

Paper Boat

A Request
for **your**
support

The Project



A world that unlocks the infinite potential of every child

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Our project enables young people from marginalised communities to access inclusive learning spaces that not only help them to gain a deeper understanding of their rights, but also participate in creative learning activities that enhance their self-esteem and help them to have their voice heard.

Activities such as youth-journalism and film making provide them with an 'alternative media platform' and channels of communication through which they can explore and transform their world.

We provide them with the 5 essential learning competencies - creativity, collaboration, critical curiosity, consciousness and commitment - that build their self-esteem and furnish them with the skills needed to unlock their infinite potential.

Introduction

One of the primary aims of the latest Indian Education Policy (2019) is to improve the quality of education for all children. However, there remain persistent challenges in government schools which call into question the quality of learning that children from the most excluded communities have access to.

These include poor quality teaching and learning materials, a curriculum that does little to inspire and is often 'divorced' from the lives and communities of the children that are learning it, and poorly qualified teachers.

A propensity for outmoded pedagogic approaches persists, including rote learning and 'teaching for exams' (a legacy of colonial models of education that continue in government schools to this day).

However, the following extract from the Policy Report indicates that the government's current direction of travel is closely aligned with the vision, values and ethos of Paper Boat's creative learning spaces:

“ The entire school education curriculum will be reoriented to develop holistic learners and develop in learners higher order skills of **critical thinking, creativity, logical deduction, collaboration and teamwork, social responsibility, multilingualism, quantitative reasoning, and digital literacy.**

Learning will thus move away from rote memorisation. If and when rote learning is used, it will always be pre-accompanied by context and motivation, and post-accompanied by analysis, discussion, and application.

The curriculum will aim at enabling learners to attain learning outcomes relating to all curricular areas, including sports, science, art, language, literature, and ethics education, thereby ensuring that all children and youth receive an education that **helps realise their potential**, in all realms, to the fullest. ”





It is now widely acknowledged that children living in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world will need to develop a set of learning skills that enable them to handle these challenges.

The ability to iterate and adapt, adopt playful, imaginative and creative approaches to problem solving and project-based learning are all essential according to a variety of organisations – including the British Council, the Lego Foundation and the Durham Commission on Creativity in Education.

If India is to have any chance of responding to its ‘youth employment bulge’ with 12 million young people expected to enter the job market every year for the next two decades – skills fit for employment in the 21st century are going to be vital. At the most recent DAVOS gathering these skills were identified as ‘creativity, complex problem solving and critical thinking’.

Our project responds to this need by establishing alternative community-based creative learning spaces that:

- a) support children to develop what are increasingly recognised as the three most important skills for children in the 21st Century – creativity, complex problem solving and critical thinking.
- b) enable children from the most marginalized backgrounds to ‘unlock their potential’ through creative learning opportunities
- c) Reinforce and extend what children learn in school – thereby mitigating against the pressure to drop out.

Invisible Communities/Silenced Voices

Children who come from 'invisible' communities, like the Koravar and the Irular, not only experience high levels of socio-economic exclusion but also frequently face systemic abuse and human rights violations – compounding the difficulties they face in formal learning environments.

For example the Koravar have been labelled as a 'criminal caste' – a phenomenon with its roots in the colonial administration of India. The community is widely seen as 'criminal or deviant from birth'.

As such adults are vulnerable to false imprisonment and systematic police abuse. Children are labelled deviant in school and experience substantial pressure to drop out. The Irular tribal communities are particularly vulnerable to bonded labour – the most common form of modern slavery. This occurs when a person is forced to pay off a debt, often tricked into working for little or no pay and with no control over their debt. It has been common in many industries in Tamil Nadu including silk looms, rice mills and brick kilns.



In the worst cases children as young as 5 work for 12-14 hours a day and UNICEF highlight that bonded labour 'usually keeps children out of school, in poor health and subject to psychological and physical abuse'.

It is well documented that children who come from Dalit (former 'untouchable') communities experience what is often referred to as a 'wounded psyche'. Having been told from birth that they are 'impure, unclean and inferior' owing to their subordinate position in the stratification system – falling outside the accepted 'caste system' – they experience low levels of self-esteem and self-belief which have a knock on effect on their educational chances.

Our Project

Paper Boat responds to this situation by enabling young people from these marginalised communities to access inclusive learning spaces that not only enable them to gain a deeper understanding of their rights, but also participate in creative learning activities that enhance their self-esteem and help them to have their voice heard.

Based on internationally recognised educational research, we have designed a 'tool-kit' for use within our Children's Hubs that enable children to take part in 'project-based' learning and furnish them with the skills to lead transformative change in their communities.

There is a substantial body of evidence to suggest that supporting young people to develop skills that foster creativity, complex problem solving and critical thinking is integral to solving challenges such as persistent poverty, inequality and exclusion.

Over the last few years the number of individuals, organisations and authorities highlighting the importance of creativity, play and imagination in children's emotional and cognitive development has not only increased but also become more diverse.



Alongside the British Council and Lego Foundation, The World Economic Forum, the OECD and Ministry of Education in India all acknowledge the value of creativity and imagination as essential skills for life, learning and work in the 21st Century.

One of the most important facets of creativity - and what makes it so central to life in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world - is the role that it has to play in helping people adapt and iterate in the face of a rapidly changing global context.

Our goal is to shape world class creative learning spaces where children at the margins can connect, play, create and imagine.

The recent COVID 19 outbreak reveals just how important ‘rapid innovation and adaptability’ is for leading transformative change. Old educational paradigms that rely on ‘simple knowledge transfer’ are no longer adequate. As the **LEGO Foundation** notes:

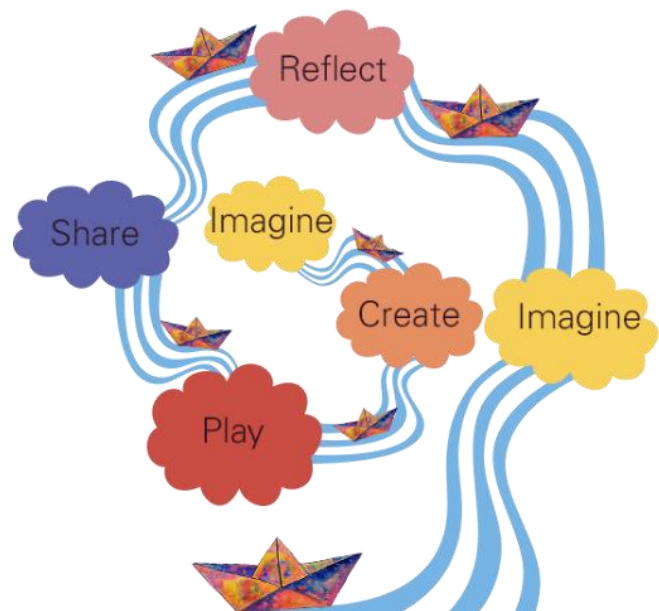
“ In an age of rapid innovation, technological advances, and societal challenges, children need a diverse set of skills to navigate unpredictable dilemmas and novel opportunities – both in life and in work. The acquisition of knowledge alone is no longer sufficient for them to survive and thrive in their new reality.

For today’s children, creativity is a critical skill and mindset, one that is personally meaningful and that children can develop through play. There is a growing consensus that creativity can benefit children themselves, as well as their communities, societies, and economies at large.

The creative thinking that children develop through play today can support them in everyday challenges, as they contribute to their communities, and eventually as they work to address the world’s social, economic and political issues. ”

Paper Boat’s approach has been deeply influenced by one programme in particular, funded by the Lego Foundation – MIT’s ‘Learning Creative Learning’ programme.

This programme highlights the importance of a creative learning spiral that we have placed at the heart of our model and ethos. The creative learning spiral is important for ‘design thinking’ – a deeper understanding around what drives innovation (not just in products and services but also social change).



This approach helps children to discover new solutions to problems – it follows a spiral of imagine, create, play, share, and reflect – a continuous loop that frames innovative and entrepreneurial approaches to learning.

Mitch Resnick, MIT Media Lab’s lead on the ‘Learning Creative Learning’ online course states:

“ We think of this spiral as something that starts with imagination. You start with imagine. So you have an idea, and then you create. So it goes from imagine to create, you create something based on those ideas.

And then you play and experiment with your creation. And then you share with others and collaborate with others. And then you might step back and reflect upon it. And through that reflection, you start imagining again. So it's this spiral that keeps going and going, from imagine, create, play, share, reflect and then more imagination. ” ”

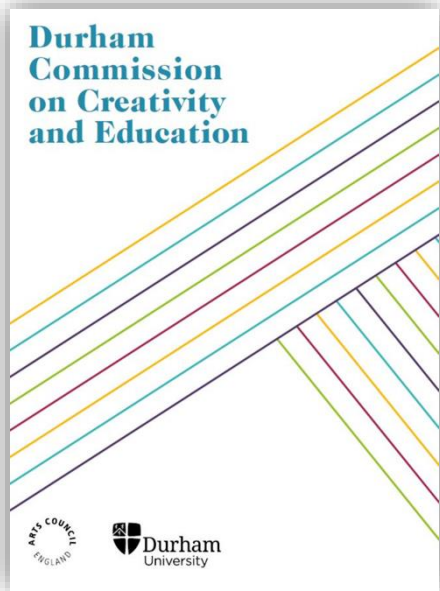


Children deeply engage with a problem, issue, challenge or something that they are passionate about through a positive lens of looking at 'new possibilities' and, through a project-based approach, tinkering and adapting to see what works.

This is the core component of the Paper Boat tool-kit that we are seeking funding for to further develop and cascade to more communities.

Our tool, which we refer to as the Paper Ark is a simple but powerful model that helps children identify real world issues in their communities and develop creative solutions through playful, imaginative and collaborative micro-projects that follow the trajectory of the creative learning spiral.





In 2020 the 'Durham Commission on Creativity and Education' published its findings from the joint research collaboration between Durham University and the Arts Council of England.

It was set up in response to the strength of opinion across business, education and public sectors that young people are emerging into a world in which the skills and knowledge of the current education system will no longer be sufficient.

The commission recommended that:

- Schools and learning environments should establish and sustain conditions in which creativity is nurtured, recognised and encouraged
- Arts and culture should be an essential part of the education of every child
- The education system should support young people to engage creatively and critically with digital technology
- In school opportunities to develop creativity should be complemented by diverse routes to take part in creative activities outside school hours
- Young people need creative capacities that employers seek and that will enable them to be resilient and adaptable to pursue portfolio careers and engage in lifelong learning.

Paper Boat's Children's Hubs respond to all of these recommendations – we blend digital technology (photography and film making) with traditional arts, crafts and cultures (art, drama, sculpture, folk music and storytelling) to provide diverse 'creative gateways' for young people.

Complex problem solving, critical thinking and creativity are essential life-long learning skills for every child growing up in a rapidly changing and unpredictable world. They are particularly important for the young people that Paper Boat works with.

Children who live their lives at the margins are all too often invisible and unheard.

Our playful and inclusive learning spaces help them to harness their creativity so that are seen, heard, valued and empowered - able to contribute to their communities and change their world.



Inside our Children's Hubs

Paper Boat Children's Hubs use a two-tiered approach to learning that blends play and imagination with deep knowledge about child-led advocacy and change.

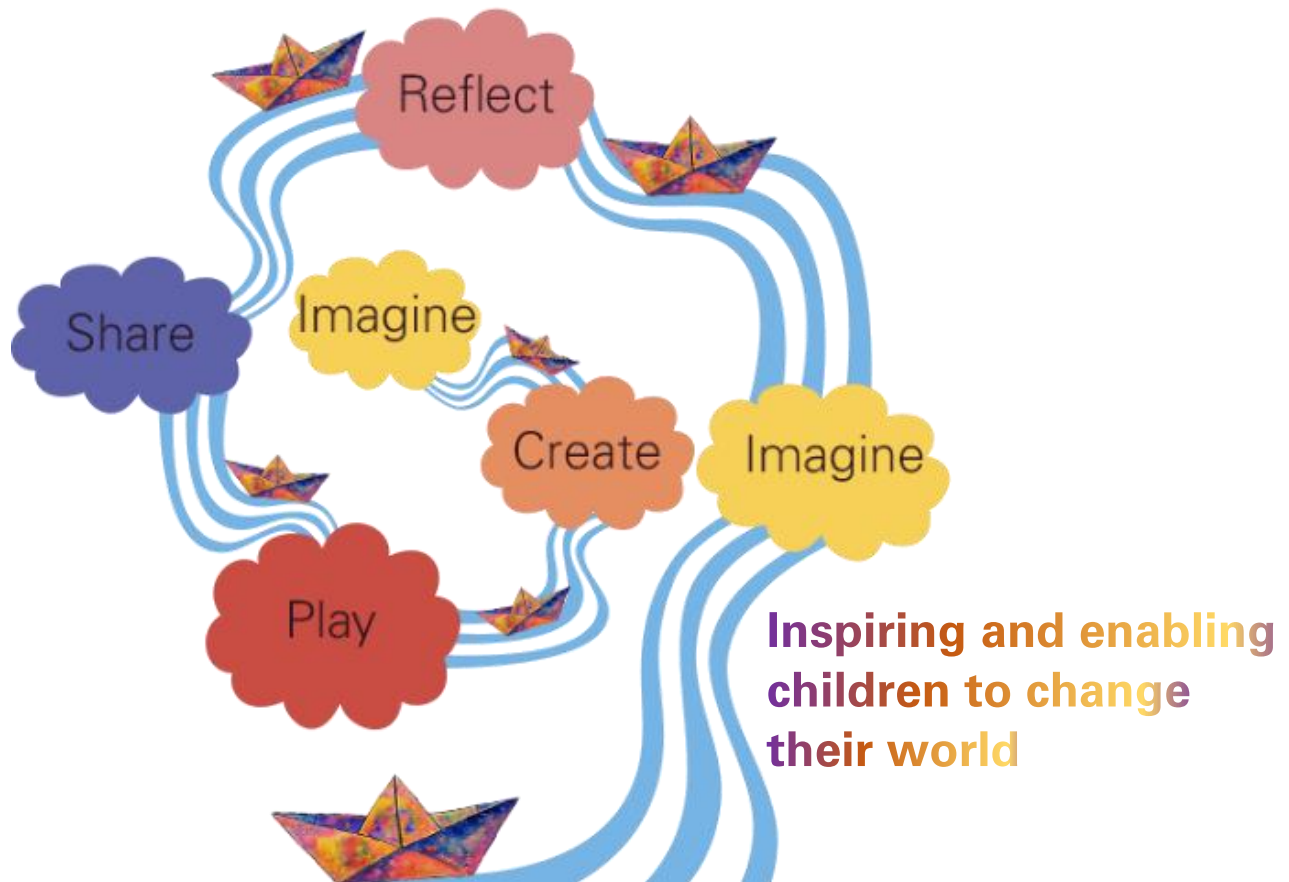
Firstly, we train community facilitators so that they can support young people to develop essential learning skills that are foundational for creative problem solving.



Art, sculpture, music, drama, storytelling, filmmaking and photography are all used to stimulate creativity and imagination. Many young people, particularly those on the margins, do not have an opportunity to access these kind of learning experiences in formal school settings.

Secondly, we develop innovative learning resources for use within the hubs that enable young people to engage in project-based problem-solving activities.

Children build on this by harnessing their creative skills to collaborate on small scale projects that help them to lead change in their communities.



Inspiring and Enabling

Inspiring – creative gateways

Paper Boat works with some truly inspirational creative professionals who are passionate about using their expertise and experience to inspire and enable children to change their world.

Our children's hubs provide a variety of creative gateways to stimulate and inspire. Within these learning spaces children can build their confidence, resilience and acceptance of self. They learn to understand and exercise their rights and begin to see the infinite potential in their own lives.

Art

When children are invited to create something new without strict rules or rigid instruction – for example through painting, drawing or sculpture – it allows them to explore uncharted waters. They discover and tap their own sources of inspiration. This invitation and freedom to play is a key part of the journey towards creative problem solving as children learn to experience joy in crafting their ideas and observations in fresh and novel ways.



Photography and Film making

Photography and film making allow children to express and capture the world as they see it. It is their window onto their world and children take huge pride in displaying and sharing their photographs and films with others.

They delight in the recognition that this brings, helping to build self-esteem as they see the value that their creations can have for others. Children relish the opportunity to exhibit their work to wider audiences.

Journalism

Children in the hubs publish their own magazine “Engal Kural” which translates as “Our Voice”. All of the content comes from the children, who also make up the editorial committee.



Youth journalism presents a fantastic opportunity for critical engagement with the world around them, and a platform through which to make their voices known. This can give children confidence to engage with local issues and bring their concerns to the panchayat (village council).



Social Drama

Children are supported to use drama to explore real world issues and challenges that matter to them.

They are invited to play with scenarios and imagine how their characters might respond equipping them with the skills and experience to solve problems in their own lives.

The children perform their plays and skits to the wider community inviting dialogue as children pave the way for change.

Dance, Folk Songs, Storytelling and Drumming

Within the hubs our partners encourage children to reclaim and rejoice in the traditional art forms of their communities which can be devalued and stigmatised by others. For example, the pariah drum is often considered an 'unclean' instrument because it is used at funerals and the people who play them are seen as 'impure'.



Children from different parts of society come together and learn to play these drums in new ways, turning it from a symbol of exclusion to one of celebration and unity.

Enabling – The Paper Ark

Antoine de Saint-Exupery (author of *The Little Prince*) said “If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to gather wood and don't assign them tasks and work. Instead, teach them to yearn for the endless immensity of the sea.”

These words beautifully capture why harnessing the creative and playful spirit in children is so important if they are to set sail for distant horizons. However, there are other waypoints on this journey that are equally important.

Children need to develop a range of practical skills and diverse attributes that will help them to think ahead, adapt and iterate in smart ways as they voyage. This helps them to cope when seas get rough or winds blow from unexpected directions.

Paper Boat's flagship initiative is a unique 'toolkit' for helping children to develop these essential skills through experiential, project-based learning. It is a flexible resource that is constantly evolving as we learn and respond to the needs, aspirations and priorities of children, partners and communities.

We call it the Paper Ark.

The Paper Ark draws upon the ground-breaking work of our Collaborative Development Partner, Caplor Horizons, in identifying 5 essentials of learning referred to as 'The 5 c's of Learning':

- **Creativity**: a willingness to explore alternative ideas, experiment, take risks, be wrong, learn in new ways, have fun and be playful
- **Critical Curiosity**: the desire to ask questions, challenge the thinking, drill down, find a deeper meaning, enquire further and discover answers that work
- **Collaboration**: the willingness to learn with and from others, to problem solve together, share ideas but also retain independent thought
- **Commitment**: the drive, will, persistence and resilience to keep going, bounce back and deal with negative feelings as we learn
- **Consciousness**: the ability to be self-aware about our learning preferences, to reflect on thoughts and ideas, to develop learning strategies and think about the learning process

The Paper Ark is an experiential learning tool which invites children to imagine which animals 'best represent' these 5 C's of learning – for example an ant might represent 'collaboration' or an owl 'critical curiosity'.

This then gives the children in each hub a 'shared and playful language' through which to engage in a range of project-based activities that help them develop these skills (to be the best 'owl' they can be, or to join together with an 'excellent ant' if they need to work together on a project).

The possibilities and permutations are endless as children and facilitators in the hubs explore the different animals that are needed on their Paper Ark depending on the purpose of their voyage.



Facilitators invite children to explore real-world challenges using the metaphor of a voyaging ark, with animals representing different skill, qualities and attributes.

Our 'whole community' approach

Paper Boat currently operates 18 Children's Hubs.

13 are in the poor rural locations of the Kovilpatti District, Tamil Nadu. The children are predominantly from Dalit (former 'untouchable') villages and communities, designated as 'Most Backward Caste' or 'Other Backward Caste' and falling below the poverty line.

5 hubs are in Urban Deprived Areas (formerly referred to as 'urban slums') where the majority of children will also come from Dalit or 'backward caste' communities.

Each hub caters for between 25-30 children with approximately 540 children being direct beneficiaries of the Children's Hub activities.

The 18 hubs are part of a wider support infrastructure aimed at ensuring the whole community (including village councils, village education committees, schools and parents) recognises and values youth agency and creative learning spaces. Paper Boat conceptualises 'learning space' as much broader than the 'physical space' where children come to learn (either the formal school building or the Children's Hub).

Our 'whole community' approach includes:



1. Parent's Collectives

These are forums for the parents of the children participating in our hubs to come together and discuss issues and themes that emerge.

They are opportunities for parents (often illiterate themselves, having only received limited formal schooling) to gain a deeper understanding about the activities and purpose of the Children's Hubs.

Parents can learn more about the importance of children's agency and the significance of children's rights.

This means that the whole community becomes a space that nurtures children's creativity and leadership and helps to embed the hubs within the local community, enhancing local ownership and therefore project sustainability.

Each hub normally has around 13-15 parents involved in the Parent's Collectives, with approximately 270 parents involved across all project sites.

2. Child Rights Monitoring Committees

This is an important and diverse group of people from the local community, consisting of children and adults.

It's primary purpose is to support the local community to develop a deeper understanding of children's rights, as enshrined in key national and international agreements, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (including the right to education and the right to a decent childhood).

The group plays an advocacy and awareness raising role and training is provided by CEDAR to ensure that they perform this role effectively. Members are recruited to the committee and liaise with key local authorities including the village council, village education committee and local schools.

The committee usually comprises 5-10 people – including representatives from the Children's Hub, adult volunteers from local self-help groups, and a 'civic leader', who represents the panchayat or Village Committee. Approximately 150 people directly involved across the project.

3. Collaboration with the local school

The project establishes direct links between these structures and the local schools in a variety of ways.

Almost half of our Children's Hubs are located in school premises, so that the schools feel ownership and understand the value of alternative creative learning spaces for children. This strengthens a 'whole community' approach to children's agency and leadership.

The project team also raise awareness and provide training opportunities for teachers from local schools where our hubs are based. This helps to deepen their understanding of the benefits of informal/creative learning spaces for children by reinforcing and extending what is learned in school.

During the next 12 month period, we will be delivering a workshop for up to 50 teachers.

Our request for your support

We are seeking funding for scaling this approach to 2 new 'hard to reach' communities – the Irular, located in Kanchipuram, and the Kuravar, located in Tanjore.

Long term, our objectives are to establish 10 additional Children's Hubs (and support structures) in Irular Villages and 10 additional Hubs (and support structures) in Kuravar Villages. However, for the purposes of this funding proposal, we are only seeking funding for one prototype hub in each community.

We will be working with two community-based partners: **Children Watch** and the **Tribal Dalit Initiative** (which comprises 15 grassroots organisations).



Funding

We are seeking funding from individuals totaling £5,000, as a contribution towards two key components of this project:

1. Design and development of the prototype Paper Ark tool kit
2. Set up and roll-out of Children's Hubs in 2 hard to reach communities over a 12-month period.

Paper Boat has invested £43,695 in the 2019/20 period to support the 18 existing Children's Hubs. These have supported approximately 1,000 direct beneficiaries, including 540 children and 270 parents, representing a cost of £54 per beneficiary.

In the 2020/21 financial year, Paper Boat will seek to secure a further £50,000 to consolidate our programme in the existing 18 hubs and scale up activities to support the development of 10 Children's Hubs in Irular communities and 10 Children's Hubs in Kuravar communities. This will increase the number of beneficiaries to more than 1,300 children and adults from some of the hardest to reach communities in Tamil Nadu.

£5,000 will enable Paper Boat and our partners to develop the essential tools and resources, provide the training that is required to support the process and prototype the Children's Hub model in two pilot communities.

This will generate the evidence that will help us to make the case for scaling our programme, and larger contributions could fund additional villages in hard to reach communities benefitting from the programme at an earlier stage.

Measuring our impact

Our model has a proven track record of success and draws on our partner CEDAR's learning over a 25-year period.

We have developed and refined our approach in 144 villages that had been vulnerable to child labour. This includes a 5 year Programme called 'Southern Collective for New Initiatives on Childhood'.

A CEDAR report, entitled 'In Search of Childhood' (2013), documents the impact of this project partnership (with Action Aid and other local NGOs), aimed at the abolition of child labour in a region known as the 'matchmaking belt' of India. Children as young as 5 were employed in 'cottage industry' matchmaking and therefore either never enrolled in school, or dropped out because of household poverty.

CEDAR's model initially helped to increase awareness in the local community about children's rights and the harmful impact of child labour (through the child-rights monitoring committees, parent's collectives and engagement with local authorities).



Alternative learning spaces helped to supplement what children were learning in school, improved children's agency by giving them a voice and helping them to understand their rights – thereby contributing to increased enrolment, retention and achievement in formal education.

The project reached between 25,000 to 30,000 children with CEDAR playing a key coordinating role – helping to build the capacity of other local partner NGOs and leading on design, delivery and impact assessment.

Between 2007 – 2011 there was a 72% reduction in children out of school and 95 villages out of the total 144 were declared 'child labour free' by the end of the project. There was additional evidence of 95% enrolment and retention of children between the ages of 6-14 in school.

One of the major findings of this project was that whilst children were being prevented from falling into child labour, and access to school had improved, there were still significant challenges around the quality of learning that the children were getting.



Formal schooling was not equipping young people with the skills and competencies for critical and creative thinking or complex problem solving.

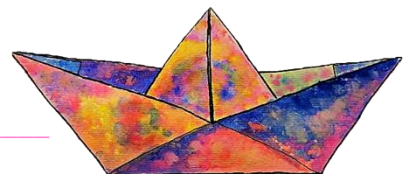
This is what prompted CEDAR to develop the Children's Hub approach, bringing more than 4,500 children together participate in creative learning.

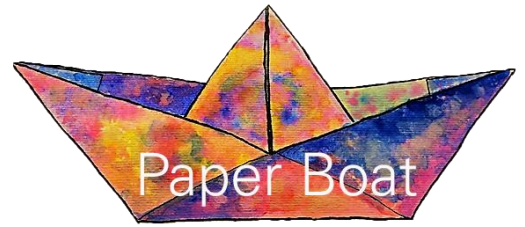
This enabled children to articulate and debate their priorities and needs, increase their self-confidence and self-esteem, and supported them to lead transformative change in their communities through 'children's collectives'.

The current Children's Hub model draws on learning and evidence from the Southern Collective for New Initiatives on Childhood programme (2007-2011), as well as evidence of impact from the most recent investment by Paper Boat into the 18 current Children's Hubs above.



Inspiring and enabling children to change their world





Our Vision

A world that unlocks the infinite potential of every child

Our Purpose

To listen to young people – inspiring and enabling them to change their world

Our Mission

To establish playful and creative learning spaces at the heart of communities through innovative partnerships

Our Values

Courage – child centred

Creativity – innovative action

Collaboration – stronger together

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