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Spotlight on Shantha Sinha (India - MV Foundation)

"Poverty is no excuse for child labour"

Brussels 31 July 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): The MV Foundation, an Indian NGO, has taken almost 400,000 children out of work and placed them in schools. Community mobilisation, dialogue with teachers and lobbying are the keys to its success. Shantha Sinha, the founder of the NGO, tells us about the MV Foundation and its desire to work more closely with trade unions.

How did the MV Foundation come into being?

We started our fight against child labour in 1991. Our foremost concern was to free children from debt bondage and put them into school. We started out in three villages, informing parents about a law prohibiting debt bondage, explaining to them that employers could be punished, and that the advances they had received in the form of a loan could be cancelled, as it is illegal to force a person to work. We approached the village communities. They were not easy to convince and said to us that if people refused to repay a debt they would have no source of credit in the future. We explained to them that if everyone got together they could find their own way of generating credit, without having to rely on an outsider.

We also had to convince the families that it is wrong to force a child to work. We set up local volunteer groups, who went from door to door to spread the message. Their parents never went to school, but the people who volunteered had been educated and felt that they had benefited a great deal from it, that it had given them some dignity.

What lessons were you able to draw from your experience in the first three villages?

We managed to free 30 children from debt bondage at that time. There was a lot of tension, as most of these children were Dalits (untouchables). The youngsters from higher castes wouldn't accept these children; they spurned them. Contact with these children was banned in the villages. When we wanted to enrol them at school, the education authorities also told us that these children, aged 10 or 11, were too old to be accepted into first grade, but they didn't have the level required to enter a higher class. Because of the tension in the villages, and the schools' refusal to accept these children, we had to improvise a solution for them. Some of the parents were able to offer us small premises where our volunteers started to give the children some basic schooling. By the start of the next school year, they had already reached the level required to enter third grade.

This experience taught us that children needed to be prepared for going to school, through the "bridge courses". We also had to find a way of

easing the tensions in the communities. Having realised that the children in bonded labour were not the only ones not going to school, we came to the conclusion that we should work in favour of all out-of-school children, to ease the tensions. Even those who were opposed to our action realised that there could be a child out of school in their own community, not only among the Dalits. This allowed us to build broader alliances: we were able to convince more people to join in our fight against child labour by talking about the right to education, rather than targeting debt bondage alone, which creates many tensions. Another advantage of this approach is that it includes girls, who generally do hidden, unpaid work. We are able to include them too, by talking about access to education for all children.

Has the MV Foundation expanded much since then?

Having started out with three villages and a few dozen children in 1991, we are now active in around 6000 villages, and have taken around 390,000 children out of work and put them into schools, supporting them until they finish tenth grade. We realised that we couldn't provide "bridge courses" for all of them, so many former child labourers are sent directly to school, but we meet up with their future teachers before enrolling them. We explain to them that it's not only their job to teach children who are already in school, but also to protect children's rights in general. We define the role of a teacher as a teacher for all the children in the village. It is up to them to go and find the children not attending school and prepare them to enter the class corresponding to their age.

Do all the teachers agree to adopt this approach?

They were very reticent in the beginning, but they've now realised the self-fulfilment to be gained from looking after all children. Because there were no textbooks for these children, the teachers had to come up with gems of creativity and imagination. It was the first time that they were put to the challenge as teachers. They enjoyed helping to get these children ready for school; they created their own lessons, it was no longer the State telling them what they had to do.

In the areas where we aren't active, the teachers still have a negative attitude towards these children. When we meet them, we tell them that we appreciate the difficulties they have. In some classes, there are 80 children for a single teacher. We want to ally ourselves with them in the fight for better working conditions.

How do you embark on your work against child labour in a new village?

We no longer do all the work ourselves. When tackling a new village, we go directly to the elected local authorities and tell them all the things they could do to eradicate child labour from their villages. We no longer go into the poor families' homes, we leave that job to the elected representatives and our volunteers, who we train for this purpose.

Is it easy to convince them?

We only go to the villages where we are invited, whether it be by a youth group, for example, or another NGO, or an elected representative. We explain to them how to implement the strategies themselves. We

continue to work in our traditional areas of action, and only expand to other areas through other agents, which produces more lasting results. Our approach is very easy to copy, you don't need the MV foundation to apply it, anyone can do it and we can advise them. Our field of action grows more quickly in this way. India is a very large country, we cannot do everything on our own.

Once the parents have been made aware, what is the next step?

Two issues are raised at this point. One: "We are so poor that we need the child's income." Two: "Ok, I'll send my child to school for 10 years, but can you guarantee him or her a job afterwards?" These are good points. Everyone, including the World Bank, says that children work because of poverty. But we point out to the parents whose children work that there are other children in the neighbourhood who go to school, in spite of the poverty. We also present them with young people who have gone to school and who, even if they don't have a job, are doing better than their illiterate children, as they have dignity, they have self respect. They are invited to fulfil various tasks in the village because they are educated, they are respected by the others. We show them that the point of education is not only to get a job but also dignity. They understand this type of reasoning.

What about the income loss argument?

We tell them to look at other parents who are just as poor as them but still manage to send their children to school. We sometimes see parents with two spare sacks of rice who do not send their children to school whilst the neighbouring family has no food reserves but do send their children to school. This argument convinces the most reticent. Then they see their children transform: they learn to sing, to read, to write, they play, ... They are really different from how they were before, and their parents are proud of them. This encourages them to invest in their children's education, even though it incurs costs (books, uniforms, enrolment fees, ...). And if they can't afford to pay them, they protest to the authorities, reminding them that the rule is no enrolment fees.

What happens when there is no school in the region?

This happens a lot. In such cases, we set up a school with the contributions made by the community. Our local volunteers teach there, and we encourage the community to go to their local government to demand teachers. At least 600 of the schools we have set up have been recognised by the government, which has sent teachers to them.

Isn't it difficult to convince teachers to leave the city to go and work in small villages?

This can be a problem, but they know, at the same time, that the communities are involved and that they respect them; they are motivated. We have seen teachers who walk 13 or 14 km to go and teach in a village where the community really wants them. This community involvement gives the teachers the energy they need.

What about the big cities where communities of this kind don't exist?

Such communities do, in fact, exist. We have just started working in Hyderabad. There are some very militant leaders in the shantytowns, who

have already fought for the respect of many fundamental rights: housing, water, electricity, public transport, etc. We say to them: "You have already led so many battles, now you can join forces with us to demand education for children. Sometimes, all it takes is an organisation like ours to raise awareness about the importance of education to set the ball rolling. The shantytown leaders are now making contact with the political parties to demand schools, and are having success.

Is it more difficult to convince parents to send their daughters to school?

Yes, it's more difficult for girls to go to school, but if the climate is right, it's possible. We speak to families about little girls' basic right to enjoy their childhood. We approach many mothers and ask them whether they don't feel that they have been deprived of their childhood, and whether they want the same for their daughters. Many mothers do not.

Do you work with trade unions?

It's important to work with trade unions, particularly as many Indian unions have close links with a political party. The political parties have never really expressed a clear enough position on child labour. They don't yet see it as a fundamental issue. To change this, we have to work with trade unions, so that they press their party to develop a policy regarding child labour and education. Our experience has taught us that eliminating child labour is possible, but it must lead to sustainable government policies.

At international level, we have been working with the IBB (International Federation of Building and Wood Workers) on a project to promote brick workers' right to education. We are also working with agricultural workers' unions, in the cotton sector. Since the employers are multinationals, we'd like to work in partnership with international unions.

We have also set up a Forum for the protection of children's rights, which approaches the media when there are serious violations. If a trade union adds its voice to that of the Forum, it gives it more reach, more strength.

Interview by

Samuel Grumiau

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