

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN GANJAM, ODISHA: A CASE OF RANGEILUNDA BLOCK

Child participation in local governance is crucial for allowing them to form and express their views, influencing matters that concern them directly and indirectly. Meaningful participation involves several key components: information sharing, dialogues between children and adults, full consideration of children's views, and the right of children to be heard. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the importance of governance, inclusion, and participation, particularly in target 16.7, which aims to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. Notably, 44 out of the 248 SDG indicators are directly linked to children.

The guidelines issued by the Panchayatiraj Ministry in 2018 and 2021 emphasized the importance of Bal-Balika Sabha and Mahila Sabha. These platforms provide children and women with the opportunity to voice their concerns and ensure that issues affecting children are incorporated into the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP). To become a child-friendly village, it is essential to prioritize children's issues and allocate an appropriate budget for both children and women.

Youth for Social Development (YSD), a grassroots development organization, has been working with the most marginalized and vulnerable sections in Odisha to make Rangeilunda a child and women-friendly gram panchayat, with support from UNICEF-India.



Over the past three years, YSD has directly engaged with children, communities, and local elected officials to promote a child-friendly ecosystem. This has been achieved through mobilization, information sharing, and capacity building of multiple stakeholders across 32 gram panchayats. Key initiatives include:

- Preparing a 'Children Action Plan' (CAP) using child-friendly participatory rural appraisal tools and methods.
- Engaging children, parents, and service providers in the planning process.
- Creating space for children's participation in Gram Sabha.
- Presenting the action plan prepared by the children and sharing their views.

These efforts have fostered an environment where children's voices are heard and their needs are prioritized in local governance.

In the Rangeilunda block of Ganjam, Odisha, children actively participate in local governance. Their involvement highlights the importance of including young voices in decision-making processes that affect their lives and communities. This case study showcases how children's engagement can lead to more inclusive and responsive governance.

We have been monitoring children's participation in gram sabhas with the help of our dedicated volunteers. Using a semi-structured checklist, we capture the following data:

number of children and women who attended, number of children and women who spoke, number of petitions submitted, number of children's issues discussed and number of issues resolved (including no-cost/low-cost activities and projects related to children and women).

Attendance and Voice

In the Rangeilunda block, special gram sabhas were organized in 20 out of the 32 Gram Panchayats on Independence Day (15th August, 2024). Out of the total attendance of 1,119 citizens, there were 502 women and 288 children. Each gram sabha ran for an average duration of 1 hour and 50 minutes.

Tabel-1: Women and Children's Participation in Gram Sabha

Gram Sabha (Gram Panchayat)	20
Total Citizen Attended (member)	1119
Women Attended (member)	502
Children Attended	228
Women Spoke (member)	199
Children Spoke	112
Petitions Submitted (number)	16

Nearly 200 women (40% of attendees) spoke in the gram sabha about various issues of concern. Meanwhile, 199 children (70% of attendees) discussed the challenges they face in their village, including vulnerability, services, and protection. On the day of the gram sabha, citizens from 20 Gram Panchayats submitted a total of 16 petitions

Children's Issues Discussed

In the gram sabhas held across 20 gram panchayats, children actively engaged in discussions and raised several critical issues. Among the foremost concerns were the needs for improved drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities, leading to the initiation of 70 different projects. Additionally, there was a strong emphasis on enhancing the facilities and infrastructure in anganwadi centers and schools, resulting in 39 distinct projects aimed at these improvements.

Table-2: Children's Issues Discussed in Gram Sabha in 20 Gram Panchayats

Sl. #	Children's Issues Discussed in Gram Sabha	Issues/Projects (Cumulative)	Per cent
1	Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene	70	32.4
2	Improvement in Anganwadi Centre and School	39	18
3	Children's Safety : risk, hazard and vulnerability	27	12.5
4	Inclusion in Social Protection : PDS, MGNREGS, Pension	26	12
5	Child Protection Issues	19	8.8
6	Improvement of Infrastructure	11	5
7	Children's Amusement : park, playground and library	09	4.1
8	Environment Protection	08	3.7
9	Electricity and Streetlight	07	3.4
	Total	216	100

Children also highlighted safety issues, identifying 27 different risks, hazards, and vulnerabilities that needed addressing. The inclusion of children and families in social protection schemes was another significant topic, with 26 issues being brought to the forefront. Lastly, child protection concerns, such as child marriage, child labor, orphanage, and school dropouts, were prominently discussed, underscoring the need for comprehensive measures to safeguard children’s rights and well-being.

Low Cost/ No Cost Issues Discussed

In the gram sabhas, children have raised their voices to highlight several critical issues, leading to discussions on various no-cost and low-cost projects. Among these, the focus areas include:

- **Health Awareness:** Initiatives particularly aimed at dengue prevention and education.
- **Water and Sanitation:** Efforts to strengthen village water and sanitation committees for better hygiene and cleanliness.
- **Child Protection:** Addressing issues related to child marriage and child labor, identifying vulnerable children, and providing necessary social protection.
- **Education:** Strategies to improve education-seeking behavior and re-enroll children who have dropped out of school.
- **Children’s Participation:** Encouraging active involvement in Advika programs at anganwadi centers, establishing child cabinets in schools, and organizing Bal-Balika Sabhas.

Tabel-3: Low Cost/ No Cost Issues Discussed

Sl. #	Low Cost/ No Cost Issues Discussed	Number of GPs
1	Health : awareness and check up	06
2	Water and Sanitation : VWSC strengthen	07
3	Education : seeking behaviors, enrollment of dropout	05
4	Child Protection : campaign against child marriage, child labour and identify vulnerable children	05
5	Environment Awareness : forestation and plastic free village	04
6	Children Participation : in gram sabha, school cabinet advika	05

Observations

- Most Sarpanchas are receptive to these issues and discuss them with attendees. They acknowledge that despite available funds, many projects are either not started or remain incomplete.
- In four Gram Panchayats, elderly people who are excluded from pension and ration card benefits present their grievances to the gram sabha.
- In three Gram Panchayats, women participants complain about village cleanliness and the lack of garbage collection, requesting regular cleaning from the gram sabha.
- In eight Gram Panchayats, people raised concerns about the lack of preparations and prior information regarding the date and time of the gram sabha, resulting in many people, including some elected officials (ward members) and service providers, being unable to attend.
- In all most all Gram Panchayats the gram sabha meetings did not meet the required quorum (the necessary number of participants was not present).

