



Children Discontinue Studies Due to Homelessness and Negligence, or Fall into Substance Abuse

Nepal Action Research Group 2

June 2024

Theme:	Discontinuation of school due to homelessness and family negligence, and children falling into substance abuse because of negative peer influences
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CLARISSA (Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia) is a large-scale research programme on the worst forms of child labour. It aims to identify, evidence, and promote effective multi-stakeholder action to tackle the drivers of the worst forms of child labour in selected supply chains in Nepal and Bangladesh.

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1. About the Action Research Group

Table 1.1: Key details

Action Research Group (ARG) name	Neighbourhood ARG
Theme of ARG (issue being worked on)	Discontinuation of school due to homelessness and family negligence, and children falling into substance abuse because of negative peer influences
Start date	September 2022
End date	September 2023
Starting participants (N=total)	Males = 3 Females = 11 Children with disabilities = 0 Children who are currently working = 10
Ending participants (N=total)	Males = 4 Females = 6 Children with disabilities = 0 Children who are currently working = 7

Source: Author's own.

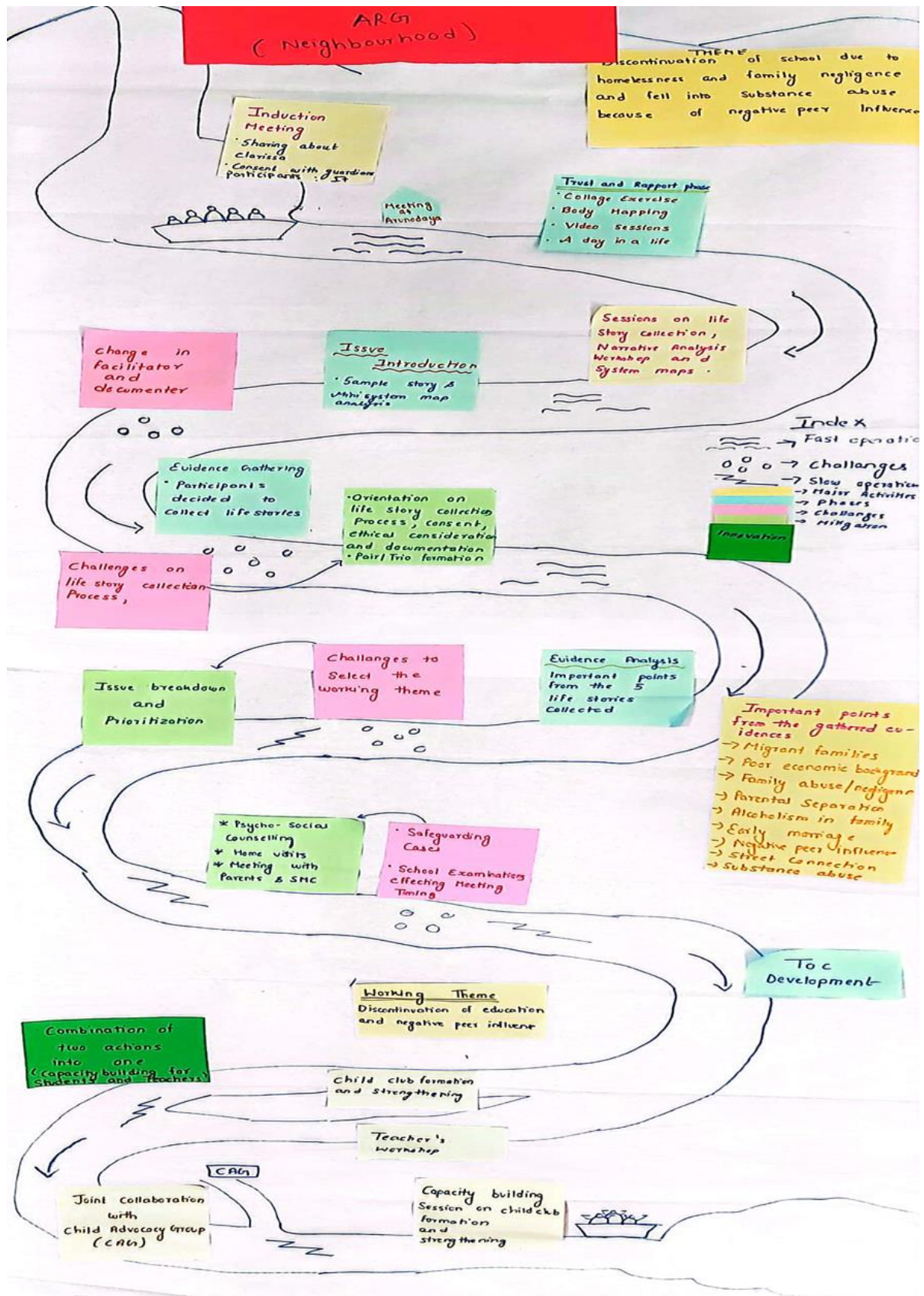
1.1 Background/introduction

The Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA) programme uses Action Research to understand the dynamics which drive the worst forms of child labour (WFCL), and to generate participatory innovations which help to shift these underlying dynamics and mitigate their worst effects.

Through 13 Action Research Groups (ARGs) in Bangladesh and 12 groups in Nepal, the programme is generating a rich understanding – particularly through children's lived experiences – of the complex underlying drivers of harmful work, and working children and their employers are themselves defining, piloting, and evaluating their own innovative actions that aim to increase children's options to avoid WFCL.

2. The story of the ARG

Figure 2.1: River of life



Source: Author's own; workshop diagram produced by the group.

2.1 Creation of the ARG

The location of the ARG is a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world heritage site and is among the three old palaces known as the Durbar Squares of Kathmandu Valley. The Durbar Square is surrounded by spectacular architecture and the surrounding area is a very popular tourist and market area. This area is also known as 'the heart of Kathmandu' due to its cultural and historical significance. It is also famous for numerous cultural events and celebrations. The area is packed with souvenir and traditional shops, street food stalls, small hotels, and *khaja ghars* (snack shops).

Some traditional buildings were destroyed during an earthquake in 2015, and the residential area is a mix of new houses and old houses that are on the verge of collapse. The residents in the area are mainly migrant workers from across Nepal and also from India. Most of these migrant workers work in low paying jobs – they are porters, domestic workers, street vendors, painters, drivers, plumbers, etc. Many families live crowded in small, rented rooms.

The area has multiple government schools and is closely linked with a nearby commercial hub which comprises multiple big-scale shopping complexes, wholesale markets, and which is also a hotspot for small-scale Adult Entertainment Sector (AES) and street businesses. The ARG location is also closely linked with an area which is known for butcher shops and small-scale factories. Lastly, the location is connected with a city which is a hub for tourists and a hotspot for massage and spa venues, hotels, tourist shops, and small-scale AES businesses.

The location was selected as a cluster for CLARISSA processes, such as Action Research, due to its density of street-connected children and child street vendors. These children are highly mobile, and the nature of the neighbourhood is diverse. There is a huge flow of people, businesses, and commercial activities in the area. The involvement of children in child labour, such as children working in small-scale *khaja ghars* and AES venues, can be directly seen in this area, making it an important location for CLARISSA Action Research. The area was central to CLARISSA life story collection: many of the 400 stories collected from children showed links to the area along with two nearby areas.

During the process of forming this ARG the CLARISSA team explored links already made with the community and community gatekeepers during the life story collection process. During the life story collection phase, CLARISSA worked with government schools in this area. A priority for forming this group was finding a place that was safe and easily accessible for participants, as it was anticipated that many of them would be school students and would not have time for travelling across the city. It was decided that the group would meet on the premises of a school that was a central and convenient location near to where most participants lived. A local motivator was appointed to the group, a local resident and social worker who was well connected with local government and social organisations in the area. She was able to conduct assessments with children associated with forms of child labour around the area.

2.1.1 Induction

This ARG was formally formed in September 2022. Two induction meetings were conducted prior to this with children working in the neighborhood as street vendors, domestic workers, etc. A total of 35 participants, including the children's guardians, were inducted and consent was taken from both guardians and participants. Due to the unavailability of some parents, some teachers acted as guardian for a few children. After induction a total of 17 participants joined the ARG.

2.1.2 Initial understanding about CLARISSA

The participants shared their initial understanding of CLARISSA and the ARG, which was related to it being a sharing platform and seeking to find solutions to child labour. Participants who were, relatively, younger took longer to understand the research components. Some of their initial understandings were:

CLARISSA works for the safety of children.

It works against child labour and the project ensures that the children are able to speak about their problems.

This research will help us to find the possible solution for the prevention of child labour.

2.2 Rapport- and trust-building

The group's rapport- and trust-building phase was crucial as it helped to weave together the upcoming processes and the group formation. Different team-building activities were conducted in this phase which helped the participants open up about their experiences as working children. Games helped to break the ice and open-up space for conversation. The group was divided into pairs and teams so all the children could get to know each other. Ground rules were agreed within the group such as respect and confidentiality.

Watching videos related to the issue helped children share views on topics such as sexual harassment and male sexual abuse, online sexual abuse, and risks associated with social media. Some reflections from the children were:

I learned that boys can also be harassed by boys. If something like that happens to us, we must share that incident with our friends, teachers, and family.

We must not take chocolates or money from strangers. Parents also need to be careful when a new person tries to persuade their children. I also want to share an incident that happened near my home. A girl was lost and after few weeks she was found in Birgung (border with India).

During a collage exercise, participants represented their lives as working children and their future aspirations. The sharing following this exercise was intimate and emotional as participants shared family issues, economic problems, problems they faced after migrating to Kathmandu, issues stemming from dysfunctional or broken families and recounting of abuse from police while selling goods in the streets of the ARG location. Many of the participants cried. Some of what they shared is below:

I came to Kathmandu from my village. I used to sell vegetables on the streets with my mother. I also sold clothes. While selling clothes people used to ask me why I was selling clothes and scolded me. There were people who also threw away my balloons or broke them. I want to be a successful family and live in a happy family.

I also came from village. I lived with my grandparents who used to drink a lot of alcohol. My parents lived in Kathmandu but my stepfather hates me a lot. They make me do all the household work and didn't let me study. [Started sobbing] I was then kept by a family as a domestic worker, but I got to continue my studies. I miss the love of my parents. In future I will be a doctor.

This process helped participants to open-up and respect each other, as they realised their common ground. One of the participants said: 'I feel like everyone has their own stories. We think we have bad experiences, but others are also having the same or even bigger problems.'

During a body-mapping exercise, the facilitator helped the participants think through the kind of physical, emotional, and mental experiences/feelings they had about their work. This revealed the context of the vibrant environment of the location area as well as the dark side – children are being subjected to intensive labour abuse and discrimination. Some of the major points and issues highlighted during the body-mapping exercise session were:

- Abuse and physical harassment from employers for minor mistakes;
- Discrimination at work;
- Vibrant environment of the location (music, festivals, and street food);
- Difficult work and effect on health; and
- Health issues due to pollution in the streets.

The exercise 'A Day in a Life of a Working Child' was also conducted with the objective of exploring their daily life experiences. In this exercise participants explored the daily situations and places in which they felt the most safe or unsafe. Given that these children spend a huge part of their time on the streets, streets were recognised as a majorly unsafe place, either in their work context, returning home after work or simply hanging out. Other places where children felt most unsafe were on public vehicles (buses) and in their workplaces.

Yes, I feel unsafe on the streets. While selling water, people try to touch my hand. Some even ask me to come with them. They say that if I go with them, they'll buy me what I want.

While I was walking on the streets with my elder sister, some boys came on bike and started harassing us. My sister tried to protect me, and she pushed me backwards. But right then a vehicle hit me and ran away. I felt very scared and unsafe.

Note: At the beginning of each ARG meeting, a review reflection of the previous meeting was carried out and this helped to bridge the gaps between the meetings. The participants helped each other recall the previous activities and discussions.

2.3 Introducing the children to evidence already gathered (in life story collection and narrative analysis phase)

Before the issue introduction phase, the children were familiarised with the existing relevant CLARISSA evidence. Mini system maps and big system maps originating from life story analysis were introduced to the participants. This helped to penetrate the technical concepts of Participatory Action Research to the participants and the processes that took place before the group formation. Sample stories from the 400 Nepal life stories that related to this neighbourhood were also presented. Four members of the group had given life stories during life story collection and the siblings of three members had undertaken the analysis. The participants shared their thoughts on the sample life stories and mini maps as follows:

Children come to Kathmandu with their parents due to poor family background. The multiple marriages of parent's affect lives of children. Children make friends with street children and start eating dendrite.

Poverty, influence of friends, and entertainment are the theme of the story. When a child runs away from home it's hard to motivate him or her as they go through a lot before coming to the streets. [Based on the life stories presented.]

Note: While reading the stories, the participants also said that the stories were similar to the lives of their friends.

2.4 Issue introduction and evidence-gathering phase

Participants then analysed 20 mini-maps from the narrative analysis and highlighted what they saw as the major problems contained in the maps. They felt that most of the mini maps revealed a similar storyline of poor families entering Kathmandu in search of jobs. Other major issues and patterns identified were:

- Multiple marriage of parents;
- Poor economic circumstances of families;
- Family violence;
- Alcoholism in families;
- Parental negligence;
- Negative peer influences;
- Easy access to drugs and substance abuse; and
- Children being detained on the streets by law enforcement and being sent to care or 'shelter' homes.

At this point the group was able to easily link the group theme (or issue) 'Discontinuation of school due to homelessness and family negligence and falling into substance abuse because of negative peer influences' with what they had analysed from the mini maps. It also aligned with their own life experiences. Participants then put themselves into pairs and trios to conduct evidence gathering to further support the issue. Participants decided to conduct further life story collection with their peers. In order to do this successfully they were given training on interview techniques such as objectives, gaining consent, ensuring the safety and confidentiality of respondents, questionnaire development, and documentation.

The experiences of the participants were that they found it hard working in pairs/trios and that it was not hard to find respondents as many of their friends had lives that related to the issue. Two participants also shared their own stories which helped respondents open up. The participants then analysed the evidence they had gathered and identified what they thought were the most important incidents or issues in the stories (as below):

- Poor economic circumstances. Poor families migrate to Kathmandu and reside in low rent areas and struggle to earn a steady/regular income.
- Children are given responsibility at a young age. Children are expected to earn due to their family's economic struggles.
- Dysfunctional family environments due to fights and disputes at home.
- Alcoholism and substance abuse problems (parents).
- Substance abuse and homelessness (children) as a result of negative peer influences.
- Multiple marriages of parents/divorce/second marriage.
- Early marriage/child marriage/elopements leading to marriage/forced marriage.
- Discontinuation of school.

The participants shared their own experiences during this phase. Poverty, family conflicts, and parental separation were seen as major issues that cause many children to leave home and end up on the streets or start working at a young age. Some group reflections are as below:

Poor economic circumstances in a family is a leading cause for children to start working. Most of us are living in single rooms with our families and the living circumstances are not good.

Family fights is a major problem. There is fighting in a family, the mother runs away with a boyfriend and the father also remarries. Divorce is a problem for children.

Most parents are separated without legally divorcing. Children don't get mother's love.

2.5 Theory of Change (ToC)

The group then started working on their ToC development. This was completed over the span of three meetings. They had an initial struggle over choosing the working issue as their overarching issue comprised multiple severe problems, i.e. homelessness, family negligence, discontinuation of education, negative peer influences, and substance abuse. The group knew they wouldn't be able to work on all these interconnected issues. The participants also felt that despite poor economic circumstances and family negligence being major and common issues, it would be hard to conduct actions based on these issues. The participants were reluctant to work with their parents as they didn't think they would be able to change their attitude and behaviour. Hence, they decided that working on a permanent social structure like schools was more doable than working on individual families. It was decided that working towards a good school environment would help increase school attendance and performance of students and that once they became more productive in school, problems related to peer influence and substance abuse would gradually decrease. Some of the comments made by group members during this phase were as below:

Working on homelessness and family will be very difficult. We all have similar family backgrounds and have poor economic circumstances so even if we try to convince our families they won't listen to us.

Working on school will mean that many children who might leave school due to family reasons can be stopped. Once a child goes and studies properly at school their performance and other activities including negative influence of peers will be reduced.

After lots of discussion the participants chose '**Discontinuation of education caused by negative peer influence**' as their working issue.

The following points mentioned below were the important factors behind their decision:

- School being a permanent part of a child's life can have a huge impact on the lives of students and children.
- A conducive school environment enhances child participation in the school and contributes to increasing the skills and productivity of children.
- Strengthening school systems can be helpful to mitigate negative peer influence, substance abuse, child marriage and child labour.

Note: The government provides free lunches at public schools. This has increased attendance at school amongst children of low-income families. This has been a huge motivation for both parents and children.

2.6 Action phase

After much discussion, the participants decided that they would work on strengthening child clubs in schools located in the area. The government has mandatory guidelines for the formation and strengthening of school level child clubs but schools in the ARG location either don't have child clubs at all or they have ones which are not functioning well and not addressing the issues of vulnerable children.

The children recognised that schools are a safe place and that any activities that were incorporated in schools would be sustainable. Therefore, ARG participants decided to conduct (a) training for teachers and students on strengthening child clubs, and (b) activities like competitions, dramas and clubs co-ordination with school management committees, parents, and teachers. They decided to organise capacity-building on child club formation and strengthening for students and teachers. This activity closely aligned with what the CLARISSA Nepal advocacy group was doing, and therefore the two groups jointly organised.

If there is club at the local level we can learn about its functioning. But in our school, there is no child club.

Until now I haven't participated in any activities of child clubs. But I plan to participate in the activities of the child club soon. There are many members in the child club of our school but I don't exactly know what they do through the club. I think the child club once held an awareness programme on violence. But I heard that in [the school] the child club also hosts different awareness-raising activities.

2.6.1 Action phase and collaboration with CLARISSA Nepal advocacy group

During the action preparation phase, the participants chose five schools that the members attended in the ARG location. The participants coordinated with their respective schools and the CLARISSA team coordinated with some others. The participants decided that five students and a child club focal teacher from each school would be invited to a two-day workshop. The participants asked for the CLARISSA team's help in convincing the schools to participate.

During the workshop CLARISSA children shared their evidence, ToC and objectives, plus their definition of advocacy, their issue identification, and their action plan.

2.7 Learning from action and reflection

After-action review and reflections were conducted with participants. They outlined their progress: for example, in one school there had been no child club, but after participating in the workshop they had formed a child club. Other schools who participated in the workshop developed the following actions:

- Drama to raise awareness against child labour, substance abuse, child abuse, and of the importance of education and good family environment.
- Parent–teacher interactions to strengthen the role of parents in supporting their children to continue their education and to raise awareness about good parenting.
- Counselling sessions (group counselling and in-person counselling) for students facing psycho-social issues.

- Art competitions with school students to communicate different social issues using 'Art for Change'.
- Red card campaign against substance abuse (showing red cards and raising awareness against substance abuse/demonstrating no-tolerance for substance abuse at schools.
- Speech competition on various topics including child labour, role of parents, negative influences of friends, the importance of education, and the impacts of substance abuse.
- Poem, song, and video presentations on the above.
- Door-to-door awareness-raising event to address child labour in the settlement.

2.7.1 Reflections

The workshop was fun and insightful.

(ARG member)

I learned about the role of president and how I can include everyone in our club [Wednesday club]. Hope to participate again.

(Workshop participant, child club president)

I learned about child club formation and the role of teachers and other concerned individuals for the club.

(ARG member)

This is a starting phase for us, we have work remaining to do as we have to finalise the plan and implement it accordingly.

(CLARISSA Nepal advocacy group member)

Teachers and students learned a lot in the workshop. I request the participating children to implement the learning of this workshop in behaviour. Also, share your knowledge/learning with other students, after getting back to school. Share about child rights, child club with other students as well.

(Teacher)

The workshop was child-focused and child-participatory. Through this workshop, the children develop teamwork, leadership skills. I request children to share their learnings with other students as well. Similarly, we must complete the action plan and execute them.

(Teacher)

2.8 Beyond the ARG and CLARISSA

This group's action plans made for their respective schools will be further supported by the CLARISSA advocacy group. Furthermore, by deciding to focus on child clubs and activities in coordination with the local ward-level government the group has added value to the sustainability of its actions.

3. Reflections from the facilitator/documenter

Being a part of this ARG has been a very emotional and an uplifting journey for me. The ARG consists of a young group of children – the maximum age of participants was 16 years old and there were a lot of younger children present in the group. These young children with their energy, despite the multiple challenges and issues they face in their life, beautifully highlighted the importance of child centeredness and a participatory approach as they forged an ARG journey at their own pace according to their growing understanding. As a part of the team, I have realised the importance of having a genuine bond with the children and being an active listener and letting the participants take the lead. The regular review and reflection and the little ice-breaking games have been a very good approach to create team bonding. The activities conducted during the rapport- and trust-building phase were a crucial point for children to get comfortable with each other, especially the activities like collage, body-mapping, etc., which helped to build bridges between the younger and older participants. The energy flow in the ARG was very vibrant but despite this there was a certain gap between the participants.

Most of these children worked as street vendors and domestic workers and most of them were very active, vocal, competitive, and had lots of positivity and a learning attitude. However, a few children were silent and inactive. Out of this number some started to gradually open up and stand out, whereas a few remained inactive until the end. The behavior, attitude, and engagement of the children very much depended on their own personal life experiences, further exposing the complexity and sensitivity of the ARG location area. The participants who were facing several issues to do with their family and mental health struggled with gaining confidence to speak up. Some struggled to the end. Also, the power dynamics between the children based on their academic and social status was complex as it created a tag of being a 'good' and 'bad' ARG member based on their understanding. A few times some of the participants were tagged negatively by their fellow ARG members, despite regular orientation on confidentiality.

One of the most important relational and emotional elements of the ARG was the bond and comfortable environment created at the end of the ARG. Many participants who were unknown to each other started to support and motivate each other, forming a strong bond built on mutual understanding and respect. The energetic desire of the children to go deep into the issues and their willingness to make a change in themselves and their neighbourhood was very emotional and motivational. The school that we worked closely with during the ARG period started its own child club and also made an activities plan for the child club addressing issues faced by children. This was an important moment where we witnessed a small ripple towards addressing the issues of the children by the school.

3.1 Challenges and mitigation

- Time management was challenging due to examinations and school activities, so most meetings were held on a Friday.
- A change in facilitator was challenging as it took longer to form the CLARISSA team supporting this group.
- The context of the location itself was very challenging as many participants were facing problems due to family and economic circumstances. Psycho-social counselling was conducted in collaboration with Biswas Nepal, but on the whole participants didn't take up many of these sessions.
- Disparities between active and inactive children was also a challenge. It was reduced by pairing children together.
- Issues like child abuse, child marriage, and school dropout amongst participants affected the regular meeting so extra effort had to put in by the team. Multiple meetings with parents, home visits, and coordination with teachers were conducted.
- Coordinating with some schools was difficult as their management committees didn't give much value to child clubs or child participation. Due to this only four out of five schools participated in the action phase.

4. Reflections from the children

During final reflections, the ARG journey, timeline, challenges, learnings, and things that could have been done differently were discussed.

The participants shared what they felt were their biggest successes, such as one school starting up a child club. Apart from this they discussed how their individual growth and learning had developed along the ARG process and had enabled the participants to become more empathetic and positive minded. However, they also realised that some things could have been done differently (as their level of understanding broadened). Reflections included:

I feel more empathetic. I can respect and understand other people's feelings as we share and listen to other here.

We have also learned about so many important things like child rights, child protection, harassment and exploitation faced by child labourers. Previously I used to tolerate whatever my employer said or did to me. Now, I am capable of speaking against abuse and exploitation.

On what could have been done differently:

I also think that we should have collected more stories during evidence gathering.

In this area there are more than 1,000 children who have similar issues.

Initially it was also challenging for us to collect the life stories as well.

Many of our friends left the ARG so we felt like maybe the group won't go on for long.

Developing the ToC was also very complex for us.

4.1 Achievements

Our school's child club dream came true. That's the biggest thing for me. And also getting to go to [nearby location] is a once in a lifetime opportunity for me.

I liked the fact that teachers were part of our action, and four out of five school supported us and the teacher's joined and actively participated in the workshop.

We are allowed to be real here. I like this thing the most. It is a safe place for us.

We were part of the self-defence training. I still remember many things we learned there and apply it.

I got to participate in a legal training given by other organisation due to CLARISSA.

We also watched the drama performed by Sundhara ARG.

4.2 Bonding

Everyone here has been so familiar to us and we all are like friends.

I think CLARISSA is like my own family.