

NGO Profile: Urmul Rural Health Research and Development Trust: An Initiative Towards Self-Reliance

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The Beginning

Urmul Trust was initiated by Urmul Dairy (Uttari Rajasthan Cooperative Milk Union Ltd.), Bikaner in 1983. Since the very beginning in 1984, Urmul has been working on ranges of issues of Thar communities extensively. In the harsh and inhospitable regions of rural Rajasthan in the Thar Desert, URMUL Group of Organizations have been innovating models for inducing community driven socio-developmental changes by devising programmes, strengthening them, sustaining and finally handing over to communities. Urmul's work is guided by the spirit and trust placed in people's capabilities to bring about the much-needed social change with their own efforts. Most of the work is focused on vulnerable and marginalized sections of the society - Women and children. Following the integrated development approaches, Urmul works on all the Millennium development Goals. Urmul adopt service delivery platforms, advocacy and lobbying tool for empowering the marginalized and vulnerable sections of society in over 1000 villages in this desert state of India - thematically working on Health, Education, Livelihood, Sustainable Agriculture, Social Enterprise Development Environment, Mother-Child Care, Child Protection and Participation etc.

The Great Indian Thar

More than half of the land of Rajasthan lies in the arid and semi-arid districts. It is separated by Aravali range and its splinters in the east. These western districts are part of Great India Thar. This region comprises of the entire districts of Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur districts and portion Nagore and Churu Districts. The

region is receiving an erratically distributed annual rainfall of less than 50 centimetres. Temperatures vary between 48-50 degrees in summers and fall below freezing points in winters. These oscillations in the climate averages for this century suggest that the drought cycle has increased from one good year in three to one in only six years. This is not to mention some pockets in the Thar are almost perpetually drought prone. The average distance between the villages is 10-15 KM and lack of conveyances makes life more difficult. These conditions make 'the living' in the desert 'with hard realities'. Most of population rely on livestock, agriculture and on informal works to earn their livelihoods.

Urmul Family

The URMUL Trust is an umbrella organization that encompasses several family organizations working across the length and breadth of the sandy arid region that is the Thar Desert. Networking all of these autonomous organizations together and providing them with a unified platform, support services, common pooled infrastructural facilities, as well as resources where needed is one of the stated mandates of the Urmul Trust. Some of the networking organizations are: Urmul Setu, UMBVS, Urmul Seemant, Urmul Jyoti, Urmul Khejadi, Vasundhara, and Abhivvati.

Urmul Trust: A Journey of 30 years in the Thar Desert

The core of the development premise of URMUL Trust is an intrinsic faith in the capacity of the rural people to devise and manage and sustain development programs.

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During these decades, Urmul has developed a network of several committed voluntary agencies, consortiums and individuals in the region. The trust is also an executive member in several GONGO collaborations and policy planning committees.

Over the last three decades, Urmul has innovated, designed and demonstrated various vital and successful models in diverse developmental themes, to name a few barefoot doctors, Non-Formal Education centres, Residential Education Camps to bridge education for adolescent girls and boys, long term constructive campaigns for gender equality, Child Rights and Livelihoods. Urmul led non-farm livelihood initiatives in the region are now full-fledged enterprises valuing over 20+ crores INR and are successfully ensuring sustained income to thousands of families in desert of Rajasthan, right in their village. While working with communities in Thar, Urmul's experiences have been vibrant. With the understanding that no intervention could be successful unless the community achieves financial security, Urmul has endeavoured to improve livelihood opportunities in the region. It has innovated various farm based and non-farm based interventions through Self Help Group model and has organized the communities' most marginalized and deprived to initiate and lead the change.

Urmul's engagement with Early Childhood Development Initiatives is over two-decade old. It has been the implementing agency of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) in the Kolayat block of Bikaner since 1991. This helps integrate efforts to various levels. Community Health Worker's along with Anganbadi workers, Youth Forums (Urmul Kishori Prerna Manch (Adolescent Girls's Groups), Kishor Manch (Adolescent Boy's Groups), Prerak Dal, Village Health & Sanitation Committee (VHSC) School Management Committee (SMC) and SHGs, helps to strengthen efforts with villages. It works with Children and Communities directly through various interventions in area of education, health and livelihoods to improve the care provided to children. Women and Girl Child have been a major focus for the organisation since its inception. Over the years, more than 50000 girls were educated to class 8 to 10th, with in the duration to six months through the innovative bridge course programme called Balika Shivir. By innovating various models in education like Siksha karmi, Marushala (Desert Schools) Balika Shivirs

(residential girl's bridge education camps), Urmul has been working towards raising education levels in this remote society.

Our work around crafts has significantly affected the lives of thousands of its participants, not just financially but more significantly - socially. They have achieved a transformation of generations within a span of three decades. The work with weavers has empowered this extremely marginalized and socially exploited community to the levels of political and legislative representation. The work with 1971 Indo-Pak war refugee communities helped it empower and prosper with opportunities, while also ensuring reviving and preservation of their extraordinary embroidery art. These interventions have now transformed into self-sustainable community managed enterprises.

In the recent years, we have worked extensively on the issues of Child Marriages, Child Protection & Participation and sex ratio in the state. Urmul led projects in Ganganagar and Hanumangarh districts have been globally appreciated, and have resulted in making Ganganagar the only district in the country to record positive growth in child sex ratio. Urmul is the founding member of the global alliance against child marriage called Girls Not Bride. Apart from this work on health & Development and Right to Education, it has also grabbed the significant attention of media and government as well. The work with Pak refugees and establishing embroidery as a sustainable mean of livelihood is unique and remarkable work in the world done by Urmul Family. The impact and the credibility of Urmul's sustained engagement with communities is such that we are now already working with the second and at some places the third generations of families in villages in the Thar desert. It has been a journey of constant learning, sharing and trust, leading to a steady generational change.

Current Challenges

It last 3 decades, scenarios have changes drastically in Thar Desert. Due to globalisation, access of technology and machines Thar has witnessed erratic reconfiguration be it at society, community level or ecology and environment. Feudalistic and patriarchal society is still a horrific reality. Education and health facilities are abysmal and contrary

to this urban dreams and aspirations among people, especially youth have led to corruption, confusion and crimes. The changes in pattern of funding and in attitude of civil society have also posed new challenges in front of

old organisation like Urmul operating in the distant and scattered villages at ground with very low cost. But, after all this Urmul Journey is on to make the Thar Desert a more beautiful, sustainable and prosperous region.

Urmul Trust

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