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Engaging, Empowering and Partnering



Population First and JSW Foundation have undertaken a year long journey to address the issue of under-nutrition through community participation and system strengthening in 29 villages of Shahapur Block. This document attempts to celebrate the spirit of that journey by sharing the processes involved and stories of change at the individual level. The stories were collected in the last three months between August and October 2019. The narratives aim to bring out the processes involved and their impact. Consent of individuals was sought to include their stories, quotes and pictures.

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Engaging, Empowering and Partnering to create sustainable communities

**A compilation of individual stories of change on addressing
under-nutrition in villages of Vashind Beat -2, Shahapur Block,
Thane District, Maharashtra.**

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Lastly I would like to acknowledge the efforts of my team. The program would not have been successful without their efforts.



About the program

The broad goal of the program was to create sustainable and empowered communities and strengthen systems for reduction of under-nutrition amongst children.

In particular the project aimed to:

- Address poor nutrition practises amongst pregnant women, children and adolescent girls by reaching out to parents and care givers
- Address water, sanitation and hygiene practices amongst community
- Build Capacities and improve health seeking behaviour of pregnant and lactating mothers
- Equip adolescent girls to make informed choices regarding their health and reproductive health by creating awareness and providing access to information and services
- Involve communities including Village Health Nutrition and Sanitation Committees (VHNSC) and Gram Panchayat(GP) members to address issues of health and nutrition.

The program called **AMCHI** (Action for Mobilisation of Community Health Initiatives) was implemented using the following approaches:

- Strengthening existing Government and semi- Government Institutions.
- Providing hand holding support to service providers at the grass root level to improve and strengthen delivery of services.
- Ensuring stakeholder participation in all activities

THANE
TEHSIL MAP



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(Last Updated on 22th April 2017)

Geography and Coverage

The program is being implemented in 29 villages of Vashind Beat 2 in Shahapur Block of Thane District. Vashind Beat 2 has a total population of 23,561 with 5732 households that is an average four members per household. There are 26 Anganwadi centers as well as three mini Anganwadi centers in Vashind Beat 2. Vashind Beat 2 has one Primary Health Center and four Sub Centers. The Child Sex Ratio in Vashind is 862 compared to the state average of 894. The literacy rate of Vashind is close to 90% which is higher than the state average of 82%. Male literacy is around 94% whereas female literacy is 86%. Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe constitute 13.3% and 9.7% of the population respectively.

While the district has better health and reproductive health indicators, there are variations by community groups and economic status. Schedule Caste, Schedule Tribe and poor households have high total fertility rates, high prevalence of anaemia, lack of information and knowledge on causes and symptoms of most health conditions and how to prevent or address them. Levels of under-nutrition and malnutrition amongst children and adolescents, is also high in these households.



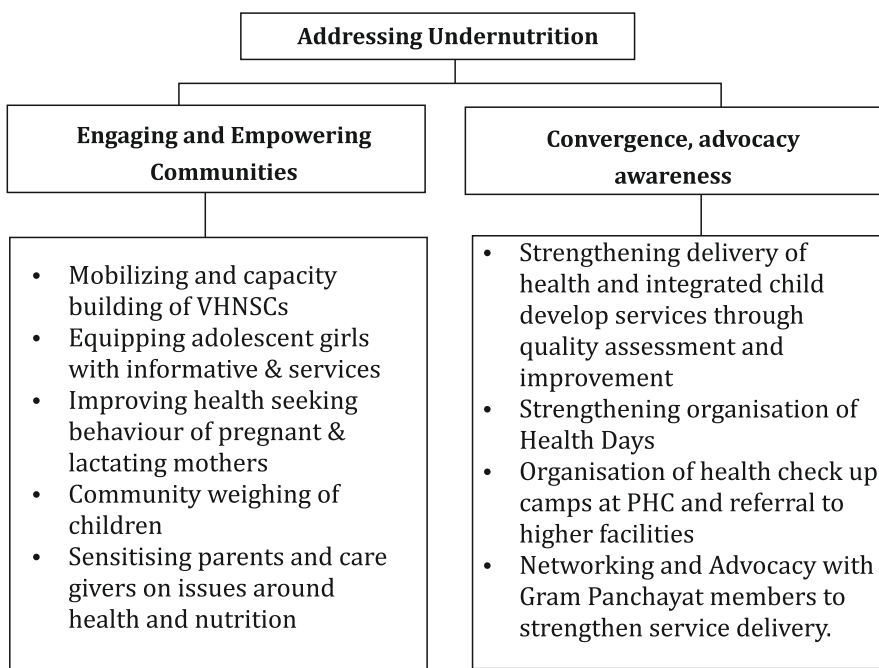
Program Interventions and Activities

The program demonstrated a richness of engagement and a range of innovative efforts were made to address the complex issue of under-nutrition. The key interventions included:

- Engaging and empowering communities
- Ensuring convergence, undertaking advocacy and creating awareness

The interventions were woven around the broad themes of health, water, sanitation, hygiene and promoting healthier food choices.

The Figure below is a graphic representation of the interventions and activities undertaken in a nutshell.





After many years we now have a fully functional Sub center... Thanks to the AMCHI team

Kavita Gugre the Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife who caters to four villages, Amberje, Madh, Hal and Maswana enthusiastically shares her experiences of serving the community. She has been working in the area for eight years. Her key role is to motivate pregnant women for early ANC registration and encourage parents, especially mothers to bring their children for immunization. She adds that she works with four ASHA workers and one Multi-Purpose Worker (Male).

ANM tai as she is locally called, says that for a very long time the Sub Center at Amberje was not optimally functional, it did not have running water, a functional toilet, the paint had peeled off completely and the sub center building looked very shabby and uninviting. At the *Arogya Din* (Health Day) event organized on 4th January this year, community leaders and village stakeholders came together, it was one of the few times that so many village functionaries like *Sarpanch, Up-sarpanch, Gram sevaks*, ASHA workers, members of Village Health Nutrition and sanitation committee, etc got together. Thanks to efforts of the AMCHI team who worked effortlessly to bring all these stakeholders together at one place. At the discussions that day we unanimously raised the issue of the sub center, emphasizing that women who come from long distances at least need an operational toilet and as a health facility we need running water. I was asked to submit a proposal for repairs and very soon the Gram Panchayat gave orders for the repair of the Sub Center to the Public Works Department. I have to thank the AMCHI team for this, they were the ones who mobilized all stakeholders together to bring in this change. Now women don't have to go all the way to Vashind PHC for their checkups and many tribal women who were avoiding their regular ANC visits because of the distance have started coming to the Sub Center.



Organising Mahila Gram Sabhas helps to bring issues of women and children to the forefront...

Surekha, a Gram Sevak from Amberje village says that it was for the first time that a Mahila Gram Sabha was organized prior to the Gram Sabha meeting on 26th January. The AMCHI team who informed us about organising a Mahila Gram Sabha to raise issues of concern to women and children and also helped us organize this. Although our *Up-sarpanch* is a woman, we had never thought of organizing a Mahila Gram Sabha.

At the January Mahila Gram Sabha, women got an opportunity to voice their concerns and opinions on development issues. Many critical issues like management of waste water, need for better facilities at the sub center, need for information on various government schemes for women and children, etc. were raised. At the Mahila Gram Sabha it was decided that the Village Health Nutrition and Sanitation Committee meetings and the AmrutAharSamiti meetings will be organized on a regular basis. The opportunity was also used to inform women about the roles and responsibilities of various Block level functionaries.

The special Gram Sabha provided a useful platform for women to share their problems, talk of development concerns facing them and inform them about their rights and entitlements. Surekha adds that organizing such Mahila Gram Sabhas will help to bring issues of women and children to the forefront that normally tend to get left out in general Gram Sabha meetings...

Surekha who is also in the final stages of her pregnancy says that the one important thing she has learnt from being associated with AMCHI and attending the Women's group meetings is the importance of feeding her new born with the first thick milk (Colostrum) She adds we follow a practice of giving sugar water to the new born and also discarding colostrum but I understood that this gives immunity to the child from various diseases and will initiate breast feeding immediately on birth of my child.



At the sessions we were given nutrition advice...

“23 year old Aarti Pravin Patole from Amberje, who is in the seventh month of her pregnancy, goes about her daily routine as usual. Being her first pregnancy, she was always concerned that everything goes well. She says “now that the Sub Center, in our village is fully functional, after the meeting of all village stakeholders, I feel more confident that I will get the services when I need them”.

Aarti got her pregnancy registered at Vashind Primary Health Center, in the first trimester itself and also got an ANC card. She had gone for two ANC check- ups to Vashind. She says, “I was told that my hemoglobin was marginally low, and I was given iron folic and calcium tablets and advised to take them for six weeks. I was also given two TT injections but not given any other advice.”

She says she got a lot of useful information from the sessions conducted for ante natal and post natal women under the AMCHI project. At the sessions “we were given nutrition advice and told to eat green leafy vegetables, lentils and beans that are locally grown and include vegetables like beetroot in our daily diet.” We were also advised to take *gur and channa*. Another important piece of information she got from the sessions was to get a check up every month in the last trimester and on preparing for the delivery by having in order her ANC card, clothes for the child, clothes for herself, identifying who will be her birth companion, etc. She was also told to keep her identity proof and take along her account number so that she could avail benefits of the Government's *Janani Suraksha Yojana*. She adds that she looks forward to being associated with the project and learning new things related to her health and the health of her family.



Working with adolescent girls helped to build an understanding on issues that are socially and culturally taboo...

Ranjana Chore is the ASHA worker for Amberje village. She says the AMCHI team members have become very popular amongst adolescent girls, within a short time in their village. Adolescent girls are very excited and look forward to their interactions with the team. Ranjanatai adds, the efforts to collectivize adolescent girls and engage with them on issues related to growing up, bodily changes, nutrition, discrimination, have been very useful. Every village in the vicinity now has a girls group. The girls find their group meetings a comfortable space to learn, share, converse and discuss their problems and safe concerns. She adds that her teenage daughter is also part of an adolescent group and eagerly waits to attend the group meetings. Such meetings have helped build an understanding on issues such as menstruation, menstrual hygiene, etc. that are socially and culturally taboo in their society.

Ranjana further talks of how project interventions have led to regular organization of the Village Health Nutrition and Sanitation Committee meetings, that were not happening on a regular basis earlier and how this has helped to improve the drainage and sanitation facilities in the village. There is now a proper gutter for drainage of waste water. She says all that was required was to bring community stakeholders together and hold them accountable for their work which was done by the AMCHI team.



After our group meeting we asked our school teachers to get us sanitary pads...

13 year old Pranali Chore who is studying in the ninth grade takes pride in stating that she is part of the *Enjoy* Group of adolescent girls, formed as part of the AMCHI project. She says we are a total of 42 members in the group. As part of the group meetings we were given information on a range of subjects. It was for the first time I attended a session on body mapping and got to learn about our body parts especially our reproductive organs. I would like to attend more such sessions as there is no other place from where we can get information like this. Even our teacher at school does not talk to us about these issues. She further adds that the facilitator creates a nurturing and learning environment in the group and we do not hesitate to ask even the most embarrassing questions.

Pranali's friend, 13 year old Akanksha adds that menstruation is a subject that is never discussed either at school or amongst peers. At the group meetings we were told about why menstruation occurs, how to maintain hygiene during our periods and how to wash and dry menstrual cloth and disposal of menstrual pads. We were also informed of a scheme about low cost sanitary napkins being available through the school. We discussed this with our teacher, who after a fortnight helped us get these pads. Each girl can buy a packet of six pads for seven rupees.

Pranali goes on to mention that at the group session we also got information on eating locally grown nutritious food. We were told that we should eat green leafy vegetables, salads, peanuts, jaggery and channa to help improve our hemoglobin levels. At school we get a peanut and gur laddoo every day, the laddoo however tastes very bad. After the session we formed a small group and informed our principal about the same, we told her that the laddoo was so bad that most girls were throwing it every day. She talked to the person in-charge of the Amrut Ahaar scheme and ensured that the laddoo we get tasted good. We did this only because we got the information that such a laddoo is good for improving our health.



I got to know the names of our organs and where they were situated after our meetings...

23 year old Suchita Bandhu Jadhav, who is a member of the adolescent girls group in Boudhpada village excitedly says “being a part of this group has been very useful”...The regular meetings provide girls like me a space to meet, talk and discuss our needs and concerns. She adds that over the last year the AMCHI team has organized a series of sessions on various issues. We did not have correct information on most of the issues discussed like body mapping, growing up and bodily changes during puberty, food and nutrition during adolescence, menstruation and myths related to menstruation, pregnancy and child birth.

Suchita says she enjoyed the session on body mapping the most. “I did not even know names of most of our organs or where they were situated in our body.” She goes on to add. 'I always thought that our *Kaleja* (liver) was situated next to our heart as it is an important organ” She also mentions that “learning about the reproductive organs and how conception occurs was very useful, adding that while we had a chapter on reproduction in our biology text book, our teacher skipped it and we were told to read it ourselves...”

Suchita also says that most of us enjoy the activities and games organized by the AMCHI team. She says she particularly like the activity of writing a letter to her menstrual cycle to share with “her” their concerns and befriend “her”. Most of us, she says, including herself discussed various concerns like pain in the abdomen, stigma around speaking about menstruating, disposal of napkins and pads and the myths associated with menstruation in their letter. As a response to the letters, the *didi* from AMCHI took up and discussed our concerns and clarified various issues in the next meeting.

She also adds that the meetings provide her and other girls a good opportunity to come out of their homes and learn something new. She hopes the sessions continue.

We should have the freedom to speak, laugh and play...

A group of 16 girls, who called themselves the “Sanskruti Group” from Valshet village had come together for their monthly meeting with the AMCHI team. The topic of discussion was rights and entitlements of adolescents.

17 year old Dipti Nichite said we are having this session after the session on gender discrimination where we discussed how boys and girls are treated differently in families and communities. 20 year old Nehali Nichite says, “I always thought that we live in a gender equal society, because women and girls are present in all fields and also doing well....It was only when I attended the last session that I understood the subtle forms of discrimination, which we had accepted as part of our lives. Adding to the discussion, 18year old Vaishnavi Nichite says, “While boys are allowed to go out and return anytime even late at night, we girls do not have this freedom... we cannot even go out to the next village with our friends”

17 year old Pratiksha Nichite adds that girls do not even have the right to speak without hesitation... “why should we be discriminated against. We can do everything that boys can do...” Carrying forward the discussion, 18 year old Harshita adds we cannot take decisions, even for ourselves. “I love to ride a scooter but I am not allowed to, whereas there are no such restrictions on my brothers.” She was seconded by Sakshi and Siddhi, who said, we are the ones who always help with the household chores and fetching the water, we do not even get the time to do our daily lessons...” 12 year old Sayali adds, “I would like me and my mom also to get some rest like my father and brothers...”

By the end of the days' session, the girls came up with their charter of rights...

Sanskruti Groups Charter of rights

The freedom to:

- Speak without hesitation
- Laugh and play outside the home
- Allowed to take decisions for ourselves
- Move around safely without being harassed
- To rest and pursue our interests



We face various forms of discrimination in our lives...we are learning to address these through dialogue

Pranali Mangesh Patange is part of the adolescent group from Boudhpada village. This 16 year old says “being associated with the AMCHI project has been a wonderful experience...because of the project, girls get an opportunity to meet regularly and get out of our homes. We also get to learn new things that we did not know about”. She says, her group has 15 members and they have had seven sessions over the last year. She enjoyed the session on gender equality the most.

Pranali feels that girls face various forms of discrimination in all aspects of their lives, whether it is going out to play or going to college for higher education. She adds that girls are normally considered weak and are underestimated. It is always perceived that decisions taken by girls are wrong and we are stopped from expressing ourselves. In the session on gender equality we learnt through role plays why and how girls are socialized into believing that they are inferior to boys. We also learnt about our rights and realized that most of the differences are created by our society and we can change these by talking to our families and elders from the community. She however adds that while she has started questioning her parents on why she is not allowed to go out and play she adds that there are many issues where she feels she cannot change the norms so easily and would like to have more information and exposure on the subject. She further adds that although the sessions are giving us the confidence to discuss issues considered taboo, we need more confidence and knowledge to address them in our daily lives.



I ensure that my children wash their hands before eating...

28 year old Lalitha Dashrath Gaikwad from BoudhPada, is a mother of two, an eight and three year old. Pranav her three year old son was detected as having anemia. Because of this Lalitha is very concerned for his health and has been attending the community weighing sessions organized at the Anganwadi center by the AMCHI team. She says, the team members regularly do the weighing of children, take their height and measure the circumference of the arm. They also organize sessions on locally prepared nutritious food and address several myths related to the same. One important thing she learnt from the sessions was to give her child a variety of grains. She says “now I make *rotis* of all kinds of grains jowar, nachni, bajri, rice and wheat for my child“(Use various millets wheat and rice to make bread for my child). She further adds that the sessions emphasize on hygiene and hand washing...” they have actually taught us how to wash our hands” and also told us that taking small preventive actions will help in the long run and save expenditure on health. I wash my hands before preparing food and also ensure that my children wash their hands after they return from playing, before eating and after defacating. She hopes that the AMCHI sessions for parents continue and she gets to learn more about her health and health of her children.



I would like to inform elders from my village that menstrual blood is not impure...

A very enthusiastic and energetic 16 year old Pallavi goes about doing her daily chores and helping her family prepare for the festival of Diwali. Pallavi who is in standard 11 and pursuing her studies in the commerce stream has been a part of the Sakhi group formed in her village Kajal Vihir by the AMCHI team. She has been attending the fortnightly meetings for five months. She says we have learnt a lot by being part of the group. The *didi* from AMCHI has conducted sessions with us on body mapping, menstruation and menstrual hygiene, myths associated with menstrual blood, attraction, love and friendship, gender equality, nutrition and healthy eating habits.

Pallavi says she enjoyed the session on menstruation the most, she particularly liked when the group was informed that menstrual blood was not impure and girls could lead normal lives during their cycles. She adds that every time she gets her periods, she is told by the elders at home not to light the lamp in front of the Gods, not to enter the kitchen or to touch the pickle bottles. She gets very irritated and restless with these restrictions. After the session, she says she mustered the courage to light the lamp in front of the Gods and confronted her mother saying “let us see if anything untoward would happen”. She says there is so much of a stigma around the issue of menstruation and periods that girls do not even talk of it openly, we refer to the cycle as an annoying guest who has come home.

Pallavi goes on to add that disposal of used pads and soiled cloth in the open is a serious hazard, I would like to gather all young girls and women and do a session on disposal of pads by discarding them in pits. I would also like to inform the elders from our village about the fact that menstrual blood is not impure and help address the myths associated with menstruation. “I have already started talking to my peers in school on these issues...”



We girls can do all that boys do, we only need equal opportunities...

Sandhya Nichite an active member of the Sakhi group in Kajal Vihir Village greets us at the village entrance and takes us to the local school where we have an interaction with adolescent girls. Sandhya we learn is a very active member of the group and regularly involved with the AMCHI team in mobilizing girls her age for the fortnightly meetings. She is quick to tell you that the girls have had a brilliant session on gender equality and discrimination. The session she says “provided us a platform to vent out our anger...and talk of the various kinds of discrimination we face in our families and community”. Questioning the norms she adds “I always wonder why boys have more freedom and are allowed to go out, while we girls are restricted to our homes”. She says “I feel very sad when I get to know of families who keep having daughters till they have a son, most of these daughters are not wanted by their families...” we girls can do all that boys do...we only need equal opportunities”. The general perception is that boys would care for their parents in old age but daughters love their parents more than sons. I will surely take care of my parents when they need my help.”

She also adds that after the sessions “I got the courage to bring together a group of girls and we plan to begin organizing festivals like Shiv Jayanti, Ambedkar Jayanti, etc which the boys have been doing all along”. She says, this will be her first step towards addressing discrimination in the village. “If elders and parents see girls shouldering responsibilities they would slowly begin to believe in our abilities.”

She goes on to add that “once I have a job and can stand on my feet I will work towards changing the deep rooted norms that prefer sons over daughters in our village”.

Our experience of investing in sustainable communities to address the issue of under-nutrition over the last year, has been extremely satisfying. The winds of change are beginning to become visible... communities are talking of health and nutrition, Gram Panchayat members are showing willingness to invest in improving health and Anganwadi facilities, adolescent girls are opening up and ensuring their voices are heard and women are demanding quality services...The journey has however just begun we have miles to go to ensure a truly sustainable community is built...



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