



Empowering Citizens to Demand Corruption-Free Access to Livelihood Entitlements in Karnataka, India

CSO:	Paraspara Trust (PT)
Years:	2009 - 2010
Country:	Karnataka, India
Amount:	\$ 17,850 USD
Sector:	Controlling Corruption in Delivery of Social Services: Social Safety Net

Corruption Problem:	Fair price shop owners embezzle entitlement benefits and authorities do not intervene
Tools employed:	Capacity Building, Survey, Focus Group, Vigilance Committee, Advocacy, Community Empowerment, Coalition Building

Paraspara Trust (PT), a local CSO in Karnataka, India, has successfully implemented the project: “Addressing Corruption in the Public Distribution System (PDS) by Citizen Groups – a pilot project in Bangalore”. The project empowered citizens to ensure corruption-free service delivery of social safety net entitlements as set forth by the law. The project was a success; the incentives for citizens to follow the project objectives and methodology should be self-perpetuating in the long run. However the challenge of sustainability remains.

Corruption Problem Addressed

Corruption in the Public Distribution System (PDS), a social safety net entitlement program, is a major issue in India. Corruption permeates seemingly all government departments in Karnataka, including the Department for Food and Civil Supplies. The complex system of intermediaries and contractors active in purchase, distribution, and stocking of commodities gives way to often harmful discretionary decision-making by officials and makes oversight and control difficult.

A maximum of corrupt activities takes place in the issuance of BPL/APL (Below Poverty Line/Above Poverty Line) cards to eligible families, where the

victims are the urban poor and the most vulnerable. PT conducted a survey in 30 urban slum communities covering 5,000 families to identify BPL eligible families. The survey identified about 750 eligible families (15%), who either did not have BPL or APL ration cards or reported having to pay middlemen to bribe the concerned officials to obtain the entitlement cards. Based on these findings, PT identified a variety of corruption problems, mainly pertaining to the issuance and management of the distribution of BPL/APL cards.

As a consequence and in the absence of BPL cards, eligible poor families purchase rations from the open market and pay more than INR 25/kg for rice and INR 40/litre for kerosene (the primary fuel for cooking). As most family members are daily wage earners in unorganized (non-unionized) sectors, like construction and garments, or are domestic servants, these prices are unaffordable to them. Their livelihood is threatened and their guaranteed rights are violated. Ironically, the government is trying to reduce the issuance of BPL cards, since there are so many bogus cards. This compounds the difficulty of getting a BPL card.

Actions Taken by PT

Baseline survey: With the support of independent volunteers and PDS Monitoring Committee (PDSMC) members, Paraspara Trust conducted a survey regarding access to PDS in 30 urban slum communities of Bengaluru. 5,000 families from these 30 slum communities were included in the survey. The survey showed three types of information: details of eligible families, shop owners' information, and views of interviewers. It revealed that 15% of eligible families (750 out of 5,000) did not have BPL/APL cards, and that shop owners possessed bogus BPL cards at about 10-20% of the total entitlement claims made at their shops. Shop Owners misused these cards to sell commodities in the black market for higher prices.

Focus Group Discussions: PT shared the survey information with the community through 30 focus group discussions. It highlighted the survey findings and explained the problems faced by eligible families. These discussions brought in more information and PT realized that most community members had paid more than INR 500 for their entitlement cards (instead of the stipulated INR 67) and even though had not yet received their cards. One fair price shop had 30 additional bogus BPL cards apart from the 150 legitimate cards allotted to it. In another case, two brothers had a shop license each, but were maintaining only one shop. Eligible families, PDSMC members and PT volunteers communicated the results of the focus group discussions to the Department of Food and Civil Supplies, making four visits to the Department.

Orientation of PDSMC members: PT organized four orientation sessions for PDSMC members to empower them to work towards corruption-free PDS outlets in the community. The results of the survey and the importance of model fair price

shops to prevent corruption in PDS were discussed also. 120 PDSMC members participated in these sessions and planned PDSMC-level action plans to prevent corruption in the future, issuing new cards to eligible families. The plans also included provisions for the availability of corruption-free commodities in the fair price shop.

Key Actors: The main actors to exert transparency, and hold service providers accountable are the PDSMC members. They are community volunteers who have stepped forward to fight corruption and devote time and energy to monitor the PDS scheme. PT provided these volunteers with information and training to plan and act locally. At the next higher level, representatives from the PDSMCs try to coordinate efforts with the government officials, other NGOs, and the general public in the *Dhanya Hakku Vedike* (DHV or Food Rights Forum).



Members of the *Dhanya Hakku Vedike*

Eligible family members were also identified as key participants. They participated in awareness raising activities to act integer and not pay bribes, thereby preventing and acting against corruption bottom-up. As the ultimate beneficiaries, their role and involvement is vital. Finally, officials from the Department of Food and Civil Supplies play a key role, as they are the 'receiving end'. In addition to the stakeholders above, PT set out to work directly with the fair price shop owners and their



association to better understand the causes of corruption and to elicit their support in cleansing the system. PT and the Right to Food Campaign provide necessary inputs to the program by way of training, information, and facilitation of efforts at grassroots and official levels.

Challenges:

The immediate challenge in the program was to deal with informal community leaders who exploit people as middle man. They are the nexus between the officials and eligible families. It proved equally challenging to orient and sensitize government officials and engage them constructively to fight corruption as there are a number of officials who directly benefit from the corrupt practices. Another tough challenge has been the identification of bogus ration cards that are hidden from plain view. Trying to identify fake cards, PDSMC members and PT staff were threatened by middle man and fair price shop owners. Finally, there is a challenge preventing political interference in the system as the huge profits tempt politicians to use their powers to influence and meddle with the service delivery to appropriate funds for cronies or themselves.

Impact and Results Achieved

Notwithstanding the difficult environment, PT obtained excellent results and worked vigorously to overcome the challenges posed:

- ✓ The conducted survey and its results served as a welcome and much needed tool for advocacy.
- ✓ Bribe payments to community leaders and middlemen were reduced by 75%.
- ✓ PT enabled the processing of 240 pending applications of BPL cards to eligible families.
- ✓ 120 PDSMC members work in the community.

- ✓ Officials agreed to check the bogus cards and to engage with the communities.
- ✓ The two brothers agreed to open separate outlets as required by their licenses.
- ✓ PDSMC and DHV members have been sensitized, educated and empowered.
- ✓ PT increased the effective participation of citizens in the Right to Food Campaign

The sustainability of the program relies on the PDSMC and DHV volunteers to check on corruption in their communities and allow citizens to benefit from the laws that are in place, however not enforced and monitored sufficiently by the government agencies responsible. While there is no direct monetary cost involved in running these groups, volunteers have the incentive to come together and act as they themselves benefit from the correct administering of the PDS scheme. The absence of PT will not deter them from continuing their activities they have learned in the short period of one year. Given the prominence and focus on the issue of corruption at both local but also the national level, the groups promoted through this project will continue to evolve as a movement, perhaps not even limited to the PDS scheme alone.

Documentation

Project completion reports (PCRs) and Project completion assessments (PCAs) can be accessed at www.ptfund.org under the “Where-we-work” tab.

PT’s website can be accessed at <http://paraspara.org/index.php>

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