the education system. It also highlights the need to address the problem for retaining children in school.

The story is powerful as it has been generated by the children themselves. Equally importantly, the children have used an innovative art form of comics to tell their story reflecting the cultural nuances, language and local flavour.

The children who made this comic were taught their new skills through a two-phased training module in comic-making.

Activity

Conceptualised and conducted by Communication and Development and Learning (CDL), a Bangalore-based voluntary agency, in partnership with PLAN International and Myrada/PLAN, Madaksira, *Comics for Development* was formulated to explore innovative media of comics for development communication. The initiative began in 2004 as an attempt to identify the developmental needs of the child, using a rights-based approach, and seeks to address this through appropriate interventions.

Presented through visuals and little text, comics are recognised to attract people's attention and make it easy for them, even those who are neo-literate or illiterate, to understand the story and the underlying message. Audiences are able to identify with the visual representation, language and the local culture. The benefits of using comics as a way of communicating lie in their non-threatening format.

The process of developing comics has been used to help build an understanding in the concerned NGO (Myrada, Madaksira) about the needs, priorities and perspectives of the communities and the different solutions to the problem. These insights and learnings are then used to feed into the project design and its specific components.

Comics for Development is a two-phased training module designed for children on the theme of child rights. The module was created to help build the capacity of child participants to look at experiences in their lives through a child rights perspective and explore interventions to change the situation. It was further aimed at training children in communicating these responses in a comic format. The two phases were:

1) Basic phase: 'It's my RIGHT to DRAW'

2) Advanced phase: 'RIGHT Comics!'

The module sought to build basic drawing skills, knowledge about child rights, and the ability to identify incidents of violation of child rights, as well as cover principles of comic-making, and visualisation and composition.

The format also included:

- Pre-testing of comics through peer review in terms of content, format and impact, relevance and priority from children's perspective.
- Parallel session orientating the NGO staff members to the concept of the module.

These training programmes were also organised in four different rural locations in partnership with four other PLAN partners. About 100 children were addressed in this initiative. Twenty-five four-panelled and six 16-panelled stories were created through both modules. Topics included, for example, child marriage, working children, eve-teasing, and children with disability.

Impact

The reactions of the participants, partner NGOs and the peer reviewers indicated a positive impact. The medium thrilled the child participants and their peers who reviewed the programme. Their responses demonstrated that it was attractive, child-friendly, interesting, refreshing and different. They wanted their friends, members of children's clubs/*balpanchayats*¹ as well as adults - parents, teachers and community leaders - to read these comics and understand their perceptions.

The child participants also felt that parents or teachers who do not welcome suggestions from children or listen to their problems are violating child rights. Children cannot directly share their inner feelings with adults who are non-responsive or hostile. However, as the basic format of the 'comics' is story-telling, the risk of feeling threatened is absent.

The members of the self-help groups, farmers as well as active local leaders who saw these comics during exhibitions understood the stories and the message through the visuals. Their overall response was, 'We now understand that children perceive things differently than us. We adults need to listen to them.'

Lessons

The programme demonstrated that comics are powerful tools for building awareness and perspectives. In fact, comics can go beyond the issue of child rights and be used as a tool to express hidden concerns, thoughts and perceptions about sensitive issues like sexuality, child abuse and domestic violence, where expression through words could be awkward.

By creating the actual stories and through the process of generating comics, it was seen that the group process of comic-making can help form opportunities for interaction, collective thinking and consensus-building. It also evokes the active participation of

¹ Partners of PLAN International have organised children's clubs and *balpanchayats*, which are children's groups that actively discuss various issues of child rights, child participation, etc. These groups also participate in different forums at the village level and share their concerns.

members of the community, giving them an opportunity to express their inner feelings in a creative manner.

The project showed to the NGO that comics could provide valuable insights into the needs and priorities of the community. This would in turn support processes such as project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

The comics also demonstrated that despite the commonality of many issues in rural areas, the extent, magnitude and manifestation varies from area to area. For example, the issue of violence against women and need to change the mindsets of the community to accept a girl child was demonstrated differently in different areas. The manifestations were:

- Issue of female foeticide/infanticide² in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu.
- Issues such as child marriages, girl child discrimination and Devadasi system³ in Deodurga Taluk in Karnataka.

Thus, the medium of comics has tremendous possibilities of use, by virtue of its reader-friendly format, in the development sector in assessing the issues present in the local area and the needs and perspectives of the community. Emerging from the local cultural context, this medium can enhance an understanding of the minds of the target group and enable planners to incorporate this understanding into development processes.

Comic-making for development is an innovative, creative and fun medium. While it focuses on the same issues, it does so a little differently: it is an attempt by CDL to counter the grim rhetoric of development writing.

² The prevalent form of sex-selective **foeticide** is the aborting of the female foetus after scanning during pregnancy, while female **infanticide** is the systematic killing of girls at or soon after birth.

³ This system involves offering the girl child to the goddess Yellamma. As these girls have to lead their lives to certain norms, established by the exploitative higher communities, often the only livelihood option open to them is prostitution.