

# AS THE SALT IN THE SEA

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The Story of Project ACCESS

Mina Swaminathan  
and  
L.S. Saraswathi

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**M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai**

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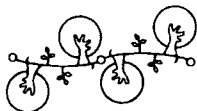
The Story of Project ACCESS

M.S.Swaminathan Research Foundation 2003

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## Foreword

I have great pleasure in introducing this extraordinary book about an extraordinary project. In my professional career of over 50 years, I have come across very few programmes like ACCESS, which has accomplished so much in so many dimensions in such a short span of time and with so little money. Project ACCESS has been an exciting adventure in confronting what I consider to be one of the most critical concerns of our country: an understanding of the issues relating to care of the child and the social recognition of the psychological, physical, and institutional support needed by the mother.

I have watched with great interest the birth and growth, initially, of DACCS (Development of Alternative Child Care Strategies) and, later, COTA (Children on the Agenda) and ORS (Operation Resource Support) within ACCESS. I therefore share the views of those like Ms. Bhuvanewari who feel "Project ACCESS has carved a niche for itself and it cannot close." I know the work will continue in a variety of ways, but more importantly, from the viewpoint of the Foundation, through the Uttara Devi Centre for Gender and Development, of which Mina is the Honorary Director. Dr. Jayashree Vencatesan has captured this evolution in the following words.

*If I were to represent the work of Project ACCESS in diagram, first, it was like a small child and woman, then it went on to become a woman and a child, then it went on to become a man, a woman and a home, then it eventually became gender and development programmes.*

Project ACCESS has brought out powerfully the message of child care as a woman's issue. As pointed out in this book, when a woman says, "I quit working because I needed to take care of my child," society accepts it as the natural instinct of a mother. This is obviously not enough—there is need for the involvement of father and family, society and state, if children are to be born for happiness and not just for existence. Lamenting the gender divide in his own way, Mahatma Gandhi said in 1920: "Man is born of woman; he is flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone. Come to your own and deliver your message again. Let us tear down the *purdah* with one mighty effort" This book is an authoritative reminder of that message.

I do not wish to repeat what is contained in this absorbing account of the philosophy and outputs of a project that touches the very fundamentals of human life and behaviour. I would, however, like to quote from the co-author, Dr. L. S. Saraswathi's analysis of the factors that led to the success of Project ACCESS, since the lessons learnt from the design and implementation of this project have a large extrapolation value.

*What stands out is the clarity of vision behind Project ACCESS; the breadth and depth of the vision with a focus on the central theme of Early Childhood Care, Development, and Education... The feature that was most stunning was the whole array of individuals and groups that were brought together to work towards the several different issues concerning*

ACCESS, with very broad and sweeping objectives, but a modest programme of work to start with.

Sometime in January 1992, I ran into Rekha Wazir, then working with the Bernard van Leer (BvL) Foundation, in Delhi. She found the whole concept of FORCES as an advocacy tool for the young child most exciting, and encouraged me to apply for funding from her institution. Again, realising that systematic efforts and progress were not possible without some assured funding, I worked out a project proposal and forwarded it to the BvL Foundation. They responded with a small grant for one year to support the development of a major proposal, which in turn was approved a year later. In mid-1993, COTA came into existence, and from then on, there was no looking back for Project ACCESS. In fact, there was hardly time to breathe till the project closed in 2001!

In mid-2001, I was working on the draft of my section of MSSRF's Annual Report. When I mentioned to my colleague Bala (K. Balasubramaniam) that Project ACCESS was closing that year, he suggested that it would be a pity if a ten-year-old project like ACCESS were allowed to just disappear without so much as an impact study, or at the very least an evaluative process documentation. That reflected a typical way of looking at things at MSSRF and it seemed a very just and appropriate idea. I commended his wisdom, agreed at once to his suggestion, and even recorded the decision in that very same Annual Report.

However, I really did not know how to go about it. For the rest of 2001, the idea lay around at the back of my mind, while I wondered how to do it and do it myself, but objectively: tell the story, but neither in a dry statistical "terminal report" kind of way, nor with starry-eyed autobiographical subjectivity. While I tried to find answers to these questions, I did nothing on the surface for a long time.

Then I consulted LS, as everyone calls her. In the early years in Madras I had met L. S. Saraswathi who had been working extensively in the field of education, something close to my heart. I quickly grew to admire her greatly, for I found in her someone to whom I could relate at once and explore and share ideas in depth. She was a patient and attentive listener, always deeply receptive and responding with an insightful wisdom that drew one ever deeper. By now, she had become a friend, guide and philosopher, not just to me, but also to the whole Project team. A member of the Technical Advisory Committee for eight years (1993–2000), she had participated as a resource person in many of ACCESS's activities, guided the monitoring, conducted an evaluation at the end of COTA, and enriched the Project with her insights at every stage. Naturally, I turned to her with the latest question: How do we go about it this time?

And thus it began to take shape in our discussions. It was clearly too late for a formal "objective" external evaluation. To do that, we should have started much earlier, formulated

criteria, gathered and monitored data, and so on. But, on the other hand, we had at our disposal the rich documentation we had done over the years, though I was not sure why we had done it—certainly not with a view to writing a history some day. But that did not seem to be enough, it seemed lifeless and uninteresting. Gradually, we arrived at the idea of multiple perspectives: many voices instead of one, many subjectivities as a way of distancing rather than an artificial “objectivity”, a balance between external and internal viewpoints to capture the spirit that lived within the letter.

So we decided to include the voices of the many participants: the staff who had worked in Project ACCESS over the years as well as a few others, partners in the adventure in one way or the other. And we also arrived at the form. We would write separately, using different sources, then bring the two streams together. I would tell the story straight, the warp as it were, the narrative, the chronological sequence, drawing on all the documentation—the Annual Reports, the Process Documentations, and the treasure house of printed and audio-visual products that had been accumulated. LS would provide the weft: chronicling the voices, the cross-sectional pictures at different points of time, drawing on the different perceptions of the players. And when we were ready, we would weave the strands together.

Early in 2002, we began putting down our thoughts, though serious work started only towards the middle of the year. I drew up an outline, a broad framework for the book, then began gathering together my source materials. At the same time, I made a list of the people to be interviewed by LS—her source materials. We worked out a methodology for the interviews, a set of three questions to each person.

1. What did they think was the impact of Project ACCESS on Early Child Development in Tamil Nadu and beyond?
2. What did they think was their own contribution to the project?
3. What did they feel they, in turn, had got out of it as individuals, in terms of concepts, perspectives, and skills, and their assessment of its usefulness in their work?

LS was to independently contact all the concerned persons, asking them to answer the questions, ideally through personal interviews, but wherever that was not possible, in writing. Above all, was the assurance of confidentiality, to encourage the free and frank expression of opinions, with no hesitation or fear of giving offence. The material would remain entirely in LS’s custody, and she would draw from it as and how she thought best.

By now, we realised we needed a master craftsman to do the weaving, sure and deft hands that would prevent the skeins from getting tangled. In short, an editor to the rescue, someone who was in harmony with this approach and who had the patience and interest to accept the challenge of bringing form to this sort of strange material. This was when we identified Gita Gopalkrishnan, a well-known freelance editor, as the third possible member

of the team. She agreed to join us, probably out of curiosity, perhaps little realising what she was taking on.

We got started—LS with the interviews, and I with first a study of all the documentation, preparing an outline before I began writing. We worked entirely separately, but talked to each other occasionally. Our discussions were only in terms of how far we had progressed, what stage we were at, who had been interviewed, and the problems we were meeting. We dealt with the mechanics of recording the interviews, with LS's handwritten notes being transferred on to the computer in the office. I steadfastly did not look at what was being produced, though it was all being compiled under my nose as it were, but just went right on with my own writing.

When Chapter I was finished, I shared it with LS, got her comments and rewrote it a bit. By then, I think she was through with almost all the interviews, except for a few latecomers and stragglers. Now began the "weaving" process for Chapter I, with LS locating the relevant quotes for that chapter from the interviews with the persons who had participated at that stage, and fitting them in at the appropriate points. Meanwhile I struggled on with the first draft of Chapter II. When LS had finished with her weaving, Gita came in. Now all three read the woven chapter and had a triangular sitting, making our comments and suggestions for its improvement. Gita went off to prune, edit, refine, and polish Chapter I, while LS worked on "weaving" Chapter II, the draft of which I had by then completed, and I went on with Chapter III.

And so it went, this process of drafting, weaving, reviewing, and refining, with each of the three major chapters. LS had by far the heaviest and most time-consuming job, I thought, matching and tallying the pile of contrasting threads with painstaking care. It was a marvellous and refreshing experience, though, rather like a three-cornered dance, with stately entrances and exits, rhythmic and graceful, though not always smooth, as three elderly women good-humouredly tried to adjust their style and tempo and stay tuned to each other. And it became a wonderful period of rapport and renewal, taking pleasure in constantly finding new insights, gaining peace through distancing and detachment. We were at times mildly surprised that we were not always meeting our own deadlines, but always sure that we were on the right road to the right place.

We went through two more rounds of the process of reviewing and refining, digging up fresh materials or rewriting when required, ensuring that all the voices were fairly represented, till the three main chapters were finally in place, and we all felt comfortable with them. We decided that, as it was a partnership, our personal voices would be heard at the beginning and in the end: mine in the Preface, describing the process and its origin from my point of view, and LS, in the retrospective, recording her observations on the exercise and its completion. The master weaver, however, can be heard only in the tale that has been told.

Meanwhile, towards the end, our editor kindly but firmly ensured that the “housekeeping” also got done. We faithfully, at her command, produced Introductions and Conclusions, Forewords and Afterwords, scanned footnotes and references for errors, compiled biographical notes and abbreviations, bravely suggested attractive paragraph headings and chapter titles, remembering not to forget the nitty-gritty of these pre-production rites. And now the whole story has been told and the book is in your hands.

It is time to express my deep and sincere gratitude to the following, to each of whom I owe a special debt, but am unable to find adequate words:

- My partners in this adventure, L. S. Saraswathi and Gita Gopalkrishnan, for their deep interest and commitment to this project, and their staying power
- All the contributors, my former colleagues at MSSRF and other resource persons listed at the back—the “voices” in the book—for their time, patience, and involvement in answering questions and giving their views freely and frankly
- My friend and colleague, K. Balasubramaniam, for having put the idea into my head in his usual irreverent and thought-provoking way
- M. S. Swaminathan, for his unwavering support at all times
- Sheela Pankaj, for her immense patience, diligence, and uncomplaining support in typing, compiling, and correcting the entire manuscript from start to finish
- S. Raja Samuel, for finding the time to practise his creative design skills on us one last time in order to bring in the visuals to match the voices
- C. Arumugam, friend, designer, and printer, for his dependable support in all three capacities
- Liana Gertsch of the Bernard van Leer Foundation who kept us constantly at the task of documentation which made this book possible, and
- All the many friends, both within MSSRF and without, who helped in innumerable little ways

Because, without them this book could never have been written.

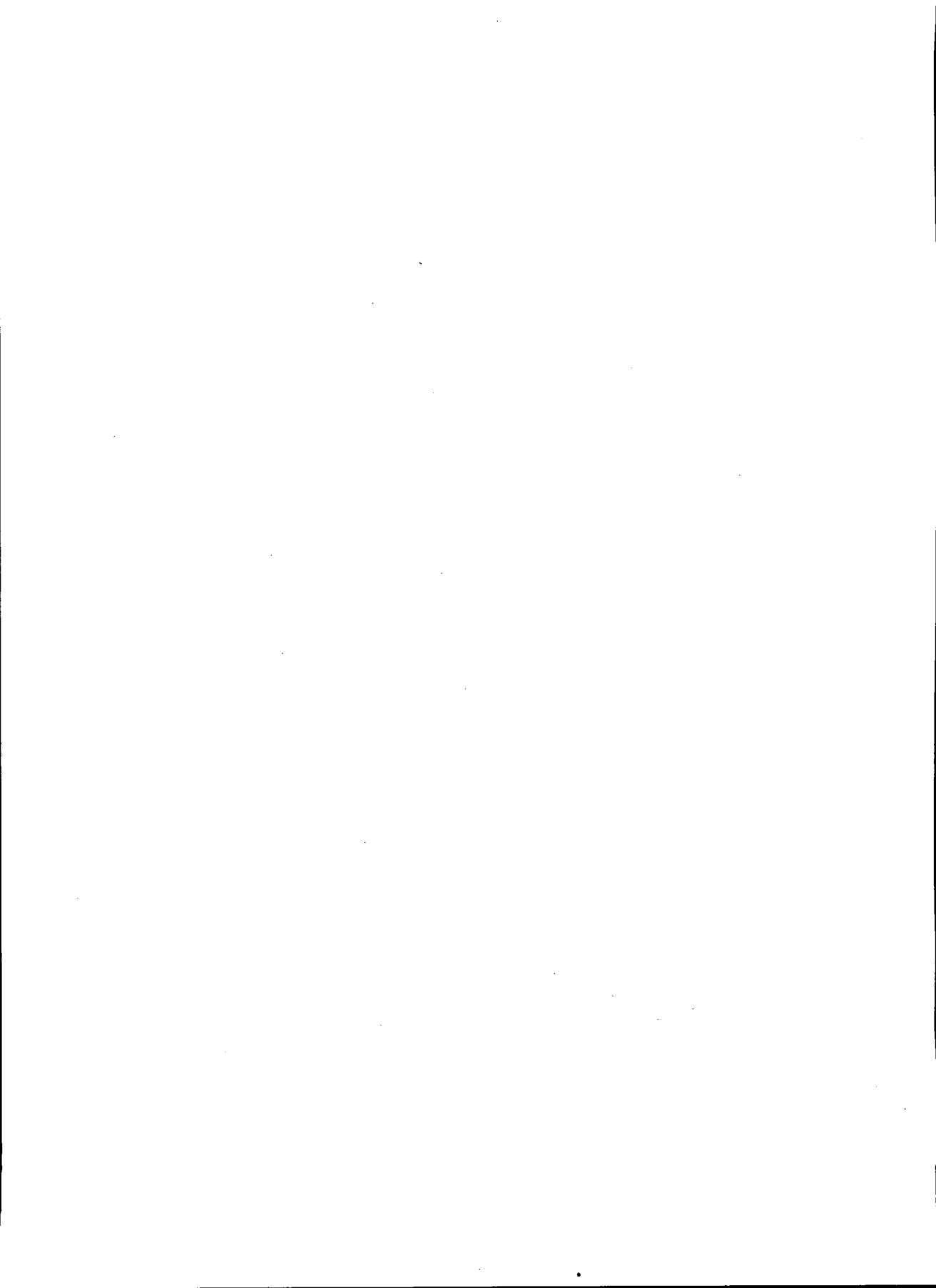
**Mina Swaminathan**

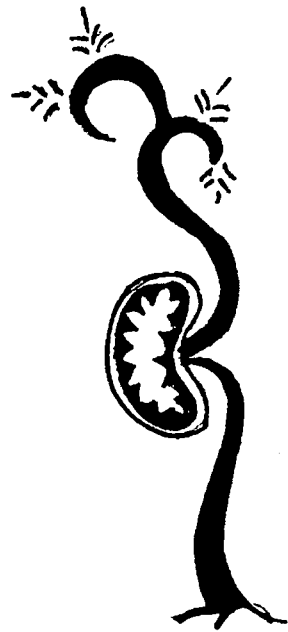


# Abbreviations

ACCESS	Action for Child Care and Education Strategies and Services
AID	Alternative for India Development
AIDWA	All India Democratic Women's Association
AIR	All India Radio
AGM	Annual General Meeting
BvL	Bernard van Leer
CASSA	Campaign Against Sex-Selective Abortion
CDPO	Child Development Project Officer
COTA	Children on the Agenda
CRY	Child Relief and You
DACCS	Development of Alternative Child Care Strategies
DANIDA	Danish International Development Agency
DATA	Development Association for Training and Technology Appropriation
DIET	District Institute of Education and Training
DSW	Department of Social Welfare
DTERT	Department of Teacher Education Research and Training
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECERS	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale
FM	Frequency Modulated
FORCES	Forum for Crèche and Child Care Services
HRD	Human Resource Development
IAP	Indian Academy of Paediatrics
IAPE	Indian Association for Pre-school Education
IAS	Indian Administrative Service
ICCW	Indian Council for Child Welfare
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services
LIC	Life Insurance Corporation
LKG	Lower Kindergarten
MDMK	Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
MLA	Member, Legislative Assembly
MLTC	Middle Level Training Course

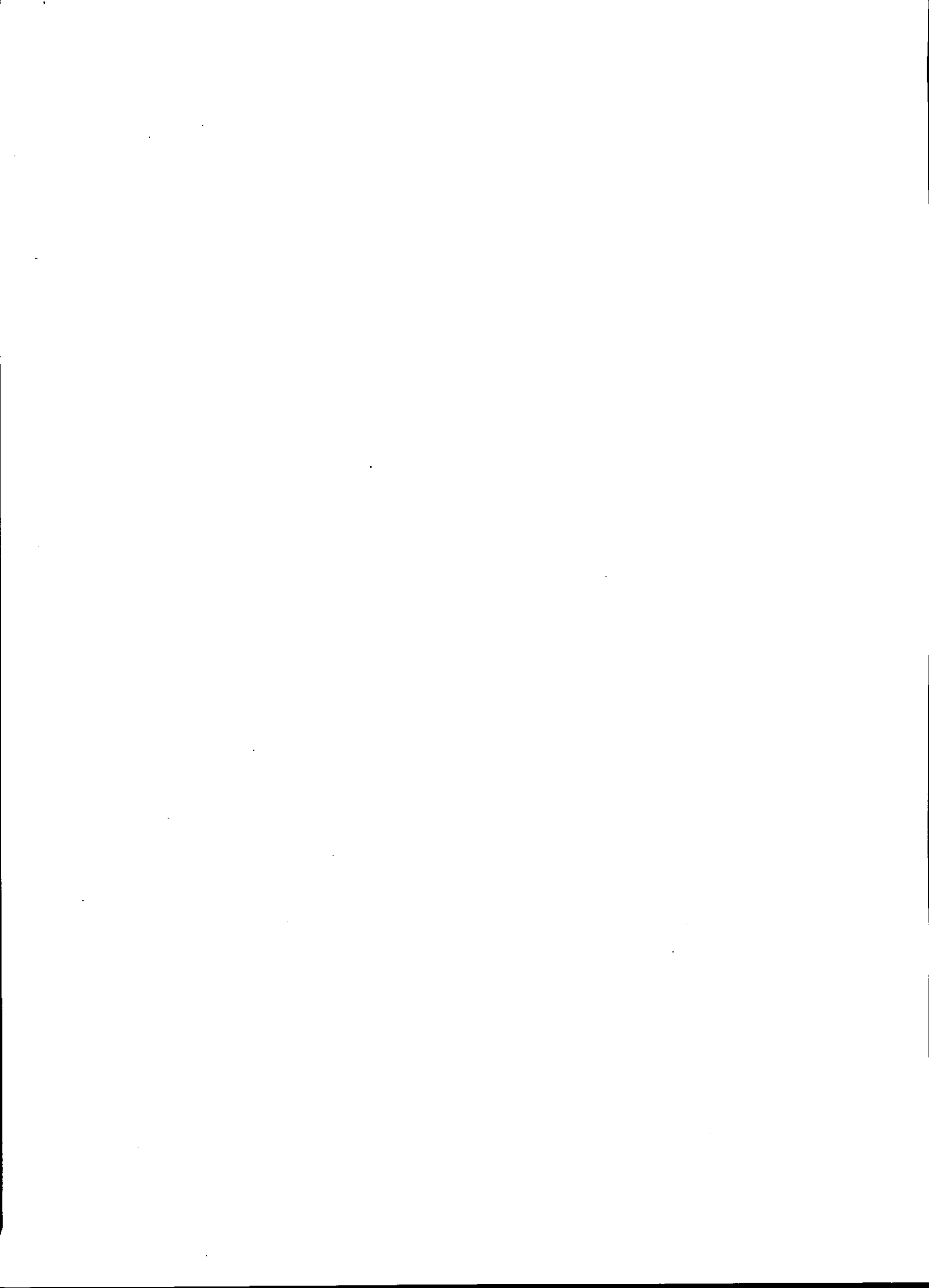
MP	Member of Parliament
MSSRF	M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation
NFIW	National Federation of Indian Women
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIP	Network for Information on Parenting
NIPCCD	National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development
NIUA	National Institute of Urban Affairs
ORS	Operation Resource Support
PE <sub>x</sub>	Programme Executive
SHG	Self-Help Group
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
SIDCO	Small Industries Development Corporation
TAC	Technical Advisory Committee
TECERS	Tamil Nadu Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale
THP-I	The Hunger Project-India
TINP	Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Project
TN-FORCES	Tamil Nadu Forum for Crèche and Child Care Services
TN-VHA	Tamil Nadu Voluntary Health Association
TOT	Training of Trainers
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association





**GERMINATION 1991-1994**

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Project ACCESS (Action for Child Care and Education Strategies and Services) had very small and modest beginnings as part of the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation's Programme Area 400 (Reaching the Unreached). Named as a Project from the beginning, ACCESS was never intended to be the starting point for an organisation or institution, but was seen as something that could be wound up when its usefulness was over. It was visualised as just the structure needed to support an exploratory approach, tentative searchings for new directions, with a firm commitment merely to a flexible and evolving methodology. Only the sphere of operation, or the target group, was firmly fixed— young children, the below sixes, belonging to the underprivileged sections of society. The choice was because this was the area of concern, expertise, and some achievement of the Director, Mina Swaminathan. The aim was action to advocate, promote, and support services for the care, welfare, development, and education of children, especially services which address the intersecting needs of women, children, and girls. Attention was to be concentrated on children in difficult or stressful circumstances, such as children of



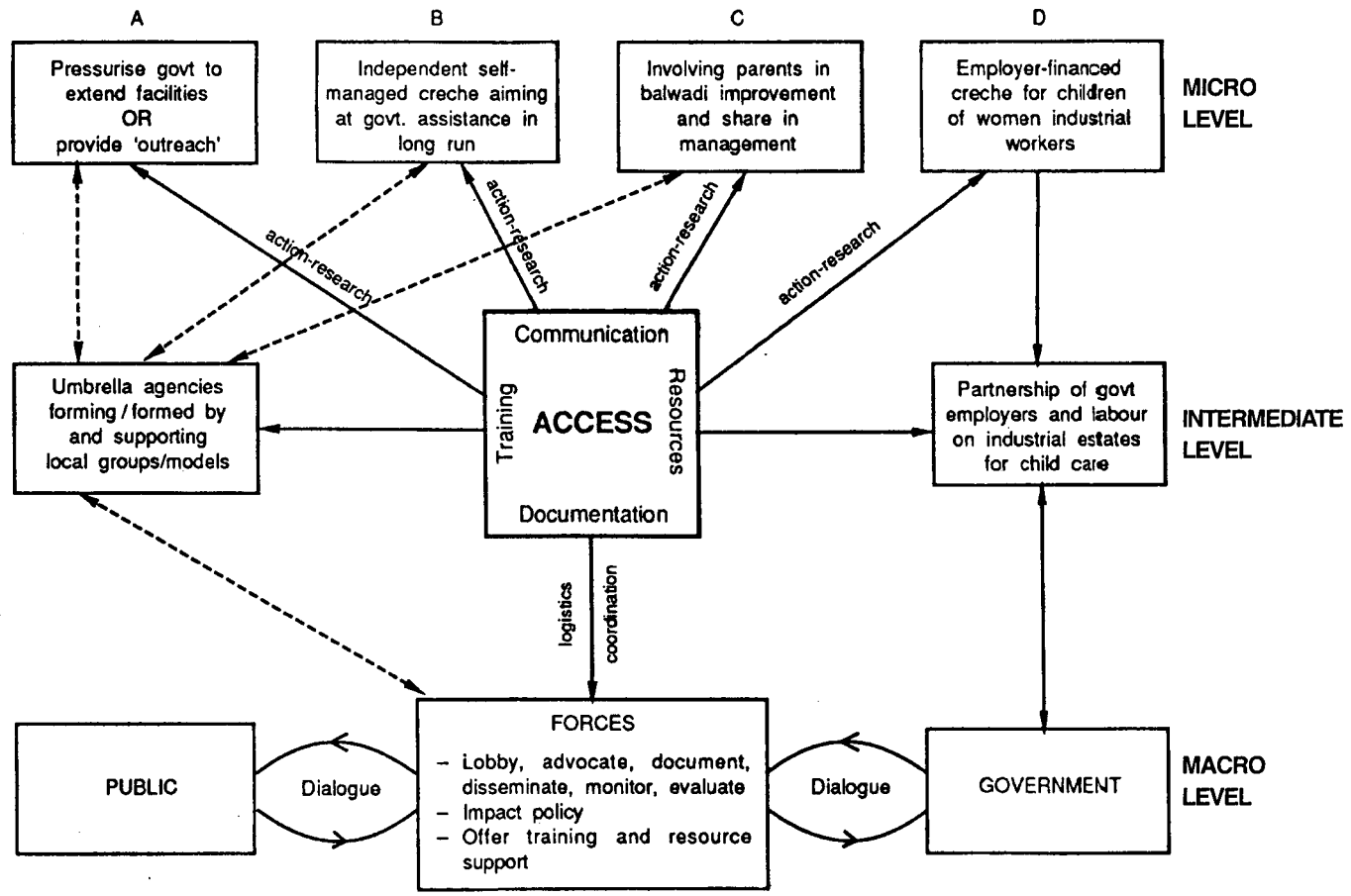


working mothers, children of migrant and itinerant labour, children in poverty, girls, and working/street children. The basic strategies spelt out were seven in number: action-research, training, networking, communication, documentation, development of resource materials, and resource expertise.

How these would be applied in the field, prioritised, linked with each other, and together lead to the achievement of goals was left open—the programme of activities was to be built up over time through a series of explorations. Thus, there was only a statement of aims and strategies to begin with, not an operationalised project proposal, and the first funders, The Hunger Project-India (THP-I), demonstrated their confidence in this rather vague approach by offering their support. And so was ACCESS formally born in June 1991, at a meeting of The Hunger Project-India in Chennai (then Madras). However, there had been a gestation period of several months prior to that, when the key ideas and concepts had been mulled over in private and discussed among a few concerned and interested people.

The first and major activity in the initial years was the project that came to be known as DACCS: Development of Alternative Child Care Strategies. From the beginning, it seemed obvious that for success these had to be visualised at three levels—the micro level of working programmes in the field, the intermediate level of active organisations and institutions, and the macro level of policy involving the state. These were graphically conceptualised in a diagram and formed the theoretical base for the early years of work.

1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31. 32. 33. 34. 35. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41. 42. 43. 44. 45. 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. 51. 52. 53. 54. 55. 56. 57. 58. 59. 60. 61. 62. 63. 64. 65. 66. 67. 68. 69. 70. 71. 72. 73. 74. 75. 76. 77. 78. 79. 80. 81. 82. 83. 84. 85. 86. 87. 88. 89. 90. 91. 92. 93. 94. 95. 96. 97. 98. 99. 100.



**Fig. 1 Development of Alternative Child Care Strategies**

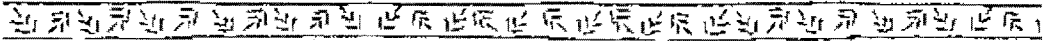




It was decided to focus on the micro level in the first year, and demonstrate and document the practical possibilities of developing alternative child care strategies. This was to be done by selecting certain communities, assessing local needs and preferences, developing models through dialogue and then implementing, monitoring, and assessing the selected models. Four sites were selected—three rural and one an industrial estate—for the trial of four different modules:

- an independent self-financed crèche
- pressure to extend government child care facilities
- parental involvement in improvement and management of existing government services
- employer-financed crèche for women workers

The rural locations were: Ninnakarai, a large village on the southern highway, about 65 km from Chennai; two fishing hamlets, Vemburusham and Kokkilamedu, just south of Mahabalipuram; and a group of five villages (the Anjur cluster) near Singaperumal Koil, also on the southern highway. The Ambattur Industrial Estate in west Chennai is one of the largest in Tamil Nadu. The process of work in each of these, evolved through trial and error, has been systematically documented.



AT THE MICRO LEVEL

Simultaneously, efforts were made to work with organisations at the intermediate level—a women’s organisation, a Union, and an employers’ association—with the idea of linking up these services, transferring the management to them, and ensuring long-term sustainability. Meanwhile, at the policy level, an attempt was made to get wider support for these initiatives from government through a policy seminar on the improvement of child care services in Tamil Nadu, followed up with a Memorandum to the Government from the fledgling, newly set up TN-FORCES.<sup>1</sup>

This, at least, was the theory. But the chain of cause and effect did not work out quite so simply. A quick look at the main efforts at the micro level and the linkages would show the underlying relationships.

***Government Support for Child Care Facilities***

In the first module, the process was carefully gone through with the help of a small team of staff, including a community worker to mobilise the community and develop the organisational base (Shanbagavalli) and an ECD (Early Childhood Development) worker, Kalaiselvi, to set up the crèche or balwadi and guide the local teacher, aided towards the end of the year by Padma, a balwadi teacher who worked alongside the local teacher in all the balwadis to strengthen the programme and put it on a child-friendly footing. The dedicated efforts of this team paid off well, and independent community-supported balwadis were set up in two locations (Ninnakarai and Vemburusham) by the end of the year, while in the third one (Kokkilamedu), the objective was transformed into pressure for a government centre with community support. The independent balwadis, however, found it more and more difficult to function unaided, and, with no financial support beyond the community during the second year, here too the goal shifted to a campaign to have the balwadi taken over by the state. This worked in Ninnakarai but failed in Vemburusham. By the end of the second year, this had become the main objective for all the efforts, including those of the other two intermediate organisations (women’s groups) stimulated by ACCESS.

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<sup>1</sup> TN-FORCES is the Tamil Nadu chapter of the national Forum for Crèche and Child Care Services (FORCES).





It had become clear that without an active local government to channelise and direct local initiatives or to lobby and obtain governmental benefits, little could be achieved or sustained. The absence of the crucial link, representative local government, became all too clear.<sup>2</sup>

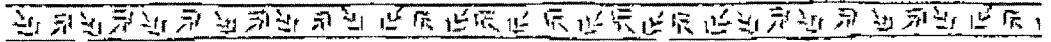
Kalaiselvi, with a Master's in Child Development and some supervisory and training experience, was the ECD worker in the project. She briefly described the process of setting up the balwadi in two villages.

In the villages where we worked intensely, Vemburusham on the seashore and Ninnakarai, an interior village near Kattankulathur, we held meetings with women and village leaders and helped them form the *Mahalir Sangam* and register it through their own efforts. This helped them gain some confidence. Some of the villagers were taken to the centres run by ICCW (Indian Council for Child Welfare), to have first-hand experience of how children learnt to sing, play, and listen to stories, and to see that they were neat and clean. The villagers started their own centre and could see for themselves their own children neat and clean, playing games, singing songs, listening to and telling stories. They really understood the need for child care centres. The Government took over the Ninnakarai centre and it became an ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) centre. The Vemburusham one was not taken over, though we tried.

### ***Getting Parents Involved***

With the first two modules coalescing, it was now decided to follow a somewhat different approach, working intensively with the State network of child care centres in eight locations (the Anjur cluster) to get parental involvement in balwadi improvement. The process was initiated towards the close of the first year, with workshops for the teachers of the eight centres on methods of quality improvement carried out with the approval and support of the Child Development

<sup>2</sup> Mina Swaminathan, "Community Mobilisation for Effective Social Services" (in Proceedings of the Third Regional Conference on *People's Involvement in Health and Development of Women and Children*, Madras: Tamil Nadu Chapter IUHPE-SEARB, 1994).



Project Officer (CDPO) and supervisors, and thus with the blessings of the administration. Monthly meetings with the teachers were also held during the year. In the meanwhile, work in mobilising the communities was begun with the help of the community workers—this team now being strengthened with the addition of Cicily, a field-based community worker who volunteered to live in the area and who could thus establish close rapport with the parents. At the same time, Kalai, with the help of Padma who also lived in the locality, was able to work at improving the quality of the ECD programme in the centres. By August, it was possible to organise a joint workshop with mothers and teachers (25 mothers and 9 teachers), which was carefully documented on video.<sup>3</sup> This was the first step in an unusual partnership, in five of the original eight villages. The breaking down of barriers of mutual suspicion between parents and teachers and the building up of a relationship of reciprocal trust and confidence led to a period of inspiring cooperation.



AT THE MICRO LEVEL

The parent group -led by the community workers was able to take up several issues, such as relocating one of the centres to a hamlet where services were badly needed, getting a new building sanctioned and constructed for one centre, bringing about repairs in another, and getting the playground of yet another fenced. Parents also began contributing waste materials from their homes for preparation of low-cost toys and play equipment.

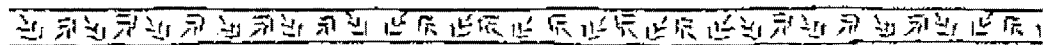
The young and energetic 'Kutty Padma', whom we were lucky enough to be able to find, was the balwadi teacher who lived in the area and who naturally liked the idea of a job conveniently near home. Her chief skills were in the balwadi classroom, working with children alongside teachers and to some extent mothers—a lively, energetic, and cheerful presence. She worked with the local teachers in the ICDS centres in seven villages around Kattankulathur. She played a crucial role in following up the training given by the Project staff.

My job was to train the balwadi teachers, be with them, and help them organise and run the balwadi, making children learn through

<sup>3</sup> G. Ravi, *Learning Through Play* (Madras: MSSRF and Department of Social Welfare, Government of Tamil Nadu, 1993), video film.







play. The villages where I worked were Ninnakarai, Ninnakathur, Thenmelpakkam, Singaperumal Koil, Anjur, Anjur Colony, and Vemburusham. I was engaged in field training of teachers throughout the year. I used to visit one or two centres each day— demonstrating the playway method to the teachers by actually playing, singing, dancing, dramatising with children, and supporting teachers in their day-to-day work with children. Project ACCESS brought in all the children of preschool age to the centres. The maximum strength was 25. Almost all the children came to the centre regularly. Children played with great enthusiasm with clay, sand, water, toys they made, or the toys made by the teacher. As soon as they came in the morning, they wished the teacher—each one wanted to hug the teacher. Children who never talked much started talking with confidence.

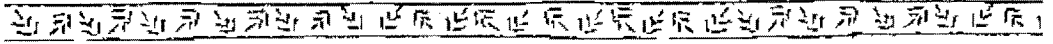
Talking of the response of the teachers to the continuous training, Padma said:

With teacher training and support given in the balwadi itself, the trainer and trainee worked together continuously throughout the year. This helped the teachers to get interested in the children and in their work with children. Teachers from balwadis other than the ones we were working with used to ask, "When are you going to come to our villages?"

She enthusiastically recalled the participation of parents in the programme, especially their awareness about the playway method.

Cooperation of parents with the balwadi functioning was another visible impact. There had been a kind of a social distance between the parents and teachers earlier. This gap was closed with frequent meetings with the parents. They showed interest in attending the meetings and getting to know their own role in the proper functioning of the balwadis—bringing children regularly, sending them to the balwadi neat and clean, etc. They developed awareness about the playway method and were happy with the children playing, singing, dancing, telling stories, talking, and so on. The children often quoted the teacher at home: "Teacher asked us to be neat. She told us to come after taking bath. She told us to comb our hair, keep our teeth clean."





Kalai too talked about the strategies that were useful in working with parents and also with the teachers.

All the ICDS centres in the Kattankulathur and Singaperumal Koil area were taken up for strengthening. We sought and got the cooperation of higher officials at the level of CDPO. In these villages, the strategies that were useful were making toys for children from locally available materials, involving parents and teachers in training, organising parents' meetings frequently for them to see their own children singing, telling stories, and playing games etc. These were useful in that the villagers understood and accepted the importance of child care centres. The parents who had not been sending their children started sending them. The progress was visible. The teachers were also interested and enthusiastic. The quality of the programme improved. The parents and teachers composed songs, *villupattu*, etc. These were put together in the form of a book.



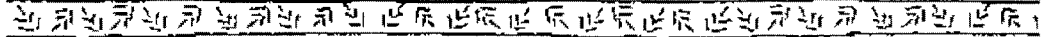
AT THE MICRO LEVEL

Shanbagavalli, called Champa by her colleagues, was the spirited community worker in the project. She was an experienced social activist and could mobilise the community with ease with her faith in people.

Project ACCESS in the initial phase formed child care centres and oriented teachers. The team went to several places and worked with several NGOs to train their teachers. At the same time, TN-FORCES initiated the concept of working towards improvement of existing balwadis—government balwadis reaching the poorest of the poor children. That these children would get the maximum benefit was the idea. Improvement of balwadis was through various methods. Instead of balwadis functioning as 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. preschools, it was suggested that they serve the working women's needs. For example, women agricultural workers go out early in the morning and come back around 2 p.m. The balwadis should start around 6 a.m. and work till around 2 p.m. providing additional support to working women in the unorganised sector. The government could provide funds plus people themselves can support.

Champa commended the significant strategy of involving parents in the structure and function of balwadis.





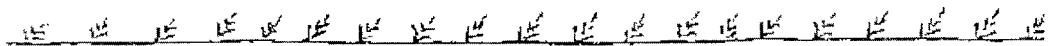
At this point another important thing that happened was the formation of "parent committees" in five villages around Singaperumal Koil. We evolved methodologies to involve parents in the structure and functions of the balwadi. The parents were helped to understand how their children learn, what are all needed for their education. Parent committees were effective. There was constant interaction with parents. We spoke to them about the weaknesses in the functioning of the balwadi and the contributions they could make to strengthen it. Poor people in general and women in particular in the communities where we worked developed awareness. "We never studied. We have not been to school. If the children go to balwadi they can go to school." That kind of understanding was there. They were convinced that education would help their children do better in life.

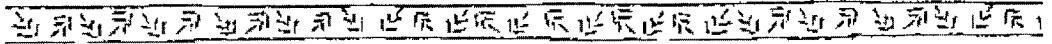
Jayshree, the fifth member of the team, was a researcher fresh from an M.Phil degree in Home Science and Nutrition, raring to apply her skills in real life situations. According to her, ACCESS was looking at the child care centre in a different perspective—serving the needs of women and developing the personality of the child.

At that time, child care support was not seen as a felt need by most women. The fact that there could be a provision made available was something that the many women in many communities we spoke to just did not think of at all. Many did not know the real purpose of the balwadi. They all thought that it was an appendage to the Noon Meal Programme. It was not looked upon as a centre trying to address women's needs and developing the child's personality. Those days only Project ACCESS was doing this. In the villages where Project ACCESS started working, around Kattankulathur and the coastal villages, people, especially women, started to realise the fact that the child care centres were not just where the child was expected to learn ABCD. We had a person, Kutty Padma, who used to go to all these villages and train teachers in singing songs and playing games with children. She was very lively. These things started registering in the minds of the people.

***Child Care is a Women's Issue***

An assessment conducted at the end of the year led to the conclusion that parents' groups organised around the single issue of child care





could not be very effective in the existing context, particularly in the absence of elected local governments to whom they could take their needs. Hence a modified strategy was taken up for the third year. It was decided to follow a similar procedure through existing women's organisations in 12 villages, and to work in cooperation with another non-governmental organisation (NGO) which was very active in these communities and was working on allied programmes such as women's groups, kitchen gardens, thrift and credit. A network was formed with a loose structure, linked by monthly meetings, workshops with the teachers, and regular visits to the villages.



Champa explained the concept of working with other women's organisations on issues considered basic by women and introducing the issue of child care to those organisations.

Child care is not the only issue for women. There are other issues such as quarrels, domestic violence, dowry deaths, rape, unemployment, water problems, men getting drunk, etc. We could not deal with all these concerns. I suggested that we could work with those organisations that take up such issues, then child care could be taken up more effectively. We started working with *Pennurimai Iyakkam* and the Tamil Nadu Construction Workers' Union. We formed three or four child care centres through this Union, with support from CRY (Child Relief and You). We were also trying to do this through *Pennurimai Iyakkam*. When we interacted with other organisations, we started to understand issues in a wider sense. For example, child labour is related to adult wages. Both need to be considered. The same way, child care is a political issue, it is not merely a personal social issue. It requires political understanding—women's rights, power relations within the family, within the community and society. Hence, the idea of working with organisations dealing with several issues related to women becomes important.

It was Project ACCESS that brought out powerfully the message of child care as a women's issue. Normally women take child care as their duty. "Only women should look after the child" is inculcated in women. There was no alternative that was thought of—a crèche, or that the husband could share the responsibility. Such concepts were not there. Women demanded wages, housing, etc. But they never asked for child





care facilities. They did not even think that it is a possible demand. How can one say 'My child is a burden'? How can one give birth to a child and consider bringing up that child as a burden? How can one think of social response for this? When a woman says, 'I quit working because I need to take care of my child', it is well accepted.

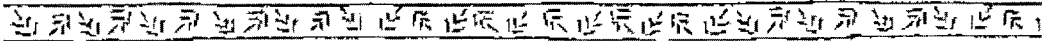
Seeing child care as a working woman's problem depended on the work of the woman. For construction workers, it is realised easily as they need to go out early and they return as late as 8 p.m. Those who work at home, don't see it. It is one of the household chores for them. They keep one eye on the child, feed the child as and when necessary. Agricultural coolies realise child care as an issue but not small farmers. Coolies have to go early. Small farmers are a bit relaxed. Domestic workers realised it. Their timings of work are different. The older children look after the younger ones and they can't go to school. Hence domestic workers realise child care as a women's issue. It depends on the work and understanding of child care. Even I, who have been in the women's movement, took so much time to realise it.

In the process of introducing child care as one of the primary concerns of women, there was evolution in the manner in which women's issues were perceived in Project ACCESS.

If I were to represent it the work of ACCESS in a diagram, first it was like a small child and a woman, then it went on to become a woman and a child, then it went on to become man, woman and a home, then eventually it became gender and development programmes.

**Jayshree**

Meantime, the staff team at ACCESS also underwent change. The two community workers, Champa and Cicily, left the programme for different reasons, and Jayshree, the research worker, concentrated her efforts in a distant urban slum. The two ECD workers, Kalaisevi and Padma, remained and this not only diluted the efforts, but made them one-sided, working more with the teachers than with the parents in the community. The project again reached a plateau by the end of the year, and reinforced the conclusion that without stronger and more effective linkages at the intermediate level, compelling policy intervention with a watchdog mechanism for the bureaucracy, and responsive local government, parent groups organised around the



single issue of child care could not get far. The crucial nature of staff composition, training, and organisation was also made visible.

### **Engaging with Industry**

The third model—the employer-financed crèche in the industrial estate—was, on the face of it, the most “successful” but here too laced with a bitter after-taste. The initiative started with a well-organised survey of the problems and child care needs of women working in the industrial estate of Ambattur, followed by protracted and patient negotiations with the office-bearers of the employers’ association. For the first time, the starting point was a research survey, undertaken at first by Champa, who was later on joined by Kalaiselvi, and supervised by a friendly economist from another department of MSSRF. This casual approach, however, yielded good results. It became an effective tool for negotiation with the employers’ association, to convince them of the need for a common crèche, as well as to lobby with the officials of SIDCO (Small Industries Development Corporation), which provides the infrastructure and facilities for the industrial estates, and for arousing concern among members of TN-FORCES, partners, other women’s organisations and Unions. However, the survey had its share of roadblocks.

The survey was conducted in seven or eight industries. Initially some employers allowed us to collect the information we needed. But, as we proceeded, many would not let us talk to their women workers. Even where we were allowed to, we could speak to the women only for about 10 to 15 minutes during their lunchtime. We had a survey form that was quite brief. The survey showed that the women felt that they need a crèche to take care of their children while they are at work. The industries who wanted to participate in the provision of crèche services to the children of their women workers were very few.

### **Kalai**

This was the first time that the value of research for advocacy, campaigning, and publicity became obvious, and the lesson was



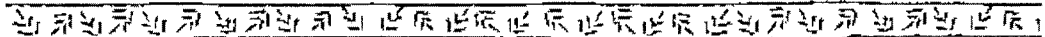




not lost. It was to become the base for all future work and led to the coining of the phrase that guided later efforts: research-based advocacy. Thanks to the interest taken by the then Chairman of SIDCO, an enlightened Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, and the willingness of ICCW to run the crèche for the women workers if financial responsibility was accepted by the employers' association, the crèche became a reality very soon and was formally inaugurated in April 1992.

But the lesson was soon learnt that the gift-wrapping concealed some bitter pills. To begin with, SIDCO, with the transfer of the key official, went back on its original promise to build a separate and custom-made building to house the crèche on land provided by it, and to this day the crèche continues to run in the original premises. Besides, over the years, in spite of several reminders, no similar new crèches have been started to meet the needs of the many more, numbering several thousand, women workers in the Estate whose needs for child care continue to remain unaddressed.

Most bitter of all was the belated realisation of the betrayal by the employers. A group of large employers, who would normally have been liable under the law to provide their own crèche for their own several hundred women workers, took advantage of the situation to bribe, persuade, or otherwise convince the concerned officials of the Inspectorate of Factories to issue a Gazette notification relieving them of their responsibility since they were contributing to the common crèche! This violated the entire spirit in which the enterprise was begun, since it was intended for the use of small employers—each of whom employed only a handful of women, and who were hence not legally obliged to provide crèches—who would have been enabled to offer this facility to their women workers through their contributions. Thus, the very purpose was vitiated, the large employers monopolised the crèche and were sitting pretty, the small employers got no return for their contributions, and the spirit if not the letter of the law was severely mauled. As soon as this became known, through the vigilance of some Unions, a joint action was undertaken by five Unions and



ACCESS, taking up the issue at the higher level. After many efforts, an assurance was obtained that the matter would be reopened and the decision changed, but this never took place. This whole episode, which has been documented, was an eye-opener on the techniques, strategies, risks, and dangers of entering into labour-management relations in a naïve and unprepared manner, and was to be a pointer for the future.<sup>4</sup>

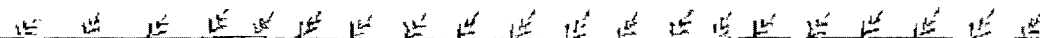


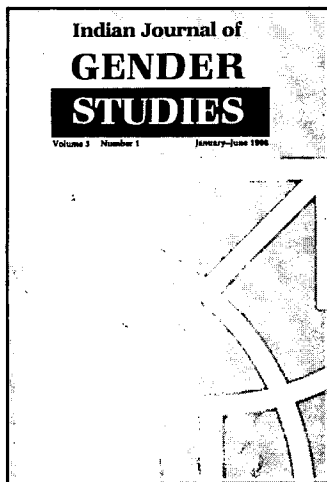
AT THE MICRO LEVEL

While the micro level interventions established their viability up to a point, sustainability was called into question because of the weakness of the intermediate and macro levels, and the failure of linkages. In three years, it became all too clear what was wrong and what was needed, and the stage was set for the next phase.

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<sup>4</sup> MSSRF, *A Small Step Forward* (Madras: 1993), mimeo.





# Indian Journal of GENDER STUDIES

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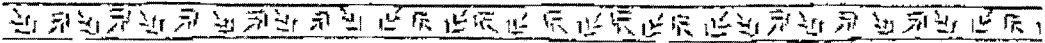
January-June 1998

## The Second Stage

At the intermediate level, the strategy was to strengthen the empowerment of the local groups with support from intermediate organisations and links to the wider level of mainstream policy. These intermediate organisations were visualised as local bodies, women's organisations, NGOs, trade unions, and academic institutions. The very first experiences in the rural sites underlined the importance of the local bodies (which were not in existence then), and formed the basis for the continued commitment of ACCESS—and later FORCES—to the belief that it is essential to decentralise the management of child care services down to the level of local bodies who are in a position to assess and respond to local needs. However, at the time, nothing much could be done at this level.

An attempt was made to proceed with a major women's organisation, the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), to support local parents' groups to work either to set up a self-managed independent crèche or to pressurise the government to open a child care centre in the area. This was tried out in one or two localities in Chennai, but the steam ran out soon as NFIW did not seem to be deeply interested in this issue.

The initiative in the Ambattur Industrial Estate had also, as described already, reached a plateau, with the inability to continue to negotiate with the employers over a period of time in the absence of strong



government and union support. The need for a broader front or coalition of groups working for child care services with common objectives and approach—a coalition which could be more effective, call on wider resources, have greater clout, and secure wider publicity—was made very evident. All these experiences pointed to the limited nature of such work in the absence of a strong macro - level organisation.

### ***Action and Research Go Together***

An action-research activity was taken up in collaboration with *Pennurimai Iyakkam* [Movement for the Rights of Women] in Chennai and the Tamil Nadu Science Forum in Pudukottai. Both aimed at making a systematic research study of the child care needs and existing services and other related factors among women in the unorganised sector and the formulation of appropriate strategies. The Chennai study focused on four slums, in two of which women were mostly ragpickers, while the Pudukottai study focused on women quarry workers. Both studies were undertaken by Jayshree, the results were shared with the partner organisations, and a series of discussions held with them on strategies to address the problems uncovered. However, ACCESS did not make any attempt to become involved in the actual field interventions in either case. This was another instance of the slowly growing strength of research pursued with proper methodologies so as to yield acceptable results, and an indicator of future directions for ACCESS.

I liked the field research part of Project ACCESS, in which I was involved. Within a few months of my joining, I was asked to develop a study that focused on quarry workers in Pudukkottai and some urban unorganised groups in Chennai. In Pudukkottai, we worked with the Tamil Nadu Science Forum and in Chennai, with *Pennurimai Iyakkam*. The idea was to look at whether these women were being covered by social security in terms of whether they had any access to child care services; if they had access, was it really tailored to meet their demands; and what exactly were the modifications that needed to be made so that these women could utilise the services. When we were actually examining the data from the Chennai slums and Pudukkottai,





we were not able to define the households very well. I found the household structure was very, very loose. I don't want to put a moral value on it. This characteristic of the household gave us a lot of problems in terms of analysing the data. We were not able to slot it. We were not able to say that this much of money which goes into the household can be safely called 'male dependent'; and another sum can be called 'female dependent'. We also found households in which the man had just taken another wife or had just deserted his wife. There were a lot of unwed mothers. We found too that in a number of households they stay married, but the man was not contributing a single paisa, nor was he helping the woman. It was essentially the woman and her work that was taking care of the family. The data could not be slotted into categories. Then suddenly it occurred to us that a continuum might be more logical. We had to define the outer limit and the inner limit of the range. We took a woman who was staying all by herself with her children as one end of the range and the other end was where a man and a woman were married and living together with children and both were equally or unequally contributing to the family whether in terms of money or in terms of work. Within this we tried to fit in three more slots, to see how the households fitted in. This we found was quite comfortable and relevant. That was a very good concept that we used. The concept is called the "continuum of female dependency". A paper on this was later published in the Indian Journal of Gender Studies.<sup>5</sup>

I learnt a lot about ground realities in Tamil Nadu. How does a woman cope? I had absolutely no idea. One question in our schedule was: 'When you go to work, where do you leave your child?' The response was: 'I leave my child at home'. To me home meant four walls, some confines of a cemented structure. What she was referring to was the entire street. The neighbour's house was also a home/house for her. Even the village limit was a house. I had to completely change myself to understand the reality. I was used to conventionally defining everything. This project helped me come out of it, breaking the existing stereotypes about households, social structures, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Jayshree Vencatesan, "Women's Multiple Roles and Coping Strategies: Myths and Realities", *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 3, no.1 (1996).

This project gave me an opportunity to work with two organisations with whose ideologies I simply did not agree. But it showed me a different working scenario where you need not agree on everything but still work on the common issue.

I should say that nothing much came out of the DACCS project although the gaps were identified, remedies were suggested, and all. But the follow-up was simply not possible. It was not any drawback of Project ACCESS but the collaborating agencies did not see this as a priority. By that time *Pennurimai Iyakkam* itself had undergone a change in structure. Their priorities became violence against women and issues like that. As far as the Tamil Nadu Science Forum in Pudukkottai was concerned, it was largely being spearheaded by the Collector, Ms. Sheela Rani Chunkath. When she was transferred, the entire programme started to fade away. By the time we had some concrete steps on paper, the Tamil Nadu Science Forum was simply not interested, neither was the *Arivoli Iyakkam* (Total Literacy Campaign) in Pudukkottai.

Jayshree

### ***Entering the Training Field***

Efforts in the field of training, however, proved more successful, and during this period, ACCESS was able to develop custom-built training modules on ECD and offer them to interested groups. These were mostly NGOs wishing to set up child care centres, or who had already done so and wanted to strengthen the skills of their workers. The training and resource component of ACCESS was set up through these experiences, and also during this period entered into its relationship with the government child care services (ICDS and TINP) by conducting, in late 1991, the first of what was to become a series of training workshops for the trainer and master trainer cadre of these organisations

Kalai, who was involved in organising the training programmes, was positive about the outcomes.

We worked with several NGOs—an NGO working with the Iruva community in Chengalpattu district, another working near Kattankulathur in the rural area, and with Women's Voluntary Services





AS THE SALT IN THE SEA

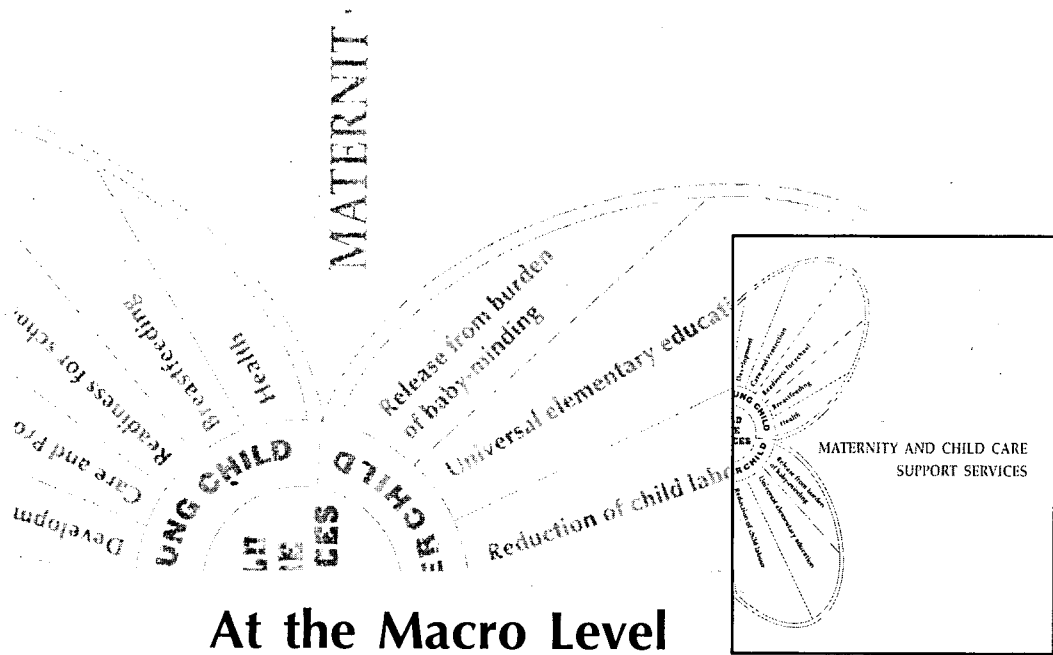


and the Construction Workers' Union in the city. We helped these organisations strengthen their child care centres through the playway method. The ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) programmes of the NGOs showed improvement as we worked with them for a year or more, following up the initial training with refresher training programmes. Training was meaningful and useful and was well received, spreading quite widely in a short period of time.

Jayshree felt differently. She thought the training programmes were not planned adequately as there were several instances of women not being able to attend on the days specified, that they were not structured enough to enable the trainees and trainers to participate fully, and were not effective because of differences in the conceptual understanding of the trainers on issues of importance.

These points of view could be due to the different backgrounds of the staff and the expectations of each one about the training.





## At the Macro Level

At the macro level, two kinds of work were initiated during this period. One was the slow, silent, and small beginnings of the networking and coalition building process, through the setting up and nurturing through its early phases of TN-FORCES, and the other was the building up of documentation, publications, and interactions on the major issues.

### ***Bringing FORCES to Tamil Nadu***

TN-FORCES was conceived of and set up as a State chapter of the national level body FORCES (Forum for Crèche and Child Care Services), which had been launched in 1989, and of which Mina Swaminathan was a founding member. The need for such a State-level advocacy group backed up by a network was felt right from the start, but became more and more evident as progress with activities at the micro and intermediate levels went on. After a few preliminary meetings with some interested groups, the first meeting was held in January 1992, and the network was born with the participation of 31 organisations, including trade unions, women's organisations, professional associations, training institutions, educational institutions, and NGOs concerned with women's and children's welfare. State branches of some of the all-India organisations belonging to the national FORCES played a leading role in this process. Several meetings were held, a Steering





Committee was set up, and plan of action chalked out. The first step was the presentation of a Memorandum to the State Government on child care services, emphasising steps for quality improvement, decentralised management, and financial support through a Special Crèche Fund. The Forum also participated in some meetings and discussions organised by the Tamil Nadu Government, including one of the earliest to address the newly evident problem of female infanticide in the State. In turn, ACCESS organised some seminars, significant among which was one on Structural Adjustment Policy and the Child in India.<sup>6</sup>

During this period some important documents were developed and prepared, relating to the quality and relevance of child care services, and to the companion issues of laws, schemes, and services related to supports/constraints to breastfeeding experienced by the working mother.<sup>7, 8, 9, 10</sup>

For all of 1992 and more than half of 1993, the Forum ran as a purely voluntary body, with minimal outlays, meetings being hosted in turn by member organisations, and expenditures minimised. It soon became clear that if the network was to acquire strength, visibility, and ultimately clout, finances were needed—both for full-time organisation and for all the related activities related to advocacy. Accordingly, a project proposal including support to the network was developed and submitted to the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and, from late 1993, the project entitled COTA (Children on the

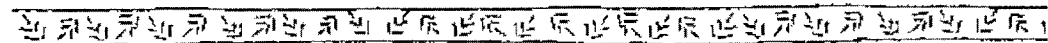
<sup>6</sup> MSSRF, *Structural Adjustment Policy and the Child in India* (proceedings of a seminar, Madras, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Mina Swaminathan, "The Continuum of Maternity and Child Care Support: A Critique of Relevant Laws, Policies and Programmes from the Perspective of Women's Triple Roles" (paper presented at the Sixth Conference of the Indian Association for Women's Studies, Mysore, May–June 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Mina Swaminathan, "Child Care Services in Tamil Nadu", *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 52 (December 28, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Mina Swaminathan, "Breastfeeding and the Working Mother: Laws and Policies on Maternity and Child Care", *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 18 (May 1, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Mina Swaminathan, "Women, Work and Breastfeeding" (paper presented at the workshop on Infant Feeding Practices and the Law, National Commission for Women and UNICEF, Delhi, March 1994).



Agenda) was launched. Of the four stated objectives of this large project, the first was 'to support, strengthen, and coordinate the TN-FORCES network to act as a pressure group for ECCE in Tamil Nadu in general', while the other three related to advocacy and communication, research and documentation, and training and instructional materials. Thus, the macro level work was brought under the rubric of TN-FORCES, arising from a clear understanding that this was essential to make progress with advocacy at the wider level and to secure the support of a large spectrum of players. The rest of the activities of COTA, and the networking component in particular, will be reported in detail in the next chapter.

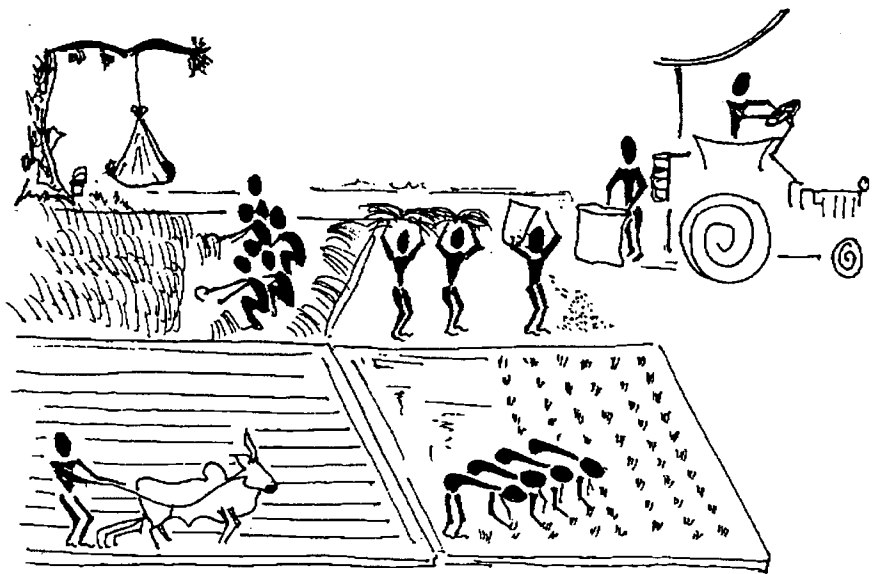


Champa realised the crucial role that TN-FORCES could play in supporting early childhood care and education.

When TN-FORCES addresses the needs of women, especially women in the unorganised sector, it can create a revolution. Women will be free of anxiety, especially since they now have the sole responsibility of child care. They can concentrate on their work. Child care is something that you cannot postpone. It is very demanding. Various child care needs can be addressed by TN-FORCES at the macro level. The issue should be conceptualised. Then it will spread everywhere. Government sees child care more as an issue of children's education and food than as women's needs. There is lot of scope and opportunity to work on this for TN-FORCES.

It is worthwhile to note that with the decision to bring the macro level to centre-stage and to support the intermediate level, a decision was simultaneously arrived at to pull out from the realm of micro level intervention in order to conserve and direct energies. Instead, it was decided to draw on the field interventions of network members and others for purposes of advocacy, and to strengthen training and resource support to them.





## The Human Element

A significant factor influencing both the direction of work, the achievements, the success and the failures, was the composition and strength of the team carrying out the task—the human element, in other words. This was partly because the methodology was exploratory: there were no fixed targets or laid-down schedule of activities; rather the programme grew out of the strengths of the players, adapting itself to emphasising their skills and leaving aside areas for which no skills were available. The members of this team, besides the Director, were, at the height of the project, five in number; but they joined and left at various times, so that it was only for a short period that all five worked together. However, there was always a process of group planning, sharing, critiquing, reviewing, and moving forward, which became the accepted normative process by which all work was carried out at ACCESS over the years.

We had regular discussions after every field visit and work. Our observations in the field were discussed orally or written as reports and discussed. It was a mutual learning situation. These were very useful sessions.

### Champa

I do not remember anything that I did in MSSRF so vividly as I do my work in Project ACCESS. It stands out in my memory: the work I did in

Pudukkottai and in the urban slums, research in different eco-systems. One thing I liked about Project ACCESS is that there was a lot of scope for discussion and debate. That openness is clearly remembered. You could sort of express your opinion very strongly.

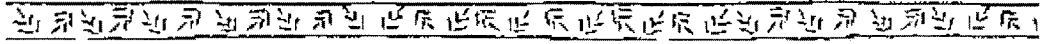
**Jayshree**



This process also was engaged in always at two levels—one that of an external Advisory Committee, which met once or twice a year to review and lay down broad guidelines for policy and programme, suggest resources, review past work critically, and inspire fresh thinking. The other was at the level of the staff team, which met usually weekly, sometimes fortnightly, to deal with procedures of planning and implementation at the day-to-day level.

The successes and failures of the programme, and the timing of these, were intimately related to the strengths and weaknesses of the team. On the community mobilisation side, the combination of the experienced social activist and the community worker who lived and worked near the selected community worked excellently for a while, winning the confidence of the community and enabling rapid responses in solving problems. However, at the end of the second year, when both left, the community organisation part of the programme could not be sustained. This brought home forcefully the importance of local staff in any community programme. Organisation simply cannot be done by long-distance commuting. Nor can it be left entirely to local animators with very little supervision, as was demonstrated in the third year, when the attempt to spread the concept through a network of NGOs failed.

On the ECD side, the young balwadi teacher in the project could demonstrate good practice to the other teachers, without being perceived as a threat or competitor, through 'training by doing', side-by-side or demonstration. Also called the advisory teacher or resource teacher approach, with its emphasis on good practice, this became the cornerstone of the method of training.



I was helping teachers and training teachers by being with them, demonstrating and supporting them in their practice. Teachers got interested because I was showing how to teach, instead of just saying, "Do this way". Seeing me running, singing, dancing, playing with children, the teachers got over their initial shyness and began to do quite well.

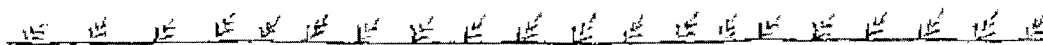
**Padma**

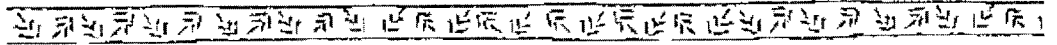
However, such an approach cannot work in dilution, as was proved in the third year, when Padma's services could not be meaningfully spread over a large number of centres. At the end of the third year, when it was decided to withdraw from micro level intervention in this locality, we had to regretfully part with this staff member.

The two well-documented action-research studies not only demonstrated the value of research in child care for evolving sensitive context-specific programmes, but pointed to the extent and nature of the need for research in this area, and its application at all levels. The interface between the research worker and the others also proved extremely productive.

Each member of the team acknowledged that ACCESS had contributed to her personal growth and accomplishment. Equally, the Director's personality and way of working seemed to have influenced them to a great extent.

Looking at my entire stay in MSSRF, the most productive years were those when I was with Project ACCESS. It is something which I have said a number of times. I had a lot of new ideas coming out from the field, testing them out. Contributing and learning was a continuous process. ACCESS gave me a lot of scope in acquiring and strengthening my skills in graphics and designing on the computer. I have a bias towards field research, Project ACCESS gave me opportunities for that. Ms. Mina Swaminathan gave me open ground to learn and contribute. Of course, there were conditions imposed by the Project. Within those conditions there was plenty of freedom to work, which I thought was





good. It helped me a lot. That way also lot of credit goes to the Project Director.

**Jayshree**

My understanding of women's problems got enlarged/enriched. A holistic approach rather than a specialised approach is important when we take up violence against women. Violence is not only husband beating wife; one-sided responsibility becoming a burden is also violence, for example, child care being the sole responsibility of women. I translated materials needed in the field and translation can be done only when the understanding is good. The work atmosphere was excellent. I kept telling my husband 'You have been pushing me to quit my job to look after the baby. I missed my opportunity to learn.' The Project had excellent leadership. Ms. Mina Swaminathan is a very simple person and she is conceptually strong. She has an open mind. That is what I see as a major positive point. She received alternative ideas. At that age she was so open. I used to be adamant and stick to my ideas. I learned I should receive from others.



THE HUMAN ELEMENT

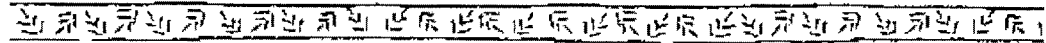
**Champa**

I love children. I was totally at home with the children, playing with them, interested in their health, especially cleanliness and nutritious food. Ms. Mina Swaminathan is highly interested in children. For her age, she could really play with children, which was amazing. She was one with the children. Compared to her, we were nothing. We were inspired by her enthusiasm.

**Padma**

I experimented with natural materials to produce vegetable dyes and made soft toys from locally available things. I gained confidence and skill in organising training programmes independently. I learned a lot from Ms. Swaminathan: her approach to people, her identification with people, and her ability to draw people out. In Project ACCESS my work was mainly in the field, I was constantly with people in the rural areas. I can now move with people well and work with them with ease. It was a challenge for me to bring the women and others in the

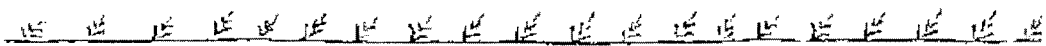


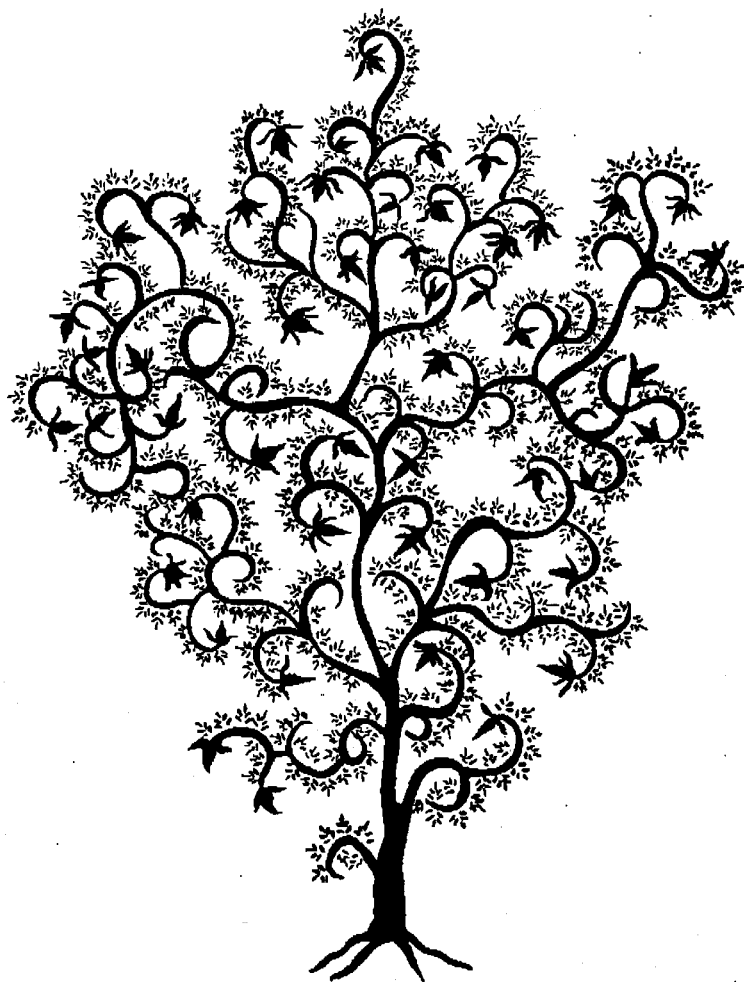


community who were indifferent to the idea of the child care centre to accept it in reality. When people who were hesitant brought their children to the centre, I felt highly encouraged and I experienced a sense of joy.

**Kalai**

With TN-FORCES well on its way and COTA coming into being, ACCESS was entering into the stage of development. There were several achievements in the first phase that were to stand the Project in good stead later. The exploratory method of working at interlinked multiple levels without getting tied down to rigid project frameworks on the one hand, or falling victim to vagueness, drift, and casual activities on the other, proved very successful. A solid foundation was laid for the factors that were to take COTA forward—networking, advocacy, communication, research, and training.

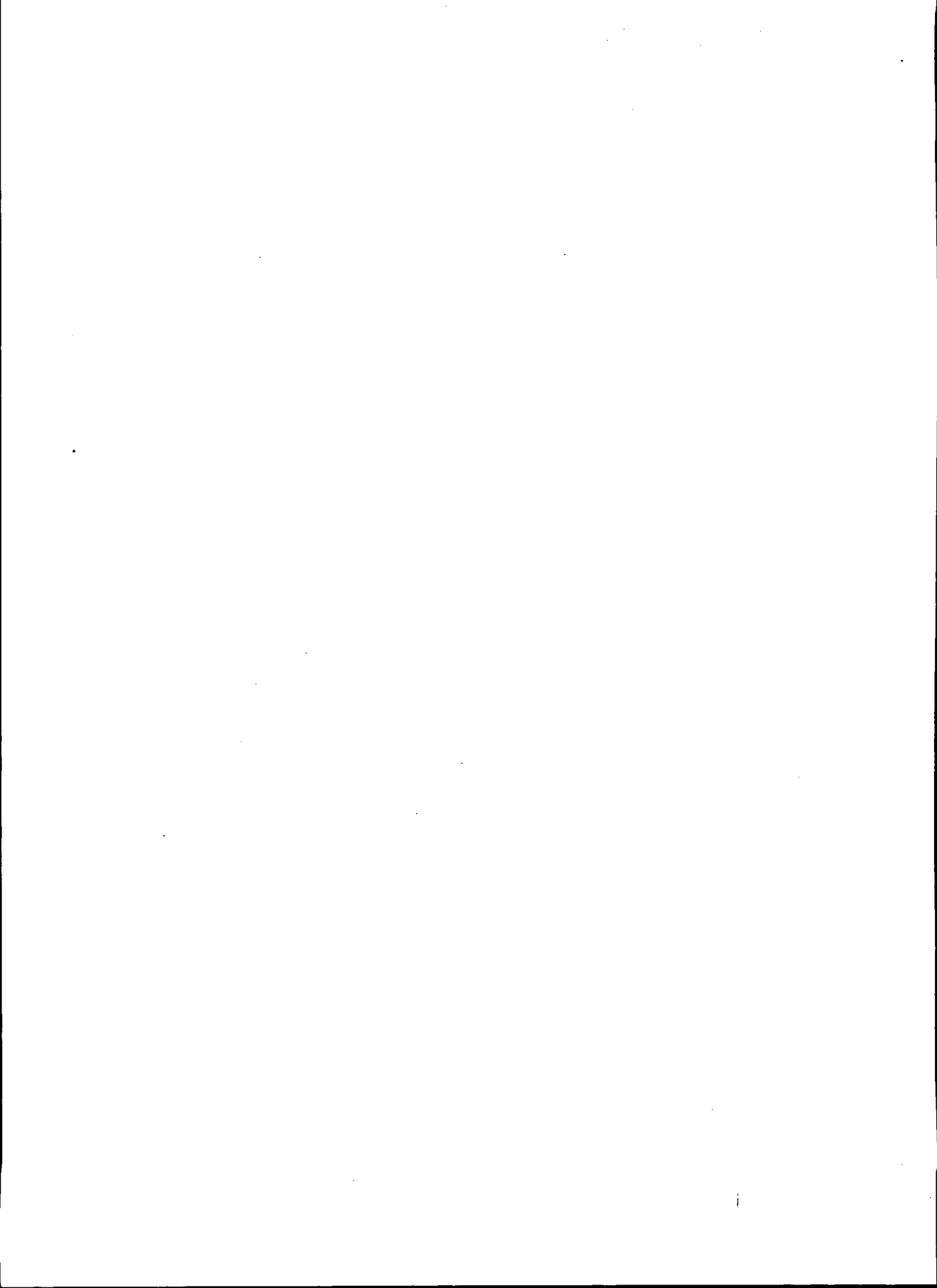




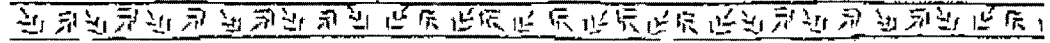
**DEVELOPMENT 1993–1997**

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The second phase of development, began in 1993 (overlapping with the first phase, which only concluded in 1994), with the launching of the main programme, Children on the Agenda (COTA), funded by the Bernard van Leer (BvL) Foundation. This was intimately linked to the strengthening of TN-FORCES as an instrument of advocacy for the young child. TN-FORCES had been set up in 1992 and its early growth and activities have already been described. It gradually became apparent that it could not achieve very much so long as it remained a small informal network based on personal relationships between a handful of people with common concerns, even though each represented an institution concerned with the young child in some way. Clearly, it required a strong structure with definite goals, a programme of activities of its own, and, hence, financial support. With this aim in view, the process of seeking funding was initiated, with a small grant from the BvL Foundation towards project formulation. Rama Narayanan was appointed as a consultant to prepare the proposal. As it happened, she continued to work in various capacities with ACCESS till 2001. A series of brainstorming



meetings with the various members and interest groups of TN-FORCES was held, resulting in the formulation of a proposal, which was duly sanctioned, and a substantial grant was received in mid-1993. Initially approved for a period of three years, the programme actually went on up to the end of 1997, that is, for four and a half years, with no additional cost or extra funding.

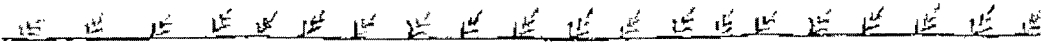
1993 also saw the beginning of another activity—documentation of innovative work in Early Childhood Development (ECD)—funded by the Aga Khan Foundation. This culminated in the production of the SURAKSHA series by 1996 <sup>11</sup> (which in turn led to Sage Publications bringing out the state-of-the-art volume on ECD in India at the turn of the century<sup>12</sup>). Similarly, two other small projects were taken up in 1997, one to study in depth the situation of the urban young child and the other attempting to develop a network committed to working on issues of female foeticide/ infanticide. Both these were seen as outgrowths and supporting activities arising from the basic concerns of ACCESS. The three non-COTA projects played a significant role, and fed into and strengthened the totality of work of ACCESS, taking up sub-themes and concerns that could not be handled by the TN-FORCES structure and process.

COTA dealt with six major domains—networking, advocacy, research (including documentation), training (later referred to as capacity building), communication, and materials (instructional and resource). Another element, dissemination—whether of research, communication products or instructional materials—gradually developed as a powerful strategy and tool. These six themes appear in different combinations at different times, and received varying emphasis at different phases, being intimately related to the concerns and strengths of the persons associated with each domain at particular times.(Fig.2)

A. Sarvesan, the first Project Coordinator (1993–96), thought COTA was an interesting programme

<sup>11</sup> Mina Swaminathan, ed., *The SURAKSHA Series: Early Childhood Care and Education in India* (Madras: MSSRF, 1995), monograph series.

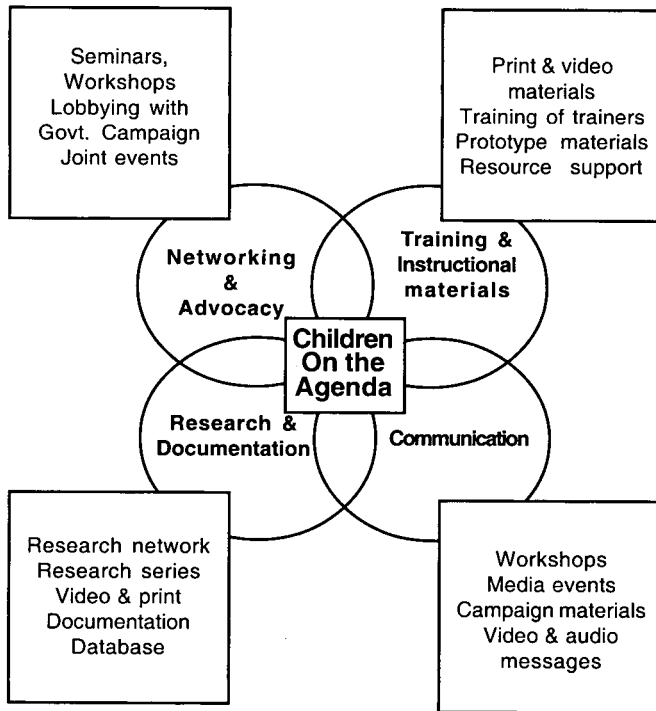
<sup>12</sup> Mina Swaminathan, ed., *The First Five Years: A Critical Perspective on Early Childhood Care and Education in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998).



The various components—research, advocacy, training, communication, and networking—supported the central issue of early childhood care and education in relation to women’s issues. Different dimensions of child care as a very strong social issue needed media support, training support, and research support. All these were visualised and a lot of activities were accomplished.



A unique feature of COTA was that, from beginning to end, it was conceived, framed, and carried out, with the support of imaginative funders in an exploratory, process-oriented mode, “inventing” itself as it went along. Perhaps this was due to the uniqueness of the attempt—there were no models to build on, and even the funding agency confessed that they had not handled a proposal like this before, but were very willing to support the exploratory approach. Only goals and objectives were set and broad strategies spelled out. These were constantly developed and revised, and then



**Fig. 2 Children on the Agenda**

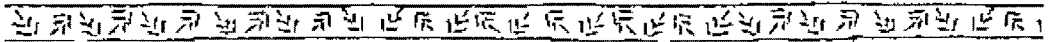


expressed in terms of activities, programmes, and events. No fixed targets were set, no schedule or calendar of activities for the year drawn up, except in the broadest terms. Activities and programmes literally grew out of each other, out of experiences that turned up, needs to be addressed, by following the responses of partners, and from constant evaluations and mid-course corrections, including a formal mid-term external review. This, of course, meant that there were some blind alleys that led nowhere, some false starts and some errors (but these were relatively few and far between), and the same flexibility of approach allowed for quick retreats, cutting losses, and switching to new approaches. On the whole, this was a richly productive period, with outstanding outputs, described in detail below, vindicating the "success" of this seemingly vague, imprecise, and unplanned approach, which nevertheless seemed to proceed with its own inner logic/dynamic, a logic that was organic rather than mechanical.

When we work on an issue, we start from a particular point, we do go somewhere even if it is not in the direction you had thought you would go, we make progress. It is important to understand that. It is important to see how far we are from the goal. That itself is a good outcome, I feel. In Project ACCESS, this was put into practice. We did not have to be constantly worried: How many groups? How many meetings? How many members? We were more concerned about how the people were functioning. As a result of that mode, right from the beginning we could even make the funding agency see that the process was important and the quality of work was important. When we function with the quality in mind, we expect that it will produce some effect, and it is up to us to see what that effect is—to measure that effect rather than to have some fixed outcome in mind and constantly try and see whether the project has reached that. I think we have done much more by focusing on the quality. Quality spins the quantity later. With the focus on the process of work, flexibility in approach became imperative. Activities were planned according to the skills and strengths of the staff members.

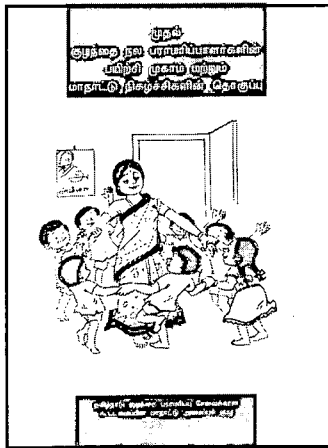
**Rama Narayanan**

So, for the rest of this section, the story will be told in terms of tracing



the development of each sphere of activity, including its linkages with other domains, rather than attempting a year-by-year summary in a narrative mode. This approach will also allow for recognition of the role of each member of the team—not only the staff, who had a significant influence on the direction and nature of activity, but also of the several resource persons, consultants, and members of the Advisory Committee closely associated with the Project. The account will, for this reason, draw heavily on their reports, especially the Process Documentation prepared at the end of the Project period, which was a group product.

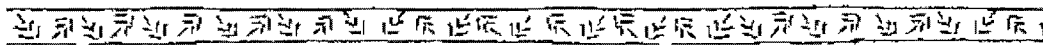




## Networking Takes Root

Networking and advocacy are intimately linked. To begin with, networking as a process received more emphasis as a base for, and with the objective of, advocacy for the young child. Later on, when the TN-FORCES network was well established and consolidated, networking was seen more as a tool for advocacy, so the advocacy component received more importance. In the very early informal stage of networking, before COTA was launched, the emphasis was on finding ways of coming together and forming the network, and joint activities were seen as leading to networking. In the first two years, TN-FORCES was gradually strengthened through a series of meetings, interactions, and discussions, spelling out objectives, drawing in new members, and undertaking a range of activities (workshops, conferences, training sessions, and campaigns), setting up sub-groups to deal with different themes, bringing out a newsletter, and clarifying doubts and views about the structure and functioning of the network.

In the initial years, the networking processes included dialogue, sensitising the media, building up a database, capacity building, and monitoring and evaluation. To these were added feedback analysis, documentation and dissemination, and social mobilisation through TV. However, there is no mention of these processes in the following years. Obviously, these had now been taken for granted and the focus was on the content of the objectives—advocacy. While the network members, who had spoken about “forming” the network



earlier, referred to “strengthening” in the second phase, in the last year, that is, by the end of the period, they were more concerned with “sustaining” the network, identifying and supporting the new Convenor, and facilitating the transition.<sup>13</sup>

As the emphasis changed, the focus shifted from membership *per se* to issues, but the approach continued to be highly participatory. The Annual General Meeting (AGM), which was instituted in 1993, became the main vehicle for expression of members’ concerns, views, and interests, and selected themes of focus for the coming year. A core committee, which met more frequently, helped in translating these issues into programmes for action. Issue-based sub-groups, some more focused and active than others, were seen as the main networking tools leading to events, programmes, and activities, most of which were finally orchestrated by ACCESS.<sup>14</sup> Documentation—and the development, production, and dissemination of supporting communication materials—was taken up by ACCESS, though development was again usually in a participatory manner, involving several of the concerned members of TN-FORCES.

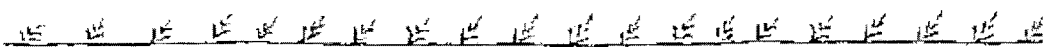
The first theme taken up, a very broad one, was Maternity and Child Care Services, which was later subdivided into sub-themes—the first among which was support to women for breastfeeding. Interestingly, this concern has remained of continuing interest both to ACCESS and to TN-FORCES over the last ten years. In the first year, a small and low-key campaign was attempted, through which ACCESS tested the waters and cut its teeth, trying out some strategies and learning some lessons. The main achievement with regard to this issue was the production of the first set of resource materials.<sup>15</sup>



NETWORKING TAKES ROOT

<sup>13</sup> At its peak, there were about 75 members in the TN-FORCES network (not all equally active) from constituencies such as women’s organisations, trade unions, educational, training, and research institutions, professional associations, NGOs concerned with women and child welfare, and others.

<sup>14</sup> The sub-groups initially were: Mother and Child, Convention, Preschool Education, and Media. Later additions were: Southern Regional, Women in the Unorganised Sector, and Decentralisation. Still later came Legislation and Health. Some were active, some lethargic, and others never got started. The activities of the sub-groups will become apparent in the sections on the various domains.







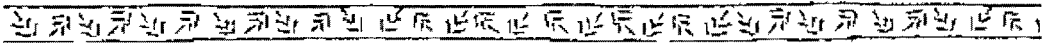
Later (by 1997) it was developed into a complete kit of training, communication, and campaign materials that became the base for advocacy on this theme.<sup>16</sup> Rama explained the context in which the issue was taken up.

The first issue that was taken up was breastfeeding, because, at that point in time a Bill was being introduced in Parliament that advertisement and promotion of infant food and milk substitutes should be banned. It was evident that supportive measures were needed to encourage women to breastfeed their babies. The issue was taken up effectively by the TN-FORCES network. I think it was the consistent efforts of the network that made the Tamil Nadu Government see that maternity leave for four months was very essential. Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu Governments have passed orders giving their employees four months' maternity leave. Though centrally the Maternity Benefit Act gives three months leave, each State has made its own provisions for its employees. The Punjab and Haryana Governments had already given six months. I am using this example to point out how valuable it was for us to take such items forward, intensify the work, and continue to campaign. We needed to generate a lot of materials. The same information needed to be presented in different ways to different groups of people—legislators, doctors, NGOs, and the general public. We needed to find avenues for preparing and promoting these materials. To reach out to the masses, we had to think of different kinds of messages in different forms using audio-visual media.

The architect of the TN-FORCES network and its presiding genius was undoubtedly Sarvesan. He pointed out that the child care needs of women in the organised sector were different from those of women in the unorganised sector.

<sup>15</sup> These included a Memorandum to the Government of Tamil Nadu, a pamphlet entitled *Mother's Milk-Every Child's Birthright!*, and the 18-minute video film, *Anguish*, to be widely used later.

<sup>16</sup> These included the research studies (a) Rama Narayanan, *At What Cost: Women's Multiple Roles and the Management of Breastfeeding* (Chennai: MSSRF, January 1997) and (b) Rama Narayanan, *Empowering Mothers to Breastfeed: Annaikku Aadaravu* (English and Tamil); two video spots on the theme; and the audio cassette of songs in Tamil, *Thayum Seyum* [Mother and Child] (Chennai: MSSRF, May 1997).



Project ACCESS brought to focus a very important perspective to child care, i.e., child care in relation to motherhood. Though the focus was working for the provision of quality child care, it was recognised that this cannot be achieved without touching women's issues and that the child care needs of women in the organised sector are different from the child care needs of women in the unorganised sector. Gaining this clarity was very crucial. The issue of increasing the period of maternity leave was taken up for women in the organised sector. In the unorganised sector, it was increasing the provision of allowance under Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy's Childbirth Assistance Scheme.<sup>17</sup> In both these, Project ACCESS played a catalyst role with success.

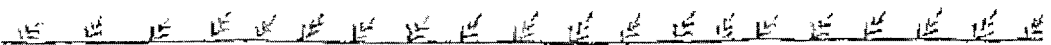


### ***The Bal Sevika Convention***

An outstanding event of this early period which brought the whole network together in a common activity was the Convention for Child Care Workers (Bal Sevikas) organised in September 1994, a major event which, however, was never to be repeated. The activity was also significant for its involvement of all the domains of work—advocacy, communication, training, and even attempted but incomplete research. Though the situation of child care workers in the voluntary sector was never formally taken up as a theme by TN-FORCES, there was considerable interest in the area, most members seeing it in terms of training opportunities for this much neglected group of workers, in the context of improving the quality of child care services in that sector.

Accordingly, a special sub-group of 11 organisations (including ACCESS) was formed for this purpose, and formally named the Organising Committee. It met several times for detailed planning of the programme and organisation of the Convention and the members participated whole-heartedly and played their role effectively. Funds were raised in the name of the Organising Committee, a separate bank account opened for this purpose, and the finances managed by the Secretary of the Committee, though the bulk of the organisational work was shouldered by ACCESS and its staff and volunteers.

<sup>17</sup> This has now been merged with the National Maternity Assistance Scheme.





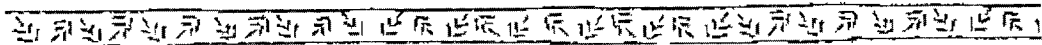
In Project ACCESS, I gained practice in networking. It was a great experience bringing together various organisations, especially the heads of these organisations, in the first convention and training programmes of Bal Sevikas in the State.

**Sarvesan**

Interestingly, most of those who came forward for this activity were either training institutions or large NGOs involved in running crèches and/or balwadis on a large scale. They were eager to have their workers exposed to training, but were lukewarm toward bringing the workers together as professionals, creating an association, or even discussing issues such as their working conditions, wages and work environment, recognition, aspirations, and motivation. The conflict of interest became apparent from the beginning (the very word Convention creating some discomfort by its connotations, instead of Conference which they would have preferred), and was handled by keeping this element on a low key, introducing it almost by way of a hidden agenda, and soft-peddalling the discussions and outcomes on those issues. Nevertheless, the Convention was an unique event, bringing together for the first time more than 300 child care workers from the voluntary sector all over Tamil Nadu, with a varied programme to satisfy all interests, interactions at several levels and building strong contacts for the network in the future.<sup>18</sup>

The Convention had lasting and valuable outcomes and implications for the network. Not only was it a well-coordinated and conducted event, establishing the efficiency with which goals could be met by careful planning in a joint activity, but it brought the members together in close and continuous cooperation over a period of time, establishing close links and warm relationships in a atmosphere of shared values and common goals. The comments made by the participating groups clearly showed their sense of "ownership" of the Conference. Even though most of the organisational load was carried by ACCESS, each and every member felt that it was "his or her" event. This also established an atmosphere of mutual trust,

<sup>18</sup> MSSRF, *Mudhal Kuzhanthai Paraamarippalar Payirchi Mukhaam Matrum Maanattu Nikhaizhikalin Thoghopu* [Report of the Child Care Workers' Convention] (Madras, 1994), Tamil only.



conducive to more such cooperative ventures in the future, and set the pattern and style for future campaigns and events. In other words, the networking component was as important and as valuable as the programmatic content.

A. S. Padmavathi, an experienced media person, was with COTA in the communication side of the Project. She was active in documenting the Bal Sevika Convention in writing as well as on video. She was impressed by the strength of networking.

I liked immensely the concept—the concept of collective power underlying TN-FORCES. In practice, Project ACCESS was networking with the members of TN-FORCES. It was really consultation with every member, and each member was taking up a role in the common activity. The Bal Sevika Convention was a very good example. I got the sense of working in a team as a collective. I also understood the advantages and disadvantages of working as a collective—where to stop, etc.

The follow-up activities of the Convention, pursued with vigour, were however one-sided, in keeping with the interests of the major partners, and related only to the dimensions of training and improvements in the quality of child care services in the voluntary sector. To implement some of the recommendations of the Convention, it was essential to involve the managements of agencies running crèches, and so a seminar was conducted for them in April 1995.<sup>19</sup> This was followed by a training workshop later in the year for supervisors. Both were funded with the balance of money available in the kitty, and both conducted in a participatory manner with all the members under the organisational direction of ACCESS. No moves, however, were made to follow up the recommendations regarding working conditions, wages, and related issues, nor was any attempt made to bring the child workers together again, occasionally or regularly, or to start a newsletter or an association, though those had also been among their requests.

The major NGOs on the Organising Committee or Convention subgroup continued to take interest during the next couple of years

<sup>19</sup> MSSRF, *Management of Crèches* (proceedings of a seminar sponsored by TN-FORCES, Madras, April 1995).





only in training of workers, improvement of quality of child care services, and related issues, and did not come forward to participate in advocacy on other issues, which they clearly felt to be in conflict with their other interests. These uneasy but concealed perceptions of threat occasionally rose to the surface. In fact, taking up the interests of child care workers as part of the agenda of TN-FORCES and including the Anganwadi Workers Union as a participating member was never done while ACCESS was the Convenor of TN-FORCES, and did not take place till much, much later.

Dr. G. Pankajam (now Vice Chancellor, Gandhigram Rural Institute) was Associate Secretary of the Gandhigram Trust and Principal of the Lakshmi College of Education, Gandhigram, at the time of the Balsevika Convention. She explained why everyone could not take up advocacy.

I am an academician, not an activist. I was more involved in training and research than in advocacy. As an academician, I could train personnel and work towards improving the quality of the programme. Raising salaries and such needs for the service conditions of the child care workers could not be taken up by us as we were institution-bound and receiving grants from the Government even for paying the salaries of the workers.

The outcome was that the network gradually grew to be a somewhat unwieldy (!) and diverse collection of interest groups, represented by the various sub-groups, each working on its own agenda, never actually coming into conflict, but often with little understanding of the movement as a whole, and coming together only once a year at the AGM. This was because TN-FORCES tried to simultaneously address multiple issues with multiple strategies, resulting in different groups working for different purposes and representing different interests. Thus, instead of being a cohesive group organised around issues and principles acceptable to all, it became a loose and diffuse one, sheltering all kinds of people held together only by some kind of commitment to the young child. This could be seen as both a strength and a weakness, but was definitely characteristic of the network during this period. This kind of organisation also led to the phenomenon of "sleeping members", many of whom were not clear about the

objectives of the network, but had vague goodwill towards it and wanted to remain within it, so they were never removed, though the issue was repeatedly discussed at AGMs. The whole issue of the structure, or lack thereof, of the network, its informal nature and focus on process, its lack of formal registration and elections, confusion about its role and function, were all frequently discussed and led finally to the drawing up of the Charter—along the lines of the Charter developed by the national FORCES—which could be used as an instrument to educate and test the commitment of members.

Rama thought that this unstructured nature of TN-FORCES only made it stronger.

For example, there is no President or Vice President or an election. At first, it was difficult for people to work in this mode as we are so used to looking up to someone as President. Here the people were expected to come together, thinking it is their own. There was the Convenor to take up administrative things, but the other members had as much right to raise issues as the Convenor. Each member organisation had an equal chance of becoming the Convenor. I think initially people found it difficult but now they have settled down to the concept. Even in terms of advocacy with the legislators, if there were issues that the members found difficult to identify with, they had the freedom to stay away. Just because they belonged to the network, they did not have to do things. I think that way of functioning strengthened the network.

Sarvesan agreed with Rama.

The Convenor-headed loose network with sub-groups based on issues really worked. There were questions whether issues could be marketed among volatile NGOs with strong convictions of their own. With intensive work with the NGO sub-groups, it became a reality.

Nevertheless, he seemed disappointed that more issue-based subgroups had not been facilitated.

The concept was that of sub-groups based on issues, for example, health, training, etc., each sub-group taking up one and working on it. It was thought that the sub-group convenors and members should become more and more active and should become centres of activities





with reference to the issue(s) concerned. Over a period of time, there was reduced participation. Partnership creation is very difficult and time-consuming; it is easier to do the programme oneself than bring others and facilitate. In TN-FORCES, the focus is no more that. Sub-groups have not become a great force as was visualised. They seem to have lost their identity. The initial momentum got lost after the first two or three years.

There was also some ambiguity about the relationship between COTA and TN-FORCES. While Sarvesan was of the view that the initial understanding that the TN-FORCES network should support COTA changed with the mid-term evaluation and it was clarified that the programme should support the network, Raja Samuel ('Sam'), the next Project Coordinator, was not so sure.

The confusion in COTA between the networking and other components was something I was not able to resolve. We claimed that networking was just one part of the project while the funders claimed that the whole project was to support the network and as such had to be more accountable to network members. This confusion in part was created by some members of the network who were not happy about the way we were functioning.

Sam too had a Master's degree in Social Work. He joined ACCESS as a Project Associate in Research and later was Project Coordinator.

Two of Sarvesan's unique contributions were the Research Network and the Southern Regional Network, both conceived as sub-networks but going far beyond the issue-based sub-groups and extending the concept to other domains, one conceptual and the other geographical. Both were his brain-children, carefully nursed and nurtured, both became autonomous and semi-independent entities over time, but neither could be sustained when the driving force of ACCESS was withdrawn with a change of Convenor in TN-FORCES and a changed agenda for ACCESS.

### ***Southern Regional Network***

The Southern Network grew out of an exploratory visit to Nagercoil in June 1994 by ACCESS in the role of TN-FORCES Convenor to get

together a group of NGOs to join the network. About 15 NGOs participated and most expressed concern about the "burden" of prevailing forms of preschool education and the need and value of learning through play. After several meetings, the theme of 'Pressures on the Preschool Child' was chosen and the first activity was a training programme for teachers, supervisors, teacher trainers, and managements, funded by ACCESS. This was followed by a series of local workshops, and sharing meetings. Motivation ran high, and even led to the launch of a string of 10 community preschools by one of the members. The Project Coordinator, Sarvesan, introduced at this stage the idea of campaigning on the issue, and again a group of 15 came together. DATA (Development Association for Training and Technology Appropriation), the Convenor for the Southern group, organised a media workshop on the theme in mid-1995, with the help of resource persons from the media, which produced a wealth of campaign materials, including six street plays, songs, posters, slogans, and jingles. A couple of months later, a workshop on folk media was held on the same theme, resulting in training in street theatre for community workers as well as the production of a villupattu (subsequently turned into both video and audio cassette by ACCESS).<sup>20</sup> All of these activities were carried out independently by the Southern Network with inputs only from Sarvesan who regularly visited and kept in touch.



Project ACCESS played a catalyst role in bringing to light certain issues that were already there in some areas. In Tirunelveli, the NGOs clearly said that the multiple work roles of women was not an issue for them, but the concern they felt and perceived was the burden of the school child. It was that felt need that helped carry on the whole momentum for the subject. The southern zone people were very active on this issue. The push was probably given by us. It is not possible to create anything in a vacuum. The spark was there. Maybe we ignited the spark. We made it more visible.

**Rama**

<sup>20</sup> Jnani, "Suavaiya? Sumaiyya?" [Pleasure or Burden?] (both audio and video), and some of the songs in the audio-cassette "Enga Paattu Kelunga" [Listen to Our Songs] (Chennai: MSSRF, November 1996), Tamil only.





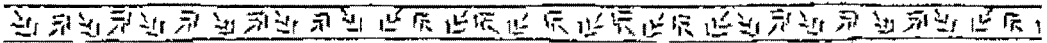
By mid-1996, the network prepared a proposal for a sustained mass awareness campaign over a period of three years. However, funding was not forthcoming and interest began to flag, as it was not possible to sustain activity at that pitch without funding. Around the same time, there was a change of Coordinator at ACCESS, which further contributed to a decline in interest. The Southern Network members began to turn to other priorities, in which they continued to be active, while contacts with parent network, TN-FORCES, were minimal. After another process workshop in mid-1997, the interest ran out, at a period when the change of Convenor at TN-FORCES was being planned and carried out in Chennai. The new Convenor was too preoccupied in the first few months to give time and support to the Southern Network, located in Madurai, while ACCESS withdrew from networking to focus on new dimensions selected for the next phase. Thus, the autonomy of the network, its greatest strength, also became its weakness, since it had not yet developed strong roots and established itself in the theme area, and did not continue to draw sustenance through strong links with the parent network.

Sarvesan was deservedly happy about his achievement in the Southern Regional Network.

During my period as Coordinator of Project ACCESS, the [TN-FORCES] network membership increased from 36 to 65. The work that I did in taking TN-FORCES to the southern districts, creating awareness among NGOs about the importance of issue-based actions and the need for collaboration in this regard, evoked good response. They took up the topic of 'Burden on the Preschool Child.' This is one good activity that I really feel I have done. It is one of my major contributions.

### ***Research Network***

The story of the Research Network is somewhat different. Also conceived originally as a sub-network and support service for TN-FORCES, it too gradually developed a life of its own and set different directions for itself. The original idea was that academic institutions could play a significant part in TN-FORCES by taking up research, the findings of which could form the base for advocacy on child care issues. Accordingly, as early as November 1993, a group of



researchers—some members of TN-FORCES and some others—were invited to an initial meeting where the objectives were squarely put before them. Possible research themes were also suggested. A large number of disciplines were represented at the first meeting, and since many members did not have much information about, or interest in, child care issues, it was decided to collect and make available more information and develop a concept paper on this. However, two broad areas for research were identified: a) services for women and children, and b) maternity, breastfeeding, and child health. Some strategies like student research and multi-centric research were also suggested.



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The first strategy was followed up for the next year or more, with steady inputs from Rama and Sarvesan, both of whom had a deep interest in research. A series of meetings were held to refine strategies further, a two-day methodology workshop for research students at the M.A./M.Sc. and M. Phil levels was organised, as well as a one-day interaction for research guides, all funded by ACCESS. The possibility of building up a database on child care issues through coordinating and collecting student researches in a planned way was discussed, as well that of a “team” approach, in which students could study topics serially or cross-sectionally. Though a number of student researches on the suggested topics were in fact carried out over the next two years, and several micro-studies were taken up, neither of these ambitious schemes actually materialised, because of various institutional and disciplinary limitations in the academic world.

Sarvesan thought the research network had been

a new and good effort. I initiated the process of bringing together research students and academic institutions and working on studies needed in ECCE. A research network was formed, but, sadly, it did not last for a long time.

Again, the research network became semi-independent, developing a life, an agenda, and a mandate of its own, with few links with the main body. The members were enthusiastic, eager to use their skills for a social cause, and greatly concerned about the issues. However,





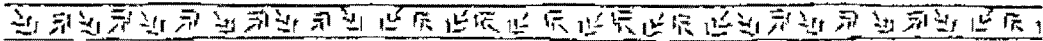
there was little of common interest between many of the members of the research network on the one hand and the NGOs and others involved in advocacy or in running of child care services on the other. Few activists or NGOs could appreciate the links between research and action, while most of the researchers with their highly focused interests, concern for technical aspects and methodology, and need for very different strategies, had little time for the activities of TN-FORCES. Thus, a gradual separation took place over time.

The need for information felt by TN-FORCES was to become the basis of action of the research network. The idea of developing the network into a full-fledged inter-disciplinary academic forum for child care issues and collaborative research ventures was mooted. However, the specialised nature of functioning of the research network and its members separated it from the rest of the group and made it into an independent entity with its own mandate and agenda. Though initially efforts were made to involve research network members in the activities of TN-FORCES, with the changing perceptions about the research network and its role, the physical separation gradually took place.

### Rama

Meanwhile, the research network did draw up plans for large-scale research and building of databases, but it was soon realised that these needed funding of a scale that was not available, and that researchers would have to raise the funds themselves from various sources. This dampened enthusiasm somewhat, since these were not the topics of primary interest to most of the group, who would rather expend their energies on raising funds for their own pet topics. Thus, by the middle of 1997, when the available funding came to an end and the Convenorship of TN-FORCES changed, it was not clear whether further funding would be available even on a limited scale, and the research network petered out. It was again evident that its independence, which was its greatest strength, also turned out to be its weakness, since there was no strong link, either financial or in terms of professional commitment, to hold together a group from different institutions and disciplines.

The most successful "product" of the research network, ironically, was the outcome of its most tightly controlled, centralised, and



funded activity—the multi-centric research study, *At What Cost?: Women's Multiple Roles and the Management of Breastfeeding*. The findings of this review provided immensely valuable material for advocacy and training, became the plank on which TN-FORCES campaigned for maternity entitlements, and continues to be effective even after five years. The study itself will be commented upon in the section on research. Here only the insights gained from the process, which was a rich learning experience, will be mentioned.



After identifying the topic as a priority area of research, several institutions were invited to a preliminary discussion to talk about the possibility of a joint venture, the participatory nature of which was emphasised right from the start. In a series of meetings, a common plan of action, approach, strategy, methodology, and logistics was worked out, and the protocol and schedules prepared. Then training of investigators was carried out, data collected, scrutinised, processed, and analysed, and a draft report prepared and critiqued before being finalised. Members participated at each stage, but the entire process was coordinated and directed by Rama Narayanan, then the Research Fellow at ACCESS, who also carried out the main burden of work. From the start, the importance of documenting and learning from the process was recognised, and both positive and negative outcomes recorded.

Seven institutions—five academic and two NGOs—jointly conducted a multi-centric research study on 'Women's Multiple Roles and the Management of Breastfeeding'. The quality of participation was quite high and the output generated was enormous. The findings gave a lot of insight into the child-care needs of women and the management strategies that they adopted. Besides being useful as tools for advocacy, these were also used in addressing specialists and professional bodies and in training programmes conducted by NGOs for grassroots level workers. The range and scale of dissemination was quite high. The information generated was incorporated into the charter of demands prepared and given to various political parties for inclusion in their election manifestos. They were published and distributed to a large number of individuals and institutions. They



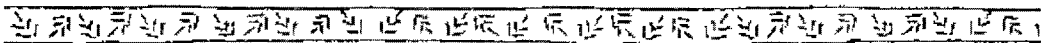


were translated into Tamil and published in local magazines and dailies. Papers were presented at national seminars and conferences.

### Rama

The strengthening of interaction and sharing among researchers and the cost-effective nature of the exercise—since most of the investigators were students operating on minimal honoraria—were the main advantages. Some of the difficulties related to lack of planning in logistics, delay in data processing by the partner institutions, skills demanded of interviewers being too much for students to handle, turnover among student investigators and use of untrained investigators as a consequence, lack of guidance to students from the research faculty, and so on. Most of these resulted from the loss of interest on the part of the faculty who were supposed to be co-investigators, and lack of “ownership” of the study by them. It seemed that the perception was that it was an ACCESS study contracted out to them for minimal returns, and most saw it merely as a useful training experience for the students who participated in them. Further, there seemed to be some gaps in the ideological approach and understandings of the objective and value of the research. Thus, little interest was shown by the faculty in guiding the students in individual presentations of their part of the studies, or in publishing those studies later as post-graduate dissertations, or in the dissemination of the final study, or its use as teaching material, or as a step towards building up further researches on the theme. This raises questions about the meaning of the concept of “participation” in multi-disciplinary research, and whether it is possible to be participatory and rigorous at the same time. Certainly, it throws light on why the research network could not, in the absence of large-scale funding, continue to exist.

The third combined activity—after the joint advocacy and joint research just described—was the training in ECE (Early Childhood Education) conducted by some members of TN-FORCES in the summer of 1997, which was later (in 1998–2000) to grow into the trainers’ network. The germ from which it grew, the Summer Course, will be described in the section on Capacity Building.



The skills, strategies, tools, and processes of networking grew and developed slowly, out of exploration and trial and error, and out of the experiences and expertise of the staff as people and as workers, who were “formed” by the activity just as much as they “formed” the process. The contribution of ACCESS through COTA to the formation and strengthening of TN-FORCES has been acknowledged by several observers and network members. Sarvesan, for instance, perceived as his forte



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the ability to manage diverse groups to focus on issues. Being a social worker I could work with different groups. This was strengthened by the opportunities given by the Project.

Rama thought that

the strength of TN-FORCES is in comprehensively taking up the whole area of early childhood, and not just nutrition or education. The approach is holistic. Even the Government has started thinking not only in terms of nutrition but also in terms of other components such as education.

Dr. Shanmugavelayutham (familiarily called SV) of the Department of Social Work at Loyola College, Chennai, who later took over as the Convenor of TN-FORCES, was warmly appreciative of ACCESS’s efforts.

In Tamil Nadu, there is definitely a focus on ECCD (Early Childhood Care and Development) because of TN-FORCES. That importance should be given to the young child is something that is understood among NGOs and among government sector personnel. TN-FORCES is an important contribution of Project ACCESS — creating the network, giving momentum through organised efforts were done by Project ACCESS.

S. S. Jayalakshmi, Secretary and Correspondent of the Vidya Vikasini institutions in Coimbatore, acknowledged the coming together of the various members of the network.

Project ACCESS to a certain extent brought together people working in different projects/programmes; institutions both professional and





academic, working for the cause of ECCE in Tamil Nadu. Government projects of ICDS and TINP (Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Project), professional organisations like the Indian Association for Preschool Education (IAPE), academic institutions, Departments of Child Development were all working in ECCE in watertight compartments, with little or nothing to do with one another. Awareness was created in all and we are all together even today. We are all there meeting the demands of the different situations regarding ECCE.

Jayanthi Rani Christiana, yet another Master's in Social Work, was Project Associate – Research in ACCESS. She seconded Jayalakshmi's observations.

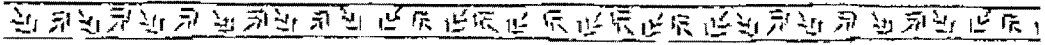
Project ACCESS, with its holistic perspective, brought in an extensive range of stakeholders and professionals to work on issues concerning Early Childhood Care and Education. TN-FORCES, initiated by Project ACCESS, had as its members non-government organisations, women's organisations, educational institutions, professional associations, and trade unions. The practitioners in the fields of ECCE, community health, paediatrics, media, legal aid, labour, rural development, etc. (both governmental and non-governmental) were provided with a common platform for tackling ECCE issues of importance from different perspectives.

Santhiya Maheswari, who was the Project Associate-Research with ACCESS from 1994 to '97 and is now a Child Development Project Officer in ICDS, was positive that ACCESS gave a fillip to networking in child care issues.

ACCESS helped to bring in various resource persons through networking in ECCE. Following this model, networking has been done by UNICEF in areas of research, media, parenting, etc.

Dr. L. S. Saraswathi, a member of the Technical Advisory Committee of Project ACCESS, was the consultant who evaluated TN-FORCES.

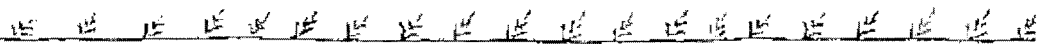
I felt strongly that the process of networking was participatory in the sense that Project ACCESS facilitated the formation of issue-based sub-groups and played a catalytic role in the production and use of



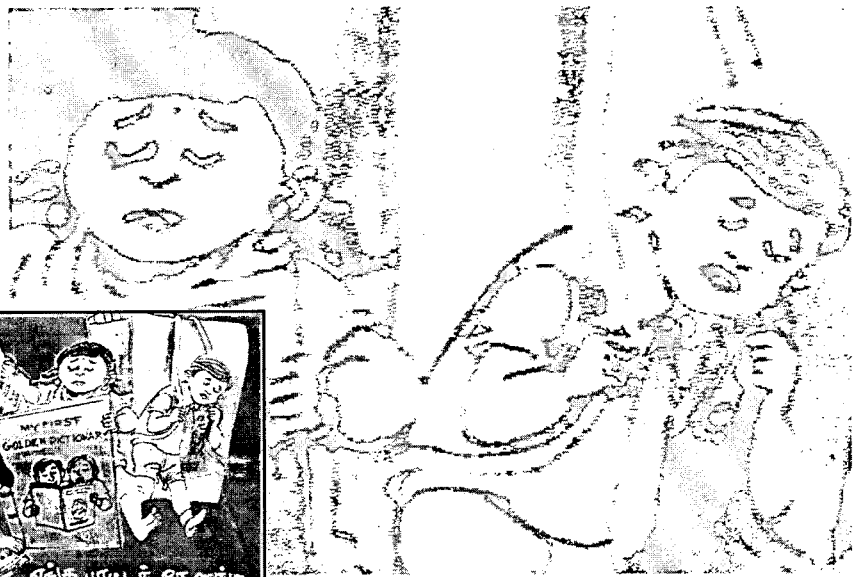
issue-appropriate materials. The outcomes of this process of networking were first: the network became visible and active, bringing together a considerable number of institutions and organisations concerned about 'the child' on a common platform for the first time. They were also influenced in terms of developing skills, training quality teachers, streamlining their preschools, bringing out their talents in folklore for campaigning, acquiring new perspectives like becoming aware of the different dimensions of childcare, women's triple roles, and the health of women and children as social responsibilities. Second: childcare issues as a women's concern, the issue of ECE, all of which were non-issues earlier became focused, and there was a sense of awareness created in people who matter at the policy level as well as professionals, activists, and the public at large.



NETWORKING TAKES ROOT







## Advocacy is the Next Step

Advocacy was intimately linked with networking, but did not take place only through networking. ACCESS played a major role, not only in coordinating TN-FORCES around activities and events related to issues, but also in the selection of the themes, organising discussions to refine concepts, strategising and planning the most effective methods, developing and disseminating the materials required for campaigns and events, and so on. Several advocacy measures were also undertaken directly by ACCESS. Since the networking component has been discussed in some detail in the previous section, here only the advocacy strategies and tools, and their development and evolution, will be described and commented on. Advocacy is also closely linked with communication, and with communication strategies, tools, and materials developed for the purpose. It was connected with research too, since most of the research studies taken up by ACCESS have been specifically with a view to generating authentic empirical information for purposes of advocacy. Thus, all these elements are interlinked in multiple ways, and it is difficult to comment on one aspect without bringing in the others. Here the focus will be on advocacy.

Advocacy strategies also developed over time, and through experience, exploration, and experiment. The objective was to build up a supportive climate, to address different critical interest groups concerned with each issue as well as policy makers and the general

public directly, and to make both the “users” and the “providers” of services aware of the implications of those services. Starting from sporadic activities and simple one-off events, and from seminars, consultations, and workshops directly addressed to policy makers, advocacy developed into a series of interconnected activities, working at different levels, trying to influence different stakeholders through different methods, reaching the campaign mode in the later years. The development of a range of strategic materials in different media, based on research and documentation and constantly added to and refined, provided a rich source for advocacy. Later these materials were further shaped and adapted into different forms for different audiences, in different languages. Memorandums and petitions addressed to Government or to specific authorities became information and discussion documents, and then evolved into multiple-issue election manifesto material, which were offered to all political parties to choose from.<sup>21</sup> All the activities, especially the campaigns, were backed by communication materials in print, video, and audio form.



Over the period, the following were some of the themes selected for advocacy, based both on the yearly themes of the TN-FORCES network, and on emerging issues:

- Maternity and child care services
- Burden on the preschool child
- Support for breastfeeding
- Gender sensitisation
- Women’s multiple roles
- Decentralisation of child care services
- Development of the young child (0–2 years)

### ***Support for Mothers and Children***

The broad theme of maternity and child care services was the first to be taken up, but later it was broken up into two or three smaller sub-themes. The starting point was with the three seminars and publications which resulted from them, in which policy makers were

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<sup>21</sup> MSSRF, *TN-FORCES Anaithu Arasiyal Katchikalukcum Vidukkum Korikkai* [TN-FORCES Memorandum to All Political Parties] (Chennai, 1996), Tamil only.



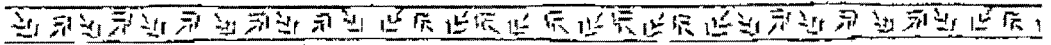
directly involved.<sup>22</sup> Efforts focusing on maternity entitlements and support for breastfeeding were singled out for attention as early as 1994, and a memorandum with four major demands developed and presented to the Government of Tamil Nadu. Widely circulated to legislators, trade unions and others, and reproduced in newsletters and journals, it became the basis for some sustained pressure on the Government. It led to two important announcements in the budget of 1995–96: extension of maternity leave to four months and inclusion of pregnant and lactating mothers in the Noon Meals scheme.

A lot of interesting work was done in raising the awareness of MLAs, political parties, unions, and the general public on ECCE and women's issues, both in the organised and unorganised sectors. When the State Assembly was in session, before the subject discussion on Social Welfare, we met MLAs and distributed leaflets. We had good response. The Communist Party of India raised these issues in the Assembly. Before the elections, we met leaders of political parties for them to include the topics in their mandates. We can really say that there were changes. There was an increase in subsistence allowance for pregnant women in the unorganised sector.

#### Sarvesan

Encouraged by this response, more specific materials were developed on this theme and were also widely used. The documentary *Anguish* (1994) and two video spots specifically on this theme in *Messages that Move* were regularly shown on TV; an audio-spot featured for some time on AIR-FM stations. Besides being regularly shown on Doordarshan, the spots, along with the documentary, were used at meetings and discussion groups. Fact sheets and pamphlets too were developed on this issue. After the publication of the research study *At What Cost?* in 1997, which itself was widely disseminated, especially to paediatricians, government officials, and NGOs working in health, a training manual incorporating all the basic information entitled *Empowering Women to Breastfeed* was brought out in two languages—English and Tamil.

<sup>22</sup> MSSRF, *Maternity and Child Care Support Services* (proceedings of an NGO consultation, Madras, August 1993); *Policy for the Young Child in Tamil Nadu* (proceedings of a seminar, Madras, October 1994); *Design for Partnership* (proceedings of a consultation jointly sponsored by MSSRF and ICCW-TN, Madras, November 1995).



More than 5000 copies of the Tamil version were distributed through the Department of Public Health, as well as partners/network members like the Indian Academy of Paediatrics (IAP) and TN-VHA (Tamil Nadu Voluntary Health Association).

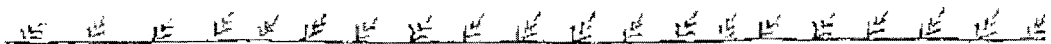
TN-FORCES sub-group on breast-feeding was very active. It was linked to the Voluntary Health Association, and the issue was taken up with hundreds of health organisations in Tamil Nadu.

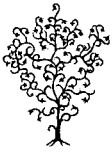
**Sarvesan**

ACCESS also produced papers and monographs on this subject, reviewed and summarised information, published popular articles, entered into debate in the columns of the press, actively helped members to set up work-site crèches and child-friendly work places, took part in TV and radio programmes, and also participated in consultations on the Infant Milk Substitutes Act which was passed in 1994, and engaged in diverse other activities. For example, an unusual approach tried later was the distribution of the audio cassette *Thayum Seyum* with songs containing various messages on mother and child care to 300 paediatricians across the State with a request to play the music in their clinics and outpatient waiting rooms. Gradually, the campaign has come to be almost a regular event, usually climaxing during the first week of August, when most health and women-related organisations observe International Breastfeeding Day (now Week). To begin with, this was consciously promoted by ACCESS, guidelines were sent to network members along with materials, and events sometimes coordinated, but later the observance has become institutionalised. This has turned out to be one of the most enduring issues on which continuous engagement has been both necessary and possible, with increasingly evolved strategies. It touched the interests of several network members, the health professionals, the women's organisations, trade unions and professionals, with support from international agencies and donors, enabling both dialogue with government and increasing public awareness. The only group that could never be directly tackled was that of the employers in the private sector. ACCESS was also influential in coaxing national FORCES to take this up as a major issue.



ADVOCACY IS THE NEXT STEP





Sarvesan quoted an example to illustrate the definite increase in awareness on ECCE and working women's issues.

My wife works in the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC). The Women Employees' Union is influenced by AIDWA (All India Democratic Women's Association). In their Union Convention we pushed the issues of maternity leave for four months and crèche facilities for children of young mothers. These were discussed continuously in LIC Union Conventions for two or three years. These issues were taken up by LIC and amendments brought about. Overall, there was a change in the government's perception.

### ***Burden on the Preschool Child***

In contrast, the campaign on 'Burden on the Preschool Child', the best known and most visible issue with which both ACCESS and TN-FORCES came to be identified, started almost inadvertently, catapulted into campaign mode when the series of video spots, collectively to be termed *Messages that Move*, burst on an awe-struck Tamil Nadu through telecast by Doordarshan. Before that, the issue of improving the quality of ECE, and of tackling the issue of "burden", which is rampant in the private sector, had been taken up mostly at the level of working with teachers and trainers. Starting in 1994, and continuing right into 1996, a series of training workshops and publications addressed to teachers and trainers (to be described in the section on Capacity Building) and the development of two video documentaries on the theme had helped to lay the groundwork.<sup>23</sup> But, it was the tremendous response to the telecasts that led to the realisation that other stakeholders also could be addressed directly through the media.

Though I had started off to make one film-*Intha Bharam Thevaya?*- I could do two films, the other one being *Arivathil Anandam*. Both negative and positive sides of early childhood education were portrayed. We could telecast the videos and video spots on Doordarshan, quoting the policy for FM radio that for every nine minutes of commercial ads, there should be one minute on social issues.

**Padmavathi**

<sup>23</sup> A. S. Padmavathi, *Intha Bharam Thevaya?* [A Dangerous Burden] and *Arivathil Anandam* [Learning Can Be Fun] (Madras: MSSRF, 1995), video films, English and Tamil.

Padmavathi also described the efforts in the popular press.

There were quite a number of cartoons published in *Dinamani*: a small child with a big bag of books on the back; a child going to the preschool and behind him comes a lorry loaded with books; a large number of children in a small rickshaw; and so on.

And Rama talked of attempts by others to sensitise the public on the same issue.

The topic of burden on the preschool child was taken up as an episode in a TV serial, *Kathai Neram*, produced by Balu Mahendra. The episodes were based on stories on different themes... Newsreader Varadarajan's group produced a play, *LKG Asai* [Desire for Lower Kindergarten], which was staged in different places all over Tamil Nadu. During the beginning of the school year, Sun TV made it a point to bring this issue up.

The stakeholders were conceptualised as falling into five categories: parents, teachers (and trainers), school managements, the Government, and the general public, and accordingly strategies were gradually evolved, again in an exploratory manner, to reach out to each category. It was obvious that parents were too numerous and too spread out to be got to directly—they could only be reached indirectly through the media, or directly in small groups, mediated by schools and other institutions. It was also realised that school managements, being on the whole negative to the suggested change, were the hardest to reach, while teachers, however enthusiastic, were often unskilled and powerless to bring about change. Allies and network members proved to be the links, keys to the process of advocacy. And the medical professionals turned out to be the most powerful ally in this campaign. Members of IAP took the lead in coordinating a series of meetings across Tamil Nadu, including enlightened school managements, training institutions, and other TN-FORCES members, in which ACCESS and other network members addressed the issues as resource persons, using the materials already developed. The video documentaries and video spots were widely shown all over the State, in this process.





SIDA (Swedish International Development Agency) projects on ECCE were on in three districts in Tamil Nadu: Chengai, Pudukkottai, and Nilgiris. These centres had TV and VCR. In these SIDA projects, video and audio cassettes produced by Project ACCESS of MSSRF were used at community level meetings and campaigns. There were Bala Mela activities, fairs for children from balwadis, where again the video cassettes were screened.

### Santhiya Maheshwari

The spots themselves owed part of their magic to the use of powerful "authority" figures in them, including well-known public figures, educationists, and members of the medical profession. The academic and educational institutions also came into their own during this campaign, as did the media. The Indian Association for Preschool Education (IAPE) arranged for a series of articles on this theme by distinguished experts to appear once a month, in the national English daily, *The Hindu*, a series which continued for nearly two years.<sup>24</sup> Numerous articles also appeared in the Tamil press over the same period. Two memorandums were submitted to the Government during this campaign to press for legislation or regulation of preschool education.<sup>25</sup>

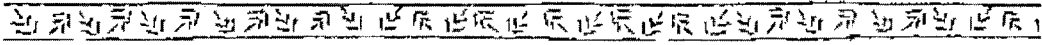
Mina Swaminathan's approach was to work on all fronts. For example, with regard to the theme of the 'burden on the preschool child', work was taken up for creating awareness among the general public through media, among NGOs through training, and it was also taken up with government. Creating a demand and trying to match the demand with supply was the effort.

### Rama

However, no dialogue with the Tamil Nadu Government could be initiated, and the response from managements of private schools ranged from indifference to hostility. The impact of the campaign, however, the ripples of which continued into later years, was mostly

<sup>24</sup> These were later collected and published by IAPE as a volume titled *Together We Go Far* (Chennai, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> The first called for a separate Directorate for Preschool Education to implement regulation and the second called for reduction of the burden on preschool children and put forth a series of proposals (including the one already mentioned).



in the form of tremendously increased awareness among all the stakeholders across the State, heightened interest and understanding. It has continued to remain an important topic of discussion ever since.

Sam emphasised the part played by ACCESS in making ECE significant in Tamil Nadu.

Earlier, ECE was a non-issue, both with the government and NGOs. Of course, there were balwadis and NGOs were running crèches and preschools. But the quality of ECE was never an issue. Accessibility of ECE centres was never an issue. ECE as a support service to mothers was never an issue. Nor were need-based services and community monitoring of ECE. ACCESS used all possible avenues to promote the cause of ECE. The Government woke up to the importance of the right kind of ECE. The Directorate of Social Welfare started talking about "joyful learning".

### ***Taking Child Care Services to the Grassroots***

A somewhat different approach was required and used for advocacy on the decentralisation of child care services. This started on a low key with meetings and discussions among the network members, since many were lukewarm or indifferent to the idea, and were not convinced that it would improve either the reach or quality of child care services, while powerful groups of stakeholders, such as the political parties and the teachers' and workers' associations were opposed to it. A workshop early in 1997 brought some consensus on the issue and provided a plank for lobbying.<sup>26</sup> Soon after the local body elections in late 1996, a series of workshops were organised for women elected members of local bodies, two urban and two rural, and a kit of resource materials was developed to help in this process. It was soon found that, at this stage, the women members were more in need of general training on how to tackle their responsibilities, assert themselves, and take up concerns of their choice. They were not ready to focus on a single issue such as child care services, and this was confirmed by a study of the functioning



ADVOCACY IS THE NEXT STEP

<sup>26</sup> MSSRF, *Decentralisation of Child Care Services* (report of a brainstorming session, Chennai, 1997).







of elected women representatives in panchayats.<sup>27</sup> It was quite clear that a different tactic was needed and again, in response to the realities of the field and through a process of discovery, exploration, and trial and error, a new and more sophisticated approach was evolved. The action-research which grew out of this belongs, however, to the next phase.

### ***Using Communication as the Tool***

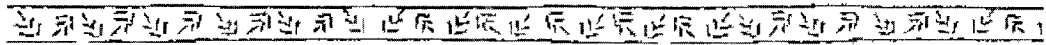
Communication was the key to the "Burden" campaign, and if 1993 and 1994 could be termed as the Years of Networking, 1995 and 1996 were the Years of Communication. The key players at this stage were the communicators, with networking strategists and trainers playing a supportive role. Padmavathi, the lead communicator, was joined by two younger colleagues (V. Vijaya and Murali Shanmugavelan) while Raja Samuel, the new Project Coordinator (1996–98), was in charge of planning, strategising, and networking. Strong teamwork, thriving on constant debate and discussion at times amounting to spats, formed the basis of this outburst of creative activity during these two years. With each step, new approaches and ideas swam into view. There was nothing planned about this phase—like the campaign, the flow of materials and resource grew by itself, as it were, from stream into a gushing torrent, providing energy years into the future.

Actually what Project ACCESS has done in a short span of time with the media is remarkable. Professor M. S. Swaminathan's articles get published in *The Hindu*, but in the Tamil media it was Project ACCESS that brought MSSRF to the fore. The issues focused are not sensational from the media's point of view. In fact, these concerns are considered dull and uninteresting. But Project ACCESS brought in the media focus through continuous efforts and through the perspective it brought to the issues.

#### **Padmavathi**

Murali Shanmugavelan had a Master's degree in Political Science. He was young and ready to relate to media personnel at different

<sup>27</sup> V.B. Athreya and K.S. Rajeshwari, *Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj: A Case Study from Tamil Nadu* (Chennai: MSSRF, 1998).



levels. He too thought that advocacy through media had been successful.

I have concrete examples to share regarding the impact of Project ACCESS, especially in disseminating information and fostering public debate for the purpose of policy intervention. I joined Project ACCESS in January 1996 for a task-based assignment to disseminate information relating to policies on child care services to the Tamil Nadu media and political parties. That was a time-bound strategic approach because the State was going in for an Assembly election in the month of March. My assignment was to translate the advocacy documents from national FORCES into Tamil. With a reasonable understanding of local media and a good grasp of local politics and politicians, I could put together a campaign strategy. The issue was widely disseminated in the media.

It is important to note that the Project had already had a strong media component (with inputs from experts like Ms. A. S. Padmavathi, Mr. Jnani, and Ms. Mina Swaminathan). This helped me to access some popular mainstream media like *Dinamani* without any difficulties. However, the issue was covered beyond these media-friendly institutions. For example, after long deliberations, Mr. Vaiko, the party president of MDMK, promised to publicise these matters in his party organ *Sangoli*. It was the second newspaper—besides *Dinamani*—that carried the entire TN-FORCES manifesto.

However, V. Vijaya, a post-graduate in Women's Studies, was disappointed that the media efforts were not sustained and therefore failed to make any significant impact.

Success of any project depends on the response of the audience. Creation of public awareness on the issue of ECCE was aimed at initially by the Project. Any awareness campaign should be continued for a considerable period to help the public internalise the concept and bring about changes in themselves, resulting in action. The issue of child care is not as sensational as female infanticide or child abuse. It is too technical, and the focus on the issue should be continuous and constant. We did work through the media, both print and audio-visual, i.e., newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio. Audio and video spots on



ADVOCACY IS THE NEXT STEP



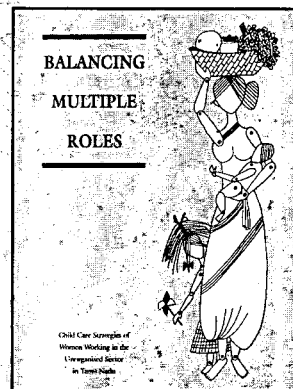
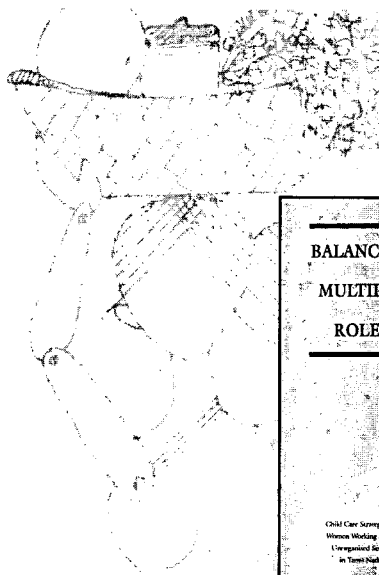


women's concerns and on the burden on the preschool children were on in the media quite frequently for one year. After a year, they were not shown. New ones have not been produced either. People will hardly remember those messages. Before the efforts started gaining momentum with the public, the focus shifted to working with the government, sensitising officials on the issue of child care. In my opinion, the Project did not make much impression among the public nor did it produce much change in the government. I am saying all this with my own experience of having to send my daughter to a school where the child is hardly of any importance.

BALANCING

MULTIPLE

ROLES



## Research Grounds the Project

Research and documentation were considered the bedrock of the programme to attain the goal of improvement of the quantity and quality of child care services—since the basis was considered to be an accurate and reliable knowledge of realities on the ground—a baseline, so to speak, from which to start to estimate needs and advocate for their fulfillment.

Five main studies were produced during the period. The data for another (the sixth) though collected in 1994 could not be analysed and published till the next phase of the Project and yet another, on the quality of ECE, could also be taken up only in the next phase. In any case, in the sphere of research, too, there was no target and no pre-planned approach, even about the topics, methodologies, or nature of the work. Of the five, two were large-scale empirical studies that yielded invaluable information on areas never before researched, while three were critical analyses based on documentation. All were widely disseminated and used in various ways for advocacy. The process involved—from selection of the topic and of the scholar to the methodology—was different in each case, and again reflected the evolving approach of the Project, the relative autonomy of the researcher, and the powerful role played by the interests, skills, and talents of the persons associated with the various studies, especially those working in ACCESS.

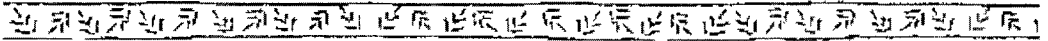


## How Do Women Cope?

The first major study, *Balancing Multiple Roles*, a path-breaking one, investigated a large number of women (about 1,000) belonging to different occupational categories across Tamil Nadu, both rural and urban, and looked at the way they balanced their roles (as workers, home-makers, and mothers of young children), their child care needs, the strategies they used, and the extent to which existing services met their needs.<sup>28</sup> It was carried out by a pair of researchers from the Department of Social Work, Loyola College, Chennai, one of whom—Raja Samuel—was later to join the Project and become its Project Coordinator. The unique aspect of this study was its involvement of students as field investigators, which enabled a large sample to be reached in a short time (the summer vacation) at low cost, while also providing research experience to students. However, this methodology could never be repeated, possibly because it proved too time-consuming for the academics who undertook it. The findings were widely disseminated, in both English and Tamil, followed by presentations and discussions in various forums—seminars, workshops, and consultations involving Government officials, academics, NGOs, activists, and women's groups. This became one of the most quoted and used reports in all discussions and campaigns on child care services for women workers, since little had been known about this grey area before then, and never on this scale. Nevertheless, this had less impact than some of the other campaigns, possibly because it failed to involve the end-users, that is, women working in the unorganised sector who actually needed the child care services. That was to come much later.

The second major empirical study, *At What Cost?*, was also a large one, again including about 1000 women, also drawn from various occupational categories, but in specific rural and urban regions of Tamil Nadu. This study looked into women's multiple roles and the management of breastfeeding, and was again to provide the basis for awareness raising, communication, training manuals, papers, lobbying, and policy making. It was to be an important part of the

<sup>28</sup> M.R. Arul Raj and S. Raja Samuel, *Balancing Multiple Roles* (Madras: MSSRF, 1995).



set of resource materials for the campaign on maternity entitlements. It has also been influential in introducing a new dimension into studies of breastfeeding. Here the methodology followed was the multi-centric one, but with a common plan and protocol and the entire exercise was coordinated by Rama Narayanan, on behalf of ACCESS. The multi-centric experience and its shortcomings have already been commented on, and this experience too could never be repeated, low-cost as it was. Interestingly, though all the partners cooperated, none showed any interest in the findings or in publication, and perhaps saw it only as a training exercise for their students.



In both these cases, the topic was chosen because of its perceived importance, in a process hammered out together by all the Project staff, with Sarvesan in the lead. Next, the research questions to be asked, the sample to be selected, and other issues were worked out in depth in collaboration with the research team. In both cases, strict sampling techniques were utilised. In the first case, the investigator training was done by the researchers themselves, while in the multi-centric study it was organised in common for the entire team by ACCESS. Summaries of these two studies in Tamil were widely disseminated.

Rama talked about the important effect that the study on *Women's Multiple Roles and the Management of Breastfeeding* had.

Are women able to breastfeed their children? Why could they not do so? What is their perception? What are their feelings? How far have we understood these? The study brought out various dimensions of the problem. From that emerged a lot of details. This helped to take up the cause of support for women. The whole issue of support came from the strength of that research study which said how women combined their jobs, what sort of sacrifices they made: having two instead of three meals a day, selling some of their jewellery, staying home without going to work, changing jobs, leaving a highly satisfying job to come back to a lower level job—all these, which were not brought out in the earlier traditional studies, came to the fore. A manual, *Annaikku Aadaravu*, was put together. It formed the basis for the video spots called *No Milk!* and the findings were taken to the people.





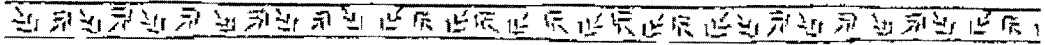
## Other Research Themes

The next three studies followed a different strategy.<sup>29</sup> In each case, a topic was selected because of its salience for the Project, a suitable scholar identified, and the study contracted out, with only minimal support from ACCESS. Each report was then referred to three independent reviewers, and the feedback incorporated before publication. These studies were also widely disseminated and used in various ways.

The two on the issue of female infanticide/foeticide led to attempts to facilitate a separate network on this issue, based in the regions where the phenomena were widespread, and this will be described later. *Services that Matter*, a review of all child care services in Tamil Nadu, was the least used, but was to lead to the study of costs of ICDS.

The Cinderella in the group was the study of child care workers. Carried out during the Convention in 1994, a wholly unplanned event, the idea was the brainchild of Sarvesan who felt, that with 300 workers gathered in one place, it was a unique opportunity to gather basic data about them—a purposive sample, and a captive group. The study was designed accordingly and was intended to develop a profile of child care workers in the voluntary sector, looking into their background, training, working conditions and work environment, motivation, job satisfaction, and aspirations. A questionnaire to be self-administered was developed in Tamil, and during the Convention, about an hour's time was set aside when the workers, sitting in groups, and supervised by volunteers who had been given a quick orientation, were asked to fill them in individually. In these circumstances, it was a pleasant surprise to find that so few were incorrectly filled or had to be rejected. The team returned triumphant with a bundle of questionnaires, which were soon scrutinised and the data entered on the computer. But alas! The time never seemed to be available, given the busy schedule of those days, to sit down and study the data, and analyse and interpret it.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Negi, *Death by Social Causes*; Sarada Natarajan, *Watering the Neighbour's Plant*; E.V. Shanta, *Services that Matter* (Chennai: MSSRF, 1997).



This was one of the sad stories of that period, the flip side of not having fixed targets, plans, and deadlines to be met. However, the study was eventually completed and published in 1999.<sup>30</sup>

Seeing how hectic the pace was, and how great the emphasis on activism and activity in the field, it is amazing that even so much research got done. What was most significant about the studies was not so much their number or even their academic rigour as the process out of which they grew and into which they fed, the involvement of several partners, and the close links established between research and advocacy. Meanwhile, a systematic procedure for extensive dissemination was built up, which broadened contacts, gave publicity to efforts, built up sympathetic and supportive public opinion, and became in itself a tool for networking.

Sam summarised the strength of the research base for advocacy.

Research findings are useful as tools of advocacy. Research-supported advocacy improves the credibility of the issue and also enables us to move forward with conviction. A related experience has been an understanding of the multiple ways in which the findings of a study could be communicated for advocacy purposes.




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<sup>30</sup> J. Jayanthi Rani Christiana, *The First Teacher* (Chennai: MSSRF, 1999).







## Communication Spreads the Word

Communication in ACCESS, in the COTA phase, related to two major aspects: on the one hand, sensitising the media about issues, capturing space in the media, and working closely with media as a major stakeholder in any public concern; and on the other, development of project support communication materials for advocacy, networking, and capacity building. These two elements will be considered one by one.

### *Sensitising the Media*

From the beginning, working closely with the media, especially the Tamil press and electronic media, was given great importance, the media being perceived as an important ally.

Padmavathi had been writing about women's issues and felt she got her job in ACCESS because of that.

Very few wrote on such issues before Project ACCESS was set up. Except Project ACCESS, no one else who worked on these topics made sustained efforts to engage the media. When the Project was planned, the very idea of considering media to be an important component and appointing an associate for the area was a very positive step.

At the outset, in the very early stages, a study had been undertaken of the coverage of issues relating to women and children in the Tamil

periodicals published in the month of December 1993. This now formed the basis for a strategy to sensitise them and try to increase the space for such matters as well as the quality of the coverage. The results were not encouraging, confirming the perception that women's issues were trivialised and that stereotypical conceptions of women prevailed.



When we look at the impact of women and children's issues in the perspective of Project ACCESS, media in general seem to take up children's issues willingly and not women's issues. They do not want to be progressive. The stand we took was that child care is a burden on women. But in general media takes the stand that it is the duty of the women.

**Padmavathi**

The big question was: how was this scenario to be changed to bring in different views, perceptions, and understandings about women, their problems, roles, and place in society, especially realisation of their multiple roles and burdens relating to work, home, and children? After much discussion, a three-pronged strategy emerged—to capture more space for the issues in print media in Tamil, to identify and promote young writers on gender themes, and to feed the media with relevant messages and materials.

The task of identifying young writers and stimulating them to write on new themes in new ways seemed to be a Herculean one. A unique approach was evolved by Padmavathi, herself a writer, journalist, and filmmaker, with vast contacts in the world of media. She was the driving force behind this five-year venture, the first in the annals of Tamil media, to combine social conscience with good writing. She began by ferreting out a list of 500 writers who had participated in a short story contest run by one of the weeklies, short-listing about a hundred, and inviting them to a two day-workshop. About 40 persons, both men and women, responded to the invitation. The workshop had two important strands—presentations by distinguished speakers and videos followed by discussions on women's issues, child education and development, multiple roles, gender relations, and various contemporary issues, with attempts to introduce more innovative and unconventional thinking; and



interactions with distinguished Tamil writers. At the end of the first day, all were invited to write overnight a story, poem, or article on a topic of their choice. These were read and critiqued the next day by a panel of senior Tamil writers, who offered tips on how to make them more readable, effective, and interesting. Some of the writers succeeded in getting these stories published later on.

In the process-oriented style typical of ACCESS, the workshop and its outcomes were intensively debated and thrashed out by the staff group to arrive at the next step, and the strategy was modified slightly to include placement of selected writings for publication. For the second workshop, writers were invited to submit entries on a specified theme, 'Women are also Workers', with a view to publication on or around Labour Day, 1 May. Out of 41 entries, about 25 were invited to a one-day workshop, in which they engaged in critical discussion and feedback with a panel of senior Tamil writers and editors. Following this, 16 corrected and rewritten stories were selected for placement by ACCESS in periodicals, and five were published.

The next step was a short story competition jointly organised with a popular women's weekly catering to lower-middle class and semi-literate rural readers. The theme was women at work, and a wide range of work-related problems was reflected in the 650 entries. After several rounds of evaluation, but no attempts to interact, critique, or rewrite, 3 were selected, given awards and published in the magazine, representing a considerable change in the kind of material usually associated with the weekly. These three rounds, with subtly varying processes, indicated the immense interest and enthusiasm generated by this sort of activity, and the deep interest shown by older writers in "mentoring" the young.

In 1996, the third workshop was held. Again, stories were invited on the theme of women working in the unorganised sector. Out of 300 entries, 40 were invited for a two-day workshop. After another intensive two-day process involving both discussions and presentations on the issue, and critiquing on the craft of writing, the stories were rewritten for submission. This time 12 stories could be placed for publication in a variety of journals and magazines, thus



encouraging the writers to explore themes in greater depth. The last in this five-part series of activities represented another shift in strategy. This time there was no workshop and no prizes for competing. A leading weekly announced a short story competition on the theme in its regular issues. Over 300 entries were received, the best 5 were selected in consultation with ACCESS and published in five consecutive issues. Through this series, ACCESS worked jointly with the editors of magazines, journalists, and writers, a unique example of cooperation between a non-commercial “social” organisation and the commercial media.



Careful documentation has enabled some evaluation to be made, though it cannot be quantified. The impact on both writers and media was visible. A new crop of young writers committed to social issues definitely arrived on the scene, and many of them continue to write or have entered journalism and media professionally. The nature of writing and the extent of reporting have slightly, but definitely, improved. Meanwhile, media also is showing greater interest and providing more space for non-stereotypical writing, though the usual sensationalism also continues. The impact can be judged by the fact that the following year *Dinamani*, the leading newspaper and periodical in Tamil Nadu, which had been closely associated with the entire process, spontaneously came forward to sponsor a poetry competition on a woman-related theme, in cooperation with Project ACCESS.

Padmavathi described how Project Access successfully facilitated the interaction between resource persons and the media.

While many NGOs blamed the media for focusing only on politicians and celebrities, Project ACCESS understood the need of journalists and writers to show that they are responsible and do cover issues of importance, and fostered their links to resource persons. The workshops with the media were designed by ACCESS in two ways— one, by giving inputs on women and children’s issues from experts and the other, by getting senior writers to demonstrate how these issues could be presented interestingly. Young writers started writing on women and child care, and early childhood education.





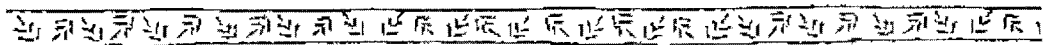
Many continue to write on these issues and acknowledge that it was ACCESS that introduced them to such themes. Through organising writers' workshops, Project ACCESS created about 40 writers. We could have created many more, at least 150 to 200. There was a proposal that district-wise workshops be conducted to motivate writers on these issues. If we had done that, we would have had a band of writers all over the State. I am unhappy it did not happen.

It is very heartening that an author of Asokamitran's stature appreciated our efforts. He wrote that he did not believe that an NGO could contribute to creative writing. It is really great that Project ACCESS could experiment on this.'

Other related activities were the starting of a photo competition in a leading newspaper on a woman-related theme, offering small prizes and publication in the newspaper as incentive. This continued for three years, and had the advantage not only of identifying and promoting amateur photographers, but also of building up an archive of photographs that could be drawn upon for various purposes. At the same time, continuous efforts to provide the media with information through fact sheets, brochures, interviews, statistics, and interview opportunities resulted in a definite increase in coverage and better representation of many issues in the form of editorial articles, news items, independent articles, stories, cartoons, and discussions of various types.

Writing on these topics may be only one out of a hundred assignments for media persons. They needed proper materials and information. Generally, we organised kits on specific issues for the media. These have been found to be very useful and very positive. Project ACCESS gained importance to a certain extent among writers and among some of the popular dailies and weeklies. Also, where radio and television (not only Doordarshan but also other cable channels) were concerned, personnel from Project ACCESS or partners of Project ACCESS could from time to time present programmes.

**Padmavathi**



Murali confirmed this.

A strong media network, especially with the Tamil press, was established, even beyond the popular *Vikatan* and *Dinamani*. ACCESS had reached a point where journalists would call us for inputs (sometimes on non-ACCESS activities too). We were running an informal media referral service.



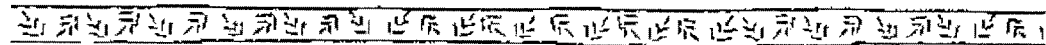
COMMUNICATION SPREADS THE WORD

As another dimension of the process of sensitising the media, attempts were also made to build the capacity of media personnel. With the enthusiastic support of the then regional Director of All India Radio (AIR), an orientation on women and child issues was arranged for Programme Executives (PEXes) of AIR. The rationale was that AIR is still the most powerful medium of communication, reaching 90 percent of the population, especially in rural areas. Sixteen PEXes from nine radio stations in Tamil Nadu attended the two-day workshop, where they were first exposed to presentations and discussions on various topics by resource persons—including both subject matter specialists and media persons—and then took part in deliberations on the issues. They were helped to analyse hidden messages and underlying negative attitudes, and encouraged to develop newer and more positive messages, incorporate new information, and create awareness on issues that they had not tackled before, using their own skills in formatting programmes. Materials and sources of information were also supplied on the themes. This workshop proved to be the first step in building up a healthy working relationship with the PEXes, some of whom stayed in touch, developed new programmes, asked for resource persons and materials, and introduced new concepts and directions into some of their older programmes. This exercise however could not be repeated. This was another characteristic weakness of the exploratory approach: often several new fronts were opened up, but some had to be given up for lack of time and resources.

Padmavathi, greatly interested in media, not surprisingly voiced her disappointment that ACCESS failed in keeping up the momentum.

The efforts earlier made by ACCESS in advocacy and communication using the media were discontinued. The writers' workshops, short story





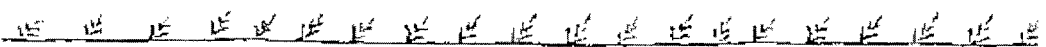
competitions linking to popular magazines, if these had been continued it would have made much wider and deeper impact in regard to taking up the issues by the media. It is not only taking the message across but involving more and more of media personnel in gaining the perspective of child care as a women's issue.

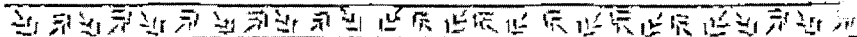
Project ACCESS was economically achieving the goal of gaining media space. We did not spend much money on the writers' workshops—we only paid them their travel expenses and provided food and accommodation on the days of the workshop. The magazines in which I had contacts, such as *Kunkumam* and *Dinamani*, were made partners in conducting story and poetry competitions and hence these were done at little or no expense. These could have continued in subsequent years.

### ***Meeting Project Needs***

Communication materials, events, and activities which followed thick and fast in these crucial years were specifically oriented to goals—mainly of advocacy, but also of networking and capacity building. Though the lead was taken by the communication specialists on the staff, these were a product of close and intense team work, in order to tailor outputs to needs. The entire group was involved in each exercise, and the leadership of the two Project Coordinators of this period was expressed on both the dimensions of content and process.

The most significant materials were those related to advocacy, and these grew out of a process of exploration, trial, feedback, reviewing, strategising, and moving on to the next step. The case of the video spots illustrates this process. The first decision was to make two video films on the theme of early learning, one on the negative or "burden" dimension and one the positive or "joyful learning" dimension, at first intended to be used with teachers and schools. But it was suggested by Jnani, ACCESS's media resource person, that it would be useful to re-edit some of the materials in the form of short pieces or spots for two purposes—to sharpen and focus the messages and to reinforce them by repeated telecasts. Accordingly, the first five spots on the "burden" theme were prepared and offered to





Doordarshan. The rationale for going to Doordarshan was that it reached 22 million viewers at that time, more than any private channel, and that there were 17,000 odd sets in rural panchayats. Thus, a very wide spread was ensured. The response of Doordarshan was however quite unanticipated. Prolonged exposure (over three years) and frequent telecast (several times a day) had a profound impact, already described. Undoubtedly the constant, uninterrupted, and continuous support of Doordarshan for this awareness campaign was the main reason for its success, and unquestionably the intensity and duration of the telecast was the most powerful factor on impact.

Sam put it succinctly.

The issue of the burden on the preschool child was firmly placed for discussion in the public forum. Never before had there been any campaign as large and as intense as this.

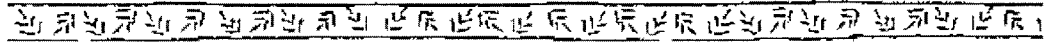
So much so that "burden" of preschool education became a household word, and ACCESS personnel who featured in the spots were accosted at bus stops and railway stations by members of the public wanting to know more and what action to take. This issue also found its way into the memorandum presented to all the political parties by TN-FORCES on the eve of the elections in 1996. In fact, the feedback presented a challenge that ACCESS was at first ill prepared to meet. However, making a quick recovery, ACCESS tried to build on this windfall, and quickly linked up to a set of activities and a kit of materials. The spots themselves were also available on video for showings at meetings, along with other materials, and thus became part of a larger coordinated strategy undertaken with partners and network members, already described.

With the issue of the 'burden on the preschool child' taken up vigorously, Project ACCESS could not cope at first when requests for information began coming in. For example, people started ringing up asking, 'Where are the alternative schools,' and saying, 'Give us a list of alternative schools and we are ready to put our children there.' The problem was that we generated a lot of interest and debate but we never thought of the spin-off.

Rama



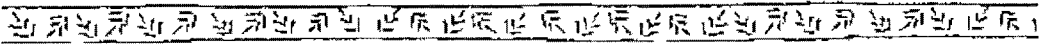




The success of the first five "burden" spots (subsequently seven) naturally led to the idea of making more such on other themes. Six on the theme of gender justice, with emphasis on the multiple roles of women, and five on early development (children below two) were prepared, both for telecast and as video. These were regularly telecast by Doordarshan. However, the gender spots received less prime time showing and were mostly shown during the afternoons, when women are expected to be the main viewers, even though the series primarily aimed to target a male or mixed audience. Perhaps gender is a more sensitive issue, one that endangers the status quo and threatens to hurt the male ego, even though all the spots were carefully and deliberately made to portray men in a sympathetic and supportive way. There seemed to be a definite downplaying of these "radical" concerns, while the "child" was obviously seen as a "safe" topic, arousing compassion for the plight of little ones, and only indirectly attacking commercialised education; the latter is anyway in keeping with the Government's declared policy of support to playway in education. The telecasts came to an end after three years, but the spots continued to be widely used in discussions in their video form.

During these years, a wide range of communication materials were produced and activities conducted on all the major issues and themes addressed by ACCESS. These included video spots and documentaries, both for advocacy and for training; audio cassettes (whose use in various ways has already been described); print materials, including brochures, fact sheets, pamphlets, memoranda, papers, abstracts, reports, and studies, most of them in two languages; events like TV and radio programmes, lectures, seminars, workshops, releases, interviews, press conferences, and panel discussions; multi-agency celebration of special days; folk media forms and their dissemination; competitions and awards. In all of these, the process of development was the most outstanding common factor: from the selection of the topic to its working out in detail, at every step it was a highly participatory process, involving several layers of players, orchestrated by ACCESS. For example, the production process of the cassette *Thayum Seyum* involved two workshops, one in Nagapattinam and one in Chennai, and those participating included





mothers, child care workers, supervisory and training personnel and officials of ICDS, folk artists, musicians, media persons, graphic artists, representatives of AIR, educational consultants, and several observers, besides the Project staff. The refining was done by a smaller team, and the final production was handled by a professional music director. Almost all the communication materials went through a similar, though, in many cases, less lengthy and elaborate process.



The production process of any communication materials from ACCESS is something remarkable and offers scope for enormous learning for everyone involved. Thus, the idea of "expert sharing" or "enlightening the public" is often questioned. Every material designed always respected its prospective audience. The video spot *Summa* is a unique example. It addressed a problem about an insensitive man but did include the man when concluding the message.

**Murali**

Project ACCESS brought out a whole lot of materials, had several workshops and seminars on ECCE and allied issues. In every effort that was made, even if it was a leaflet, presentation was given attention. Presentation was as important as content. This meant much effort in terms of the language used, visuals, the design, keeping in mind the audience for whom it was produced. I think attention to presentation makes the content appealing.

**Rama**

A key communication strategy already referred to was the celebration of special days, to draw attention to the various issues. Such days were used for events like the release of important communication materials, or for TV and radio programmes on the theme, meetings, workshops, and panel discussions, competitions and awards, and so on. Some of the days selected were dedicated to women, children, teachers, human rights, labour, literacy, and breastfeeding. Many of these events and activities included other members of TN-FORCES as active partners, or ACCESS took part in activities organised by others. At a later stage, guidelines on what to do and how to do it were circulated through ...MMA, the quarterly network newsletter, to bring about some unity of perspective and a common approach. For example, suggestions were given to avoid





competition in programmes involving very young children, or to focus on women's and children's rights in dealing with breastfeeding.

Communication was also a tool of networking, an important one being ...*MMA*, of which 14 issues were brought out during this period. The objective of ...*MMA* was primarily sharing and exchange of information, news, and views of the members about the various issues of concern to the network, and to promote joint planning and coordination as well as to be aware of developments at the national and State levels on the issues. However, ...*MMA* was not merely a "house" letter, as its circulation was far wider than the membership. About 400 copies were printed regularly, on special occasions many more, and were sent to several others besides TN-FORCES members, including schools and educational institutions, medical doctors and health professionals, media persons and social activists, legislators, trade unions, and research institutions. Though often members were sluggish in sending information, or sent irrelevant stuff, and though it sometimes appeared as if no one was reading it, ...*MMA* did perform a vital function in documenting activities, putting together resource materials, and highlighting the ups and down of the network. It remains a valuable archive for studying the history of the TN-FORCES network.

The content of ...*MMA*, the quarterly newsletter, included news items on FORCES activities, information on communication and training materials, audio and video cassettes, and research findings. Requests for materials relating to preschool education, when ...*MMA* published them, were quite significant. With regard to celebration of special days, the number of responses was high when the Government took the initiative for the celebration.

### Murali

Dissemination also came to be seen as an important strategy, and various methods were developed for the purpose, and to build demand. Besides developing extensive and categorised mailing lists of various types of stakeholders, other strategies were dissemination at meetings and special events, riding piggyback on other events and programmes, linking up with partners, using one medium to

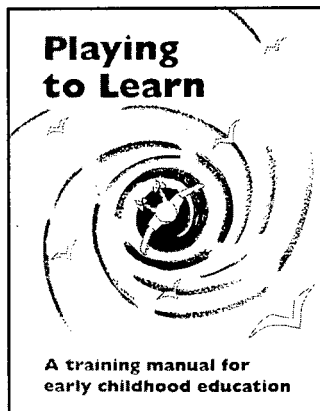
disseminate materials for promotion in another, and being ever ready with materials for distribution.

Murali described the effect the dissemination strategies had.

ACCESS has evolved as a good media management house to disseminate development issues. I was given the liberty to go and chat with media personnel and give them a very informal orientation, to make them feel that the issue was important. Mr. Ramanathan, who was in charge of choosing fillers in Doordarshan, became really involved with the "burden" issue. He even went out of his way to collect audience responses. Such flexibility was rare in Doordarshan, given the bureaucratic atmosphere. Mr. Ramanathan even made a decision not to admit his daughter in a conventional preschool and I witnessed his furious arguments with his colleagues quoting ACCESS examples.



Another strategy that emerged was obtaining corporate sponsorship to meet the costs of distribution to particular stakeholders. Thus, a pharmaceutical company volunteered to sponsor the production of 4000 copies of a poster on development of the young child (0-2 years), which was distributed at IAP Conferences and made widely available. The same company later took up the distribution of the *Thayum Seyum* audio cassette through its network of salespersons to over 300 paediatricians, and also sponsored a one-day workshop with them on issues of the young child, at which a large amount of communication materials on the subject was distributed. All of these ideas were basically the suggestions of the various staff members working on communication.

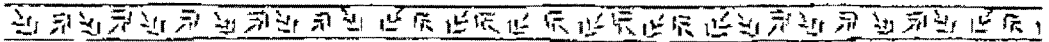


## Capacity Building for ECE Skills

In this period, capacity building was mostly in the field of ECE, and focused on the development of cadres of teachers, trainers, and supervisors of ECE centres, in both Government and NGO sectors, with emphasis on practical classroom skills and process-oriented strategies for teaching, training, and supervision. This emphasis was not surprising, given that it was the key area of competence of the Project Director. Achievements in terms of coverage, quality, and immediate outputs were impressive, yet the long-term impact was disappointing, mainly because of the lack of recognition of ECE by the Government, the low priority ascribed to it, and the resulting lack of interest in improving quality. Byproducts in terms of materials were also excellent, and will be discussed later.

Five sets of training workshops were held over four years, addressing different groups—trainer supervisor cadres from the ICDS and TINP (Department of Social Welfare); teachers, trainers, and supervisors from NGOs running balwadis and crèches; teacher-educators from the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) of the Department of Education, and, in the last year, nursery teachers from private schools.

I. Glory, holding a Master's in Child Development, was the Project Associate, Training, during this period. She was actively involved in the training sessions, right from fixing up the venues to running the courses.



I worked from the base level—preparing curriculum/background materials, deciding on the venues, interacting with officials, and so on—right up to being a trainer. The compilation of resource materials required my going through books and magazines and formulating the curriculum. The background matter was mainly on the overall development of children, the kind of activities that should be undertaken for their physical, emotional, language, intellectual, and social/aesthetic growth. These materials were found to be very useful and were much appreciated by the participants.



Dr. Pankajam of the Gandhigram Trust described their involvement with ACCESS in the training endeavour.

We played a crucial role in training ICDS personnel, Bal Sevikas from the NGO sector, teachers from private English medium schools. Gandhigram Trust is wedded to ECCE. A large number of training programmes on ECCE have been conducted by us over the years. We served as a base training centre for ECCE in the southern districts. With the collaboration of Project ACCESS we had several training programmes to reach a large number of ECCE personnel in the State.

### ***Heartbreaks with Government***

In early 1994, at the request of the Government, a workshop was held for the entire trainer cadre of ICDS, consisting of all the members of their nine mobile training teams and a few others, to orient them to a new programme to be started for stimulation and development of under-threes, which was to enrich and supplement the ICDS programme. The objective was to offer insight into the development of children 0–3 years through practical process-oriented training strategies and to formulate concrete action plans, in an atmosphere conducive to effective holistic learning. Conducted in a participatory mode with the help of several resource persons, the output included the identification of nine important messages, a plan for the development of appropriate communication materials in both folk and mass media, and innovative training strategies for vertically mixed groups. It was an excellent plan, in its way, but its fate was not, since planning from below is not yet an accepted norm in the Government. For the next two years, in spite of repeated meetings

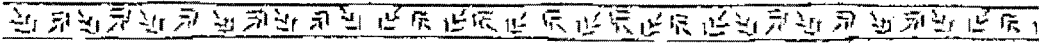




and discussions, no follow-up was undertaken. Instead, an alternative plan was formulated by officials for a home-based approach to be tried out as a pilot project in Nagapattinam. No information was available to ACCESS about this, except through some of the resource persons who were involved. A consultant was appointed by the Tamil Nadu Government to develop materials, but no satisfactory output appeared to have come out of the consultancy. Nothing further was heard for the next couple of years. This was an example of the vagaries and difficulties of working with Government, the long delays, unexpected changes of plan and policy, unexplained turnarounds, misplaced documents and unutilised reports, infructuous consultancies, changing officials, external pressures, and various factors beyond control.

Responding to these twists and turns, COTA again came up with a new strategy, trying to salvage something. Early in 1996, a proposal was sent to the Department of Social Welfare to develop communication materials in support of the pilot project on 0 to 3-year-olds at Nagapattinam. Due to several changes of top officials that year, the proposal was approved only in December 1996, and the workshop was finally held in February 1997. The output of that workshop in terms of rich communication materials has already been described. Not only the songs and *villupattu*, which featured in the audio cassette *Thayum Seyum*, but also four more video spots on the development of the young child were added to the stock in constant use. Besides, materials for a puppet play or radio play and a calendar were also prepared, though these latter never saw the light of day. Thus, something did come out of these efforts, but much later, and not in the form originally envisaged. This is yet another reminder that the Project continued to be an open-ended exploratory one, and it was only the ability to respond to these changing scenarios and to re-strategise that enabled the Project to achieve anything at all. This flexibility was something very important in the context of working with government.

But the materials produced three years later were not all that were salvaged. Another output of the first workshop was a sensitised and enthusiastic cadre, and this news seems to have travelled the



Government grapevine. For, later in 1994, a request was received to conduct a similar course for the cadre of TINP, identical in content and procedure, but run by TINP with COTA as consultants. The course was indeed conducted in August, but with the difference that no report was prepared or sent out, no information was ever received about follow-up, whether implementation had been carried out at any level, and no feedback was ever received. This is yet another risk of working with government, where consultants are "outsiders", not entitled to receive information or even ask questions.

Meanwhile, since TINP and ICDS are the major purveyors of child care services in Tamil Nadu, with 30,000 child care centres between them, efforts continued to interact with their trainer cadres. A two-part orientation course for trainers was planned, entitled 'Play in Child Development'. A small group of seven skilled professionals met in March 1994 to work out the conceptual framework for such a course and develop a detailed design, course content, materials, and exercises. A consultant was appointed to see the course through and develop a training manual out of it. The course was to be in two parts, with a gap of at least six months in between, to enable the participants to practise some of the learnings. The objective of the course was to give an insight into the role of play as a vehicle for child development, and then to develop practical training strategies and concrete action plans for carrying it through the system. The first part of the course was held in June 1994, with 29 participants, 13 from ICDS, 8 from TINP, and 8 from the NGO sector. The output was a concrete action plan for a one-year programme to incorporate play more widely through the system, and for training at various levels, from fresh recruits to administrators and supervisors. Since no monitoring or follow-up was possible during the six months gap, it was decided to go ahead with the second part of the course. This time, out of the 22 participants, only 17 had attended the first part, and 5 were new, while the remaining 12 of the original group could not attend because they had been shifted to other assignments. Surprisingly, this was true even of NGO participants. The objectives now were to analyse and evaluate training strategies in use and to offer intensive practice in skills. Again, some useful action plans were made, suggesting measures to institutionalise procedures and







mentioning specific commitments for ICDS and TINP, but again, no commitments were formally made and no follow-up reported. The course became a one-shot affair delivered by "outsiders" and taken as such. This was because the initiative came from COTA and not from the client, the Government, and this was the bitter pill to be swallowed.

However, there were some positive outcomes. Informal contacts over the next three years revealed that the course had been perceived as a rich and full learning experience, that some sensitisation and up-gradation of skills had taken place, and that at the individual level, many were making sincere attempts to incorporate these into their day-to-day work.

A. Christina, who started with ACCESS as a Project Associate and later became Project Coordinator, talked of the impact of the work of Project ACCESS in government balwadis.

Mrs. Swaminathan and the staff are remembered for the training given to the CDPOs and the teachers. In these centres, one could see the importance given to sensory experiences of children (eye-level of children is taken into consideration to enable children to see, to feel by touch, etc.). Dance, games, rhymes, and so on are in practice.

Sarvesan drew attention to a significant outcome that has gone almost unrecognised.

When we conducted training for TINP or ICDS field personnel, they had the best chance of meeting IAS officers, interacting with them, and communicating issues from the field. The quality of interaction was such that they were able to come out freely with implementation issues. In government training programmes, field personnel hardly had a chance of meeting top officials, and even if they had the rare opportunity, the forum was not for free interaction. We have not recorded this dimension much. When I look back, we could say that issues were communicated successfully as we made it a point to ask the IAS officials to interact.

However, no formal acknowledgment of the utility of the course was made, nor was there any systematic attempt to institutionalise

and implement the learnings. Formal assessment of training outcomes thus became impossible.

The major output from this course was the development and publication of the training manual *Playing To Learn*, which was created in the brainstorming workshop and field tested in the two parts of the course, bringing together innovative participatory methodologies which had been tried and tested in the field.<sup>31</sup> The process will be commented on later in the section on Instructional Materials.



I participated in the brainstorming workshop for creating the training manual *Playing to Learn*, contributed my bit, and also participated in the training programmes in which the manual was tested. Project ACCESS brought together several persons with experience in participatory training and utilised their resources in developing the manual and in the actual training programme. Strong conviction and tireless efforts in tapping the resources available in the context could very well be one of the major reasons for the quality of training that was organised.

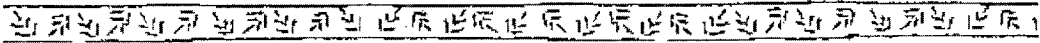
**L. S. Saraswathi**

In 1995, the DIETs were given responsibility for introducing ECE into teacher education. Since the DIET faculty had no orientation to ECE, the Department of Education was interested in a training that would enhance knowledge about Child Development and ECE among the faculty and help build a team of ECE trainers. The Department of Teacher Education Research and Training (DTER) approached ACCESS to conduct such a course, and a 12-day course in two units was planned and conducted in September 1995 and June 1996 respectively, including some NGO representatives, by invitation. The objective of the first part was to enable participants to understand and internalise a play-based curriculum for holistic child development, and strengthen and give practice in training strategies, solve practical problems of implementation, and prepare concrete action plans. An important feature of the methodology in both parts was the provision of a living total environment conducive

<sup>31</sup> Asha Singh and Mina Swaminathan, *Playing to Learn* (Madras: MSSRF, 1995).



to process learning, a sort of living demonstration of “holistic learning”. Again, a six-month gap was provided to enable participants to gain practical experience, observe field situations, and bring up practical implementation problems for solution. In fact, most of them made a brave effort to go into the field, in spite of the serious obstacles they faced, to try out various activities. The feedback, though very limited, was positive. At the end of both parts, the action plan included activities like each DIET adopting 10 to 20 nearby schools/classes/centres for practical implementation of playway, conducting pre-service and in-service orientation and training at various levels, and developing resources and instructional materials for teachers. Follow-up visits after six months revealed that a good start had been made—several short orientation courses had been given at various levels, some material developed in workshops and distributed, and a few schools selected for implementation and demonstration of play. However, no later reports were received, and it is not difficult to conclude that the experiment died a natural death after some time, for the reason that the DIETS, and indeed the Department of Education itself, has no structural and programmatic links with preschools or child care centres. There are no pre-primary classes attached to Government primary schools, where they would have found a natural field for action. On the other hand, the vast mass of child care centres, numbering 30,000 in all, fall under the Department of Social Welfare, which has its own well-qualified cadre of instructors and supervisors. This leaves no place where the DIET staff can be exposed to, leave alone acquire, practise, or demonstrate their practical ECE classroom skills, besides the elementary fact that it is not easy to cross territorial boundaries between Government departments. Hence, this left little scope for action. The DIETS could have gone in a different direction by introducing ECE into their regular pre-service training for primary teachers, but there is no sign that this has happened. With the usual gap between policy, which is made at the top, and practice, which takes place, along with training, much lower down, the poor levels of communication and transparency, and the barring of outsiders from dialogue, if any, within the Department, it becomes difficult to catalyse change from outside. So again, while the course was lively,



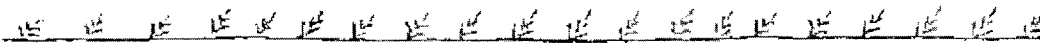
engaging, and enjoyable, much appreciated by the participants who had clearly gained a lot from it, a formal assessment of its utility is almost impossible.

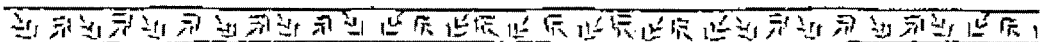
### ***Encouraging Results with Other Sectors***

These three experiences with the government sector taught important lessons: the first being that demand must precede supply if the latter is to be valued, and second, that planning must start and conclude at the highest level for effectiveness and follow-up. The continued lack of recognition of ECE as part of the educational ladder, and its dismissal as a “soft” welfare option in which feeding is given more importance than learning, also contributes to this devaluation of training and lack of attention to its implementation in the field. Wherever the training was effective, the trainers were enthusiastic and almost the entire trainer cadre was included, but little came out of it in the end. From 1996 onwards, therefore, capacity building efforts were turned more towards the voluntary and private sectors, and were directed through the TN-FORCES network.

The biggest push came from the Southern Regional Network. In May 1996, as a follow-up to a workshop conducted in December 1994, a second residential workshop was arranged. Originally designed for trainers and supervisors, it turned out that very few of them showed up and the course was attended mostly by child care workers from the field, requiring a complete rescheduling of the course to meet their needs and interests. This group, however, responded well to the participatory approach, and became greatly enthused with the idea of developing activities for holistic child development. At a review held two months later, it was clear that they had done their homework. Awareness had been created among parents, several in-house trainings had been given, and a variety of communication materials, especially in folk media, prepared.

After the workshop, the child care workers went back to their centres and put into practice what they had learnt. They told us that the training was very useful and, even after Project ACCESS closed down, I hear the innovative approaches are still being applied. A participating institution in Nagercoil has been very successful in creating awareness





among parents on the effectiveness of the playway method of teaching.

### Glory

A training resource team was set up, which met several times. The group identified four components (songs, stories, games, and creative activities) for in-depth work in material preparation. Two material development workshops were held in succession, which generated a wealth of materials. The first one produced more than 50 educational games, and the second a large number of teaching aids with low-cost materials.

An important aspect of process learning is collaboration, that between government and NGO as well as NGO and NGO. It was discovered that there was a big need for such efforts of partnership among the agencies. We conducted some training programmes for the Southern Regional Network. We were there only as trainers. The NGOs took care of organising the training. The need was there and Project ACCESS responded to such needs and facilitated collaboration of NGOs for a common cause.

### Sarvesan

Though two more workshops were planned, these could not be held for various reasons like lack of funds and infrastructure, internal conflicts and lack of cooperation, and lack of monitoring by experts. About this time, the Southern Regional Network also started coming apart, as mentioned earlier, and the steam went out of this activity. However, the materials were put together and formed the basis for one of the most popular products of ACCESS—a training manual for teachers, which was, however, not to be prepared till the next phase of the Project.<sup>32</sup>

I edited the booklet on games for young children, with contributions from the participants of the material development workshops. The illustrations were well executed and the booklet was greatly appreciated by many ECE experts.

### Glory

<sup>32</sup> I. Glory, ed., *Aadippaadi* [Let's Dance and Sing] (Chennai: MSSRF, 1998), Tamil only.



The experience with NGOs and TN-FORCES members was diametrically opposite to that with the Government. Not merely enthusiasm and participation, but vertical integration, involving everyone from grassroots workers to supervisors, trainers and heads of institutions, was remarkable. So too the consistency and thoroughness of follow-up and field applications as well as the involvement of parents and community. Ideas and materials, once accepted and prepared, were immediately put into action, and qualitative changes brought about, though on a small scale.



Sam felt strongly about the quality of ECE training initiated and strengthened by Project ACCESS.

While one may find it difficult to point out the actual tangible impact of ACCESS's activities, a lot of awareness/discussion was set into motion on ECE issues which are continuing in their own form and way. For instance, quality ECE training (in-service) picked up in a big way. Children's Garden School and Balar Kalvi Nilayam were already following the playway method. Many other schools started after the efforts made by ACCESS.

The conflict between scale and quality is a permanent dilemma of NGOs. The lack of sustainability mainly reflects the lack of funding and low priority accorded to quality in ECE in this sector, but can also be blamed on the failure of ACCESS to continue with this initiative. Several such ideas and intentions faded out before they became self-sustaining.

The training of the Southern Regional Network was also remarkable and different from the earlier ones because, except for the first residential workshop which was handled by the Project Director and a resource team, it was almost entirely managed by Glory, the staff member in charge of training. In the earlier trainings for Government, most of the Project staff were too young, inexperienced, and lacking in ECE background to handle training, especially for people often senior to them in age, experience, and, above all, status; so they often handled only the logistic and administrative responsibilities and played supportive roles in the training process itself. But here Glory, with her background in Child Development, a



couple of years of experience in supporting roles, personal maturity, and a low-key pleasant personality as well as the ability to comfortably handle participatory methods, came into her own. Perhaps this was also because NGO workers tend to be more at ease with peer learning strategies and non-hierarchical settings than government workers. At any rate, capacity building within the Project in the area of ECE was clearly visible.

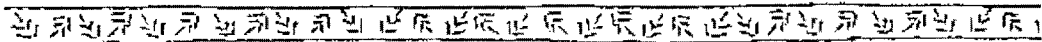
Glory was plainly motivated by the working atmosphere in ACCESS and the facilities available to hone her skills.

A detailed orientation about the Project was given by the Director and the Coordinator soon after I joined ACCESS and I was given time to understand and clarify the concepts. Rich resource materials were also supplied. The Project staff was exposed to several internal brainstorming meetings and we were encouraged to freely express our ideas, views, expectations, etc. Videos and audio tapes on various aspects of training were readily available in the ACCESS library. We could use the Foundation's library too, which had a separate section on training and instructional materials. And anything else we required would be procured for our use from other resource sources.

Once a week, we had an internal seminar where many topics useful to us in gaining knowledge and skills were discussed. Staff members from other departments in MSSRF talked to us about their activities. Apart from this, experts in education (government, NGOs, freelance consultants) from all over the country were invited to address a range of issues related to child care services.

Documentation was thorough. During training workshops, brief notes had to be made about the session. A detailed report, in both English and Tamil, was prepared within a week of the workshop and circulated to all the participants and resource persons. The impact of that particular training session was analysed within a couple of months after it was over.

Team spirit is the backbone of any successful venture. And that ACCESS had in full. The experienced members of the staff voluntarily came forward to interact with the newcomers and helped them in every



way to understand the Project's work. There was good contact with MSSRF too.

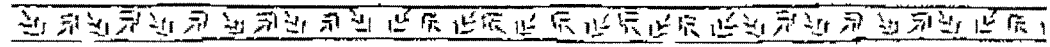
### ***The Seed is Sown***

The last training conducted during this phase—the Summer Refresher Course of 1997—also set the stage for entry into a new venture in capacity building in the next phase: the trainers' network. As a result of continuous campaigning by TN-FORCES on the "burden" theme, a rising swell of public opinion had begun to develop. In 1996, TN-FORCES again submitted a petition to the Tamil Nadu Government pleading for fresh rules to regulate preschool education and promote training of teachers for this level, but no support was forthcoming. As a way to build up alternative responses to the growing awareness, the preschool sub-group decided to conduct in-service refresher courses of about 4 to 6 weeks duration for pre-primary, nursery, and balwadi teachers during the forthcoming summer vacation. The objective was mainly, but not merely, to give orientation in ECE to practising teachers, but also to gauge demand for such training in order to approach the Government again with more strongly articulated demands. It was decided that each training institution would conduct the course in its own geographical area. Of the eight institutions invited to join the project, four came forward and one-month self-financed courses were conducted in Chennai, Coimbatore, Gandhigram, and Karaikudi in May 1997. The courses were advertised through inserts in the press and distribution of brochures, more than 400 applications were received, and about 200 candidates selected. About 45 resource persons from the institutions as well as others were involved in the conduct of the courses. A rough common plan was hammered out to begin with, but each institution was free to go about it in its own way, and experiences were diverse. However, all the courses used a combination of theoretical teaching with practical sessions, dramatisation, and use of audio/video and print materials, much of it developed in-house.

The response was overwhelming. Most of the participants maintained 98 percent attendance in the gruelling heat, missing the relaxation







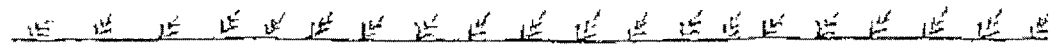
AS THE SALT IN THE SEA



of a summer holiday free from school, and paying for it too, though several of the candidates were sponsored by their institutions. Participants experienced great joy and satisfaction, said that they had learned a lot and now felt better able to handle their classes. Most wanted longer exposure and asked for longer courses with periodic follow-up contact and workshops. What the organisers acutely felt was the lack of practical “hands-on” experience in the classroom, because of which many participants would be unable to actually implement what they had learnt in the course. This was more than confirmed by the feedback received over the next few months. At a review meeting held in October that year, the various shortcomings were reviewed, above all the chaotic and uncoordinated nature of the curriculum, and the lack of adequate training skills and strategies among trainers to deal with this unique situation. It was accordingly decided to run an orientation for trainers in training strategies, and thus was sown the seed of the trainers’ network that will be described later. It was hence only at the end of this phase that the directions and strategies for capacity building were slowly revealed, after much experimentation which exposed both the strengths and the weaknesses of the earlier approach.

Project ACCESS initiated and conducted several trainers’ training programmes for both government and non-government supervisory personnel. This helped in bringing together a group of trainers in Tamil Nadu and focusing on training of personnel in ECCE, which is crucial in improving the quality of the programme.

**S. S. Jayalakshmi**





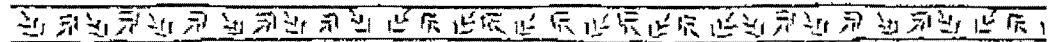
## Resource Materials are Effective

All the instructional materials prepared during this phase, like the communication materials used for advocacy, were developed by participatory evaluative processes, and have been widely distributed. However, some have been less used than others, mainly because of the inability of systems to absorb them effectively. In the last phase of the Project, a very large number of six of the best materials (four printed manuals, a video of short messages, and an audio cassette) were purchased by the Government for distribution to its network of child care centres and workers, but this was much later.

A significant aspect was the series of critiques and/or field trials at each level which each product went through before final production, a characteristic feature of the work style of ACCESS, which many at times found exasperatingly slow.

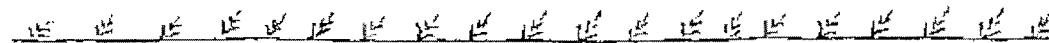
### ***Guides for Teachers***

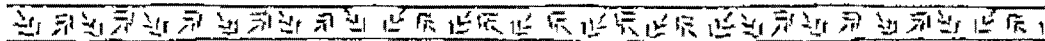
The first major product was the trainers' manual, *Playing to Learn*, which emerged out of the trainers' workshops of 1994–95. Planned during the preparatory brainstorming workshops, it was roughly put together and tested in the field during the two training workshops, and then finalised for publication. The manual offers a comprehensive child-centred perspective on training field workers for ECE, with emphasis on a play-based curriculum. It consists of a series of structured exercises using innovative participatory and process-



based strategies. The first 200 copies were soon taken and an additional 200 copies were printed and widely distributed to training institutions and trainers, including the Middle Level Training Course (MLTC) centres of ICDS, throughout the country. While systematic and critical feedback is not available, there has been a steady demand, and evidence that it is appreciated, popular, and well used among a circle of trainers.

Reaching teachers directly in the field on a mass scale for better classroom practices was another initiative that grew and evolved in unexpected directions and resulted in a set of products. The first approach was to capture space for a regular special educational supplement on ECE in a well-established periodical with wide reach, and the obvious choice was *Chittu Kuruvi*, TINP's own in-house newsletter, circulated to all its 30,000 child care workers. Hence, the idea was mooted of bringing out a four-page centrespread in each issue of the bi-monthly to be called 'Teachers' Page', devoted to the effective use of low-cost materials, games, songs, and other classroom strategies. TINP responded positively and the task was begun. Ten resource persons were invited to a meeting to prepare the materials, a plan for 6 issues was drawn up, and six institutions volunteered to take up the challenge and develop a piece each on one of six selected topics. Guidelines for length, style, and language were prepared and COTA took up the responsibility for editing, design, illustration, layout, and delivering camera-ready materials to TINP before the deadline for each issue. COTA kept to its side of the bargain, and throughout 1994, the materials for each issue were delivered well in time, in camera-ready format to the print specifications of the newsletter. However, there were serious difficulties at the TINP end. There were long delays, issues did not come out in time, the postponements grew longer and longer, the last issue (November–December 1994) appearing only in 1996. Shortly thereafter the publication itself was suspended. These were some of the by now familiar difficulties of unpredictable and unexpected constraints when working with the Government. The bright side is that all the materials did finally reach the intended readers and informal feedback through travel to some sites, letters to the journal, and supervisors' meetings indicated that they were enthusiastically received.





Uma Shankari Chandrasekhar of the Pragati Preschool in Neyveli had been associated with three of ACCESS's projects. She felt that the *Chittu Kuruvi* project did have some impact on the Noon Meal Centres and helped them to plan activities for the children in their centres.

It was never clear how many people actually got a chance to use it and what they learnt, or how they did so, and whether they were able to preserve and put together the old issues, but there was an expression of demand at various levels. So the six supplements were reprinted exactly as they were and bound together in the form of a booklet called *Ippadiyum Karkalame!*. A thousand copies were printed, several hundred distributed almost immediately, and the booklet continues to be in demand.<sup>33</sup>

Sarvesan felt strongly that creating materials and making them available was itself a change.

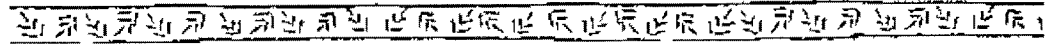
There were hardly any materials when we started. There was no software. When we looked for videos or pamphlets on child care, there were none. Creating the required materials and making them available to all those concerned is in itself a change. It can definitely influence the quality of ECCE. No other organisation could have brought out so much material on Early Childhood Care and Education.

One of the outcomes of the production of materials in this way was the pooling of talent and the building of long-term collaborative relationships with various resource persons and experts, who could be called upon to participate in various activities at various times. This was networking, but at a different level, in relation to another kind of activity other than advocacy, and this also gave scope for the expression of the skills and talents of the staff who may have been unable to participate so visibly in advocacy or in training. The same networking process could also be observed with regard to communication, building a silent subterranean network of well-wishers, experts, and supporters.

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<sup>33</sup> MSSRF, *Ippadiyum Karkalame!* [Let Us Learn Like This] (Chennai, 1996), Tamil only.





With the association of Project ACCESS, we got funding from the Bernard van Leer Foundation for a project on 'Strengthening Child Care Services in Tamil Nadu'. Our institution was made a resource centre for producing locally relevant materials on ECCE, especially for educationally and economically most backward areas. We produced books for children, manuals for teachers, pamphlets for teachers and parents, audio cassettes on music, music teaching, and musical games, and a video cassette (*Kanavai Gopal*) on one day in a preschool in a remote village.

**S. S. Jayalakshmi**

SV was positive that Project ACCESS had made an impact in Tamil Nadu through

production of quality learning and training materials. On the whole, Project ACCESS helped strengthen ECCE in Tamil Nadu.

### ***Toys as Aids to Learning***

Other kinds of instructional materials were developed similarly, but for various reasons some of these were less successful in finding their way into the system. One was in relation to soft toys. Noting the absence of play materials for social and emotional development in most child care centres in all three—government, NGO, and private—sectors, and knowing that dolls are some of the best play materials for such activity, it was decided to enter this field. Dolls and soft toys provide scope for imaginative play, language development, and group play, and offer opportunities for the expression of both positive and negative emotions. Yet, these are hardly ever found or given to children in balwadis, while those in the market are phenomenally expensive besides being highly Westernised. So it was decided to explore the possibility of developing low-cost culturally appropriate toys and to test the viability of using such a specially designed set. An advisory committee was set up; it defined the parameters for production of soft toys and suggested a procedure for field-testing and evaluation and for mass production. With the help of a creative young designer, a kit of eight toys (two families of parents and two children each) were prepared with local materials, the dolls being portrayed to resemble local persons, and each outfitted with two sets of removable





clothes for dressing up, suggestive of different ethnic groups. The toys were first evaluated by the experts, who also observed the reactions of some young children playing with them. The next step was field-testing in ICDS centres. Five rural and five urban slum centres were chosen, in which teachers would receive orientation on the use of the toys, while another set of five rural and five urban slums were selected as control centres, where the toys would be supplied without any specific guidance. After the planned orientation, the study was duly carried out in 20 centres. The results showed that all the teachers, both those with and without orientation, welcomed the toys, found them useful in stimulating imaginative play, and reported improved teacher-child relationships and attendance of children at the centres. The signals were clear, indicating a need for mass distribution.

Radhika Dommaraju, with a Master's degree in Child Development, was the Project Associate in charge of instructional materials for a little more than three years (1995-1998). She was positive that

preparing low-cost teaching aids for children (3 to 6 years) from locally available materials was helpful in bringing out the creativity in the teachers. Through these, children could be involved in looking for materials, which gives them a sense of achievement and self-esteem. It was found that soft toys were enjoyed by both boys and girls. They played with them with the same zest.

The next step therefore was to find ways and means of producing the toys at lower cost. A plan was formulated to encourage the tailoring societies and women's groups organised by the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) to produce these toys, using the waste materials generated in their tailoring units as stuffing. This would reduce the cost considerably, and also facilitate the distribution of the toys to centres run by the DSW, and localise and match production with distribution.

A number of efforts were made to identify such tailoring societies and give them guidance, and work out the cost of the toys. After a series of orientation workshops and trials, an acceptable low-cost





kit with durable and washable materials was prepared. A prolonged period of negotiation with DSW began, but here again little welcome was found for a proposal emanating from outside the Department, and no one was prepared to make the effort needed, merely for the sake of the frivolous purpose of getting toys to children and employment to women! Once more, defeat was the result of inability to relate to systems or the inability of the system to respond.

I was involved in the follow-up activities in terms of introducing the designing and preparation of soft toys to the Department of Social Welfare, through their tailoring societies themselves. Our experiences of working with the Government showed that it is really a long-drawn process. It took quite some time to get them to identify two units. We organised the training within a week. Again, actual making the toys by these units took a lot of time.

**Radhika**

### ***And Stories Too***

A similar case of ultimate frustration, once more starting on a very high note, was that of the collection of stories. As part of a move to encourage the use of local folklore, TINP had collected local folk stories from its child care workers at a workshop in 1994. An enthusiastic senior official of TINP, also a member of COTA's Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), was taken with the idea of developing these into easily "narratable" stories for the use of teachers in the classroom, who otherwise restricted themselves to less than five stories for classroom use!

The collection of 400 stories was given to COTA, and following its usual procedure, a committee of experts—including writers, journalists, communicators, and educationists—was set up. The stories were screened and selected after several rounds of review, based on criteria evolved by the group. They were then rewritten in simple language suitable for children, with focus on certain values laid down by the group. A set of 20 stories was finally ready for publication. (Some of them were in fact later published by leading

newspapers and journals.) The entire collection was handed over to TINP, it being their property anyway, for publication in *Chittu Kuruvi* or in some other form, but have yet to see the light of day. Again, this is because of the low priority and value given in Government programmes to improvement of the quality of ECE in their centres, or support for teachers in the form of useful materials. The deadly seriousness and professionalism with which COTA approached its task, and the elaborate procedures and processes for evolving the product in all sincerity and good faith, stand in ironic contrast.

But a strong team continued to be built. Opportunities were also found for staff members to grow and express their talents. One such was the bringing out of a booklet on the use of soft toys in the classroom, and another on the preparation of colours from indigenous materials.<sup>34</sup> Observing that drawing and painting, important classroom activities, were rarely carried out because of the non-availability and prohibitive cost of colours and accessories, the booklet was developed to demonstrate simple ways of making colours for use in the *balwadi* out of easily available local materials and natural objects like vegetables. The booklets continue to be in demand, though little is known about their actual use in the field. Meanwhile, they offered scope for building up of expertise within the Project, which could also be used for communication and capacity building at various levels, and this was a positive outcome balancing the silence about what use was made of these instructional materials in the field.

I helped to produce a booklet (both in English and Tamil) called *Shades of Nature* after actually experimenting on preparing colours from natural materials like vegetables and other inorganic materials. It was considered helpful for the teachers to introduce colouring to children. For children at this age (3-6 years) when they have not yet mastered the art of language, this becomes an important way of 'communication' through building their self-esteem and their creativity.

**Radhika**

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<sup>34</sup> D. Radhika and I. Glory, *Shades of Nature: Iyarkai Vannangal* (Chennai: MSSRF, 1997), English and Tamil.







## ***Training Teachers through Film***

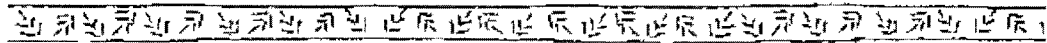
Instructional materials also included a series of video films intended for training of teachers, as distinct from those produced for advocacy. The first few films were made in an exploratory way and without going deep into the various possible uses and ways of using them, except for one specific documentation of a training programme for mothers and child care workers.<sup>35</sup> Many of the advocacy films were also used as introductions to teachers of playway methods in education. At the same time, gaps in training materials were identified and a need was felt for specific teaching films aimed at teachers and on specific topics, to give them a clear idea of how to go about doing something and what outcomes could be expected from it—a sort of step-by-step guide, with simulated examples in virtual reality. The training was visualised as exposure to actual activities carried out by actual teachers in similar situations and facing similar constraints, as reality-oriented as possible, yet giving positive direction and offering both example and motivation. So, a series of short video films was planned on four themes, each documenting real life experiences. The four chosen themes were use of low-cost-no-cost indigenous rural and urban materials; use of natural materials like sand, clay, and water; science experiments with simple materials; and teacher-made toys, aids, and play materials. To achieve the objective, contacts were first made with different institutions and a series of visits helped the teachers to prepare and conduct the activities.

I personally feel that the use of low-cost, no-cost locally available materials depends on the teachers themselves and especially on their understanding of children and how they learn...It is vivid in my memory how teachers enthusiastically used clay work with children in balwadis in Erode.

**Radhika**

The institutions chosen were an urban-based and a rural-based balwadi, run by different NGOs, and a group of four ICDS centres in a rural area. Teachers from all of them were to appear in the last segment. A process of orientation, discussion, and preparation with

<sup>35</sup> Ravi, *Learning through Play*.



the teachers was initiated, including several visits by Project staff. In Pudukottai, the services of a resource person from the local DIET, who was deeply interested in science education for the young, were sought. He worked for some weeks with the teachers of the four selected centres, while in Dindigul the head of the NGO institution developed activities with natural materials. A team of professionals was recruited for script writing, shooting, editing, and finalising the film. This entire process was spread over several months, and the intense interaction between the educational, communication, and technical members of the team was a learning experience for all of them. During the shooting, teachers were interviewed to demonstrate their skills on camera. At the end of the year-long process, the film series was released at a special launch on Teachers' Day in September 1997.<sup>36</sup>

It has been noted that most people in training institutions and schools do not know how to use educational videos in a planned and systematic way, and generally merely show them like entertainment, without further comment or ado. So one of the strategies used in the film was to combine two objectives. It was decided that the film should show the desirable activities as models, and also comment on their value and learning outcomes. This was done fearing that the required interpretative comments would not or could not be supplied by the teachers/ trainers /users, and to eliminate the need for a skilled user. Hence, the visuals showed the activities while the voice-over commented on objectives and expected outcomes. Later use by groups has never made it clear whether this was a successful strategy or not. Some have said that they found it confusing and were able to concentrate only on one or the other, the visual or the aural. So it appears that it might have been a self-defeating strategy: the debate is still on, since not enough information is available. It is not clear whether the films are too didactic or not didactic enough.

Dissemination of this video series has not been as widespread as that of the advocacy videos—for several reasons. One is that it is aimed at an audience still quite unaccustomed to using video as a training tool, often lacking the basic facilities needed or unable to

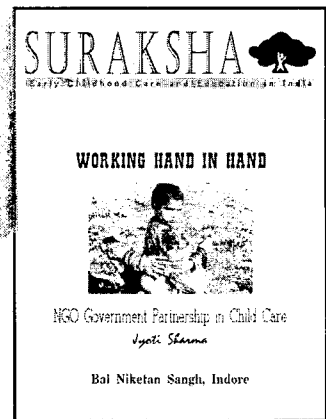
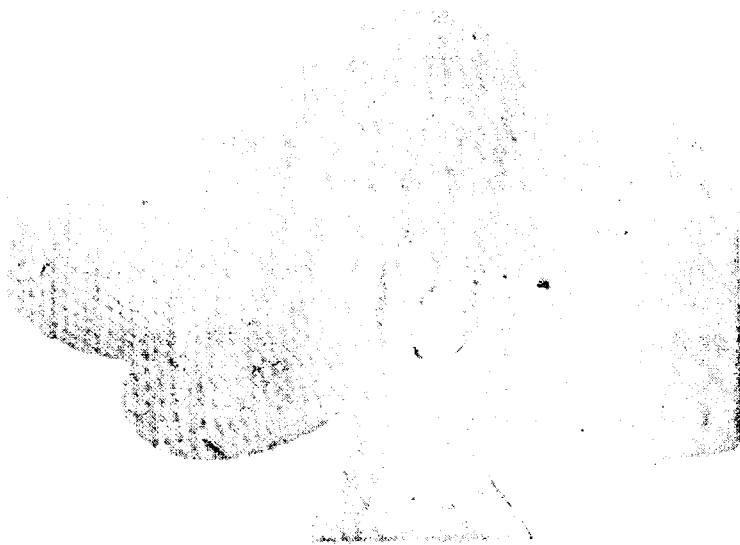
<sup>36</sup> G. P. Krishna, "Activity Based Education" (Chennai: MSSRF, 1997), video film.





make them work. There is a fear of technology and a tendency to avoid it, rather than confront its challenges. Thus, the very reason for which the films were made, to make up for gaps in available training materials of a practical and realistic type, turned out to be the insurmountable one, since they depended on the use of a technology that was not so popular. The films have been highly applauded wherever used, but little used.

The gap between utility of instructional materials as perceived by the staff of COTA and by other users, the constraints of actual use on a large scale, the various strategies experimented with, the nature or lack of feedback, are all elements the study of which contributed to the ongoing process of assessing demand and trying to meet it, while at the same time trying to stimulate demand through supply. Indeed, at one time, strategies were discussed in terms of "marketing" in referring to these approaches, though without any commercial connotations. The constant analysis of success and failure on the demand side, on the one hand, matched the constant process of exploration, experimentation, and discovery on the supply side on the other.



## Beyond COTA

Throughout these hectic and productive years, which made heavy demands on time and intensity of effort, other activities involving funding, staffing, and programming were taken up by ACCESS, outside of and independent of COTA, though linked in theme, content, and approach (already referred to). The first of these, a documentation of innovative child care projects in India, was independently funded by the Aga Khan Foundation and had its own staff, and since the theme was central to ACCESS, occupied much time and space in the years 1993 - 95, while the other two arose out of and were continuations of COTA, or part of its unfinished business. Relationships with FORCES at the national level, and the handling of the change of Convenor of TN-FORCES are also part of the larger story of what lay beyond and after COTA.

### ***The SURAKSHA Series***

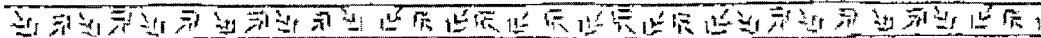
Documentation was considered to be an important base for research and advocacy. While it was known that there was a wealth of experience in the country on ECCE, with many small-scale experiments under the leadership of outstanding thinkers and educational leaders, little was known about it by the wider public. In a country of our size and diversity, it was felt that flexibility and responsiveness to needs were essential characteristics of successful programmes for young children, and that this required to be brought



to the attention of both policy makers and the public. With the twin objectives of dissemination and advocacy, the project entitled 'Multiple Approaches to ECCE in India' was launched in 1993, with financial support from the Aga Khan Foundation. The aim was to bring out a series of studies of innovative programmes of ECCE, especially those addressing the intersecting needs of women, young children, and girls. An advisory committee consisting of distinguished persons from several disciplines was set up, and it drew up the criteria for selection of programmes as well as procedures for a participatory process of documentation. The Project Director was to be the Series Editor, assisted by a part-time Project Coordinator to administer the programme.

These case studies, later to be known as the SURAKSHA series, represented a rich diversity of experiences, with a range in terms of geography, auspices, and structure. The locations varied from the Himalayan region to the coastal South, industrial metropolis to tribal hamlet. The programmes were run by diverse institutions, from voluntary agencies and women's groups to educational institutions, trade unions, and government. The organisational patterns varied from spontaneous private efforts to statutory obligations and government-NGO partnerships, were employer-funded or Union-sponsored, school-based or community-based. Common to all were the need-based, client-responsive nature of the system, optimal size, an existence of more than three years, catering to lower socio-economic groups, and non-profit making in nature. Eight programmes were selected with these criteria.

The process of documentation was participatory in nature, involving an independent researcher/writer, interacting closely with the representatives of the agency concerned, and with inputs from the Editor and specialist reviewers, who remained anonymous. The studies were hence not merely descriptive in character, but process-oriented, the scholars focusing on both the unique features and the replicable aspects of each programme and maintaining a balance between objective reporting and passionate involvement. The concluding part of each study, as well as the Editor's introduction, dwelt on the implications for wider policy initiatives for young



children, with emphasis on the questions and issues raised by that particular case study.

The process was initiated in 1993, but took off only in 1994, and the studies were completed and published during the whole of 1995, released in two lots of four each in April and December respectively. On the second occasion, a workshop was held involving all the agencies and the writers, as well as policy makers, to learn from the experience. Two overview papers summarising the key features, commonalties, and contrasts, and drawing attention to the elements needed for sustainability and replicability formed the basis for discussion. The workshop report went into these issues in depth, laying down guidelines and procedures for learning from these experiences.<sup>37</sup>



BEYOND COTA

Krishna Iyer, the Coordinator of the programme on 'Multiple Approaches to ECCE in India', described the contribution of Project ACCESS.

The need for documenting innovative practices in Early Childhood Care and Education was felt and talked about. Project ACCESS did the documentation in such a way that it could reach all those concerned with ECCE, systematically presenting information vital to understanding the practice. The presentation was also made visually rich. Anyone who wanted to replicate could choose from among the practices according to their requirements.

With this the programme formally came to an end, but the follow-up activities and outcomes continued for another two years. To begin with, the challenge of dissemination, without either the expertise or the resources of regular publishers, proved to be a valuable learning experience. Among other approaches, encyclopaedic mailing lists were generated of all types of academic, professional, and educational institutions which might be interested as buyers, attractive flyers were prepared and sent out to solicit orders, use was made of conferences, meetings, and workshops, while conventional processes like book reviews also helped.

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<sup>37</sup> MSSRF, *Learning from Innovation* (report of a consultation jointly sponsored at Delhi by MSSRF and NIPCCD, Madras, 1995).





Project ACCESS did lots of dissemination work through various strategies: reviews in important journals, presentations in conferences, complimentary copies sent to various heads of departments and deans of all the inter-disciplinary fields that concern child, child care, early childhood education, and sales of copies to departmental libraries. A national level consultation was organised to discuss the issues of replicability and sustainability of programmes.

### Krishna

As mentioned briefly earlier, another activity arose from the decision to publish a book on the state of the art of ECCE in India, which would look both at macro-level trends, history, and various critical dimensions of the subject as well as condense the learnings of the SURAKSHA series as one of the major dimensions, namely, innovation. The process of seeking and getting contributions from various scholars, reviewing and rewriting, editing and finalising the manuscript for press, took up the next two years, and the book was finally published by Sage Publications in mid-1998.<sup>38</sup>

The SURAKSHA project, closely interwoven with but independent of COTA, was handled mostly by the Project Director, with help from Krishna Iyer. It not only took up a considerable amount of time but also led to heavy pressure at certain times. Krishna, herself a creative teacher and communicator with excellent organisational skills, could not give herself whole-heartedly to a project of this nature, partly because of other demands on her time, but more because the kind of academic and editorial work it required was not her forte or area of interest. While the clash between expectations and responses often led to strained relations, it illustrated once more that full flowering is closely related to the happy "matching" between task and person. On her part, Krishna was critical of the poor human relations experienced within the Project.

Mina Swaminathan is an eminent resource person in the field of ECCE, with her solid knowledge and skills built on her hands-on experiences in the field. But her difficult personality was a factor in her dealings with people within or outside the Project. It was her direct telling off

<sup>38</sup> Swaminathan, *The First Five Years*.

people when they were wrong that turned them away. She was ready to apologise, but that did not seem to help when people were already hurt.

### Two New Issues

In 1997, two new issues came up, signalling a shift to a rights-based approach. Work on these was initiated, but was to develop significantly only during the next phase. The first was that of the survival of the girl child, expressed through the persistence of female infanticide and the growing menace of female foeticide or sex-selective abortion. ACCESS had published two studies on aspects of this issue (earlier referred to in the section on Research) and, along with other members of the TN-FORCES network, felt a growing need to get engaged in some kind of action. To begin with, a play on this theme, *Pacha Mannu*, developed by Voicing Silence, the feminist theatre group (a sister unit in MSSRF), was performed continuously in 1996 and 1997 as a cultural *jatha* (journey) in several districts most affected by this phenomenon. This enabled contacts to be established with several NGOs in those areas also working on this problem. In December 1997, with some funding from the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), an attempt was launched to bring these NGOs together and form a loose network to tackle the issue.

Sam talked at length about ACCESS's work in this regard.

Going by our success in networking in TN-FORCES, we thought that the same process could be initiated for a network on female infanticide. With the two studies we had done on the issue— *Death by Social Causes* and *Watering the Neighbours' Plant*—taking us deeper into the problem, we felt that we were now equipped with the right knowledge that needed to be disseminated. The combined experience of the above with that of the *Pacha Mannu* experience made us confident of tackling the issue of female infanticide—that too from the correct perspective focusing on "attitudinal causes" rather than on traditional reasons such as poverty and dowry. It was at this time that concern was being expressed on declining sex ratios. Studies were being conducted and gender-disaggregated data was an important area of focus.



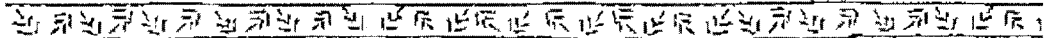




*Death by Social Causes* documented earlier efforts at networking. We knew that most of them were shortlived because of the classic reason for which networks fail. We felt that a neutral organisation (that does not have a direct stake) like MSSRF was in a better position to initiate the network, as it could not be seen as a threat. We thought we could initiate the process of networking with the help of Alternative for India Development (AID) in Salem and ICCW in Madurai. Both were puzzled as to why we were interested in this issue and in networking, when we did not have any stake at the field level. Both wanted to know the implications of our involvement and AID was initially skeptical, as it knew earlier efforts had failed. Both were persuaded to co-host the first meeting.

We sent letters to NGOs in Salem and Madurai. I participated in the meetings but key players in both places did not attend. My role in the meetings was to explain the benefits of networking. Several doubts were raised and discussed. We wrote to AID and ICCW to continue organising the meetings. I don't think they were interested in doing so and we also left it at that point. Looking back, I think the members were not prepared for networking. There was no one who could take it along at the local level. We could not have remote controlled the whole thing.

The second issue was that of the threats to the development of the child in urban slums, usually existing in a hostile environment that was the reverse of child-friendly. Attention was focused on the sad plight of the child in urban poverty, subject to far greater neglect in government programming than children of the rural poor, and often rendered invisible by the obviousness of urban wealth and the heavy pressures and demands of urban development on planners. In 1997, the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) brought together a group of ECD professionals, and with financial support from UNICEF, embarked on a study of the situation of the child in eight urban centres of varying sizes across the country. This review, coordinated by the Project Director of ACCESS, was a small-scale but intensely qualitative one, personally conducted by senior professionals from various disciplines.<sup>39</sup> It tried to gain an in-depth picture of the situation of the urban child, the kinds of services available, the gap between



needs and services, leading to a SWOT analysis and some speculation on remedial possibilities based on the findings. However, it was not to be followed up, in spite of repeated efforts by the research team, till four years later. For ACCESS, the study brought the issue to the forefront and it was taken up as one of the six themes for the next phase in the Project, later to be known as Operation Resource Support (ORS).



### ***Relations with FORCES***

The relationship of ACCESS with TN-FORCES (of which it was the Convenor for this period) and with national FORCES went through several ups and downs during this phase. At the outset, ACCESS, as a founding member of FORCES, had taken the initiative to start TN-FORCES and did so by following the model of FORCES. The first persons to be contacted for this purpose were the Tamil Nadu branches and representatives of the organisations that had formed national FORCES as well as a few others. The objectives also were drawn up along the same lines and the functions were considered to be the same, that is, as a watchdog of government policy and to lobby for policy change through direct dialogue with government. Slowly, however, it became apparent that the situation on the ground at State level was different, that the Tamil Nadu Government was not ready for dialogue with a body whose legitimacy and expertise it did not recognise, and further, that the members of the network also had varying interests, approaches, constraints, and understandings. Building the network was the first priority, and in doing so, the scope, objectives, strategy, and tools of the network also gradually underwent a change, and an agenda for TN-FORCES as an entity emerged. Some of these processes have already been spelt out in the first section. Meanwhile, the years 1991–95 were also a period of dormancy and lack of activity and leadership on the part of national FORCES. Thus, there was a gradual moving away and separation in thinking between the two. As a founder member, ACCESS felt deeply disappointed and frustrated at what was perceived as low response from the national organisation, the lack

<sup>39</sup> Mina Swaminathan, "Process and Outcome Documentation of ECD in Urban Disadvantaged Areas" (1997), unpublished.

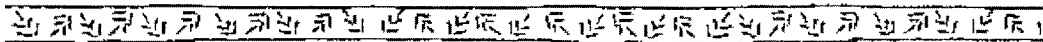




of interest, support, understanding, and guidance, though in fact this was probably more a reflection of the state of affairs in FORCES. At the same time, being free of artificial shackles imposed by a distant body and responding to the challenge as it presented itself was an exciting experience, so the attitude veered from hurt on the one hand, to relief, satisfaction, and exhilaration on the other.

From 1995 onwards, FORCES slowly began to come to life and started organising meetings and drawing on the experience of TN-FORCES, which was at that time the first and the strongest State-level organisation. It was during this period that ACCESS was successful in drawing attention to the issue of social security for women agricultural workers, since they formed nearly half of all agricultural workers in the country, and insisting that maternity and child care services should be included in the social security package. This has since become one of the major planks of FORCES policy and one of its central demands. ACCESS also represented FORCES in various ways, including as part of the delegation to the Finance Minister and in a consultation on Child Care Services organised by the National Commission for Women.

Attempts had been made from time to time to set up similar regional branches in other States. Some were started only in name and never took off; others grew slowly, but had a modest and limited existence; still others stagnated or folded up; to all, TN-FORCES was a role model. But the relationship was still ambiguous and at times fractious. During the years 1995–97, both the Project Director and the Project Coordinator attended the occasional meetings and consultations arranged by FORCES and contributed what they could, but still with a frustrating sense that the field level experiences of TN-FORCES were not being heard with the seriousness they deserved. It was only after 1997, when FORCES at the national level assumed a new and dynamic shape and the Convenorship of TN-FORCES changed hands, that a new, invigorating, and strong partnership grew, with ACCESS once more taking its place as a valued member of both the bodies.



TN-FORCES is now a vibrant and visible institution that has made its mark as an ECCE network and as a platform in which ECCE issues are raised.

Rama



BEYOND COTA

### ***Handing Over Charge***

By the end of 1996, ACCESS having completed five years as Convenor of the TN-FORCES network, serious efforts were made to identify the next Convenor. Most of the network members were unwilling to accept responsibility, though enthusiastic about participating in events and activities. By the end of the year, the present Convenor (SV) and his parent organisation, Loyola College, had been coaxed, persuaded, and convinced to take up the cause, and a formal announcement was made at the AGM in December that year. In early 1997, the process of transition was started, involving the new Convenor gradually in planning and prioritising, orienting him to perceptions and approaches on the major issues, and towards the second half of the year, carrying out activities jointly, thus allowing for a smooth handover before the AGM in December 1997. Most importantly, this period was utilised to help the new Convenor prepare a project proposal for funding from the BvL Foundation, and at the same time, drawing up a request for financial assistance from the same agency for the continuation of ACCESS's own work.

It became clear that with the change of Convenorship, the networking part, and with it the advocacy component, must go to the new Convenor and ACCESS find a new role, while continuing to be an active and useful member of the network. It was hence decided to focus on the "supply" side in future, and ORS was therefore developed with emphasis on three main components to support advocacy—research, as a powerful empirical base for advocacy; continued capacity building; and communication and resource materials to support both of the above. The shift mirrored that from networking to resource agency, from advocacy to skill development. This was to be the role for ACCESS in the third and final phase, while TN-FORCES, under its new leadership, was to continue to evolve and grow in new directions, reaching new heights.





Rama clarified that the vision of the Convenor determined the direction of the network.

The structure and functioning of TN-FORCES changed with the perspective of the Convenor. The perspective of the first Convenor, Mina Swaminathan of Project ACCESS, was to work at different levels in different modes in order to be able to reach a certain common goal. For example, we had to work with the media, with the legislators, with the common public, and also very specialised technical skills were to be imparted through training. I think the perception of the second Convenor was more in terms of advocacy, more in terms of providing platforms for NGOs to raise issues in trying to influence legislators and policy makers.

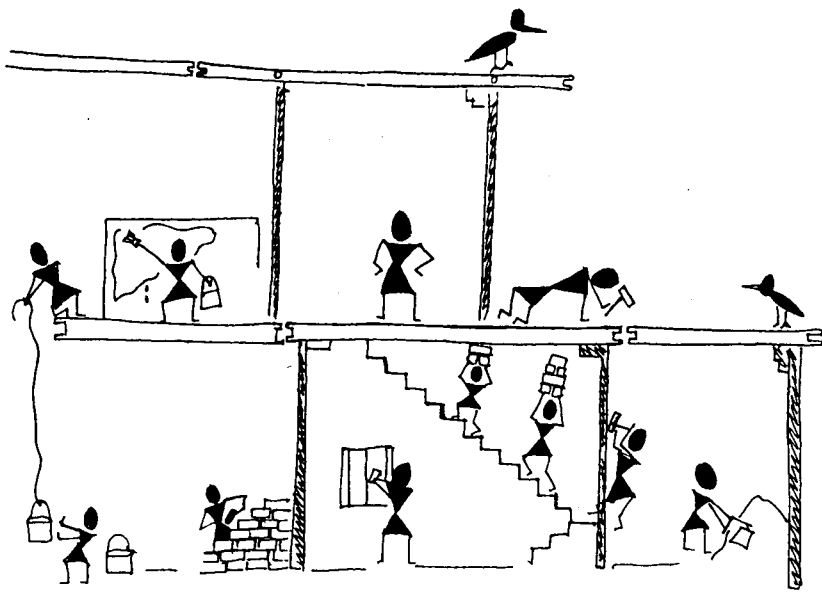
Jayanthi Christiana commented that

in TN-FORCES, Dr. SV's activist approach has been able to mobilise people from the community and make them address ECE issues at the policy level.

SV talked about his strategy for TN-FORCES.

TN-FORCES continues with a modified approach. Project ACCESS gave importance to certain sectors such as production of materials on ECE. We work more at the grassroots level, taking the campaign throughout Tamil Nadu, focusing on women and child care in the unorganised sector. We have decentralised the areas and our work is shared among those responsible for each area. The areas are: ECE, women in the unorganised sector, NGO and women's issues. Much depends on those organisations involved in working on these areas.

Project ACCESS worked systematically on child care as a women's issue. They produced videos. They published books and campaign materials. We continue with the campaigning as a part of the wider campaign of unorganised labour issues. It is an on-going process. We still need to create awareness among the general public and we need to sensitise the government further. We are unable to evaluate it with some concrete results as the process seems to continue.



## The People Who Made It Work

The human element was once more the predominant one in determining success and failure. Even more than in the earlier phase, the exploratory and opened-ended nature of the Project allowed the programme to grow (sometimes with false starts, it is true) from the strengths, talents, and skills of the persons involved. In areas where these were lacking, a new strategy of recruiting part-time workers and short-term consultants was developed, both to close gaps and to draw in new talents in a looser organisation. The programme thus always had two circles of workers—a smaller one consisting of the staff, and a wider circle of consultants, resource persons, part-time workers, and network members, who were available for limited times or specific purposes and were backed up at the next level by the Technical Advisory Committee.

Over the five-year period, ten professionals were associated as staff at various times and in various capacities. The skills, experiences, and understandings they brought to the job, and their complementary strengths and weaknesses, significantly affected the choice, extent, and pace of activities at any given point of time, and a different combination might well have led to very different outcomes. Three had post-graduate degrees in Social Work, three in Child Development, and one in Nutrition, while the three communicators were variously qualified. They worked for different periods of time in the Project, on an average three years. Most of them, at the time

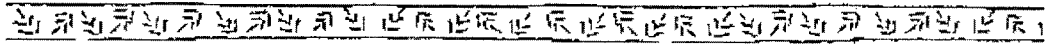


of recruitment, were between 25 and 30 years of age (only a few had crossed 35 by 1998!) with brief work experience in their own fields. They were quite unprepared for the kind of work envisaged, and most came expecting to work at the primary level (that is, directly with children or with communities). However, here they had to work not even at the secondary level, that is, with teachers. But even more so at the tertiary level: with teacher trainers, not teachers or children; with community leaders, associations, organisations, and institutions, not communities; with stimulating and disseminating research rather than conducting it.

That this extraordinary group of young people could achieve so much speaks volumes for their own imagination, motivation, dynamism, and willingness to learn. At the same time, the flexibility and autonomy provided in ACCESS, including the freedom to experiment and make mistakes, and the presence of a circle of supportive and skilled specialists as resource persons were important enabling factors. The Project grew in the directions they took it, of course within the broad framework laid down; they knew they were responsible, and had to take both praise and blame, which helped them to take mature decisions and to learn to deliver as promised. The democratic process of working—regular meetings, with constant brainstorming, sharing, critiquing, and cooperation in carrying out activities—built up not only a critical and reflective approach to work and the willingness to listen to others, but also habits of peer learning and harmonious (usually!) collaboration and teamwork. As the work culture was maintained throughout the period, so effectiveness and efficiency did not suffer, even though there was a slow and silent turnover of staff during the period, only one of the original four who joined in 1993 continuing till 1998. Each made a contribution, and each also grew as a professional.

This was the first time Padmavathi had worked with NGOs.

Before I came into Project ACCESS, I had no experience of working with NGOs. I did not know their requirements. I knew only journalists' requirements...I have a concern for women's and children's issues. I was working on these earlier. In ACCESS I gained depth in the subject. I want to continue in this area.



She also understood the role of a coordinator in the writers' workshops.

Being the coordinator meant identifying resource persons for the workshop without bias. I could invite even those with whom I may not have much to do or I may not agree with ideologically, as I knew I was not working as an individual but on a broader framework.

Sarvesan and Murali were more than satisfied with the gender sensitivity they have developed because of Project ACCESS.

I did not have clarity of knowledge about working women's problems. The experiences in Project ACCESS helped me in gaining clarity. In the corporate sector where I work now there is a vast difference between others and myself in the way we perceive women's issues. There are only three or four among one thousand who are working here who can understand women's issues.

**Sarvesan**

At a personal level, I owe a lot to Ms. Mina Swaminathan and Project ACCESS for my present level of gender sensitivity, which is still evolving!! This has altered my perspectives and my thinking. I have gained a great deal in this. A caveat must be introduced here! My wife still thinks I have a long way to go!!!

**Murali**

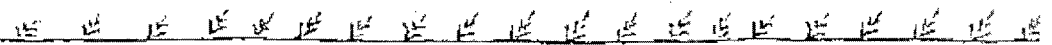
Sarvesan continues to be committed to ECCE in the corporate field where he now works.

I initiated ECCE as an important component in corporate social responsibility programmes. In the Thirupporur block, where we work, we have funded the building of two ICDS centres and maintaining the available infrastructure in other ICDS centres, conducted training programmes for all the balwadi teachers in the block, and introduced the playway curriculum through providing indoor and outdoor play materials for children.

At all the corporate sector meetings on social responsibility programmes at the State level, I push the need for providing quality ICDS programmes. Whenever an opportunity comes, I am there to readily put forth the cause of early childhood education.



THE PEOPLE WHO MADE IT WORK







And Murali enthusiastically admitted that

ACCESS had been a learning school in many ways. I gradually acquired skills in writing efficient press releases, networking with media practitioners, conducting media workshops, audio and video production, printing and layout designing, and software proficiency.

Sam was very happy with the great strides he has made in skills and knowledge.

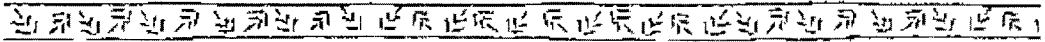
The field of ECE was quite new to me and the Project gave me an opportunity to familiarise myself with some of the emerging knowledge in this subject. What struck me first was that the Project was working on unconventional issues—issues that were not addressed by most of the other NGOs. It was sometimes frustrating to see the lack of response from other NGOs on these topics. But it did give me the satisfaction that I was working on something that others have never thought about.

I learnt a lot from Mina Swaminathan. I learnt the importance of small details—in programmes, in organising meetings, and in editing text for publication. My written communication was chiselled and polished by her and I am proud I now possess editing skills fine-tuned by her. With the wide knowledge and skills I have gained by being in Project ACCESS, I am able to see a great deal of difference between me and my present colleagues who have never worked in such a project. (This may look like blowing my own trumpet, but it is reality!!)

Krishna realised the problems that could beset the work.

I gained an understanding of what could be some of the drawbacks in any programme. I understood the consequences of funds crunch. I came to realise that from a proposal to the actual programme, the proposal undergoes a tremendous change.

Glory enumerated the various aspects in which she had gained tremendous experience: convening meetings, organising training workshops, writing reports, preparing background/resource materials, producing booklets and brochures, conceptualising and scripting and directing and editing audio-visual aids to training, and



interacting with people in various situations. Yet, to her what mattered most was the personal understanding.

Whatever I had learnt and experienced throughout the Project as a trainer, I have practised with my daughter. I have been observing her development continuously and I provide the proper inputs for her care and education.



THE PEOPLE WHO MADE IT WORK

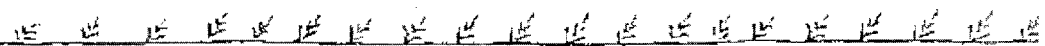
The other day I met a parent who told me that her sole ambition was to get her child to speak English fluently. I felt really sad that this mother had missed out on all the wonderful, innovative playway methods in ECE. We need a strong campaign to create more awareness among parents.

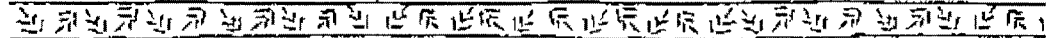
Radhika acknowledged that working in ACCESS helped her in realising that research, training, communication, and dissemination work as a cycle of events and contribute towards enlightening the community on the importance of early childhood care and education.

Santhiya Maheshwari gained practical skills while she was with ACCESS.

I am a social worker. My knowledge on child development was limited when I joined Project ACCESS. I did a lot of reading on this while I was in ACCESS. I gained a better understanding of ECE here. It is because of this opportunity that I could get the present position as Child Development Programme Officer. On this job, I am working with 86 balwadi teachers. I am able to relate to the needs of children in the context in which they live, while planning activities at my project level. More than what I could contribute while I was working in Project ACCESS, I am able to apply what I learnt in ACCESS at the field level.

Taking stock at the end of the second phase of Project ACCESS, it was clear that the achievements of this rich and productive, rather breathlessly packed, period of development were many. Various major issues taken up, some in campaign form, and others in more diffuse ways, were: the "burden" on the preschool child and the importance of playway in ECE; quality in ECE; multiple roles of women and support services for women; support for breastfeeding; training at all levels; the role of child care workers; and





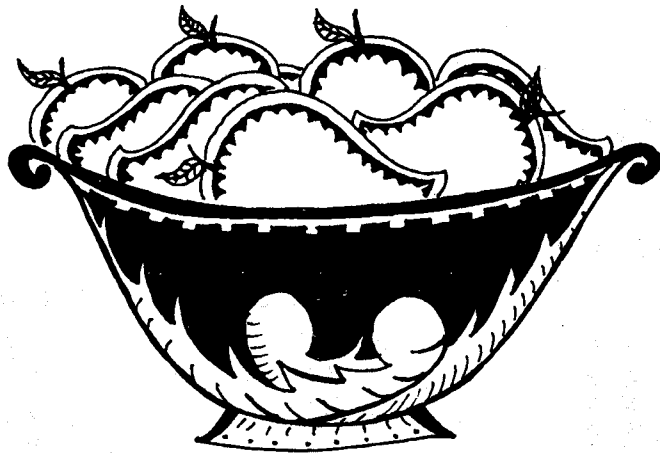
AS THE SALT IN THE SEA



decentralisation of child care services. The accomplishments included the growth and consolidation of the TN-FORCES network; the progress in training capability in ECD, both within and outside the Government; the quantity, quality, and range of communication and resource materials and their dissemination and use; two major policy-related research studies of significance; substantial documentation; widespread awareness on ECD issues among civil society groups and the public as a result of advocacy; and a few policy and legislative changes.

COTA had, to a very large extent, attained its objectives. The time had now come to consolidate the efforts in each of the domains and to find ways to sustain the underlying processes.





**CONSOLIDATION 1998-2001**

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The third and final phase began in January 1998 with the launch of the new programme, now called ORS (Operation Resource Support), which, with its connotations for those familiar with the international terminology of child health (Oral Rehydration Solution), clearly signalled a change of direction. Even at the outset, there was a recognition that this was to be the concluding and consolidating phase, and the strategy was drawn up for three years, though, in fact, it continued, in a low-key and gradually fading out mode for the fourth year. Activities were now to shift from the "demand" to the "supply" side, from advocacy and demand creation to strengthening the capability to deliver. However, it was not so easy to make the switch, either quickly or completely, especially as ACCESS had come to be identified with advocacy. This led to some problems of identity confusion, especially in the first year, when the new Convenor of TN-FORCES was taking over the advocacy functions, and clarity was only achieved over a period through many debates.



ORS had four clearly laid down objectives, which distinctly indicated the emphasis:

- To strengthen the capacity of existing institutions working in these areas—both government and voluntary—through training and development of training modules
  - To develop communication materials to support advocacy, training, and capacity building
  - To undertake research on selected child care issues of immediate priority, the findings of which could be used for advocacy and policy formulation
  - To maintain and develop a database on the issues of child care
- The content and context for this approach was also specified in terms of six major themes to be addressed:
- Quality of child care services offered by both NGOs and Government
  - Linkage between women's multiple roles and child care as a support service
  - Discrimination against the girl child at all age levels
  - People's participation and alternative structures for child care services
  - Care and development of children belonging to most vulnerable age group, i.e., 0-2
  - Needs of young children in urban disadvantaged environments

The actual activities were further conceptualised as elements of two broad strategies, indicated in the diagram below (fig. 3).

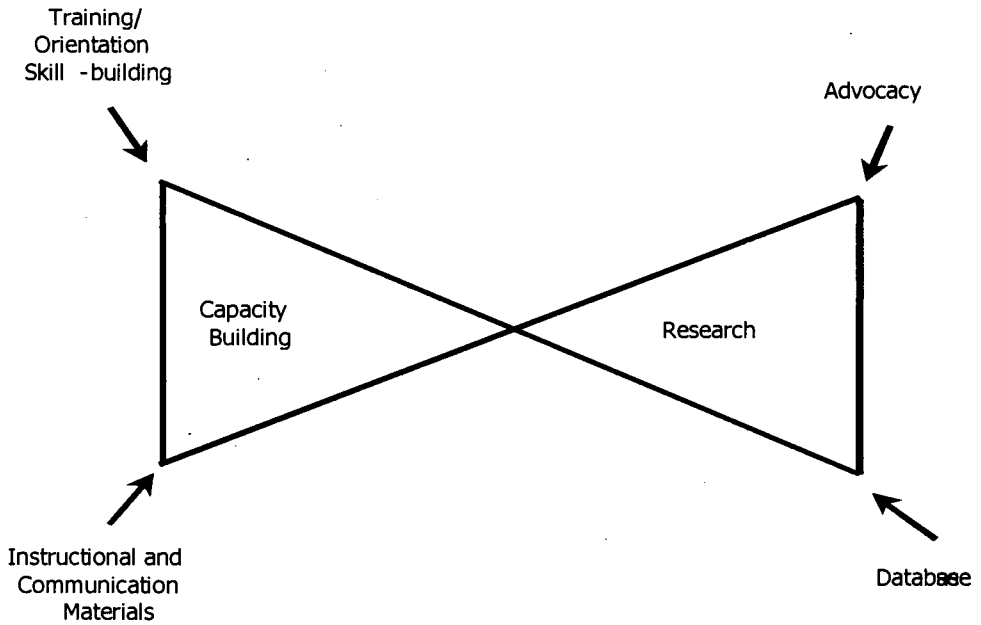
Along with this came the legacy of the past: the unfinished research study, the initiatives taken on in the closing months of the previous programme, activities and products in the pipeline, and of course the ongoing relationships with FORCES at both the national and the State levels. Also, a perception that, as this was the concluding phase, terminal reports and final evaluations would have to be prepared at the end of the period, and that some kind of closure was to be planned for. This changed the approach to quite an extent.



With new staff, and a new Coordinator from late 1998, a much more goal-oriented, target-driven, pre-planned, and organised approach gradually began to prevail. A sea change in procedure came about, a shift not only in content but also in methodology, associated also with a change of personalities. At the beginning of this phase, there were only two persons left (Sam and Murali) from the previous phase, but both left within a year or so. Five young people joined at various stages in the next few months. Rama, who had been associated with the Project in various ways from the beginning, became the new Coordinator, and a new team took shape with a new working approach needed for the new goals.

Rama explained how the objectives of this phase gradually crystallised.

In the Operation Resource Support phase of the Project, the original proposal was to set up a resource centre, since there was a lot of demand created for the materials produced by ACCESS. However, this was subsequently modified to a project mode for three years to



**Fig. 3 Operation Resource Support**

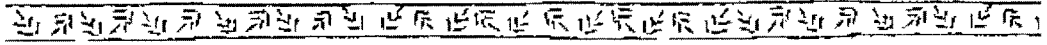




consolidate the work done in the previous years and with a few added elements. The major objectives became (i) to further strengthen and sustain the trainers' network; (ii) to carry out three research studies on specific topics; (iii) to provide technical support to TN- FORCES, whose convenorship had changed from that of Project ACCESS; (iv) to create a database on ECCE and to produce resource materials in print, audio, and visual media.

Yet, the earlier approach refused to altogether go away, the old habits (bad ones?)—like naughty children who have been told to stay inside when important visitors are expected—kept bobbing up from time to time, lurking behind doors, peeping round corners at odd moments, sometimes when least wanted, bringing in new concerns, opening up new avenues. But that was not all. The earlier exploratory approach was also reinforced by the expectations, indeed demands, of other partners that flexibility would continue, that there would be responses to new and unanticipated events, especially in the policy area. So, while to a certain extent, the planned and targeted programme brought order and went ahead as scheduled, the twists and turns, the revision and reviews, the accommodation of the unexpected, and the changes of direction continued.

In visualising ACCESS more as a resource centre in the ORS phase, questions arose as to who will be the user groups and what kind of information needed to be kept. The Bernard van Leer Foundation, which was the funder, suggested that Project ACCESS could give *support* to a lot of people who generate *activities*. Finally this was agreed to. I clearly understood that we had to move away from the original COTA mode and start focusing on how we could support others. At the end of one year, we realised that we had not really moved away from the previous mode. Work was going on, but it was not the kind of work we were expected to do. This was because clear-cut goals were not there. "To give support" is something vague. You have to give support as and when the need emerges, which is difficult to predict. Producing materials cannot itself become a goal. What are we going to do with them? To what end?



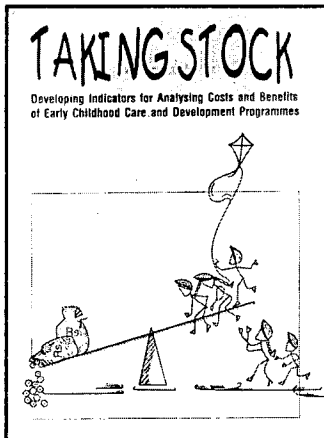
## Rama

These differences sometimes surfaced as conflicts but were usually ironed out by yet another continuing dimension. That was the working mode, of open and participatory discussion, review and evaluation, the democratic procedures evolved earlier, but now with different people, leading to the ability to manage change and move forward, firmly, if not steadily. This process also continued to encourage and recognise the contribution of each individual member of the team and his/her own growth and professional development.



Again, the narration will be thematic, not chronological, and each of the major areas of work will be considered in turn.





## Research Becomes Central

The experience of the previous five years had clearly indicated the areas where research was needed for advocacy, both to generate empirical data to satisfy policy makers about the need for policy and programme change, and to convince various stakeholders and the general public about major issues. So it was decided to take up research studies on three selected issues. The first one was to be on the little-understood area of the care and development of young children (below twos) among the urban poor, the second on the attributes of early childhood education and the impact of varying quality on the development of children, and the third on assessing the costs and benefits of child care services. These were perceived as being respectively related to needs, services, and policy. It was envisaged that one study a year would be taken up and completed, but, in fact, only preparatory work for all the three could be done in the first year, the studies were all carried out in the second year, and completed and published in the third year.

But even before getting started on the new studies, there remained the question of the unfinished study of child care workers, which was hence given priority. It was taken up in the first year by J. Jayanthi Rani Christiana, a Master's in Social Work, newly appointed to be in charge of Research. Picking up the abandoned but codified data, and starting afresh on the examination of the context of the subject matter, collecting updated secondary data as *background*

information, interviewing important sources of information, and weaving all these together, the study was slowly put together. Because of the long gap between data collection and report writing, the many changes of hands and of approaches, it was decided to publish it as a report acknowledging the role of all those who had participated at different stages, and to subject it to a critical external review by three specialists before publication. It was also necessary to write in such a manner as to avoid giving offence to some of the NGOs and other players on sensitive issues where there was a divergence of stakeholder interests, like the conflict between managers and employees of NGOs.

Jayanthi was tireless in her efforts in completing several research studies in Project ACCESS.

I saw that the data collected on child care workers in 1994 had not been analysed and reported. Therefore, I made it my commitment to complete that and the other studies I was responsible for. All this needed extra time and effort.

Rama, however, felt that the lack of adequate planning led to a lot of time having been spent on this study.

We organised the Bal Sevika Convention in the previous COTA phase. Some information was collected on the status of the Bal Sevikas as it was thought the Convention could be used as an opportunity to do this piece of research. It was not analysed. In the ORS phase, we had budgeted for only three research studies. The budget was really not the problem, for if we had completed the three and taken up another one, the funder would have been happy. But we had to spend a lot of time in analysing the Bal Sevika data. Jayanthi spent one whole year on this, in analysing and writing up. The information was used for advocacy, which again was not planned during this phase of the Project. The time of the staff member was spent on something that was not part of the Project.

The study was ready by early 1999.<sup>40</sup> It was quickly followed by a policy-makers' workshop—Child Care Workers in the Voluntary

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<sup>40</sup> Christiana, *The First Teacher*.



Sector—in April, as the first step in advocacy.<sup>41</sup> The keynote speaker, from the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Development (NIPCCD), presented the findings of a recently concluded survey of crèches in the voluntary sector, while the workshop itself was inaugurated by the Chairperson of the Central Social Welfare Advisory Board. Thus, for strategic reasons, the status of child care workers was made to ride piggyback on a consideration of the situation of child care services in the voluntary sector as a whole. This workshop was the starting point for a series of activities for advocacy on this issue. A working group was set up, including the major NGOs running crèches, to revise the Central funding scheme in a more realistic manner; petitions and memorandums were sent repeatedly to both Central and State Boards, and at one point a rally and demonstration by the child care workers and NGOs acting on their behalf was organised by TN-FORCES. The movement continued for nearly two years. Promises were made but not kept, and there was little change, except for some small upward revision of the provision for food. While child care workers in the government sector are well organised and have managed to wrest a few gains, the minuscule few in the voluntary sector continue to be the victims of neglect, neither here nor there, while child care workers in the private sector are not even recognised as such. Invisible workers in an invisible sector: this is one of the toughest of issues to tackle, and the one that seems will never go away.

Dr. Shanmugavelayutham (SV), the present Convenor of TN-FORCES, talked about the use of the child care workers' study for advocacy.

Findings of some research studies were taken up for advocacy. Lot of campaigning was done on the findings of the child care workers' study. Several rallies have been conducted. Only Tamil Nadu started working on this issue. At the Central Government level, there is a move to revise that scheme, which is an achievement.

<sup>41</sup> MSSRF, *Child Care Workers in the Voluntary Sector in Tamil Nadu* (proceedings of the workshop jointly organised by MSSRF and TN-FORCES, April 1999).

### ***Caring for Infants***

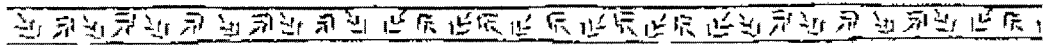
To return to the three main research studies that were to be the base of the Project: each had its own trajectory and problems, but all faced the common dilemma of being handled by an institution which was oriented not only to research but to several other activities, and without experienced research staff on its rolls, thus leading to greater dependence on consultants and advisers. The first one sought to study the impact of maternal child care practices on the growth and development of infants from birth to one year of age in the urban slums of Chennai.<sup>42</sup> This was planned by Rama as part of her doctoral research, and the field work, including the study of over 300 mother-child dyads in 13 urban slums, was hence completed in the first year, even before she became the Project Coordinator. For the next one year, the burden of ACCESS work was such as to leave little time for careful analysis of the data and hence only the draft report could be completed by the end of 1999, and the final report only in December 2000 at the close of the Project. An important lesson learnt was that research and project management were both time-consuming activities, and that hence it was foolish to expect the roles to be combined effectively within time constraints. However, it was too late to apply the lesson. More important, the findings of the study were of immense value for advocacy, on the very theme on which ACCESS had been working for several years. Yet, these could not be effectively used during the life of the Project because of restrictions imposed by academic institutions on the use of the data prior to the submission of the Ph.D thesis. Thus, even though this was one of the most outstanding pieces of work on this subject, yielding vital information for health care for programming as well as for women's rights as mothers, the research-advocacy link was temporarily broken.



### ***Rating Quality in ECE***

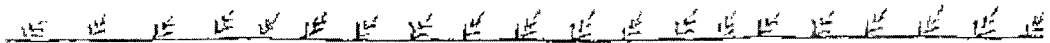
The second study was on understanding the relationship between quality of early childhood education and learning competencies of

<sup>42</sup> Rama Narayanan, *Maternal Care and Infant Growth* (Chennai: MSSRF, 2001).



children, and culminated in the report *Quality Matters!*.<sup>43</sup> Taken up early in 1999, it had a chequered history with several major course changes. The proposal for such a study had been drafted as early as 1997, but since no help was forthcoming from the government departments approached for support for a large-scale empirical study, the first major decision was to downsize the survey and carry it out on a scale small enough to be handled with available funds. The major focus was to be on methodology, especially on adapting, testing, and validating a rating tool for quality in ECE, thus making available a dependable methodology for future large-scale studies. Accordingly, two research consultants were invited to develop the tool and supervise the study, while a broad-based advisory group was also set up to steer the process. The tool development, field-testing, and training of investigators proceeded smoothly, the latter being carried out with great thoroughness, especially in the area of inter-investigator reliability. However, major changes in the methodology— especially as related to the sampling procedure— had to be accepted as a result of the divergence between the reality on the ground and the theoretically correct sampling plan. For example, it had been planned to take 8 to 10 four-year-old children from each ICDS centre, but this had to be given up when it was discovered that there were very few four-year-olds available, and even fewer who met the other criteria of at least one year's presence and 50 percent attendance at the particular Centre. It was decided to test only 4 children per centre, a realistic number. But this doubled the number of centres to be studied, and increased other kinds of work and the time required. Again, it had been decided to group centres into threes, including one ICDS, one private, and one NGO-managed, in each community. This dream too had to be given up, since such triads were not conveniently available, and the sampling design was revised to focus on pairs and include enough pairs of different types to meet all the variations. However, this enlarged the geographical area of the study, increased the time, and led to a higher workload, besides making certain types of comparisons impossible. Similarly, the plan to take ICDS as the base of the pair

<sup>43</sup> MSSRF, *Quality Matters!: Understanding the Relationship between Quality of Early Childhood Education and Learning Competencies of Children* (Chennai, 2000).





and locate the other types of centres near it was also found to be impossible in practice, since NGO-run centres were few and far between, while the spread of ICDS is very wide, almost universal. Again, the plan was adapted and the NGO centre was taken as the base, and the ICDS centre nearest to it was taken as its pair. The hard experience of "reality-testing", besides making the research team into experts on the field situation regarding child care services in Tamil Nadu and turning up a lot of unexpected information of great value, enabled the team to vouch for the authenticity of the data collected, its comparability, reliability, and utility for research. These hurdles overcome, the data collection proceeded with only the usual glitches.

There were several international experts who were involved, whose help was taken for the research study on *Quality Matters!*. Some of the experts who helped were Kathy Sylva and Barbara J. Isely. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) created by Harms and Clifford (1980) which was being used in five different cultures, was modified for the Indian situation. TECERS (Tamil Nadu Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale) was created and tested by Project ACCESS.

**Jayanthi**

Other team members like Christina and Lakshmi Priya (who had joined as Project Associate for Training) were involved in some of the fieldwork associated with the development of the TECERS tool and collecting data from balwadis.

I am good at fieldwork. As a social worker, I have had 14 years of experience in the field when I came to Project ACCESS. In the three studies—*Quality Matters!*, *Maternal Care and Infant Growth*, and *Panchayati Raj and Child Care Services*—I was fully involved in the field work. The preparation of the TECERS tool was mainly dependent on field observations.

**Christina**

The next crisis and the next change of course came at the stage of analysis and writing of the report, when the consultant in charge of the study expressed her inability to write the report. This led to a



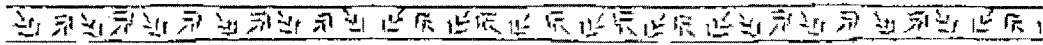


change of strategy, out of which came a brainstorming session with the members of the advisory committee and the consultants, in which the broad contours of the analysis, the approach, and the conclusions were agreed upon, and the work of writing was shared out between different persons, while the responsibility for putting the whole together was left to Mina Swaminathan. Thus, once more it was a group report, and the study was published in the name of MSSRF, listing the names and roles of all who had participated, quite an unusual procedure in such research studies. However, arriving at this decision was not difficult, since it was well in keeping with the participatory and democratic style of functioning of ACCESS. In addition, there were several presentation and critiquing sessions before the final publication.

The report stressed not only the important finding that the nature and quality of the ECE experience was closely and systematically correlated with children's achievement and performance in four major domains of development—a finding which has vital policy implications—but continued to lay emphasis on the importance of validating a methodology which could be widely applied in the country. A tool for the purpose was available for the first time in the country.<sup>44</sup> The tool could be used for quality improvement in a variety of ways: for evaluation (including self-evaluation), monitoring and supervision, training, research, and accreditation. This was the message for advocacy.

The advocacy campaign for quality in ECE that came out of this study was a long and sustained one, successfully roping in leading stakeholders and mobilising the professional community. It began with dissemination in a systematic way. Besides the usual distribution of copies to academic audiences, summaries were prepared in both Tamil and English to reach a wider audience. More importantly, travel was undertaken to carry the message across the country. The first presentation was at an international conference in London, offering an entry point into academic respectability. Between October 2000 and July 2001, presentations were made in leading centres of

<sup>44</sup> Barbara J. Isely, *Tamil Nadu Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale* (Chennai: MSSRF, 2000).



education, training, and research in ECE, including university departments of Child Development, schools, IAPE meetings, ICDS functionaries, senior administrators in the Department of Women and Child Development, and others, culminating in a presentation at NIPCCD. These meetings targetted the ECE professionals, and were intended to push for policy changes and the formal acceptance of the tool as a strategy for quality improvement. At another level, a series of workshops on quality in ECE was held with teachers, school managements, supervisors of ICDS, heads of NGOs, and others running child care centres offering ECE in some form, providing scope for self-improvement in a practical manner. To support these efforts, a training video was developed on the TECERS tool itself, a guide to the tool illustrated with simulated examples to help users find their way through it.<sup>45</sup> The tool was also translated into Hindi.



The response varied. While the entire ECD community, both practitioners and academics, outside the Government was drawn into the campaign and gradually became committed to it, the responses from Government at both Central and Tamil Nadu levels were indifferent. Perhaps the talk about quality was perceived as threatening, but in spite of repeated offers to train functionaries, undertake field studies to validate and refine the tool further, little interest was shown and no concrete steps taken. An appeal to NIPCCD to take up large-scale comparative studies of quality in different sectors of ECE also met with no response.

The climax to this year-long preparatory phase, which set the stage for what was to come, was a workshop on quality improvement in ECE, with broad national participation from professionals—policy makers, practitioners, and trainers—as well as some international participation. Held in August 2001, the objectives were

- to introduce, critique and study the various possible uses of the rating tool TECERS
- to develop, modify, adapt, improve, and refine the rating tool as an instrument for the measurement of quality

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<sup>45</sup> A.S. Padmavathi, *Orientation to TECERS* (Chennai: MSSRF 2002), video film.





- to develop the outline for policy guidelines on regulation of quality, licensing, and accreditation with the help of the rating tool

Even before the workshop, selected participants were invited to field test the rating tool in their own area and sector and in specific socio-cultural settings, and to come prepared to present their findings on its application and utility. The discussions were fruitful and led to certain firm outcomes.<sup>46</sup>

S. S. Jayalakshmi's institution, Vidya Vikasini, participated in the testing of TECERS.

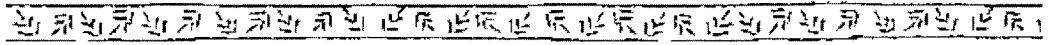
We associated with Project ACCESS in testing the TECERS tool. Our past and present trainees were involved in testing the tool for monitoring and evaluation of the preschool programmes. The TECERS tool developed in Project ACCESS is extremely useful in three ways: as a tool for evaluation of preschools, introduced for trainees in the training programme; as a monitoring tool for our visit to balwadis; and as an awareness-creating tool for those interested in starting play schools as it lists all the requirements of a pre-school. Its use as a tool for accreditation is, however, questionable.

Prema Daniel, Coordinator, ECE, at the S. C. S. Kothari Academy for Women, Chennai, helped in the pilot project of TECERS.

I was with the project till the end, till the National Conference at MSSRF to debate on TECERS. I assisted Mina Swaminathan in workshops in Coimbatore and Chennai on introducing the TECERS tool to teachers. I used TECERS in my training programme as an observation tool for the teacher trainees, especially for assessing the quality of the classroom in preschools.

This workshop, which came towards the end of Project ACCESS, was not only its grand finale, but created a new constituency, almost a movement, to take the work forward to a wider level. Formed in moments of high emotion, this step opened up an avenue of sustainability for this element of the Project, on a theme that was its

<sup>46</sup> MSSRF, *Scaling Heights: A Strategy for the Improvement of Quality in Early Childhood Education* (proceedings of a workshop, Chennai, 2001).



core. A national level task force was set up then and there to work on the common rating tool and evolve strategies for regulation, while FORCES would continue to address the issues of awareness building, advocacy, and demand creation.

Jayanthi, who was fully involved in the research study that led to the development of TECERS, was concerned about the apparent slow progress on work with the tool.

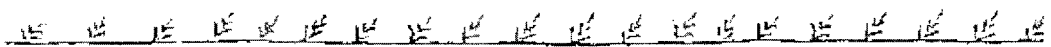


TECERS was shared with all in the workshop held in August 2001. It is one year now and the approaches to further work on the promotion of TECERS seem to be fragmented. Training programmes for ICDS supervisors or balwadi teachers/ management seem to introduce this as a tool for assessing the quality of balwadis, though this has not come out in IAPE reports. I have also heard that there was something happening with the tool in the Department of Social Welfare. They appear to have come out with a tool that is simple. There were UNICEF inputs also in that.

She was also unhappy that Barbara Isely had claimed the copyright to TECERS.

We did not think technically that Barbara would ask for copyright. This copyright seemed to have created a lot of unpleasant feelings among people who matter such as Advisory Committee members, UNICEF personnel, and the Department of Social Welfare. I personally think we missed out. Even in the TECERS tool workshop, there is no acknowledgement in writing of those who had worked, who were involved. Barbara expressed her heartfelt thanks only orally. The question remains: when so many Indians are involved, how can a foreigner claim copyright? It appears that UNICEF was not very much for the ECERS model. According to them, there is rich expertise available in the Indian context. We could have made a tool of our own. I would like to make a point that within the Foundation, there is no policy on the copyrights issue. This is a definite lacuna. This should be looked into.

The Task Force made a slow start, but the work is now, in 2003, going well. Isely's tool is no longer being used as the base and an entirely original Indian tool is being developed.





## What are the Costs of ECD?

The third major study was in some ways the most difficult of all, beset with trials and tribulations. To begin with, it was on a complex theme—costs—on which there was no in-house expertise. After several attempts to draw on outside know-how and prepare a proposal, none of which proved fruitful, it was decided to hold a brainstorming workshop on the issue in order to develop a theoretical approach based on inputs drawn from several disciplines and points of view, which could lead to a “do-able” yet meaningful research study. And this is exactly what happened. A wide range of specialists participated, some directly, others through papers in the workshop held in September 1999, a variety of presentations were made and hotly debated, and visible outlines of the kinds of studies needed did emerge.<sup>47</sup> Though cost studies existed at different levels of education and in other sectors, it was clear that little had been done in costing ECD, and that studies therefore needed to progress at three levels: first, of appraisal and understanding of costs; next, of cost effectiveness in terms of efficiency and effectiveness of expenditures; and only then could one begin to study costs in relations to benefits. For ACCESS, the lesson was obvious. Keeping in mind the financial, time, and human limitations, it was decided to embark on a study of costs of child care services, to start by taking up ICDS as a service to be priced, and to attempt to study costs at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

But, if the direction to be followed was theoretically clear, it was still not apparent how to get there. The first step was to identify a consultant with the necessary expertise, prepare a plan of action, and get government approval for the study. The consultant appointed proved to be phenomenally successful at gathering enormous amounts of data about ICDS costs, no mean feat considering the difficulties of non-governmental agencies in getting access to government records. After this, however, there was a long time lag caused by difficulties in putting the data into an appropriate

<sup>47</sup> MSSRF, *Taking Stock: Developing Indicators for Analysing Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Care and Development Programmes* (proceedings of a workshop, Chennai, 1999).



theoretical framework and the sudden departure of the consultant. He had done an admirable job but his skills lay only in that direction. It was now mid-2000 and time was running out, while a desperate search was made for a consultant with the appropriate expertise. There was debate about what exactly that was, until eventually the choice fell upon a chartered accountant, who accepted the assignment out of curiosity and good-humored surprise that so simple a thing as child care should need costing. But this proved to be the turning point, and the output as well as corroboration by other researchers vindicated the choice. The framework and analysis were completed soon, involving the participation of the staff in interpreting and analysing the findings and writing the conclusions, since they could bring to bear knowledge and understanding of the issues. At the end of 2000, the study was submitted to the Government of Tamil Nadu, who showed obvious reluctance to accept it.<sup>48</sup>

Though the study has since been distributed to workshop participants, other academics, and the concerned government departments, no interest has been shown and, in spite of many attempts, it has not been possible to generate any kind of follow-up action. Clearly, this is too sensitive an area for the Government to welcome open discussion or involvement from outsiders, even academics. Why are governments that are prepared to study the costs of education reluctant to study the costs of child care, at least publicly? This sensitivity has much to do both with the identification of child care services with populist policies, making it a sacred cow not to be subjected to examination, and with the "invisibility" of the young child as part of the educational mainstream.

Jayanthi had earlier worked with a UK research consortium on the cost effectiveness of AIDS programmes and had been introduced to costing frameworks. That experience helped her with the ACCESS study in merging ECE concepts with analysis of costs. At the London Conference of the European Early Childhood Education and Research Association-, she had opportunity to interact with several others on this issue.

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<sup>48</sup> T.R.L.Narasimhan and J.Jayanthi Rani Christiana, *Costing Child Care Services* (Chennai: MSSRF, 2001).



The two international experts, Tony Bertram and Chris Pascal, gave us a new perspective on the costing study. A study was undertaken in the UK on 'Cost Effectiveness of Early Excellence Centres'. The tool they had used, converted into Excel software, gave the mode of analysis of quality in terms of cost in pounds. They shared their experiences, focusing on the drawbacks in some of the approaches like ECE practitioners' tendency to look at evaluation without looking at the cost. The cost could give guidelines for dealing with policy changes. Their contribution has been immense from that perspective. Their work in the UK gave me more insights. There is no other work like that. In fact, with their software, now I have lots of ideas. When I find free time I will work on ECE and costing issues. That is one area I found very interesting and challenging and not many people are working on that.

Now after coming into the church, I find that several donors working on different issues have their own network, not using the term ECE but using old jargon like day-care centres and preschools. All the churches (Catholic, Protestant, Baptist) are into preschools and they do share some of their experiences with me. I have had opportunities to stay in guesthouses to which preschools were attached. The social workers there have shown me the account books. What we have done in Project ACCESS regarding costing of child care services is only using government data—it is useful only for government programmes in Tamil Nadu. If we need to do a costing exercise for all programmes, much more effort is needed, lot more exposure is needed, which I do not yet possess. I am gaining that now because I know what the gaps are.

### ***Three More Studies***

The year 2000 can honestly be described as the Year of Research, involving tremendous pressure and intensive activity. The three major planned research studies were completed that year, under considerable stress, and advocacy efforts related to one of them launched. The Year of Research saw three more smaller studies, which grew, in different ways, out of the Project's concern with the issues. But not only that, they were also visualised as opportunities for individual staff members to gain experience in research and documentation in specialised areas. The first one was a



straightforward documentation of the action-research on decentralisation of child care services, to be described in a later section. Characteristically, the programme was also documented on video, to be used as tool for advocacy when needed, so it could also be described as part of capacity building of panchayat leaders.<sup>49</sup> The second study was one on the sex ratio at birth, vital information for the growing campaign against female foeticide or sex-selective abortion. Titled *The Unborn Girl Child*, it compiled statistics relating to the trends, regional and class differences, and other aspects related to the sex ratio at birth.<sup>50</sup> It was envisaged that this could support the newly emerging network on the Campaign Against Sex-Selective Abortion (CASSA), again coming face to face with the reluctance of government agencies to part with data on such sensitive issues.

The third study, which was taken up at first as part of the preparation for developing resource materials on the earliest period of life (0–3 years), an activity to be described in a later section, was carried out by a consultant (L. S. Saraswathi) with support from Vijaya, one of the staff members.<sup>51</sup> Being a study of the cultural practices and literature of the Tamils, it is the only one to be wholly carried out in Tamil. All three were in some way by-products of other activities of ACCESS, and all had as secondary objectives the provision of legitimate opportunities for younger staff members to hone their skills.

Christina was enthusiastic about her experience in action-research, though she was disappointed she could not analyse the data.

Only after coming to the Foundation (MSSRF) did I get involved in action-research in child care and also at the panchayat level. Intensive interaction with panchayat personnel was a new experience for me. But, there was compartmentalisation of work in Project ACCESS. I was branded as a 'field person' and I was not involved in the analysis and interpretation of the data I collected.

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<sup>49</sup> V. Vijaya, *Pennungal Ooor Pillaigalai* [Community Care for the Girl Child] (Chennai, MSSRF, 2000), video film, Tamil only.

<sup>50</sup> M. Bhuvaneshwari, *The Unborn Girl Child* (Chennai: MSSRF, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> L. S. Saraswathi, *Paamara Makkalin Unarvil Pachilam Kuzhanthai Paramarippu* [Depiction of Infants in People's Cultural Forms] (Chennai: MSSRF, 2001), Tamil only.





However, she did eventually write and publish a paper in her own name on the subject.<sup>52</sup>

Bhuvanewari, a post-graduate in Social Work, had joined ACCESS as Project Associate, Information Base. She worked on the study on *The Unborn Girl Child*.

Project ACCESS took the responsibility of collecting the data on sex ratio at birth in Chennai. I collected the data from various sources. VSIS (Vital Statistics Improvement Scheme) of the Corporation of Chennai's health department had very good data. In the hospitals we collected data on sex ratio at birth.

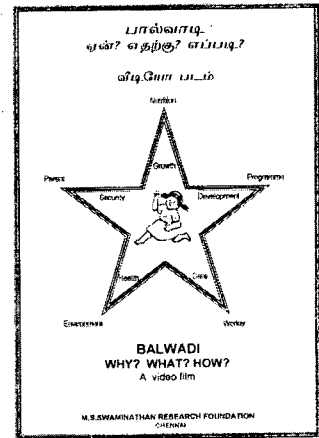
While appreciating the useful research studies done by ACCESS, SV yet lamented that they had not all been used for advocacy.

Project ACCESS had taken up lot of research work relevant to ECCD in Tamil Nadu. This is one of the major contributions of Project ACCESS. Some examples were: *Balancing Multiple Roles, Death by Social Causes, Services that Matter, Cost-Benefit Analysis, Quality Matters!, Panchayati Raj and Child Care Services, Child Care Workers in the Voluntary Sector, Maternal Care and Infant Growth, The Unborn Girl Child*. These studies could be used at the training level and at the policy level. Only Project ACCESS has done systematic research studies in ECCD in Tamil Nadu. The need to convert research findings in forms useful for advocacy and communication is still there. There is a gap in this regard. Not all the study findings have been used in advocacy and communication.

Jayanthi was very enthusiastic about her participation in multi-disciplinary research.

I really had an opportunity to work with people from different disciplines: Development Studies, Economics, Econometrics, Cost Accountancy, Statistics, Education, Social Work, Child Development, Nutrition, Journalism, Information Systems, Demography, Research Methodology, Home Science, etc. This was very helpful in understanding how these get integrated and the real meaning of multi-disciplinary research.

<sup>52</sup> A. Christina, *Panchayati Raj and Child Care Services* (Chennai: MSSRF, 2000).



## Systematic Communication Grows

COTA had clearly demonstrated the primacy of communication and resource materials as the basis for advocacy and awareness generation on issues related to the young child, while expanding awareness in turn generated further demand in a cyclical process. It was this persistent demand that led to the understanding that production and dissemination of communication and resource materials should remain one of the essential planks of the Project.

Earlier experience had also helped to develop certain guidelines for production. First was the careful identification of the user groups and of the distribution channels to reach them. Next was the by now well-established process of participatory development: including the users, specialists, and staff in an interactive critiquing process as well as bringing in technical experts at the production stage. These processes were followed with regard to both the print and electronic media. Then came the question of language. While research was generally published in English (later translated and/or summarised), all other materials were at first brought out only in the regional language, Tamil. But as interest in these products grew and requests trickled in from other parts of the country, English versions of most of the instructional materials were also prepared, slowly moving to almost complete bilinguality by the end of the Project period. Interestingly, some of the Tamil material, especially the training manuals on ECE, were of great interest to Tamil populations in other



countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, and later Sri Lanka. Lastly, basic procedures had been set up with respect to distribution and recovery of costs, especially as much of the material was intended only as prototype that others could take up for production. A limited number of copies of every product was distributed free of cost to important user groups, sufficient to create awareness of its existence. After that, requests were handled by providing copies, both in print and in electronic media, on reimbursement of the cost of making the copies, and the money received in this manner was placed in a revolving fund to finance further reproduction as needed.

In keeping with this mode, a tentative plan was prepared about the number and nature of products to be developed during the three years, but, as usual, the flexible approach and response to need altered this plan.

#### Planned and Actual Output of Communication Materials

| Type of materials                           | Proposed output<br>(in nos) | Actual output<br>(in nos) |
|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Research reports                            | 3                           | 7                         |
| Tools                                       | none                        | 2                         |
| Videos                                      | 3                           | 4                         |
| Training materials or manuals               | 3                           | 2                         |
| Audio cassettes                             | 3                           | 1                         |
| Campaign materials<br>(books, posters, etc) | 3                           | 5                         |
| Proceedings of workshops                    | none                        | 2                         |
| Briefing document                           | "                           | 1                         |
| Information base                            | not specified               | 1                         |

It was clearly seen that actual outputs exceeded the planned ones for all but two types of materials. The reasons were not far to seek:

strong demand and expectations of a now established resource centre, unanticipated requirement growing out of new and emerging issues and needs as well as some unfinished agenda from the earlier project. Materials were developed on all the six themes, but in a somewhat uneven manner, in response to changing situations, sometimes galloping to meet deadlines, at others struggling to cope with backlog while trying to anticipate the next step.



Bhuvana thought that ACCESS's work in communication

was perfect, complete, thorough, and hence very effective. What I as a communicator have in mind should get through to the receiver with the same kind of feeling and meaning. In this connection, both extensive and intensive video spots were very unique strategies, very powerful, and they reached many people. When the spot on the 'Burden on the Preschool Child' was aired, I was not involved in Project ACCESS, I was a member of the public audience. I can say that it conveyed what it intended to convey. Many people have said that, and many parents' thinking changed. It was a real good success. In modern commercial jargon, Project ACCESS has the capacity to sell the idea and the product as well.

She also described a method of communication that had been tried earlier.

In collaboration with the *Dinamani* newspaper, we conducted a photo competition on the themes of child care, like the role of the family, development of the child, socio-cultural expressions, and so on. There were 30 to 40 entries. The prize-winning photographs were published in *Dinamani Kathir*. There were some appreciative letters. Even after the competition, we were receiving photos. We were able to create interest in the issue of child care through such efforts.

### ***The Young Child (0 to 3 years)***

In the first six months, materials were produced in quick succession, starting with the poster on the child below two.<sup>53</sup> Then, three pamphlets were brought out in both English and Tamil on various dimensions of care of the below-3s, and some more video spots now on this theme.<sup>54, 55</sup> All of these have been, and continue to be,



widely used in meetings, campaigns, and workshops and have been reprinted many times over.

Meanwhile, a joint effort was taken up at the initiative of TINP, whose senior officials had identified the dearth of suitable communication materials on the growth, development, and welfare of the 0–2 years age group as one of the handicaps in aiming for holistic development of under-threes and especially in reaching out to mothers. Accordingly, a five-day workshop was conducted for the communication and training officers of TINP. During the workshop, around 41 messages were identified and about 10 materials were prepared in draft form, including a series of counselling cards on developmental domains, posters, calendars, charts, songs, plays and skits, and very short communications in traditional Tamil forms such as riddles, proverbs, and epigrams. Project ACCESS was asked to refine and develop some of these further and develop prototypes for field-testing by TINP functionaries, while others were to be handled directly by TINP.

While waiting for clear directions from the Government, which were as usual slow in coming, ACCESS had the opportunity to become a member of the newly formed UNICEF-sponsored Network for Information on Parenting (NIP) which aimed to disseminate messages to caregivers on developmental issues concerning the young child. The network Coordinator (Bala Mandir) had already developed a calendar consisting of a series of flip charts on the various domains of child development, in collaboration with and adapted from a Canadian partner. After a series of meetings, it was field-tested and subsequently taken up by TINP for dissemination on a very large

<sup>53</sup> MSSRF, *Ungal Veettu Kuttippappavai Valarpathu Eppadi?* [How Do You Bring up Your Child?] (Chennai, 1998), poster, in Tamil only.

<sup>54</sup> MSSRF, *Can the Girl Child Survive?: Penn Kuzhanthaiyin Vazhum Urimaikku Aapatha?*; *Parenting the Under-Threes: Munru Vayathu Variyilana Kuttippappavai Valarpadu Eppadi?*; *Mother's Milk-Every Child's Birthright!: Thaippal-Kuzhanthaiyin Perappurimai!* (Chennai, 1998), pamphlets, in English and Tamil.

Jnani, *Ey!* [You There!]; *Yaar Karanam?* [Who is the Cause]; *Enna Pidikkum* [What does Baby Like?] (Chennai: MSSRF, 1998), video spots, Tamil only.

<sup>55</sup> Jnani and A. S. Padmavathi, *Messages That Move* (Chennai: MSSRF, 1995–98), video spots on issues related to women and child care.

scale. This led to an in-house review of materials, and ACCESS decided to continue to support the network, and to avoid duplication of available materials by focusing only on identified gaps and by working in different forms. By the end of 1999, the completion of the study on child care practices of mothers in urban slums led to the identification of a further 20 very specific messages related to the situation of urban poverty, while the training programme for functionaries of a foundling home (to be described later) not only threw up more concepts related to infants below one year of age, but also cast light on forms appropriate to reach illiterate or semi-literate target groups in informal (non-classroom) settings.



But it was the search for frameworks that revealed the missing link: it was soon realised that little was known about either the portrayal of infants and young children and their developmental stages in Tamil cultural expressions, or about the similarity or divergences between folk wisdom and modern thinking on child development. It was hence decided to carry out a study of existing cultural forms from this point of view, and a consultant was identified. It was now near the end of the Project period, and since very little time was left, an exhaustive review was no longer possible, but an introductory study was prepared on perceptions of early childhood and its developmental stages in folk media (including songs, riddles, proverbs, epigrams, games) and some semi-classical literature.<sup>56</sup>

L. S. Saraswathi undertook this study under very difficult personal circumstances and within a limited period of time. However, she found the exercise very rewarding.

The development of the young child revealed in folk wisdom was quite a fascinating study. The time-tested knowledge on the developmental stages of children underlined the importance of human feelings and relationships at every stage, in simple and powerful language using various modes of expression. Songs appeared to be the favourite method.

This study could very well form the basis for communicating child care messages of importance, as the cultural wisdom on child

<sup>56</sup> Saraswathi, *Pachilam Kuzhanthai Paramarippu*



development and care is best understood in the forms people are familiar with.

The research itself pointed the way to the forms appropriate for different audiences, and two approaches were thrown up, one in the oral-aural medium and the other in the literary medium. The first suggested a radio serial, in an intimate chat-show format, along the lines already tried out in other sectors such as women's development and reproductive health, using a mix of elements that would provide rich opportunity for the folk materials of an oral type to be integrated with newer messages. This would be a mass programme, while the second, a literary approach, would target the reading public. This was envisaged as a regular column in a weekly or monthly journal on child rearing, again drawing on semi-classical and folk literature as well as scientific treatises. Preliminary planning for both were carried out, with TINP offering to sponsor the radio serial, but this offer never materialised; while at the same time the reduced strength of the links with media slowed down the search for those who could write and publish such a column. Sadly, both these ideas are in cold storage, waiting for the day when some entrepreneurial media or corporate baron will pick them up. This is perhaps one of the few instances when the intensive preparatory work characteristic of ACCESS did not mature to the final stage and yield an effective and popular product.

### ***Advocacy Materials for ECE***

It has already been reported that a training manual on the playway approach to learning for children aged 3 to 6 had been developed in a participatory mode with the help of the Southern Regional Network during the COTA period. Titled *Aadippaadi*, this was now modified, refined, published, and widely disseminated, about 12,000 copies being reprinted by UNICEF for use by the network of public sector centres. It has become one of the most enduring and popular products because of its links with grassroots realities and its practical approach.

While a large amount of training materials on ECE had been prepared for teachers, it was felt that there was a dearth of materials on the

“demand” side, that is awareness about ECE among parents, the public, school authorities, panchayat leaders, women’s organisations, health functionaries, and other social groups concerned with young children in one way or another. It was hence decided to develop a video film for a different kind of advocacy: one that would, by pointing out and illustrating the objectives and characteristics of a “good” child care centre, empower an informed public and concerned stakeholders to monitor child care services. The film specifically targetted the average balwadi parent, telling her (and him) what to look for and why, and was intended to be used by TN-FORCES at its public forums and by other groups addressing stakeholders who could take up the “watchdog” role effectively.<sup>57</sup> This was a new approach and hence the process of making the film was a long one, the critiquing process involving several turnarounds in method, swinging from a format deemed too didactic by some and too vague by others.



Another video film, also for advocacy on this theme, was a picturisation of three of the songs from the audio cassette, *Enga Paattu Kelunga*, on the theme of “Burden on the Preschool Child”, using available footage from earlier films.<sup>58</sup> When completed, a low-cost by-product of the Project, it became a powerful addition to the existing video of short messages (*Messages that Move*), enriching and revitalising the original ones. The rating tool, TECERS, developed as part of the research study, and its translation and distribution in English and Tamil (later also in Hindi) as well as an 18-minute film orienting potential users, also made with available footage, has already been mentioned. These efforts were possible because of the extensive video archives developed by ACCESS over the years as well as skilled and imaginative editing.

Using raw footage, Padmavathi and I worked together to make some excellent videos. Three songs from the audio cassette *Enga Paatu Kelunga!* were illustrated with appropriate visual scenes that brought

<sup>57</sup> A.S. Padmavathi, *Balwadi: Why? What? How? : Balwadi: Yaen? Eppadi? Etharkkagha?* (Chennai: MSSRF, 2002), video film in English and Tamil.

<sup>58</sup> A.S. Padmavathi, *Enga Paattu Kelunga!* [Listen to Our Songs] (Chennai: MSSRF, 2001), video film, Tamil only.



out the playway method. In the TECERS film, we actually 'visualised' the concepts.

**Christina**

### ***Survival of the Girl Child***



Developing communication materials for NGOs working on the survival of the girl child grew out of the experience of networking in the southern region, documented at length in a paper.<sup>59</sup> It was realised that the best way in which ACCESS could support the process was by skill building, especially in areas identified by the NGOs themselves as useful for their purposes. In fact, the editors of *Search Bulletin*, in which the paper was published, specifically commented that ACCESS could play a valuable role as a resource agency, thus confirming the perception and the decision that followed it.

Two workshops were conducted in 1998 and 1999, for different groups of NGOs: the first was on working with media and handling media relations, while the second was on skills for street theatre on these issues. The first involved not only interactions with media personnel, but practical exercises on dealing with media in different situations.<sup>60</sup> At the end of the workshop, a strong need was expressed for a manual or guidebook on the subject; and this led to the development of the handbook, *Media Uravugal*, by Jnani, not only a distinguished communicator and media figure himself, but also a resource person for the workshop.<sup>61</sup> The examples chosen were deliberately drawn from the issue of survival of the girl child, but the manual itself was of practical value for all NGOs working on any social issue, since it dealt with everyday problems in a practical manner. Since Jnani worked very closely with the Project over a number of years and was in close rapport with the team, the participatory process of critiquing was minimal, though there were several other delays before the manual was finally published. Needless to say, it was "sold out" in a manner of speaking, within weeks of its publication.

<sup>59</sup> Mina Swaminathan, A.Mangai, and A Raja Samuel, "Confronting Discrimination: Some Approaches to the Issue of Female Infanticide", *Search Bulletin* 13, no. 3, September 1998.

<sup>60</sup> MSSRF, *Report on the Media Workshop* (Chennai, 1998).

<sup>61</sup> Jnani, *Media Uravugal* [Media Relationships], (Chennai: MSSRF, 2000), Tamil only.

Probably ACCESS erred in keeping the print order so low, since it never had the funds later to reprint it, nor could sponsors be found.

The second workshop on skills in street theatre was again in response to the observation that many NGOs felt that street theatre was an important communication tool for advocacy, but skills to use it were lacking. In a six-day workshop in which two or three persons from each of seven agencies took part, participants were first exposed to, and given practice in, various theatre skills such as breath and voice control, movement and mime, music and rhythm, improvisation and story building, and then helped to prepare and perform short plays on the same theme; survival of the girl child. The entire exercise was recorded on video, and edited into two films, one on the *process*, including the various exercises on theatre skills, and the other on the *product*, the three plays produced during the workshop. This was felt to be useful for both training and advocacy purposes, and opened up a new direction—of using documentation itself as a road to advocacy.<sup>62</sup>



Since preparation of databases was part of the Project mandate, an information base in the form of a bibliographic abstract on available material in English and Tamil on the issue of the survival of the girl child in Tamil Nadu was taken up. Scanning the collections of major libraries, institutions, and individual scholars interested in the topic, including a collection of newspaper articles maintained at the Indian Council for Child Welfare, it was found that most of the materials were available in ACCESS's own collection. A bibliographic abstract of 43 materials in a fixed format was made with the help of a student volunteer and placed on a diskette, and a flyer describing its contents was also prepared and distributed. However, though a useful training and documentation exercise, this material has not been in much demand.

Bhuvana described the process of developing the information base.

Initially I was given the task of processing the print materials at Project ACCESS library. This included weeding out of hundreds of materials

<sup>62</sup> MSSRF, *Pen Kuzhanthaiyin Vazhum Urimai* [The Girl Child's Right to Live], a theatre workshop (Chennai, 1999), video film, Tamil Only.



received. I was asked to get the essential materials, do the abstracting and the categorisation. We had a student volunteer, Meera Balarajan, who helped with the database on the girl child. She compiled this in English, while I was trying to compile the Tamil information base. We had made a tour to the southern districts of Madurai, Theni, and Dindigul. We found some novels and reports on the subject.

Another communication material on this issue was a video spot making it clear that it is the chromosomes of the father which determine the sex of the child, which was added to the *Messages that Move* kit.

### ***Multiple Roles of Women***

The multiple roles that women play in their lives, which had been the flagship issue for advocacy during the COTA period, now receded somewhat from direct attention, becoming the taken-for-granted background and underlying unspoken assumption behind all discussions. Little direct work was done on this, partly because earlier products continued to be available for use, and partly because with the launch of a separate department on gender (the Uttara Devi Resource Centre in Gender and Development had been initiated as a department of MSSRF in 1997), a conscious decision was taken to focus on child-centred issues, though with a continuing gender focus, and leave the more obviously women's issues to the other unit.

The most outstanding product in the early period, that is, 1998, was the three-minute video, *Enna Pannikitturinde?*, which was shortlisted for an award at the National Documentary Film Festival for its elegant, wordless communication of the message.<sup>63</sup> The film, which highlighted both rural women's multiple roles and the universal invisibility of housework, was directed by Jnani and shot in a rural family, using no professional actors, and almost no words. Being practically silent, it communicates easily with all language speakers. Not counting the prolonged exposure of the earlier *Messages that Move* series on Doordarshan, it became, of the videos produced by ACCESS, the most widely used—in discussion groups ranging from

<sup>63</sup> Jnani, *Enna Pannikitturinde?* [What Were You Doing] (Chennai, 1998), video film in Tamil only.

students and women's organisations to international conferences and agricultural specialists. This was the last of the *Messages that Move* till the picturised songs.

Bhuvana took care of the preparatory and follow-up work when the video *Enna Pannikitturinde?* was sent to the Documentary Film Festival.



The preparatory work included filling in forms, making stills from the film, and dubbing the sub-titles and the minimal text into Hindi. I also made up a kit with all the *Messages that Move* spots for Jnani to use at the Festival. I was responsible for the publicity in the press when the video was screened at the Festival. Jnani appreciated my work. It was a fulfilling experience for me, and I learnt some new skills.

However, most of the work on this theme now shifted to the macro level and was done on behalf of other agencies, such as FORCES at the national and State levels, and was in the academic documentation mode. A series of policy papers were produced: the Maternity and Child Care Code for FORCES, (1998);<sup>64</sup> models for draft legislation on maternity entitlements, child care, and ECE, also for FORCES (2000);<sup>65</sup> discussion papers for the National Commission on Women, and later the National Commission on Labour, on maternity entitlements (2001);<sup>66</sup> and policy papers on maternity entitlements, child care, and training of child care workers for the Government of Tamil Nadu (2001), through TN-FORCES.<sup>67</sup> These were all back in the realm of advocacy, which was purportedly not

<sup>64</sup> Mina Swaminathan, "Maternity and Child Care Code" (paper prepared for the First Policy Committee Meeting, FORCES, April 1998, New Delhi: FORCES, 1998), mimeo.

<sup>65</sup> Mina Swaminathan, "Models for Draft Legislation for Maternity Entitlements, Child Care Services and Early Childhood Education" (paper prepared for Policy Committee Meeting, FORCES, May 2000), unpublished.

<sup>66</sup> Mina Swaminathan, "Maternity Entitlements" (discussion papers presented to the National Commission for Women, January 2000, and National Commission on Labour, March 2001), unpublished.

<sup>67</sup> Mina Swaminathan, "Maternity Entitlements, Child Care Services and Integrated Training of Child Care Workers" (paper prepared for Planning Commission, Government of Tamil Nadu, December 2001), unpublished.



the objective of ORS. Nevertheless, it continued, because it was the *raison d'être* for the parent body ACCESS, and was carried beyond the more limited aims of ORS through the networks of FORCES and TN-FORCES.

### **Reaching People's Representatives**

Special communication materials were needed to reach and involve the elected representatives of the people at all levels, to advocate with them directly on issues of women and young children as well as to press for decentralisation of child care services. Some had already been prepared earlier, during COTA, but this had been a limited effort, and the channels to reach the target group had not been clearly visualised. From the time the Convenorship of TN-FORCES moved from ACCESS to Loyola College, there was a firm understanding that ACCESS would function as the technical resource centre for the movement. Early in 1999, a request came from the Convenor for an advocacy document to brief MPs and MLAs on issues regarding women and children: a document that would provide an overview of existing laws, schemes, and policies, describe the situation on the ground, identify gaps, and make suggestions. The paper was to be distributed in the next session of the State Assembly. Following a brainstorming sitting, the issues were then identified, ranging from the pre-natal period to the first year at school, and focusing on lacunae in policies ranging from sex-selective abortion, maternity entitlements, adoption, child care centres, day care, and ECE. The document was brief, summarising the laws and schemes, and was copiously illustrated to make for attractive and easy reading.<sup>68</sup> This dimension was suggested by Murali, a specialist in political communication, and the document was prepared mostly by him. This was one of the rare products produced entirely in-house, since it proved difficult to find a writer/journalist who could do the job effectively in the time available. Another special feature was the four-page supplement or pull-out addressed to MLAs, suggesting both what they could take up in their

<sup>68</sup> Murali Shanmugavelan, ed., *Tamil Nattil Thai-Sey Urimai: Oru Paarvai* [Rights of Mother and Child in Tamil Nadu: An Overview] (Chennai: MSSRF, 1999), Tamil only.

own constituencies and what issues they could raise in the Assembly. In the event, the document proved to be interesting enough to be read by many MLAs, from whom feedback was received. Meetings were held with several of them, especially among the opposition parties, and questions were raised on these issues in the next session of the Assembly, and some also followed it up in their own constituencies. Encouraged by this response, a similar four-page supplement was prepared, this time addressed to panchayat leaders, again with tips on what they could do and how they could mobilise resources. By this time, the Department of Rural Development too found this document useful as an input into its own training for panchayat leaders and members, and UNICEF came forward to reprint 15,000 copies on an updated edition the following year, along with the supplement addressed to panchayat leaders. The dissemination has been wide, but unfortunately ACCESS could participate only in one or two of the orientation programmes for panchayat leaders, so it is difficult to say how well it has been used.



The next challenge was to alter the form once more to make the materials acceptable and useful to yet another set of people: those at the grassroots. Now the target groups were women members of panchayats, self-help groups, women's groups, and functionaries at the grassroots like health workers and anganwadi workers. It was hence decided to present the materials in the form of a manual. The same themes were taken up, but this time developed, again in highly pictorial form, with one page of information couched in a "Do You Know?" format and a facing page on suggestions for action in "What You Can Do" format.<sup>69</sup> Since Project ACCESS was formally closed and there were no more funds for publication, an innovative supporting strategy was devised. The manual has been printed and widely distributed by three different agencies, including TN-FORCES. Growing skills in communication techniques as well as the ability to ride on the strengths of networks and function convincingly as their technical resource centre have made this possible.

<sup>69</sup> A. S. Padmavathi and A. Christina, *Tamil Nattil Thai-Sey Urimai: Oru Kaiyedu* [Rights of Mother and Child in Tamil Nadu: A Handbook] (Chennai; MSSRF, 2001), Tamil only.



Yet, once again, SV expressed his disappointment that Project ACCESS had not helped enough with advocacy efforts.

We needed data on (i) indicators for ECCE and ECCD in Tamil Nadu; (ii) ECE Trainers; (iii) NGOs involved in ECCD; (iv) ECCD services available in Tamil Nadu. We had the government data. But we needed alternate data. We thought Project ACCESS could help in building a database. Somehow, this work was not taken up as much as we needed.

COTA continued as ORS. Approval by Bernard van Leer Foundation was based on the understanding that Project ACCESS will supply the necessary resource materials to TN-FORCES: an MOU to that effect was signed. Project ACCESS gave us only three materials in three years: (i) Mother and Child Rights for the orientation of panchayat members and MLAs (ii) A four-page resource material for self-help groups (iii) another leaflet for panchayati-raj leadership. These were useful materials for our work. The *Balwadi* video film was good too, but since we were given only one copy, it could not be widely used for advocacy.

Besides these, they gave us the study reports, 100 copies each. These may have been useful to research institutions. But they were not useful to our members. These research findings should have been converted into advocacy materials, which was not done. We had minimal staff and budget. It was not possible for us to do this job of preparing advocacy materials.

### ***Widening the Spread***

A new feature of ORS was uptake of materials by government and other agencies for mass dissemination that had not existed in the COTA period, when production and dissemination were undertaken entirely with Project funds, with its own limitations. Earlier, in the period 1992–95, Tamil versions of teachers' manuals developed by Mina Swaminathan (*The First Three Years* and *Play Activities for Young Children* respectively) had been mass produced and distributed by the Government of Tamil Nadu with financial aid from UNICEF, but these were not developed by the Project. As a variety of communication and resource materials were developed and their

utility gradually became apparent, this situation changed and towards the end of the ORS period, others came forward to reproduce and disseminate material on a large scale.

First, as already mentioned, UNICEF helped to get 15,000 copies of the overview *Thai-Sey Urimai* to panchayat leaders across the State. Next, UNICEF reproduced six resource materials for distribution to functionaries of child care services (TINP and ICDS at that time) These were



- *Aadippaadi* (print manual, 12,000 copies)
- *Annaikku Aadaravu* (print manual, 2000 copies)
- *Thayum Seyum* (audio cassette, 450 copies)
- *Can the Girl Child Survive?* (pamphlet, 1500 copies)
- *The First Three Years* (print manual, 1500 copies)
- *Messages that Move* (video cassette, 150 copies)

In both cases, very wide distribution was ensured, but in the absence of orientation and guidance, effectiveness of use cannot be assumed. Since, there has been no feedback on either, little is known about their use or effectiveness. In the case of the latest manual-*Tamil Nattil Thai-Sey Urimai: Oru Kaiyedu*-the situation is more hopeful, since the dissemination is being done by non-governmental agencies and some feedback is likely.

Though the reach of the materials could be discerned through the dissemination process, how far and how many people had read them and how many tried out anything is a question that is largely unanswered. However, an attempt was made to get one of the consultants to put down in writing how she had made use of the manual *Annaikku Aadaravu* to raise the consciousness of a group of women to the role of the family, the society, and the government in providing support to breast-feeding mothers.

### Rama

L. S. Saraswathi was the consultant who used the manual in a training programme for rural women and the field staff of a NGO working with them in Tamil Nadu. She was positive about its impact.





I found the manual *Annaikku Aadaravu* to be a powerful tool in changing the perceptions of the participants. They were clearly moved from their thinking that breastfeeding is the sole responsibility of women to that of feeling strongly that it is the joint responsibility of the family, the community, and the government. It was interesting that the group had women with babies that they were breastfeeding. The field workers asked for copies of the manual and took the message and the programme further to other villages.

Rama went on to say that

the focus of the Project was more on the process orientation and therefore no systematic documentation was done about the impact that it had had. At the end of the first two phases, a process documentation about the various activities was made. The issue of what impact it had was a question raised by both the donor and the staff alike, at least with respect to the materials produced.

This question of impact was interestingly raised only with respect to materials produced and not with other issues such as the role of the network, probably because in all the other issues the impact was visible to those involved.

Bhuvana brought alive the process of dissemination that was unique to ACCESS.

In my less than two years with ACCESS, I would have handled hundreds of information needs (letters, phone calls, requests in person, etc.). Different groups of people—NGOs, schools, researchers, activists, teachers, staff of other departments of MSSRF, and officials from all over India—used to ask for either specific publications of Project ACCESS or information on specific issues on child care in relation to women, child care services, and care and development of children under two years. There were some wanting to open crèches, others preparing articles and papers: all they needed was information and we had it most of the time. Whatever the issue chosen (female infanticide/foeticide, girl child, parenting, child development up to 3 years, pre-school, people's participation, quality of child care, burden on the preschool child, maternity benefits as part of breastfeeding) the general approach was deep research work on a small focus area, making sure to provide authentic data.

Demands were there even beyond Tamil Nadu. Many requests for the video spots *Enna Pannikittirunthe?* came from North India for dubbing into Hindi. It was such a small spot, but it made such a great impact. This was very special to ACCESS: very simple messages conveyed the import in a flash.



There were international requests. People sent cheques in dollars. Once I remember making a huge kit for UNICEF in Pakistan. Malaysia wanted materials produced on ECCE in print, video, and audio.

I have worked with other NGOs before I came to Project ACCESS. Nowhere have I seen someone acquiring the position of an "information giver" that I did here. People were confident we had resource materials in the form they needed and that it was reliable. The Project had the capacity of identifying the right people to do the work. Generation, presentation, and dissemination of information on issues of importance were ACCESS's strengths. It became important to set aside time for regular disbursement of materials, mass orders for printing, pricing publications, etc. There was a physical limit to what we could do in a week or in a month, given the intensive way we worked.

The last item to be produced before the Project formally closed at the end of 2000 was a comprehensive catalogue of all the communication, information, and resource materials produced by ACCESS over the ten-year period.<sup>70</sup> This was intended to be a guide to the stock of materials, most still available, and to provide for their continuing dissemination on request as well as for translation and future adaptation.

When I joined ACCESS, no one handed over charge of resource materials to me. I had to take the load, and organise the existing materials—print, audio, video, and photographs—both produced by the Project as well as received from outside. It took a lot of my time and energy to categorise and systematise them, and maintain the stock status. When I left, I made sure that there was a system to the whole thing, that the materials were physically brought together in one place, that everything—including information requests—was computerised.

**Bhuvana**

<sup>70</sup> MSSRF: *Resource Materials on Early Childhood Development: A Catalogue* (Chennai, 2001).

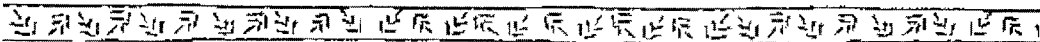


## Capacity Building at New Levels

One of the major outcomes of this concluding ORS phase of ACCESS was the development of an autonomous network of ECE trainers in Tamil Nadu, through a three-year process. Appreciation of the need for such a group itself grew out of the experiences of the COTA phase. At the end of COTA, when a dead end had been reached with training of government cadres, it had been decided to focus more, in the next phase, on capacity building in the NGO and private sectors, but at the lower end of the economic scale, on those working in the poorer sections of society. At the same time, the experience of the first self-financed Summer Refresher Course in 1997 had revealed, and confronted in a review meeting, the unpreparedness of the handful of trainers and training institutions, in terms of the dismal lack of skills, curriculum methodology, and personnel. Accordingly, capacity building was started with a workshop in January 1998 for trainers, and the process continued through six meetings spread over the next three years.

### ***Evolution of the Trainers' Network***

The first workshop was a six-day exercise in experiential methods and participatory training strategies to develop skills for the next summer course. Twenty institutions were canvassed, and 19 persons from 10 institutions attended: a mix of classroom teachers, teacher trainers, and university lecturers. The composition was both a blessing and a problem. The main gain was in self-confidence and personal



growth, skills in a wider variety of training strategies, and a coherent and orderly plan for the 1998 summer course. The second meeting in late 1998 reviewed the summer experience and carried forward the task of developing and practising skills, and began planning for a model of extended in-service training.



Usha Raghavan, Principal of ICCW's Training Centre, has been an active member of the ECCE trainers' network (one of the sub-groups of TN-FORCES) and is now its Convenor. She explained how the strategy of extended training came about.

With the experiences we had in the Summer Refresher Course, we started the extended course—the course extended throughout the year in a phased manner. The initial programme was for ten days in summer, then a week's programme at the end of every school term. The teachers practise what they have learnt and come back with their feedback. We conducted this course for three years, with 30 to 35 teachers attending each time.

The course was visualised as a series of blocks of training at the institutional level (10-15 days in the summer vacation and sessions of 1 to 3 days at regular intervals during the year) linked by practical fieldwork and assignments to be carried out by the trainees in their own centres. By this time, one institution was already in the midst of such a course, which was followed with close interest by the others.

The Summer Training Course and the Extended Training Course were tremendous successes. The idea became real in our institution. Our strength is training. We sent personnel to the trainers' training conducted by Project ACCESS. We have our own team of trainers continuously involved in in-service training for ECCE personnel at all the levels.

In our extended training programme, all the school personnel in almost all the play schools (both teachers and management) are trained for a month in batches of 30. Our trainers are involved in training the personnel in four districts— Coimbatore, Salem, Erode, and the Nilgiris. This extended course is highly successful as the teachers have opportunities to practise what is learnt in the training and bring back the problems and challenges. They are continuously guided for one





whole year. In the city of Coimbatore, 75 percent of the teachers of the pre-primary and primary classes (up to third standard) are trained by us. Schools sponsor the teachers. Managements also show interest. The schools have definitely improved the quality of the programme offered.

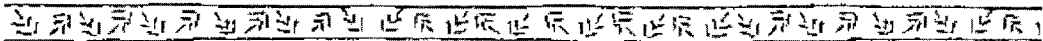
**S. S. Jayalakshmi**

Uma Shankari commended the extended in-service teacher training programmes.

The pattern of the extended in-service teacher training programmes was an innovative one and has been widely appreciated as very effective. IAPE, Neyveli, organised the extended training for us. The participants were from Neyveli, Cuddalore, Villupuram, Panruti, Thittakudi, and Poraiyar. A lot of awareness on ECCE has been created.

The trainers' network has benefited several teachers all over the State, especially in the private sector, where teachers have little scope for any sort of in-service training.

The third meeting, in early 1999, was a business meeting to draw up detailed plans and a common curriculum for the coming summer. By this time, some institutions had dropped out, but around 10 participants from about 7 or 8 institutions continued, though only three courses were run that summer. The fourth meeting, towards the end of 1999, helped the group to reach new levels of insight in two directions. The first was in the realisation of the weaknesses in field and practical work and the inability of trainees to put into practice what they had learned. This included an understanding of the meaning of supervision, methods and styles of supervision, and the need for supervised teaching practice, reinforced by exposure to concepts of "mentoring" and field supervision as applied in other countries. The second insight related to the importance of the external environment and the wider context of ECE training, the need for advocacy and demand creation with parents, community, school managements, and the government. At this meeting, the participants began to think in terms of a long-term perspective—of developing a variety of contextualised training courses based on their strengths—and the concept of an evolving and self-sustaining network was born then.



By the time of the fifth meeting in early 2000, directions had become much clearer. It was realised that it was necessary to work at two levels for wider advocacy, and action plans emerged to work with parents and managements on the one hand and with TN-FORCES on the other.

We were not involved in lobbying and campaigning earlier. We are doing so now. Lobbying with government is important for us, so that the importance of ECCE is recognised. Our trainees' salary was low and hence the demand for training was not there. When they have a job, they need to go by management pressures like completion of syllabus, and other demands.



We started developing our own communication materials—street plays, villupattu, and so on—for advocacy. We developed these with our trainees who were good at singing. We were able to create understanding in managements about ECCE programmes. There is a lot of awareness among the NGOs that such methodology is important in the best interests of the child. We have prepared a handbook, a trainers' manual. We plan to bring out a newsletter that can serve crèche workers and balwadi teachers. We have collected and documented a lot of case studies relevant to the field.

**Usha**

A common plan for the next course was also made (subsequently taken up in three centres), with emphasis on direct field supervision. This had to be built into the training package offered to managements right from the start, including financial aspects, to help managements appreciate the supervisory element. Continued peer sharing, the interaction of resource persons, and growth of mutual trust led to the emergence of mini-networks or regional clusters.

At present, about five of us are actively involved in the trainers' network. We are in constant touch with each other, sharing professional knowledge. We participate in the training programmes organised by the others, and a lot of sharing takes place. As my contribution, I would like to introduce some new members to the existing network. I would also like to be part of another TOT (training of trainers)





workshop, where promising participants from all our refresher courses could get training to be trainers. We could then continue to act as mentors for this group. We could also participate as a group in training programmes initiated by others.

**Uma Shankari**

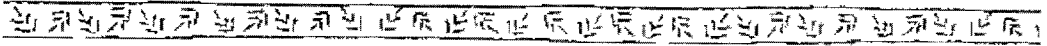


The last meeting at the end of 2000 was a review and evaluation exercise, and planning for the future of the network as well as continuing work. The review of experience of the three years led to an appreciation of

- the impact on demand creation of the new strategies and efforts related to advocacy
- the challenging and difficult tasks of working with managements
- the need to seek at least partial funding from external sources
- the emergence of three strong regional clusters at Chennai, Coimbatore, and Cuddalore
- the need to balance the conflicting dimensions of quantity and quality in the future

The evaluation of the network process itself was condensed from the responses of participants to a questionnaire. The self-perceptions of participants regarding their personal growth and fulfillment were categorised under five heads—skills learnt, awareness, problem solving, alternative approaches, and suggestions for the network. In short: Important skills like participatory methodology, experiential training, team work, flexibility, systematic approach, team teaching, and self-confidence were evolved; expanded awareness and understanding had developed about the impact of external circumstances and the role of government, media, parents, associations, etc.; problems and issues related to working with other agencies and need for more skills to tackle external circumstances were identified; innovative and alternative approaches to training were developed; several suggestions for strengthening and sustaining the network were made.





Prema Daniel acknowledged that the trainers' network has introduced her to the experiential learning in ECCE.

It has equipped me with methods and skills for training teachers, which has helped me to make the training programme I head more practical and purposeful. I have gained contacts with many persons and institutions and therefore have been able to conduct many workshops for teachers and orientations on ECCE.



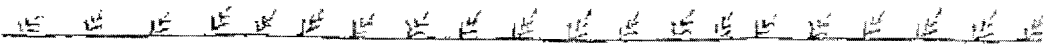
Usha explained at length the institutional growth through such processes.

We understood that the experience of the child is important for his/her learning and the experience of adults cannot become the experiences of children. We realised it is not only true of children, it is also true of trainees. We have introduced participatory learning methodologies in our training.

We are also planning training programmes as a team and evaluating them as a team. What we used to do earlier was to conduct the training and give a report. Now our evaluation practices have changed. We have a checklist prepared for the purpose. For every topic a lesson plan is made, objectives and outcomes are specified. We are able to assess how much we can take to the trainees. We are evaluating ourselves. We are also trying to introduce peer-trainer evaluation. There is some difficulty in implementing this. If we can implement this we will be able to identify many gaps.

After every training session, we take a break: we don't start the next training immediately. We examine ourselves. What have we learned from this training? What were the gaps we need to look into? In the next programme, we are able to rectify these, at least to some extent. Fortunately we also have a project visit to ICDS centres as one of our tasks. We can also see how much of the training is implemented at the field level. We examine the implementation and non-implementation and the reasons for the same and our own role in it. Where have we failed? This is an opportunity for us to evaluate ourselves continuously.

Of late, we have also prepared a format, which we send to NGO sponsors of the training programme, for them to assess the training and the







performance of the trainees at the field level. They are also asked to send us their feedback. Thus, we can look at our training from different angles.

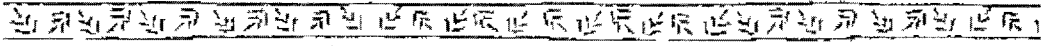
However, these were not the only gains: there were several others too. First was a growing sense of group identity. With greater self-confidence and experience, members began to regard each other as friends rather than rivals and their relationships became supportive instead of competitive. Group cohesion and solidarity emerged without threat to individual or institutional autonomy, and the group became strong enough to think of recruiting more members and strengthening itself through the same processes by which it had grown.

The network members were in close contact with each other. Whenever we needed help from other members and vice versa, we could give and take. We shared our expertise. We were also able to interact often with committee advisor, Mina Swaminathan, and also trainers in Children's Garden School and Kothari Academy. Whenever people from Neyveli or Coimbatore came to Chennai for some other work, they always came to visit us or we go and meet them. As we have good co-ordination and we speak the same language in the trainers' network, we shared a lot in FORCES and IAPE meetings.

We started acknowledging and recognising other trainers who were doing similar work in the field of ECCE. We came in contact with trainers outside the network.

**Usha**

Another important gain was in the methodology of training itself, in terms of content, process, and outcome, making the members *designers* of training rather than mere trainers. Starting from a simple 30-day refresher course, the curriculum became flexible, diverse, context-specific, and adjusted to target group, working to a concept of "custom-made" courses. Major innovations were the emphasis on supervised placement and the involvement of managements. Moving away from focusing only on classroom strategies, they included dealing with the external environment and advocacy with various stakeholders. In terms of their own professional growth too,



the trainers realised their own need for higher levels of skills in supervision, in advocacy, and in management. Free sharing of ideas and a welcoming attitude to feedback in turn led to professional growth in a positive spiral.

After joining the network, because we were motivated to search for knowledge, we started referring to many training methodology books. We asked our Council voluntarily to send us for training programmes outside: we participated as trainers and trainees. Since then we have attended several training programmes. We also started to go to NIPCCD once a year, as it is the apex body in training. We started participating in all the programmes of TN-FORCES and Project ACCESS. We participated in State and national level workshops.

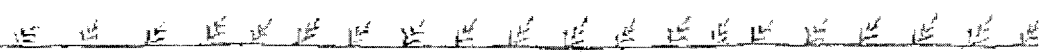


CAPACITY BUILDING AT NEW LEVELS

I have very positive feelings about Project ACCESS. It has been an experience of personal growth and professional growth. As a trainer, in ten years I have grown. Fifteen years ago I was not aware that there is scope for improvement, that there is need for improvement. With personal growth, there is institutional growth, which is seen in terms of recognition and demand for training from different organisations.

**Usha**

In sum, the network has had two solid achievements to its credit: first, the emergence of a small but committed team of peer professionals, loosely linked in three regional clusters, and dedicated to participatory and experiential methods of learning and professional growth through shared experience. The second was the formulation, through trial and error, of a model of extended internship training for teachers in service without formal qualifications—the largest majority in ECE. The courses themselves were innovative, with a sound practical foundation. With several run every year, feedback has indicated that there have been concrete changes at the classroom level, and awareness and demand for further development from managements—all signs of awakening. Institutions who were earlier reluctant to pay for training are now willing and eager to do so. There are increasing requests for training and resource materials from schools, NGOs, other geographical areas, other States, etc., which the network is unable to meet. Small support groups of



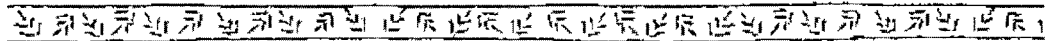


committed individuals and institutions have emerged in some areas and new members have joined the network.

We understood that we are proceeding in the right direction when others started recognising our services and invited us to introduce the activity-based curriculum in their own institutions. Several managements asked us for training programmes for their teachers. Last year one management sent all their 15 nursery school teachers to us for training. In the districts, we are working in close collaboration with the government, which has recognised our activity-based curriculum and training at the primary level. We have trained teachers in panchayat schools at first, second, and third standard levels.

**Usha**

But, that is not all. The network continues to exist, against odds. At the concluding meeting in October 2000, it was decided to go on as an autonomous and self-sustaining network under the umbrella of TN-FORCES, and one of the members volunteered to be the Coordinator. The members met to draw up proposals for funding of training courses and have been exploring various possibilities for financial help. Meanwhile, different kinds of training have been going on in the three regional clusters. In Chennai, in the regular courses it conducts for ICDS supervisors and in other courses for other groups, ICCW has been steadfastly working to introduce these concepts, approaches, and strategies, and to emphasis quality, its meaning, measurement, and steps to achieve it. The Coimbatore group has been continuing with the self-financed pattern, which its clientele seems to be able to afford, but now drawing both trainees and resource persons from a wider geographical region. In Cuddalore, again the geographical spread has increased, and the courses have led to a widening of the IAPE network, culminating in a regional Conference to orient school managements, teachers, parents, and authorities to the need for change in ECE. Some of the network members have also been able to conduct small short courses for individual schools or groups of schools, and these efforts are notable chiefly as examples of ongoing collaboration and networking. A new and continuing dimension is the emphasis on quality of ECE and steps to attain it. In all of these ACCESS has been involved as a



resource agency, though now in a low-key and supportive role: a friend, guide, and mentor. Progress is small and slow but visible, and offers scope for optimism.

Rama has put it all in perspective.

Today the training network has reached a stage where the group members are functioning on their own. When asked, after eight years, what they felt about it, they were for continuing the training network. They admitted that initially the training was to their own benefit, but now they are able to see it in a larger perspective and they are able to see how to take it forward. The Pondicherry Government has approached TN-FORCES to work out the curriculum and training requirements for the lower and upper kindergarten classes to be introduced in government schools. TN-FORCES was recognised as an activist body earlier. Now it is seen as a professional body, giving support. The people who have brought this about are the members of the training network.



Mina Swaminathan has been quite strong in training. She has a vision. All the trainers who have now become part of the strong network of trainers were working in a limited way. They have started widening their scope with their experiences as members of the network. I think what is ultimately sustainable is this human input. Because that is what carries it forward. The inspiration that is drawn from an individual or a group of individuals is ultimately what is sustainable. That has happened in the trainers' network. We say that genes never die, because your genes get transferred to another generation. If you are able to leave behind human resources that are self-sustaining, that is what matters in the end. It is not enough to have dreams. It is not enough to have vision. It is important to have the energy to make the effort to carry on the work in the future.

***Getting to a Marginalised Group***

Capacity building has also been undertaken in other directions. Early in 1999, an NGO running a foundling home for abandoned children (who were looked after there till placed for adoption, usually by the age of twelve or fifteen months) made a request for a training





programme for its child care workers handling infants. It had been noticed by the management that, though all the children were physically healthy and well nourished, some of them failed to attain the appropriate developmental milestones. The objective of the training was to enable the workers to offer more stimulating developmental care to the infants.

This was a challenging assignment since the workers, many of whom had long service and were seen to be both deeply devoted and efficient, were mostly barely literate and were considered as “menials”. Hence a conventional or formal training may not have been appropriate. The first step was to put together a multi-disciplinary team of resource persons to design and implement a suitable programme. The team included specialists in child development, paediatrics, nutrition, and process training as well as teachers and crèche supervisors. A needs assessment was made by some of the resource persons through direct observations of the daily routine, child care practices, and adult-child interactions in the home. Interestingly, it was observed that most of the workers were cheerful, dedicated, and competent in very difficult working conditions, and that most of them routinely responded more than appropriately to children’s needs, though without being able to articulate why they did so. They were aware of a different range of behaviours but had never been asked to use them. This observation and study period led to the development of a 20-session course of weekly workshops, using games, songs, visual and aural aids, craft, field trips, and group discussions as training strategies. The course was conducted and evaluated by the same resource persons, all of whom found it a valuable learning and professional experience.

In the training programme, ‘Strengthening Infant Caregivers’, for the staff of Karna Prayag, I played a major role in coordinating around 16 sessions wherein the needs of the caregivers and the children under one year were addressed. I also facilitated one of the sessions, which was a great boost to my confidence. I prepared a kit for the training, which helped me to develop skills in this regard.

**Lakshmi Priya**

But, it was realised that training alone would be insufficient to bring about the desired behavioural changes in the workers, and



that the management needed to concurrently address work schedules, personnel policies, working conditions, and management procedures to enable the training to be effective. The NGO concerned did not feel able at that stage to tackle these issues, and the interaction stopped at that point, in spite of some attempts by ACCESS to maintain contact.



L. S. Saraswathi had occasion later to meet some of those who had undergone the training.

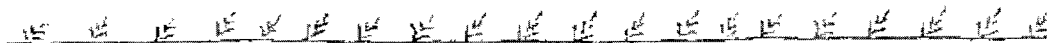
I was one of the resource persons for the training of infant caregivers. I felt that it was a well-planned and implemented programme based on the needs of the caregivers. Recently (in December 2002), I met some of the caregivers. They were happy to recall the course and maintained that they were doing their best to put into practice what they had learnt during the training.

In addition, the course, which was documented in detail, also drew attention to the existence of workers in such homes as an important and neglected, almost invisible, category of caregivers with their own needs for training, guidance, and support.<sup>71</sup> It was hoped that this course would create interest among other adoption centres, orphanages, and foundling homes in training for their workers, and that a module could be developed for this purpose. Here again, there seemed to be insufficient appreciation of this need among the network of such centres, struggling with their own financial and management problems, while neither ACCESS nor TN-FORCES had interacted enough with this group to succeed in making a dent on the issue of training. The course, therefore, remained a "one-off" activity, mostly of value for its contribution to the methodology of working with illiterate and semi-literate groups.

### ***Strengthening Local Governance***

Another significant area for capacity building was in local governance, with leaders and members of panchayats, especially the women among them. At one level, this was attempted through the dissemination of advocacy materials, already mentioned. But

<sup>71</sup> MSSRF, *Strengthening Infant Care Givers* (report on the extended training sessions for the staff of Karna Prayag, Chennai, 1999).

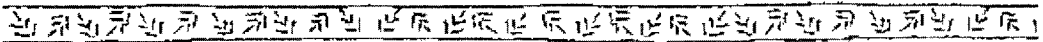




there was also the level of direct intervention, briefly referred to in the earlier section on action-research.

The intervention related to decentralisation of child care services to the panchayat level has already been mentioned both in the context of action-research and in that of documentation. However, another important aspect of this activity was that of capacity building. The action-research itself, a joint activity of ACCESS and the Gandhigram Trust, was begun with the objective of orienting, motivating, and supporting panchayat leaders to improve the quality of child care services. It was an open-ended and exploratory study, with no fixed plan of action, and an approach evolving from regular review and strategising. Gandhigram Trust, which agreed to be the partner, was selected because of its long experience and record of working in the area and its ability to provide the required field support for facilitation, organisation, and monitoring. Fourteen panchayats in Athoor block were chosen for the intervention because of their close links with the Gandhigram Trust. In a preliminary workshop in March 1999 for panchayat leaders and women ward members, the importance of early childhood was emphasised, available services reviewed, lacunae identified, and an action plan drawn up. Over the next few months, monitoring visits revealed that, while infrastructure had been improved to some extent, very little had been done with regard to the improvement of quality of services, as this required recurring expenditure for which there was no direct allotment, nor had community participation been sought. In the absence of either direct funding or specific directives from government, the leaders could not perceive their role in improving the services.

A second workshop was held in December 1999. Now the aim was to provide them with information about their powers and functions and on methods of accessing funds and mobilising financial resources, to establish direct links with the TINP officials for the purpose of community mobilisation, and to bring the issue to the Gram Sabha. Interestingly, though the leaders were mandated to raise issues of general concern in the Gram Sabha, they felt constrained to draw up a petition to the Collector to include child care services on the agenda of the Gram Sabha. The petition was



duly sent, but no response was received. At this stage, video documentation of the views of the panchayat leaders and their difficulties and problems was undertaken by ACCESS as a tool for advocacy. Continued observation over the following months showed that there was little progress in any direction. The issue was not raised at any Gram Sabha meeting and neither party—the elected leaders or the officials—initiated any step to work together. It was clear that decentralisation of services as such was not a realisable goal unless the involvement of elected bodies was made mandatory by government and specific funds provided for the purpose, as has been done in Kerala.

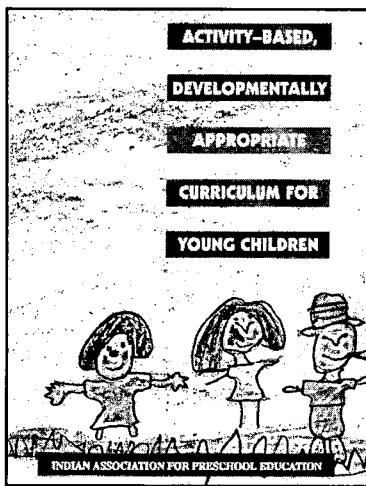
At the end of the year, the partners decided on a two-pronged strategy for the future: at the policy level, to continue to advocate for decentralisation and, at the grassroots level, to motivate people's groups, such as youth groups, SHGs, women's groups, and others. The aim was to raise the issue at Gram Sabha meetings and to foster links between the elected bodies and TINP. The second strategy would be followed only by Gandhigram Trust, since they were working at the grassroots, while the first one would continue as the joint agenda of TN-FORCES and all its constituent members. The entire process was documented as an action-research study, which also would be useful for the movement as a whole to guide future efforts. Interestingly, there were on several occasions during this entire exercise divergences between the partners on the approach and strategy, a constant almost occupational hazard in any joint project. These were sorted out by regular and frank discussions between the partners, following the periodic strategic review that had by now become second nature at ACCESS, and the functions of the two partners were clearly spelt out.

Dr. Pankajam of Gandhigram talked of the positive outcomes of the partnership.

In training and action-research efforts, we benefited mutually. Our ECCE training was strengthened. Our efforts in decentralising child care services were jointly taken up. Action-research helped us to identify the needs of the panchayat leaders and ward members.







## Links with Others

After shedding the TN-FORCES Convenor responsibility and role, ACCESS began to work more directly with individual network members. One example is the development and publication of a child-centred activity-based developmentally-appropriate curriculum for young children (3–6 years) in partnership with IAPE, with which Mina Swaminathan has had a life-long association in various capacities. The process was facilitated by ACCESS, bringing together various ECD professionals in Tamil Nadu, evolving a common approach and philosophy, then sharing out tasks, and finally compiling and editing the volume, which was published in both English and Tamil. ACCESS also made a considerable input, not only into the process, but also into the content of the curriculum. This document, which has been widely circulated both nationally and in Tamil Nadu, has proved to be a potent tool for both advocacy and training, and has been heavily drawn upon—though not always acknowledged—by government agencies concerned with ECE.

### ***With Old Friends***

Again, while formally concentrating on being a resource support agency as ORS and withdrawing from direct advocacy, ACCESS continued to play a role in advocacy as a member of FORCES, TN-FORCES, and other networks.



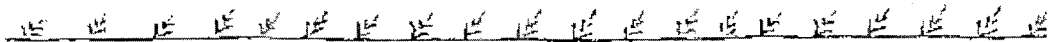
By 1998, FORCES at the national level had once more become an active, committed, and powerful advocacy group, working in a participatory and democratic mode, which made it possible for ACCESS to work closely with it. During this period, ACCESS made major contributions to FORCES on three or four major issues: developing policies and schemes for maternity entitlements and advocating for them to the National Commission for Women and the National Commission on Labour; participating actively in the national crusade to include the under-sixes in the Right to Education, culminating in the orchestration of the campaign against the infamous 93<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Bill (passed in November 2001 withdrawing this right); advocacy for quality in ECE at all levels and in all sectors and acceptance of this as a policy goal by FORCES' planning the study of the impact of decentralisation of child care services in Kerala. These contributions were in the form of preparing policy papers, writing briefs, media hand-outs, and newspaper articles, participating in meetings and workshops, addressing press conferences, disseminating materials, conducting orientations and advocacy meetings as well participation in FORCES, events and in designing the Kerala research study. Similar active participation as well as resource support was characteristic of ACCESS role as a founding member of TN-FORCES. Gradually, and not without some misunderstandings in the first year or so, a new relationship was forged with TN-FORCES, based on mutual trust, sharing of tasks, and clarity about divergent but supportive roles.



LINKS WITH OTHERS

Jayanthi saw some lacunae in the working of national FORCES even later (in 2002) with regard to ECE, and offered a very perceptive suggestion.

At the national scenario, the efforts are sporadic in the sense that the ECE endeavours of only Delhi, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Orissa are included in the lobbying efforts. Though other States are members as per the report of FORCES, they are not active. The northeastern perspective is not there in any of the ECE lobbying, which I see as a gap. The churches are very active in the northeast. They should be roped in. With the change in the convenorship to YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association), FORCES could get support from





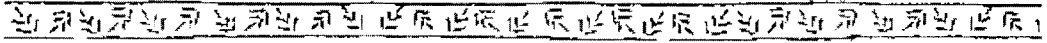
church-based organisations. One thing the churches do not have is the advocacy perspective. They are still charity-based. There should be a shift. There are a number of preschools run by a variety of church denomination organisations and donors such as Dan Church Aid, Christian Aid, etc. National FORCES has not roped in the services of these donors. In a global campaign against child servitude, wider participation of all stakeholders should be there. FORCES needs wider networking and everyone who is doing ECE should become part of FORCES in the long run.

A close connection was built up during these three years with the Campaign Against Sex-Selective Abortion (CASSA), which came into formal existence in late 1998. Here again the role of ACCESS was as technical support, collating and compiling research information as well as participating in meetings, workshops, protests and rallies, preparing petitions and memorandums, and working on amendments to the Prenatal Diagnostic Tests Act and offering support to legal activism in different ways.

Jayanthi made special mention of CASSA and saw it as a continuation of Project ACCESS's work.

Sam had initiated some activities in the TN-FORCES network on the protection of the girl child. We had some negative experiences with that networking and our plans to strengthen it proved futile. Only a fact sheet was prepared on the girl child (that was my first assignment in ACCESS) and it was circulated widely. There was a growing awareness. Many people picked up the issue from the fact sheet and looked deeply into the problem of female foeticide. UNICEF initiated wider circulation of the Tamil version of the fact sheet within Tamil Nadu.

As far as CASSA was concerned, activists picked up the issue and are really keeping it alive till this day. CASSA is very strong, with Phavalam, Gandhimathi, Ossie Fernandes, and Sabu George playing the activist role. UNICEF has taken up the agenda. At the national level they have convened a religious leaders' meeting. We too are trying to do advocacy at the Bishop's level. Some of us are really working on the issue. CASSA's taking off as a positive trend.



Rama, however, felt that getting involved with CASSA was at the expense of ORS.

Besides what needed to be done in the ORS phase according to the plan, several pieces of extra work (which were heavy) were also taken up. One example is the participation in the activities of the CASSA network, taking up a study on sex ratio at birth as an indicator of female foeticide. The ORS phase should have perhaps stayed at a different level.



***With the Parent Institution***

The M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, of which ACCESS was a part, was from its inception designed as a science-led development institution "without walls", that is, an institution that relied on partnerships for its vitality and effectiveness. ACCESS exemplified this totally in its networking capabilities.

Jayanthi was emphatic that ACCESS came into existence conceptually before MSSRF was founded.

The history of Project ACCESS should necessarily include the period prior to 1991. Much before the Foundation started, Mina Swaminathan was very active in the ECE field in India as well as abroad. I think her rich experience, the organisations with which she worked, her contributions to ECE, her vision and her style of functioning, her skills, her alliances, all these were pooled together when MSSRF was started. All these helped a few individuals to shape ACCESS. I see it as an evolution. I see Project ACCESS as a consolidation of happenings in the field of ECE in India and her pioneering experiences in ECE.

Right at the beginning, during the first phase of ACCESS, Shanbagavalli expressed her doubts about the combination of activism and academics.

Project ACCESS was in MSSRF, which was working mainly in the field of agriculture. I used to wonder how ACCESS fits into MSSRF. The academics in the Foundation were not able to comprehend the grassroots work we were doing. We were not able to get a feel of how they understood us. We were there by ourselves. The scientists were





from upper and upper middle class background. They had little understanding of suffering. The concepts of poverty and poor were not that much reflected upon.

While Jayanthi had similar feelings, she clearly saw the advantages of the links with MSSRF and talked about it in detail.

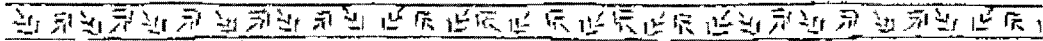
Though MSSRF had a common management system, Project ACCESS was different in its working. People with science background had different experiences and exposures and, therefore, their management practices were different. Social scientists like us had a separate system, which was interactive and good. I do think, however, that MSSRF contributed a lot in terms of harnessing technology towards addressing social content.

MSSRF had already evolved management systems—right from infrastructure management to HRD, especially personnel policies. I did not find this in any of my earlier NGO jobs. The administrative rules and regulations did not come in the way of our work. They were pretty good and they were made even more flexible within Project ACCESS.

It was easy for us in ACCESS because all the facilities were there in MSSRF, we did not have to run around. For example, if I had to use the video, I just had to go get the room ready and view the film. We had access to Internet facilities, we were informally taught to utilise the Internet. The Informatics people were really helpful, especially for the research component. They also taught us the different IT skills.

An important feature of Project ACCESS was bringing in experts. Due to its well-planned personnel policies, MSSRF was paying a pretty decent amount, compared to other NGOs, in bringing all these experts. That was a plus point. The attitude was: "We recognise your professional expertise and we pay accordingly." That attracted a lot of consultants to MSSRF. Also, within the Foundation, there were persons whom you could 'draw in' for research. There were people in other projects within MSSRF who not only gave their expertise but also guided me to go to the right persons in the right places.

MSSRF was a role model in the promotion of withdrawal strategies,



that is, transferring the mission to network partners, with active follow-up. In NGO circles, they may say that they will withdraw but they don't. If one funder wants to quit, the NGOs will seek help from some other funder. I used to think there can never be withdrawal. Here, in MSSRF, withdrawal is in-built into the projects. In Project ACCESS, the withdrawal was based on the trust that we have contributed a lot to the ECE field and others will take over, especially TN-FORCES. It was not because of the lack of funding, as the Bernard van Leer Foundation was prepared to extend the Project funding. We could have worked in the Gender Centre too and addressed the concerns of ECE.



It was not just Project Access that gained from being located within MSSRF: there were advantages for MSSRF too. To begin with, the activities over a ten-year period brought both national and international stature and recognition to MSSRF. And Project ACCESS demonstrated modes of networking and partnering as well as developed a process methodology for democratic and participatory functioning. However, this did not have as much impact internally as it could have, mainly because it was never taken up seriously as an objective, the gaze always being firmly fixed outwards.





## Once More, the Human Element

The human component, as ever, was an important part of the successes and failures, but in this phase, the tone and quality of relationships was different; so was the mode of working, its impact on the staff, and the contributions it demanded of them. The last three years, the ORS years, were less exploratory and open-ended, more systematic, planned, deliberate, and target-oriented. This was inevitable to some extent, because, at the end of the Project period, it became clear what the “unfinished” jobs were, and these needed to get done within the time frame. There was little scope now for exploring byways. The Project now progressed (mostly) with the disciplined grandeur of an army on the march rather than the trial and error searches of explorers seeking the best path up the mountain, also reflecting the style and personality of the new Project Coordinator.

This was a smaller as well as a rawer and less experienced team. At the beginning of 1998, only two persons were left from COTA (Sam and Murali) and recruitment started for new staff. In about a year’s time, both of them had left, for reasons of professional advancement, and Rama, who had withdrawn, planning to devote herself full-time to the pursuit of a Ph.D degree, returned as Project Coordinator.

At the time when Sam left, when he suggested I take over, I thought to myself whether I should do it. I really felt that I deeply

owed something to Mrs. Swaminathan, that I have learned so much from her. I took it that it is something I should give like *gurudakshina*. It was *shramdan* at the time when it was needed. I decided the best is to step in and do it. When you assume responsibility, larger institutional responsibilities keep coming at that level. I realised the demand it was going to make on me. That was a conscious choice. I also gained a lot from that. I am not regretting it.



### Rama

Five staff members, four of them new recruits to the work force, joined during 1998 and early 1999. Of these three had degrees in Social Work (only one of them had over ten years of work experience), one in Child Development, and the fifth was a journalist who had briefly worked with COTA. Besides being young and inexperienced in general, once more all were quite new to the strange kind of work they met here, far from their expectations. They were awed by it, and by the challenges of the broad sweep of the content, the abstract nature of the tasks, the dealings with much older and experienced specialists, and the demands all these made on them. While the participatory and democratic mode of functioning continued with regard to planning, implementing, reporting, and monitoring of individual tasks as well as for group review and critiquing of progress, this in itself proved taxing for the new young staff members. Again, the wide gaps in age and experience between the older and younger members of the team often revealed themselves in frustration, tension, and eruptions caused by misunderstandings. Despite all this, however, each grew visibly in professional terms and in self-confidence, each made a special and different contribution, and each on leaving the nest soared to much greater heights. For example, Jayanthi, an introspective and hard-working intellectual but often found wanting in interpersonal relationships, quietly completed three research studies in daunting circumstances, each in a subject not familiar to her earlier.

Jayanthi said that before she came to ACCESS she had only had some practical understanding of children's needs in the projects she had worked in.

But, we were not given the theoretical understanding of the developmental stages of children, the different domains of





development, etc. This theoretical understanding I gained in Project ACCESS that gave me new insights into understanding children and their learning. Working in ACCESS, I was exposed to quantitative research methods and realised the importance of such data in policy decisions. My skills in web research, database management, writing, presentation, analysis, public relations, event management, were all enhanced.

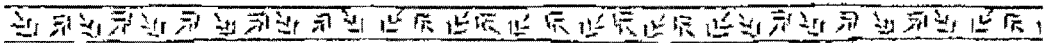
Christina blossomed into a versatile and flexible organiser, capable of turning her hand to things as diverse as action-research and filmmaking; while Vijaya, with her skills in communication and background in Tamil writing, played an effective role in developing all the communication materials and products. Project ACCESS facilitated the individuals on its staff to develop research skills and bring out at least one publication each.

Christina maintained that her entire experience in ECCE for two and a half years was totally new.

It was a wonderful and rich experience, like an intensive course. When I entered MSSRF, my thinking on ECCE was like that of a lay person: when a child is born, the child can grow on his/her own. What is so great about it? Here I came to know that there is so much to early childhood. I was really surprised that so much stimulation is required; even holding the child is important; the way the child is fed is important. Now I feel quite rooted in ECCE.

I had never done videos. In Project ACCESS I had excellent experience in technical details of all sorts—going to the field, identifying locations, script writing, production management, converting simple data to a compact disc; printing, editing, designing layouts for different kinds of publications; what is brochure writing, how to make your writing appealing—all these were systematically taught to me in Project ACCESS.

The two youngest—Lakshmi Priya and Bhuvanewari—had to be given more limited roles, one in training and the other in documentation, and grappled bravely with them, learning useful lessons for the future.



I have just listed down the skills I acquired: Public relations skills in interacting with visitors and within the Foundation; developing and establishing contacts— within a short span of time, I came to know a lot of people; organising materials, organising meetings, and programmes; making all efforts to get things done; translation skills— I did lot of translations from English to Tamil and Tamil to English, this was my major contribution; conceptual understanding and perspective gained; courage to face any rigorous environment (I mean it in a positive sense).



### Bhuvana

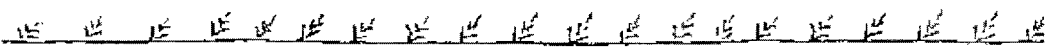
Bhuvana also spoke about the confidence and credibility engendered by the genuine commitment and hard work.

It was possible to look at the visitors from abroad on par: “We are no less than you, we can discuss with you, critique with you, find fault with you.” The status is that of a partner. In other NGOs where I worked, any visitor from abroad was received with some fear and the actions were out to please the visitor.

Rama, not only a mature person with formidable skills, also had the advantage of having been with the Project in one capacity or another right from the beginning and knowing its history, background, strengths, and weaknesses. A person of strong views and clear concepts, with no hesitation in speaking her mind, qualities that often led to clashes but most of which were productive and enriching, hers was the firm guiding hand that finally brought the ship safely to harbour.

She reflected on the ways she has grown in her capabilities.

To co-ordinate a lot of people and to be able to take decisions in such a manner that it would not hurt anybody and at the same time it would be fair and just: there were a lot of problems like this. I don't know whether I completely succeeded or failed. I could sharpen my skills in interacting with people when I was in a position of equality. When I was given the position of authority, I had to balance more. At times, authority had to be used. I learnt to use it in a constructive manner. Sometimes you gently have to remind somebody you do have





some authority to do certain things, only then day-to-day problems will get solved. For example, locating information became difficult, as it was not kept in a classified or organised manner. Given the nature of the Project in the second phase, we needed everything classified, organised. It was difficult to convince my colleagues about it. It took nearly two years before people could see its worth. May be I could have sorted it out in one or two months if I had used my authority. But, that would not have reached me anywhere. I knew I had to give them the time because somebody gave me the time at some point—the time to experiment, make mistakes, understand and learn from my mistakes. This way the work was getting done. The result is that we left behind something tremendous, something beautiful that was really worth a lot.

It was not all positive feelings, however. With the poor health of the Project Director and the working methods of the Project Coordinator, human relationships, in this last phase of ACCESS, were not as good as in the earlier periods.

The atmosphere of work in Project ACCESS was conducive for the Associates during the COTA phase. But it was not so during the ORS phase. Earlier, the Coordinator treated us as equals, whereas later during ORS there was a big gap between the Coordinator and Associates. This caused problems for us Associates. The focus was more on extracting work from us rather than allowing us to do what we considered important and useful for the Project.

**Vijaya**

Bhuvana felt that the staff members did not get enough positive help to bring out the best in them.

Time should have been spent on building people up. Human beings involved in the process are more precious. There was panic for petty things. Time cannot be wasted in too much attention to nitty-gritties of logistics. Not all the staff could express themselves well in all the areas at all times. At times it appeared that there were some assumptions on the capability of particular individuals and hence the treatment of the staff was based on such assumptions and was judgmental.



Jayanthi was unhappy that the transparency in the work, the hallmark of ACCESS, had diminished over the years.

Compared to other projects in MSSRF, where there were no continuous monitoring meetings and review meetings, Project ACCESS had a lot of transparency in its work. In the regular meetings we had, we were informed about the decisions taken in committee meetings; the project proposal, including the budget, was shared with us. But, I must mention that in ORS there was a decreasing transparent relationship. We did not have permission to attend programmes organised by other Associates. We were not given the space for interactive learning. We had meetings mostly to report our own work.



ONCE MORE, THE HUMAN ELEMENT

She felt that the preferential treatment given to some personnel was not favourable for good staff morale.

There was a clear specification in the project proposal that all staff members would be full-timers. When a consultant became the Coordinator, she should have worked full time. But her timings continued as before. This was not beneficial to Project ACCESS as she was not always available to contribute to the needs of the staff.

Opinions and perceptions differed too, especially on the relationship between the Director and the staff members. While Vijaya felt that the relationship between the Director and Associates was one of teacher-student relationship in the sense it was more hierarchical than democratic,

Rama had a totally dissimilar viewpoint.

It never mattered to the Director from which quarter the information came so long as it was relevant. Giving her own work to the junior-most person to read to see whether it was okay was really nice. She made everybody feel equally important. Hard work was always recognised. For example, she felt Jayanthi's temperament was a bit damaging for the whole group. But whatever the problem, there was no question in her mind as to who should go to London with her as Jayanthi was the one who had done the work. It was a very fair treatment.





Mina Swaminathan's personality and influence over ACCESS, indeed the entire field of ECE, was commanding. SV described her as

a powerful character, we can say that she is an indomitable figure. Her presence is a great strength. It is a powerful force. Her focus on the issue is total. Even if you ask her in the middle of the night over the phone, she can talk about the issue in depth.

Bhuvana was most impressed by her ability and commitment.

The ability to see the cycle, the ripple effect, one work leading to the other, that kind of commitment was there. The major triggering force, the hand behind, the mind behind that one person who made the difference was a great influence on me professionally. At that age, that she could read a 50-page report in one night and bring it back the next day with such sincere, dedicated comments was really amazing for someone like me. All these made a great impact on me.

But it was not all bouquets for the Director. There were brickbats too, some light, others heavy.

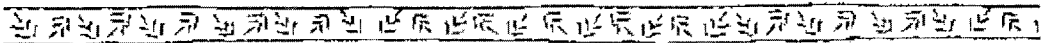
A lot of MS's good work was undone by her temper. Though this quality of hers may be insignificant when compared to the world of good qualities and skills she has, it did to a large extent contribute to stonewalling in some places and with some stakeholders. When she sometimes went overboard because of her passionate attachment to the issue, I used my sense of balance to moderate her views. I often acted as a sort of buffer between her and the others—including Project staff.

**Sam**

Mina Swaminathan's inter-personal relationships are very poor. Her expectations are very high and hence she can come out with unpalatable comments on ECE efforts of others. She has good intentions, which some people could understand and were benefited from. But all could not. This affected TN-FORCES as some of the members who were known in the field left the network. Some were very hurt with her caustic remarks. She is dominating in meetings. She speaks a lot, giving little opportunity for others.

**SV**

Yet, there was another perception.



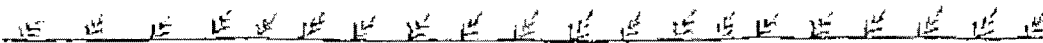
Many times in TN-FORCES meetings, I have noticed that Ms. Mina Swaminathan felt that her personality was a little aggressive or threatening. She stayed away deliberately from meetings so that people could discuss freely. She felt that it was more important they worked out their own ideas rather than just implementing her views. I noticed this several times. That is what ultimately sustained the movement.

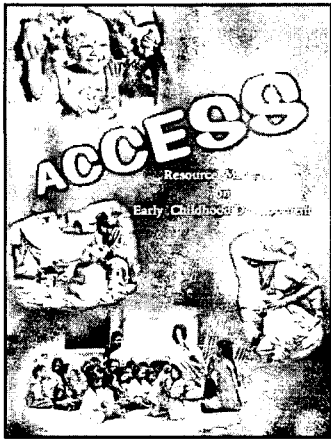


### Rama

The major achievements of this period, then, were the solid output of well-planned research studies with significant findings, providing a base for future advocacy; the trainers' network and the varied efforts to spread ECE training; the strength of the communication materials and their wide dissemination; building a new relationship with TN-FORCES by "letting go" of it; and the spin-offs from positive involvements with new groups. As in earlier periods, the personal and professional growth and development of the human beings in the Project was a matter for deep satisfaction.

However, there were several unfinished agendas, notably the inability to follow through on the study of cultural forms relating to infancy and bring it to its culmination in the form of innovative and culturally relevant products. Similarly, the two other studies completed in the closing months—the cost study and the maternal care study—could not be vigorously used in advocacy campaigns as previous ones had been. And the joys of human development were clouded by tensions, strains, and communication gaps not witnessed in the earlier phases of the Project. At times, it seemed that instead of the wisdom of age harnessing the energy of youth, the dreams of old age ran ahead of the limitations of youth.



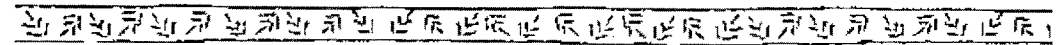


## Looking Back and Looking Forward

In 2000, the decision was taken to close Project ACCESS and it was gradually wound down by the end of the following year. However, a minimal ECD Information Centre is still being maintained and materials are being disseminated on demand by a skeleton staff, under the management of the MSSRF Library, while Mina Swaminathan continues to be actively involved as a resource person in ECD.

The reasons for the decision to close down go right back to the origins of the Project. From the beginning, ACCESS was conceived of as a mission- and goal-oriented project, and not as a department or permanent programme of an institution, the assumption being that it could come to an end when it was no longer felt to be relevant or needed. In fact, in constant recognition of its temporary status, it continued to be referred to as 'Project' ACCESS throughout.

In a little over ten years, there have been major achievements in the four domains of advocacy, research, capacity building, and development of resource materials related to Early Child Development, through networking and participatory methodologies. From the very beginning, sustainability was a prime concern but the goals and emphasis were not so much on institutional sustainability as on programmatic sustainability. The aim was to build up strong and committed external networks of concerned stakeholders to carry the work forward. These networks and institutions were consciously



initiated, supported, nurtured, and strengthened during the Project period, to allow for its eventual withdrawal.

The significant outcomes of the ten-year period are:

- FORCES (Forum for Crèche and Child Care Services) at both national and State (Tamil Nadu) levels, now leading in the advocacy and policy lobbying field in ECD, following a smooth transition of leadership
- An ECD trainers' network in Tamil Nadu, today an effective group of ECD professionals concerned with training and curriculum development
- A National Task Force committed to, and at present working on, the development of quality rating tools in ECD for multiple purposes
- An extensive and catalogued collection of resource and training materials in ECD in print, audio, and video (now digitalised)
- A group of mature and motivated young professionals well-placed in several developmental fields



Enough has probably been said about the first four consequences, which have been narrated in detail in the preceding pages. So it may be worth while dwelling for a moment on the last one, the least planned or anticipated, and in some ways the most satisfying: the growth and development of the human beings who were associated with ACCESS. Almost every one of these young people has, after leaving the Project and the Foundation, "done well". Most have secured far better jobs, both in terms of financial reward and of greater responsibility and challenging assignments; several went in for higher education or became self-confident enough to launch into very different career paths. Some got their new jobs by invitation, almost being selected on the strength of their achievement and reputation. All are enjoying their current work, and show every sign of excelling in their chosen field. Interestingly, the three men, far from being disadvantaged because of working in a woman-dominated field like ECD and in a woman-led institution, are rising stars. The women's







paths are equally varied, ranging from teaching to social activism, self-employment to government service, in academia, media, or the corporate sector, but all with commitment to social goals, and a high level of achievement. Yet, a few among them have predictably had to put their careers on hold, to cope with the characteristic gender problems common to young women professionals, juggling multiple roles as mothers, homemakers, spouses, and professionals. But they continue to grow as whole, healthy, and valuable human beings, whose careers will undoubtedly blossom.

It is not surprising that the decision to bring Project ACCESS to an end has evoked many reactions from this outspoken group of young professionals.

I feel very sad about closing the Project. Ten years is not a big period in history. The Project should have been kept alive. I feel just when we started growing, giving new shoots, we are closing. When the project is 'live', people come, but not with a resource centre reduced to a library.

**Christina**

The contributions of Project ACCESS are immense. I feel sorry that Project ACCESS closed so abruptly. Bernard van Leer Foundation was ready to continue its support. At least a small budget project could have continued producing campaign materials, revising, pruning, fine-tuning, etc. Mina Swaminathan said that she was closing because of her health. She could have managed with some staff.

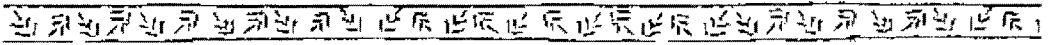
**SV**

Project ACCESS has carved a niche for itself and it cannot close. The fund of resource materials developed and shared with others will go on all the time. My wish is that Project ACCESS becomes an on-line resource centre.

**Bhuvanewari**

Typically, Padmavathi's voice was the most forceful.

Closing down of Project ACCESS is not helpful to the cause of women and children. The Project should have gone on to focus on the issues. Mina, as an individual, to be invited as a resource person for a discussion

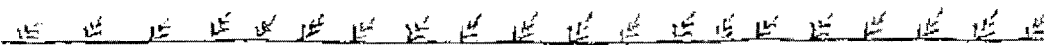


on women and child care issues may be okay. But this is different from Project ACCESS being represented as a collective force. It will carry much more strength.

The debate will go on... ... there are no simple answers, no cut and dried solutions. The glimmerings of an answer might appear if one shifted the argument to another plane, and looked at the founding dream through another lens. In this view, the Project, like all living things which must inevitably grow, exist, and die—but live on in their offspring—must close, but will stay alive through its legacy. Not through institutions, buildings, memorials, or statues, but as the salt in the sea, nowhere but everywhere, unseen but always present, making a difference, changing the taste of the water for ever.



LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD



## In Retrospect

Participating in this journey through a decade of the history of Project ACCESS has been an awe-inspiring experience for me. Though I had been associated with the Project in some way or the other for almost the entire period of its existence, listening to and recording the experiences of all the players in different phases of the Project and incorporating their voices in the documentation was indeed fascinating, although, I must admit, at times tiring.

What stands out is the *clarity of vision* behind Project ACCESS: the breadth and depth of the vision, with a focus on the central theme of Early Childhood Care and Development and Education. Keeping in mind the complexity of the subject, there was flexibility in reviewing the inquiry to encompass issues of importance. This, in turn, brought in additional perspectives to the understanding of the core concern. By the end of the first phase a new perception of child care as a woman's issue arose. Child care that was traditionally considered to be the sole responsibility of the woman came to be visualised as a social responsibility.

It was not only the vision that was comprehensive and flexible enough to take in new points of view. The major strategies (domains of action) envisioned by Project ACCESS were equally crucial as they were instrumental in focussing attention on the different dimensions of child care and were also the base for the holistic approach to work at the micro, intermediate, and macro levels. The strategies specified were (a) *networking* of non-government organisations, professional organisations, and academic institutions—all those that had the collective function of identifying and working on issues of importance that influence or affect child care; (b) *generating and disseminating communication materials*: issue-appropriate resource materials and instructional materials; (c) addressing different critical interest groups, policy makers, and the general public through several different *advocacy measures*; (d) *training or capacity building* of all those working with children below six years of age (both in the government and non-government agencies); (e) conducting *research studies* for generating authentic empirical information for purposes of advocacy, for understanding the issues of importance in depth, and also in evaluation of the quality of ECCD and ECCE.

In each of these domains, Project ACCESS explored, experimented, and critically reflected on the approach and methods followed in carrying out the variety of activities, and modified strategies as and when needed. This mode of functioning produced the dynamism that was visible in the individuals and groups working with the Project.

The feature that was most stunning was the whole array of individuals and groups who were brought together to work towards the several different issues concerning the central subject of child care. *This was the essence of collective functioning and the investment on*

*human resources.* If you close your eyes and go through the entire range of events in the history of Project ACCESS in your mind, you are really amazed at the whole range of people who came into its fold: professionals from different disciplines, media personnel (both print and audio-visual) involved in the process of production and dissemination of issue-appropriate materials (articles, poems, short stories, audio cassettes, videos, posters, thematic photographs, leaflets, booklets, etc.), child care service personnel, the trainers of child care workers, policy makers, bureaucrats, and the general public.

It is still more astonishing when you look at the number of core staff within ACCESS and the quantum and quality of work carried out. In the initial phase it was 5 members, in the peak COTA period it was at the most 10, and again, in the concluding phase, it was 5. Looking at the magnitude and the intensity of work carried out during the decade, the staff was the mere minimum. I am sure every one of them felt the pressure of work, and was at times even frustrated. But this seemed to have been compensated by their learnings from the Project, as is evident in the whole lot of insights gained and skills acquired that were enthusiastically listed by them when they talked to me of their work in ACCESS. Their interaction with a range of supportive personnel—consultants, resource persons, part-time workers, network members, and Technical Advisory Committee members—surely enriched their academic, organisational, and managerial skills. It was not surprising that most of them mentioned acquisition of organisational skills as one of their key learnings. The constant review, critical reflection, and evaluation seemed to have helped in systematising their work.

The experiences of Project ACCESS in working with the government on the issue of child care seem to show that it was difficult to make an impact and bring about any visible changes in the system. Much depended on the persons in position and the procedures. However, with the awareness created on child care issues in Tamil Nadu, there was definitely a move towards a holistic approach. This was evident in the TINP centers—which mainly focused on the nutrition of the child—also giving attention to the education of the child.

The impact of Project ACCESS in general is evident in the vibrant TN-FORCES network, the quality trainers' network in place, the whole range of resource and instructional materials produced, especially in terms of the insights and skills developed in the production and dissemination of issue-appropriate materials and creation of public awareness on child care. Its valuable contribution to the national FORCES is increasingly being recognised. Project ACCESS through its vision, strategies, and wide variety of process-oriented activities provides a framework from which any organisation interested in working in the sphere of child care can draw inspiration and get guidance.

The story of Project ACCESS makes highly interesting reading as it presents (a) the lively process of a series of interconnected activities depicting the whole programme and (b) the perspectives of all those who were part of the Project at appropriate points in the

process. I interviewed a total of 24 persons—18 staff members and 6 others who were closely associated with the Project network. I am greatly indebted to them for the extra effort they made to come to my place, give me their time, and allow me to record their voices on audio-tape. They almost lived through their experiences in ACCESS once again. They were candid in their expressions. They made the whole exercise enjoyable for me. These motivated and committed individuals carry within them a dynamic spark for working on child care as a woman's issue, and they are everywhere. The human element that was fostered is that which will carry forward the vision and the mission.

At this point, I must say that I have become acutely aware of the influence of the editor, Gita Gopalkrishnan, in presenting the views of the different contributors. I deeply appreciate her involvement in the process, especially reading through every one of the interview reports and understanding the perspectives before actually editing.

I wish to mention here my gratitude to Sheela Pankaj for helping me with typing all the interview reports, which meant collecting the handwritten matter from my place and returning the typed report for each interview. Latha's help is also appreciated here.

I profoundly admire Mina Swaminathan's passionate and energetic espousal of child care issues that has touched a lot of people. This was what was behind Project ACCESS, and what will continue to live in many more projects and programmes.

**L. S. Saraswathi**

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Mina is an educator by profession, with a career spanning over four decades, and has taught at the high school, primary and preschool levels as well as in non-formal education, adult education, and teacher education. She has been active in children's drama and development theatre, and is a writer with numerous publications, including two teachers' manuals, to her credit. Associated with Mobile Crèches and the Indian Association for Pre-school Education in several capacities, she has served in an advisory role at both national and international levels and has been deeply involved in the development of policy, programming, and planning for ECCE.

One of the foremost spokespersons for young children in the country, Mina is well-known for her outspoken and impassioned advocacy on child rights and gender issues.

**L. S. SARASWATHI**, M.Sc. in Home Science Education and Extension and Ph. D. in Home Economics Education and Sociology.

Saraswathi has had over three decades of experience in working with people in rural Tamil Nadu, especially in the domain of non-formal education for children as well as adults. Her special field of interest has been in evolving teaching and learning methodologies, integrating the present practices of the learners with whatever the programmes of education have to offer.

After a few years as a college teacher, Saraswathi switched over to field projects. She has worked intensively in the areas of curriculum planning and teaching-learning material preparation, training, evaluation, and research, right from the grassroots to state, national, and international levels.

## About the Contributors

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