

# Children Discontinue Studies Due to Family Spending on Alcohol and Addictions

## Nepal Action Research Group 1

June 2024

Theme:	Children forced to discontinue their studies as a result of poor economic conditions resulting from family spending on alcohol and other addictions
Country:	Nepal
Project:	Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA)
Organisation:	Voice of Children (VOC)
Facilitator:	Anita K.C.
Documenter:	Durlav Rayamajhi

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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**

<b>Action Research Group (ARG) name</b>	ARG discontinued education due to alcohol abuse
<b>Theme of ARG (issue being worked on)</b>	Children forced to discontinue their studies as a result of poor economic conditions resulting from family spending on alcohol and other addictions
<b>Start date</b>	January 2022
<b>End date</b>	September 2023
<b>Starting participants (N=total)</b>	Males = 1 Females = 17 People with disabilities = 0 Children who are currently working = 18
<b>Ending participants (N=total)</b>	Males = 0 Females = 5 People with disabilities = 0 Children who are currently working = 2

Source: Author's own.

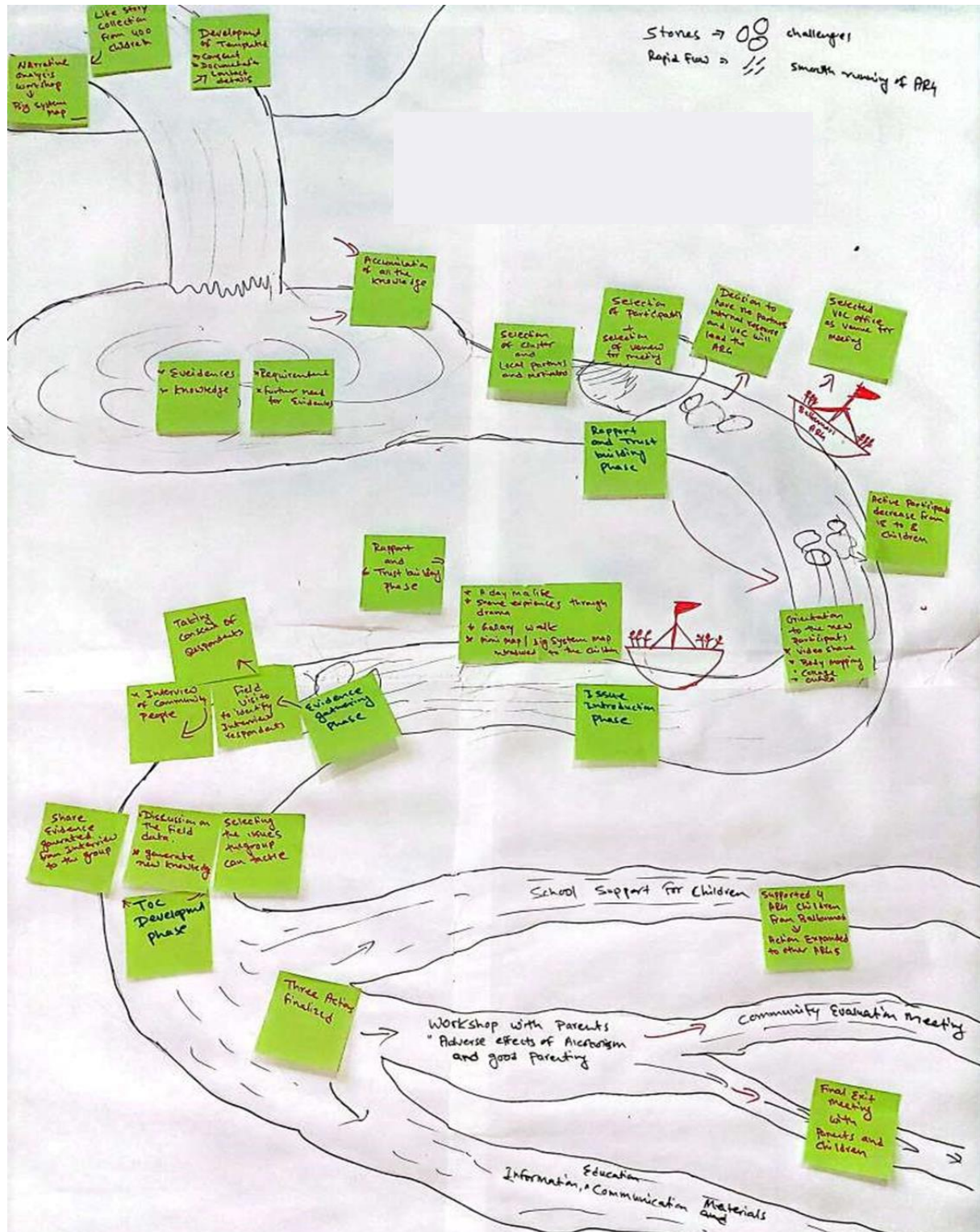
### 1.1 Background/introduction

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

This group worked on the theme (or issue), 'Children forced to discontinue their studies as a result of poor economic conditions resulting from family spending on alcohol and other addictions'. This issue was among eight identified issues from the narrative analysis of life stories in Nepal, focusing on Adult Entertainment Sector (AES) dynamics. This location was selected as the working cluster where the ARG would be formed because the evidence generated from the life stories showed that this neighbourhood and its peripheral communities best fitted the issue that the ARG group would work on.

This location is seen as an emerging hub for in-country migration, especially from the mid-eastern hilly districts of the country, namely Dolakha, Sindhuli, Sindupalchowk, and Bardibas. The availability of cheap dwellings to rent within the area has contributed to the large number of migrants vying to settle there. Furthermore, because of the increasing influx of migrants and because it is connected with the largest cities within Kathmandu Valley (i.e. Kathmandu and Lalitpur), this location is emerging as a hotspot for AES venues such as guesthouses, restaurants, *khaja ghars*, etc. Patan Durbar Square, which is a key tourism hub in the Valley, attracts many street-based vendors to the area – street vending is one initial pathway to AES.

Identifying children for this ARG was difficult because there were no active local organisations that CLARISSA could partner with during the initial days of ARG formation. This also created difficulties in identifying a safe space for the ARG meetings. Later, Voice of Children (VOC) took the responsibility of providing a safe space for the children in the group. To mitigate challenges around group formation, the CLARISSA field coordinator drew on personal connections that she had built in previous jobs to pave the path for the progress of the ARG formation. She also contacted a girl who had shared her story during the CLARISSA life story collection process, which had helped immensely in building trust and rapport. The girl helped with connections to some of her fellow AES workers. Additionally, a Children-Women in Social Service and Human Rights (CWISH) colleague also helped in identifying a few potential children and young people from the Manohara slum to be included in this ARG.

CLARISSA researchers conducted one-to-one meetings with potential children. In these meetings the researchers/facilitators explained ARG objectives, process, participatory approach, and their roles. Consent was taken from those children who showed interest. Induction meetings were then held at the VOC office with children and young people to further familiarise children with the concept of child-led ARGs. The first group meeting was held on 18 January 2022. Eighteen children participated in the meeting.

## 2.2 Key decisions on gathering further evidence

Topics in line with the group issue were explored, such as family dynamics, role of parents, addiction, gender-based violence, domestic violence, school dropout and so on. As well as exploring issues related with the group issue, the group shared their life experiences and that of their wider family and community. Furthermore, children were also exploring where the findings could differ from the issue; for example, on the topic of school dropout due to poor economic background, **BKC09F17** shared, 'It was difficult for me to find anyone with the experience (forced school dropouts) as most of them drop out on their own choice'. Moreover, on the topic of poor economic conditions in families resulting from alcohol consumption leading to children working in the AES, **BKC06F19** explained, 'I found one person who was left by her husband. She works in a hotel due to her poor economic condition but not any alcoholic issue in the family'.

The ARG was formed on the basis of evidence generated from the CLARISSA life stories data set and therefore there was substantial data supporting the issue. During the initial phases of the group, i.e. rapport- and trust-building phase, the children shared their lived experiences and challenges faced by them through art and drama. This helped children build their confidence and encouraged them to voice their concerns and challenges in the group.

The group decided that, although some of the evidence regarding the issue resonated with their lives, they wished to add more evidence and experiences derived from their own lives and community (decided to triangulate the evidence generated from their own experiences, evidence from the data set, and evidence directly coming from the field). Therefore, the group decided to move forward with evidence gathering. Eight of the ARG children therefore undertook a semi-structured interview process to collect the life stories of their peers working in AES venues.

Some of the evidence they collected aligned with the issue; for example, in relation to the evidence **BKC09F17** said, 'Many lives are ruined because of discontinuation of school led by alcoholism and poor economic condition.' The evidence generated different nuances into the understanding of children, however, by helping them to link different issues and their causal relationships, pathways, and consequences. This helped children become more aware of how various issues are interlinked. For example, one of the most important issues which came from the new evidence surrounding the issue of alcoholism was the role of social norms and how they normalised alcoholism. These social norms were seen as 'protecting' alcohol consumption in some Nepali communities, such as the Newar community where it is seen as normal to consume alcohol as part of ritualistic practices. Some of the children now better understood the implications and the damage this practice can cause in families (as was evident in different life stories). The children also came to a realisation of how gender discrimination in a patriarchal society can deprive girls of education, as boys are prioritised. Additionally, evidence allowed children to explore other issues such as children's difficulty in getting daily sustenance because of poor economic conditions, children's psychological suffering at work, the fact that it is easy to find work in the AES sector, and the ways in which alcoholism not only affects the one who is consuming the alcohol (the addict) but others around him/her.

### 2.3 Key decisions on specific issues to tackle

The ARG decided to focus on three issues that were closely interlinked:

1. Discontinuation of school/education;
2. Poor economic condition of the family; and
3. Family's spending on alcohol.

Until the evidence-gathering phase, the group had mainly focused on familiarising with the group issue and on different linkages between the issues and pathways that lead children to the AES. During the evidence-gathering phase new evidence was aligned with the group issue, i.e. children landing in the AES after they leave school, children having to work to support their education, etc. This evidence was then compared with the evidence generated from the big system map prepared during CLARISSA life story analysis. The new evidence helped children to contextualise and connect major issues, causes, and consequences.

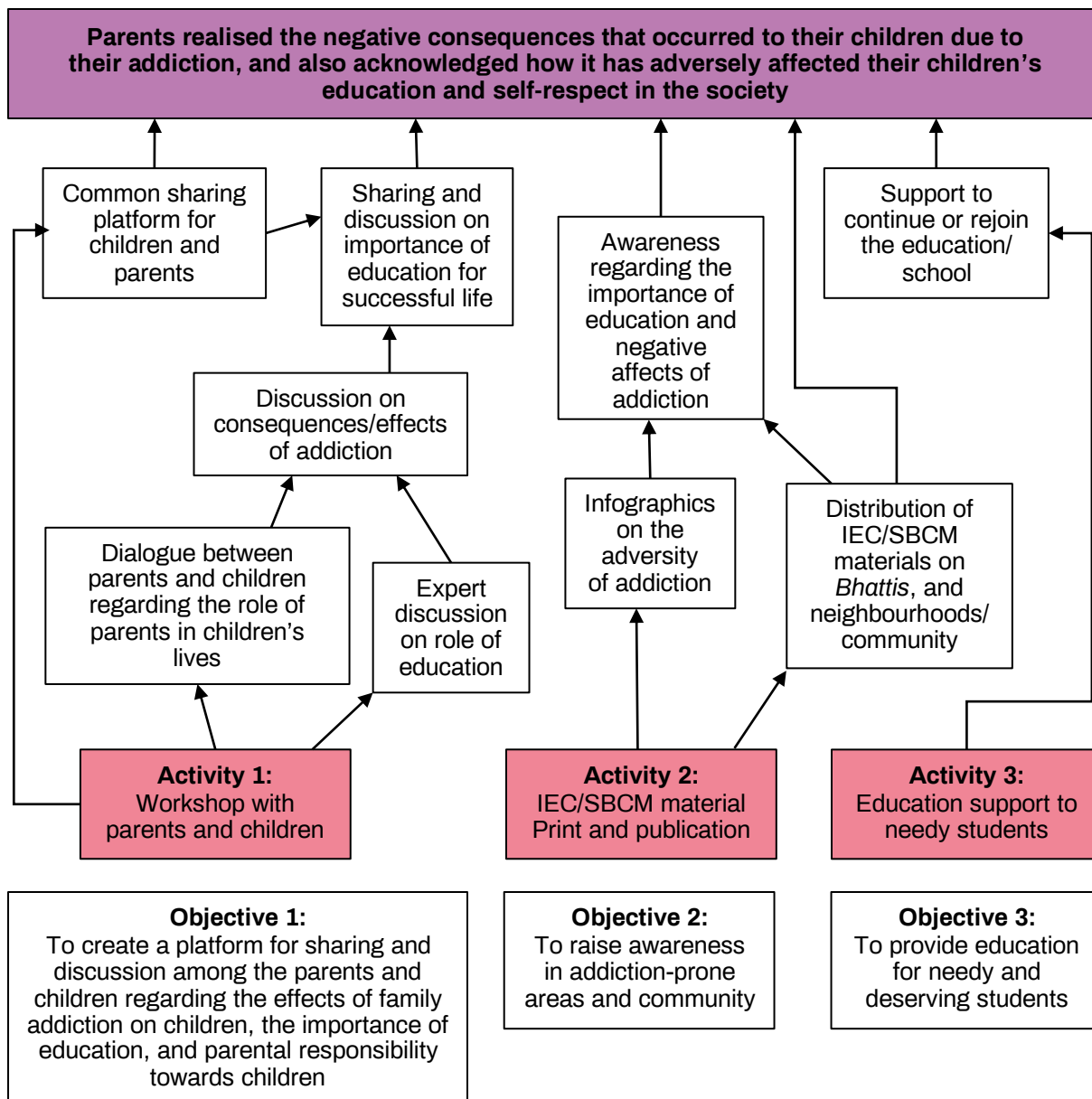
To build up their Theory of Change (ToC) the children first discussed whether to combine all three issues into one or to work on them one by one. It was decided that the issue, 'poor economic condition of the family' would be dropped because it was too broad. Contemplating on the vastness of the issue, **BKC02F19** said, 'Nepal is a poor country. Will we be able to work on issue that is big?'

At first the children also wanted to discard the issue of family addiction, especially alcoholism, as it has been normalised culturally. However, as the majority of the children saw problems with alcohol all around them, they decided to continue on this issue. Reflecting on the issue of alcohol consumption and school dropout, **BKC09F17** says 'I think we should conduct an awareness-raising programme. There are many people around our neighbourhood addicted to alcohol and smoking. Also, there are children who had to leave their studies due to family conditions'. Furthermore, children decided to plan actions that would be impactful not just to mitigate the main issue, but also in relation to other problems stemming from the issue itself, whether within their family or society. Problems such as family disputes were deemed major concerns and an important focus for action. **BKC09F17** explained, 'alcoholism and family disputes are related to each other deeply. Alcoholism leads to problems in family relations.'

The group decided that their second focus should be action to support children forced to drop out from school due to the poor economic condition of their family. The children showed interest in supporting targeted families with actual cases of alcoholism and children not in school. **BKC09F17** suggests, 'What kind of support will we provide? The criteria mean that we need children below the age of 18 with poor economic conditions. I think many from our community can fit into these criteria.'

The group felt they needed a very tangible action that would have great impact within their community, and they chose an awareness and information-related action. It was decided that children would come up with quotes, or statements focusing on the issue and highlighting child rights, children's education, family addiction, etc. They would produce information and communications materials to display in spaces such as schools, community buildings, grocery shops, AES venues and public spaces, targeting community people, children and parents, AES workers including children, adults and business owners, educators, teachers, and the general public.

**Figure 2.2: Theory of Change**



Source: Author's own

## 2.4 Key decisions on actions

The major decisions the group took regarding action planning was to drop the issue of 'poor economic condition of the family' as children felt it was too big an issue to address with limited time and resources. Furthermore, the group also decided to incorporate different issues into one action (alcoholism would be addressed within family relations), and information, education and communications materials would address all three major issues, and lastly, poor economic condition was to be a criterion for the action of school support.

The actions were as follows:

- 1. Workshop with parents and children:** Children organised a two-day workshop on 'Good parenting and the adverse effects of alcoholism'. A psychosocial expert delivered the session. This action was taken primarily to raise awareness of alcoholism and to orient parents and children on maintaining good family relations. Children identified and brought parents from



their communities. The selection criteria the children decided were: parents whose family background is poor, families where alcohol is consumed, and families in which alcohol is consumed and children have dropped out of school.

**2. Information, education and communications materials:** Children decided to print stickers incorporating quotes and messages to raise awareness on alcoholism, the importance of education to children, child rights and such. To distribute these stickers, the children organised a second community meeting at Manohara slum. The children felt that the distribution of the stickers in the community will have an impact; **BKC06F19** says: 'I felt that we are more visible now'.

**3. Education support to needy children:** This group chose 'educational support' as an ARG action. They found four ARG members who were facing issues related to their education. As the government school tuition fee is very nominal and the children were facing multiple issues the group decided to support their monthly school fees (using the CLARISSA innovations fund). With this support: 'One of our members, **doesn't** work right now and a larger contribution goes to the school support that she got. I think the support helped all the children to have freer and easier time.' This action was expanded to other ARGs – specific children had support with admission fees, monthly tuition, and school supplies to prevent them from dropping out of school and to reduce the risk of them entering the AES or selling sex in exchange for school fees.

## **2.5 What did the group learn from their actions and what happened as a result of these actions?**

As a result of the workshop on good parenting and addressing the adverse effects of alcoholism, a community meeting was held at Manohara slum where most of the remaining ARG participants resided. The idea of the meeting emerged after parents shared interest in a meeting in the community. The parents said that the knowledge they had gained during the two-day workshop had been very insightful as well as helpful, as the issues are the realities of the community. The parents felt that it was imperative to expand this knowledge into their community. As such the children ran a session in their community. Instead of just reiterating what happened during the previous workshop, ARG children felt that the community meeting could be a good platform to evaluate the changes and impacts of the previous workshop. The CLARISSA team played the role of observers only during the whole meeting. Regarding the community meeting **BKC09F17** said: 'many people looked at us differently when we organised the workshop, I felt like I earned honour. Because the meeting went very well and people learned a lot, their way of looking at me also changed. I felt so proud.' The team could see clear change in the children in terms of confidence levels after they conducted the community meeting.

## **2.6 Key decision on group transition beyond CLARISSA**

By the time of closing the ARG had five active members. Though the number had shrunk due to children's other priorities the remaining children were still very active and showed leadership. They expressed a wish to not close down the ARG or end it.

To address their request, VOC is facilitating a champions group until 2025, through which the remaining interested children from this ARG can actively participate and grow their leadership skills. They will receive training and interact on topics like climate change and actions, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), leadership, exploring learning platforms, communicating and addressing the issues related to WFCL and so on.

### 3. Reflections from the facilitator/documenter

Running the ARG for a year and half has been a rollercoaster ride for all of us. Especially with the children in this ARG who had no exposure to any previous CLARISSA activities, we had to provide additional attention on developing relationships with the children to build the trust and rapport. Their inconsistent participation throughout the journey was an immense challenge for the facilitators. Every session demanded gentle persuasion, coaxing and fun activities that would attract the children for the next session. Throughout the journey, one of the greatest learnings we took was to be an active listener, an empathetic and active communicator. Communication has been an integral part of the ARG. We felt while reflecting on the process, children really don't understand the steps and phases just as we do, they don't even know how long one phase lasted; however, fun activities were found to be very important in jolting back their memories of the activities and learning in the ARG, so communication and reflection should be an important part here.

Participatory methods and processes diverge from a more traditional approach where the researcher/facilitator plays a more dominant role. One of the greatest learnings we have had from this ARG process was on navigating power dynamics. While interacting with children, if there was bias from our side, like if we prioritised the children based on their performance in the group, we may have neglected the children who really needed the push. Keeping our expectations in check and maintaining equity within the group was necessary. Children picked up how we were behaving with them really fast, and it could create intra-group conflicts within the group. Children may have developed a sense of jealousy, become demotivated to attend the meeting, or even left the ARG. Working with children definitely needed patience and it has been a great learning from the ARG.

#### 3.1 Challenges and mitigations

We had 18 children at the start of the ARG; however, by the closing only five children remained. When we formed the ARG the Covid-19 pandemic was at its peak, and many of the AES venues were closed, helping us retain the children in good numbers. However, as Covid-19 slowly receded, the venues started opening and children resumed their work. Slowly, the number of children started to dwindle, and it was difficult to keep them engaged with us. Being able to retain AES working children has always been a major issue for CLARISSA and we had to always think of means of retention. Building social protection into the programme from the very start could have been an option. The five children who remained were school-going children who either didn't work or worked partially. Two of them got school support as a part of this ARG's actions, which made it possible for the children to continue school as well as with the ARG. On school support, one child, **BKC09F17**, said 'Because of our assessment while giving support, the right child was selected, and it helped them a lot to focus on education. One of our members, **BKC08F14** doesn't work right now, and a larger contribution goes to the school support that she got.'

Initial rapport- and trust-building was challenging as these children weren't exposed to the workings of NGOs or any sort of organisations. We needed them to deeply understand the issue they were working on. On multiple occasions we had to ensure that all activities were contextual and relative to their circumstances. Fun activities or ice breaker activities were found to be effective in making the children more at ease.

Situations such as children gossiping, talking about the family situations of other children in front of everyone, etc., were not uncommon. Some children dominated, others were docile and silent. On one occasion one of the children revealed the identity of other ARG children's fathers as alcoholic, which made the children feel sad and awkward. The facilitator had to remind everyone to maintain confidentiality. Children bickering with each other was also a problem at

times. To solve those challenges, gentle persuasion and leading through example, such as telling them why they need to keep things confidential and how it can affect others negatively, have been useful, however not completely successful.

One challenge we faced was creating a savings account for children. Creating a bank account for the children was not possible due to their lack of citizenship cards. Only two of the ARG members had citizenship cards. We then created a Child Group Savings at VOC, where children saved their money. Some of the children were reluctant to hand over their money to their parents. Children shared that they can't fully trust their parents with their money. Regarding saving, **BKC09F17** says, 'those who have citizenship can open a personal account. Those who don't have, can save in the Child Group Saving account. We don't want to save in our parent's account. If saving is not possible that way, we want our money the way we are getting it right now.'

Mobilising children in the field for evidence gathering was challenging as it was a new process. Orienting them on taking interviews took more time than expected. Children required multiple tries to get one interview done. Sending children in pairs, orienting them, and doing mock tests in the ARG was helpful. After the process, **BKC07F13** shared, 'I learnt a skill for interviewing practically. But it was difficult as the respondent was giving a similar answer to each of our questions. So, I had to keep asking the other way around on the same issue many times'. This demonstrates that field research and taking interviews has been a great learning for the children.

Other challenges include children skipping ARG sessions because of unavoidable situations, such as family members falling ill and children relocating (moving to homes further away).

### **3.2 Proud moments**

The experience of gradual transformation of the children and their demonstration of maturity over the period the ARG ran was one of the proudest moments for facilitators. Though the change wasn't uniform or for every child, the visible change in some of the children was inspiring. Growing relationships with children who have faced a lot of adversities such as workplace abuse, family disputes, having to work in the AES at a young age, and gaining their trust over time was an achievement. Many of the children's experiences were trauma-inducing and emotional, therefore we had to be very careful about when we could probe more. Despite such circumstances, gaining trust and respect from the children was achieved and children gained the strength to share their issues and experiences within the group, which was a moment to cherish as we felt it has helped open a window for children to be more expressive.

Children leading sessions, such as workshops, community meetings, and taking roles such as facilitation, documentation, and identifying participants from the community, were also moments to be proud of.

## 4. Reflections from the children

Towards the end of the ARG process we ran sessions with the children focusing on their journey thus far and how it has capacitated them for a better future. The first assessment we did was on utilising trust, equity as well as ownership tools. This tool helped us in assessing their level of trust and sense of equity as well as feelings of ownership towards the ARG. This activity helped us see the more nuanced aspects of intra-group dynamics, sense of agency in the members, and capacity to make decisions as well as the willingness of the group to take their learnings into their future. We used a trust tool where we asked the children how their trust in each other developed over the months that they had been together. The ARG children felt they have developed a greater degree of trust towards each other in comparison to the past, 'We know many secrets of each other and because others can trust me with their secrets, I also trust them with my feelings'. Children felt that they have been open with their feelings, and were comfortable sharing within the group, thus the sense of trust and respect became much better over time.

Furthermore, children shared that they felt heard in the ARG group, therefore they don't feel left out during conversations. Some of the members admitted that because of age gaps and having their homes in different communities there were certain misunderstandings, however: 'I feel like I am older and sometimes other younger members don't listen to me well. It has made many situations difficult. We are working on it though.' On feeling part of the group all the children were positive. They felt that all the activities as well as actions were possible only because of the collaboration between the group members, **BKC09F17** said 'I feel I am part of the group. The work we do is always together. I have also talked with other members to be together while doing activity.' Furthermore, children felt a special connection with the ARG group and believed that they were a very important part of the group: 'I feel part of the meeting and more over, I am an important part of the group.'

Towards the end, we asked ARG members about their capacity to make change. We wanted to understand what will be the takeaway from this one-and-a-half-year-long process. We got very positive responses from the children. All of the children reported that learnings from the ARG are immensely helpful for them, at present and for their future. Now, they have started to shift their perception of self from learners to educators, or leaders who with certain opportunities can definitely work towards the change in their communities. Children felt that their horizons have enlarged: 'I have also gone to consultancy to learn foreign languages on my own because my horizon has been expanded because of coming to ARG as I have understood life has much to offer and I can achieve much more. If it was me from before, I would have settled with just marriage. I am trying to go to Japan now.' While she is in Nepal **BKC02F19** feels: 'I want to conduct discussion sessions based on our ARG issue. I am looking forward to any opportunity in the future.' **BKC06F19** shared: 'I really want to work more on the issue even after leaving the ARG; however, I don't have a clear path or vision on how I will achieve that without the support of CLARISSA.'

So overall, the children's reflection on the ARG process towards the end has been positive. The only concern children have is over where they will go after they leave CLARISSA or how they will utilise the knowledge they gained through the ARG.