

# 'SHIKSHA SAMVAD' (EDUCATION DIALOGUE): STRENGTHENING PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENT WITH EDUCATION

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## I. THE PROBLEM

### 1. *Growing distance and distrust between the school and community*

The exit of middle-income families from the government school system has changed the composition of the classroom as children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds now dominate the demographic profile of these schools. As a result, a gap has appeared between the social class of children and their parents and that of the teachers and education administrators. The increasing social distance has led to a hostile environment that dissuades constructive interaction between the two. This, along with broader trends of a widening rural-urban gap, increasing economic inequality as well as lack of parent awareness have all served to exacerbate the social distance and create the perception of disinterest about the other by both the school administration and the community. Needless to say, engagement of the community with the school is an essential factor for improving both, the quality of the school system and the quality of learning.

### 2. *Lack of decentralization and community participation in education*

The success of the Right to Education (RtE) Act depends largely on ensuring

accountability at a decentralized level – closer to the people. However, while the Act includes certain provisions that could further this goal, such as mandating the formation of school management committees [SMCs], and the allocation of implementation and grievance redress functions to local authorities – largely the panchayati raj institutions [PRIs] – neither of them have been enabled to perform their roles adequately. SMCs have not been formed in accordance with rules; where they have been formed they have not been adequately trained; their meetings and other functions are not carried out as mandated. The local authorities suffer a worse fate, as the PRIs are wholly ill equipped to deal with the roles assigned to them in terms of human or financial resources. Coupled with the absence of a grievance redress mechanism within the education system, parents and children have no means of staking a claim to their rights under the Act. This has further limited the extent of community participation in the school.

In order to address these challenges, as well as create and fix accountability within the education system, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) – the legally mandated monitoring body under RTE – recommended the idea of *Shiksha Samvad* as a modality to enable constructive engagement between the community and education administration.

## II. THE IDEA OF SHIKSHA SAMVAD (EDUCATION DIALOGUE)

### 1. *Initiating dialogue between the administration and the community*

The idea of a '*Shiksha Samvad*' (Education Dialogue) is to hold a dialogue between the local education bureaucracy and the people with the objective of providing an institutional platform that allows for sharing of concerns, as well as finding solutions to problems related to the functioning of schools. The key elements in this process are the creation of space for active participation by the local community and a process of dialogue, as opposed to confrontation or hostility, often seen in community-state interactions in the past. Such a process seeks to foster trust between the community and the administration, and thus relies on reasoned dialogue between the two. Further, it warrants fixing accountabilities within the system so that problems can be systemically addressed. Recommended by the NCPCR, '*Shiksha Samvads*' have been institutionalized through Government orders in a few states, including Rajasthan. While the Samvads could be held at any level of education administration, they are ideally held at the lowest level – i.e. Panchayat level – so that they can be easily accessible to the people, ensuring their active participation.

## 2. Enforcing accountability through 'praxis'

In addition to ensuring maximum participation, a Samvad at the lower level of bureaucracy also helps to fix 'accountability through praxis,' at that level. For instance, if the block officer is able to find the solution to a problem at her/his level, it establishes the block office as accountable for that problem. This can then serve as a benchmark for practice in other areas as well, which is important given that accountabilities have yet to be fixed across the system. In fact, one of the key reasons that NCPCR recommended this form of dialogue was the inherent opportunity in a Samvad to fix accountability. The absence of clear and defined roles and responsibilities of education officials meant that when NCPCR received complaints about schools from all corners of the country, it was not clear where these complaints needed to be directed or who could be held accountable for each type of complaint. However, the Samvad enabled a platform whereby the process of addressing complaints inadvertently led to the fixing of accountabilities. This is not to deny that there remain a large number of complaints or problems that cannot be handled at the lowest level of the bureaucracy and those have to be taken up at higher levels. But, the fact that at least some of the issues can be handled at lower levels can be transformational in increasing the faith of the people in the system. Moreover, participation of the people as well as the format of an immediate response mechanism to find solutions helps to motivate the lower level bureaucracy and boosts their morale by providing them with a sense of achievement.

## III. THE FORMAT OF A SHIKSHA SAMVAD (EDUCATION DIALOGUE)

The suggested format for a *Shiksha Samvad* is as follows:

1. Held monthly at the Block level and quarterly at the District level. The community along with the local administration can decide the need and frequency of a Samvad at the State and/or Panchayat level. It is important to take cognizance of the fact that Panchayat level Samvads are likely to be more accessible to the majority of people, but State level Samvads might result in greater action taken.
2. The administration should provide the logistical support for holding the Samvad. In other words it should be held at an official location and as far as possible should be financed by the local bureaucracy as well.
3. All related government officials must be present at the Samvad in order to tackle the range of issues that could be presented.
4. In the initial period, a core group of facilitators from civil society would be needed to anchor the Samvads. They would be responsible for mobilizing people for the Samvad, documenting the proceedings of the Samvad and following up with the concerned officials on decisions taken at the Samvad. This would also help ensure continuity and provide a support system.
5. Complaints should be presented in writing to the concerned government officers. They could be individual complaints or collective complaints. People from the community should also be present at the Samvad to provide testimonies related to both forms of the complaints presented.
6. The complaints should provide all relevant details regarding complainant to ensure a precise and speedy response.
7. The concerned government officials must respond to all the complaints, either suggesting a local solution involving the community or official action within a fixed timeline, or notification to higher authority if the complaint is beyond the authority of the officials present.
8. The Samvad could also be used as a platform for sharing of information by government officials on new initiatives, orders, findings of audits or surveys; action taken reports and follow up from previous Samvads, and by the people on whether orders have been received and implemented on the ground. The information sharing can be followed by an open discussion. Good practices could also be presented at the Samvad.
9. A pre-determined focus area could be reviewed every month. For instance, functioning of SMCs, status of infrastructure requirements etc.,
10. The Samvad must be open to the public and held in an atmosphere free from fear and intimidation.

The format of the Samvad has been kept deliberately broad in nature, so that respective states can have the freedom to carve out the details of the modalities, based on their specific contexts and priorities. The core elements however that must be maintained are transparency, open-ness and an atmosphere free from fear to elicit maximum participation by the people.

#### IV. POTENTIAL AND POSSIBILITIES OF A SHIKSHA SAMVAD

1. It creates a platform for parents, teachers and officials to interact regularly.
2. Enables discussion and deliberation on issues emerging in the schools resulting in innovative solutions, as all concerned collaborate.
3. Helps to clarify roles and responsibilities, as officials are held accountable.
4. Government rules and provisions are also made clear to people.
5. Time bound action is enabled.
6. The bureaucracy is benefitted as previously unknown issues are brought to their notice directly by the community members.
7. Convergence of different departments, involved in the running of a school, is made possible at the Samvad, as all concerned officials participate.
8. Reduces paper work as some complaints can be handled at the Samvad itself.
9. Voices that may go unheard, particularly those of children, receive an opportunity to be heard.
10. Helps to restore confidence between people and the administration as action is taken.

#### V. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. A day and time should be fixed for holding the Samvads, which should be well publicized to ensure maximum

participation. The agenda for the Samvad should be made public and available as far as possible in advance of the meeting.

2. There should be large-scale awareness on *Shiksha Samvads*.
3. The government should take responsibility of hosting the Samvads and making the logistical arrangements.
4. Officials should be trained in the process of *Shiksha Samvad*.
5. Facilitators should be appointed or nominated, so that they can assist in community mobilization and follow up of decisions taken at the Samvads.
6. There should be a separate budget allocated for holding *Shiksha Samvads*.
7. The state government must regularly review the proceedings of the *Shiksha Samvad* at the Block and District levels and taken remedial or follow-up action as required
8. Complaints received at the Samvad should be registered and receipts issued with clearly stated timelines for action.
9. The minutes of the Samvads, including decisions taken and fixed timelines should be prepared by a government appointee and made public both on the government website and in the respective bureaucratic offices.