



# Young voices of change

How children and youth have  
made a difference to governance  
in their villages and cities



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# Young voices of change

*How children and youth have made a  
difference to governance in their villages  
and cities in India*

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Young Voices of Change

*A report on how children and youth have made a difference to governance in their villages and cities in India*

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# Ripples of change

**Y**oung people are tomorrow's leaders – it's a saying politicians and bureaucrats never tire of. We have youth in the Parliament, state legislatures and now, the Panchayati Raj system, the third tier of government. Nowhere is their impact as much as in the third tier of government. Coming from the masses and acquainted with their problems and aspirations, today's youth as panchayat members are well-placed to make a difference.

They are already doing so, in many different ways. What sets these youth apart from others is their background and training. Most are from rural India, or from slums, many are Dalits and adivasis. These communities have been out of the political mainstream and the development paradigm. Despite spending billions on their 'development' the government has failed to uplift these communities that account for close to half of India's population.

They have been trained over decades, from childhood, through adolescence and into their 20s, by a wide network of organizations. As a result, they have understood the vast power and entitlement network that the national and state governments have created ostensibly for them. This network has failed to deliver so far. Now, these enlightened youth aged 18 to around 35, have begun to take matters into their hands and are creating ripples in different corners of India.

Not only the youth, women too have come forward in the remotest of places. In villages a gun-shot away from Naxalite camps in Jharkhand, the deserts of Rajasthan and far-flung villages of Karnataka, women from the self-help group movement have assumed the lead to improve their lives. As the saying goes, improve the lives of women and you improve the whole community.

These largely illiterate and still oppressed groups work within their existing social framework to improve their lives and those of their children. They put forward their issues in meetings of the gram sabha, the block samitis and other forums where their village's development is decided.

Women and youth have engaged with the government structures in different ways. In Orissa, they have been elected to the panchayats and are in the driver's seat. In Karnataka, they monitor government programmes related to health, education and mother and child health. In Andhra Pradesh, they use the mass media as a pressure tool to hold local government officials to account. In Utrakhand, they bring village issues to the notice of the government through meetings and the mass media. In Delhi, they mobilize slum communities around social issues and influence corporators to do their job better.

Theirs is still a new movement, not more than a few years old. It is fragile and can be easily subverted by the powerful political structure that they are seeking to influence. What is encouraging is that while they are willing to work with politicians and bureaucrats, they are unwilling to become part of their milieu. They are clear about their role – to make a difference in their communities by direct action or influence the formal government machinery to do a better job.



They have succeeded in many places, and failed in others. There are hundreds of cases, a few of which are documented in this publication, where youth and women have influenced local officials and bureaucrats to deliver the goods. There are also many cases where they have not succeeded, but even here they do not give up trying.

What is startling is the difference that these youth and women make to the quality of local government when they have an effective voice. The contrast between two tribal pockets, one in Orissa and the other in Jharkhand, is striking. In Orissa, educated youth trained in leadership have worked to get entitlements and jobs, secure their village's natural resources and develop new livelihood options. In Jharkhand, traditional governance structures have become a tool in the hands of contractors and local government officials to squander resources; they spend millions on rural development and have little to show.

Their motivation and determination to improve their lives is absolutely remarkable. The words, it cannot be done, do not seem to exist for these young people. They are not skeptical of the government, having realized that officials and politicians are their allies, not adversaries. They have to work with the system to make a difference, not against it. They have to extract their due and for this, constructive criticism and occasional activism is needed, not outright opposition or defiance. Leadership for them is carrying their community's development forward.

All of them are political creatures. They understand that a mass base, whether as elected panchayat representatives or members of village youth group or a youth group working in a slum, is critical to getting heard. The system does not listen to individuals but groups; the bigger the better. They also understand that individuals can be co-opted but it is harder to buy out an entire group.

This publication carries 10 detailed reports with case studies and photographs of trends in effective local governance. We have looked at how youth and women have been trained in leadership and have made a difference in the villages or slums. In most cases, they have started to make a difference only very recently as a result of years of training, education and motivation. The process of social change that we have documented has been slow but, where communities have taken ownership, it has been irrevocable. It can be argued that these are small isolated cases. To counter this, it has been demonstrated that change begins at the village level and then percolates upwards.

Mr Nitya Jacob has done commendable field work for this publication and presented it in a reader friendly style. I am specially grateful to Dr. Nalini Abraham of Plan International, for taking special interest in strengthening local government systems and sponsoring this project. This publication will be a trendsetter for recognizing the critical role of panchayats and municipalities to function as institutions of self-governance.

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