3-5 FEB 2017

YOUTH VIKALP SANGAM

Contents

The Youth Vikalp Sangam was held in Bhopal from Feb 3rd to 5th at Poornodaya Training Centre. The Sangam was co-organised by ComMutiny-The Youth Collective (CYC), Pravah, Samvedhana, Blue Ribbon Movement, Synergy Sansthan, Agrini and Kalpavriksh. The Sangam was a vibrant event, that saw 68 participants from 17 States across the country come together. Most were associated with youth collectives or worked with young people on issues like education, social inclusion and change, livelihoods, alternative spaces for learning, developing leadership, journalism/media and agriculture.

The Youth Sangam was a fun-filled and joyous celebration of the enthusiasm and positivity of all who participated. Overall, it was a journey from looking inwards or the Self, to Society.

Vision for holding a Youth Vikalp Sangam:

To create a space/confluence of youth led and youth engaging organizations, as well as youth leaders to share alternative perspectives and practices to promote and enable young people to become effective facilitators of a new consciousness that connects self to society.

Design principles:

While planning the Youth Vikalp Sangam, the following were the broad design principles that were kept in mind while laying out the plan for the three day event:

- o Inclusiveness (bringing in all voices),
- o Interactive (spaces to freely interact)
- o Participative (creating opportunities for participation)
- o Creative (in terms of activities)
- o Balance of discourse and activity
- o Building relationships

Pre-event preparation:

1) Participant profile shared: Basic information that was shared by participants as they registered for the Vikalp Sangam was shared with all. This was made available in English and Hindi.
2) Phone calls were made to as many participants as possible three to four weeks before the Sangam to establish a relationship with the participant and chat to them about their expectations from the event.
3) A google group was formed of the participants before the event, inviting them to share a few words about themselves, in addition to what was already shared in the profile. This was to help get familiar with the participants as people and get to know a bit about their work before meeting them face to face.

The Sangam started with participants creating profiles of themselves as they registered. Participants drew pictures or wrote about themselves on small chart papers, which were then strung up in the Sangam hall.

Personal gifts and social lifts[1]

After a warm welcome to all participants from Ajay and Lokashish, the day started with participants introducing themselves briefly. This was done around a map of India that was placed in the centre of the room. Participants had been requested to bring a fistful of traditional grain from their area. As each participant introduced him/herself, h/she placed the grain in the State or region they were from or identified with on the map. They also introduced their organizations, and shared their hope from the Sangam and what they were bringing to it. The list of participants is given in Annexure 1.

The activity using a map threw up the question of physical/national boundaries and what they mean to different people. The two participants from Jammu and Kashmir shared that using a map for the activity was something that they did not like as the creation of boundaries for them was a deeply sensitive issue. Some of the participants agreed with them saying that boundaries of nations divide people and regions.

Introduction to Vikalp Sangam and to the Youth Vikalp Sangam

A brief introduction to "Vikalp Sangam" was done where the reasons for holding Sangams across the country were shared. This was followed by sharing the vision behind the Youth Vikalp Sangam, the reasons for holding it as well as the broad plan for the three days.

Mera Savera- Participant Sharing through photo language[2]

Mera Savera was an activity to help participants connect, bring out the discontent and unease they experience personally as well as particularly in the context of their work with young people, and share their deepest fears or hopes. It was also an effort to create an authentic, trustful space for participants to share from their heart.

---

[1] This session can be viewed at http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/youth-sangam-videos/#.WPSTUxQp3ww
[2] This session can be viewed at http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/youth-sangam-videos/#.WPSTUxQp3ww

A variety of photographs were placed in the room, depicting a range of images from nature, to people, to emotions and actions.

Through a meditation exercise, the facilitator read out a few statements and asked participants to reflect on the question, 'What keeps you awake at night?' Each chose a photograph that best represented their deepest fear or hope for themselves or young people in society. A very personal and deep sharing took place in small groups, with the essence being shared in the plenary.

Some issues that kept people up at night ranged from: lack of employment opportunities in villages, urbanization, violence and pain that people suffer, destruction of nature, compartmentalization between people, feelings not honored and losing connection with others.

The essence shared in the entire group:

- ～ Unlearning and acceptance are important.
- ～ It is important for us as individuals to practice the vision that we have.
- ～ We should not lose hope when we struggle with our personal and professional challenges and when we live our passions.
- ～ Understand the interlinkages between *Vikas*, *Vinash* and *Vikalp* (Development, destruction and alternatives).
- ～ Let us not have multiple dreams, but be multiple people with one dream.
- ～ We have to move from one to oneness, including all forms of life.
- ～ We are all getting caught up in the flow of "development".

Dastangoi - Insights from sharing best practice in terms of our work with young people and alternatives.

Groups were formed around 5 themes - Economics and livelihoods, Education, Governance, Inclusion, and Youth Development to share best practices, learning and insights from the work they were engaged in.

Below are the key ideas that emerged out of the discussion.

Education: The group discussed about the problems of the mainstream education system that focuses so much on grades that other ways of learning are completely ignored. Working with young people requires patience, which is usually not expressed in the way work happens. Various other forms of learning like theatre, songs, poems, and dance can also be the way to understand social issues. Practical learning through Nature walks through forest and birding can instil interest in the environment. There is a dire need to work on emotional wellbeing, mental health and some sort of facilitation to improve self-image of children. Learning can be from various sources and will be most relevant if it is localised.

Livelihoods: Livelihood is about life and not just about a means to earn, but about ways of being. Hence, dignity is a very important component of livelihood. The group questioned whether accessibility to markets is empowering livelihoods or destroying livelihoods. Intervention has to be at two levels: 1) Education –change the way work is looked at 2) policies: local need +local resources, Traditional knowledge +modern technology. The group felt the need to explore the role of money.

Youth Development: Any youth development initiative has to be co-led with youth. Initiatives should offer an experiential fun learning space that gives an opportunity to explore and innovate. The stakeholders need to have the space to experience realities, make mistakes and consequently learn from them.

Governance: Youth has to be part of decision making processes because it is only this way that they can expand their learning and will be able to connect to the realities of life. Space for self reflection is very important for any governance structure. An environment that thrives on love, compassion and trust can help in bringing out key issues and resolving them in consultation with the older generation of the community. The group came up with a liner '*Jiska Sawal uska netrativ*'(leadership of the questioner).

Inclusion: The inclusive spaces would be safe and accessible spaces that give voice to actual stakeholders. The exclusionary boundaries of man/woman/transgender etc. need to be dissolved, which can only happen when the attitude of the mind is changed without any external force. Empathy is a very crucial value of any inclusion process, like in case of disability. We cannot eradicate disability but we need to empathise and accept persons with disabilities. Accept, empathise, and empower.

Kabir Mandali

The first day of the Sangam was celebrated by a Kabir performance post dinner. A local group called the Kaluram Bamaniya and Mandali performed well-known and less-known Kabir songs which were focussed on deepening the understanding of the self. The spirited performance was followed by a brief interaction on how and why the mandali started and the inspiration they continue to draw from Kabir.

The second day started with a small action game from Gaurav. It was fun and created the mood and the participants reviewed the previous day's sessions. A few volunteers shared their observations with the larger group.

Jhol-Jhamela

To analyse and appreciate what we are up against in the larger context, an activity was designed around selling laddus. Four groups were formed and each group had four laddu sellers. The rest of the participants were paired and were assigned the role of buyers. A few rounds were played with each pair told that they had a hundred rupees, and a need for laddus. They could decide how many kilos they needed and how much they wanted to spend.

All groups shared experiences of the negotiations at the laddu shops that transpired in each round of the activity. Some of the learning from the activity was:

- Issue of accessibility of the activity to a disabled participant was raised.

- In the reviews of sellers, they all shared various tactics they applied to maximise the profit and at the same time to get the business.

- At the same time, the buyers also explored options to gain maximum benefit.

- Issues of inequity of labour were raised.

- There were compromises and certain people stuck to the rules of the activity. A valid observation was made that we always take away things as communicated or practiced. But we should challenge and see, what best we can do in altering certain aspects.

- Importance of organizing collectives and of policy in free markets.

- Applying the learning from the game to society the following were raised: what if we break all the rules and regulations in power relations? Invisible design of the "system" and do we change it from within or from outside?

- This simulation activity is a good way to introduce ideas of and building a shared understanding of various forms of oppression or iniquitous power relationships

Khana Khaa-jaana : Vikalp Food Sangam

An effort was made to include some local food in the food menu during the Sangam. Some dishes were made of millets like kodo, bajra and kutkuti. Archana who works with Miraculous Millets helped the cooks in the Poornodaya mess in making dishes from these millets as they were not used to cooking these. Archana spoke of her group's efforts to bring traditional food practices back. She spoke of the immense environmental and health benefits of millets, and its role in strengthening the local economy. The group also discussed about the role of the Government and PDS system in promoting or discouraging the cultivation and consumption of local traditional crops and food habits.

Aashayein humare dil ki : Our aspirations around alternatives

Deepening our understanding and broadening our discussion around the Vikalp spheres and principles (For detailed discussions see annexure 2)

The Alternatives Framework note has been evolving since the first Vikalp Sangam which was held in 2014. This note tries to understand what is meant by an alternative, brings together experiences of various on ground practices/initiatives and aims to help in envisioning an alternative future. This note was represented in the Youth Vikalp Sangam through an illustration of a tree, where in the roots of the tree were the values, the trunk formed the worldview, different branches represented different sectors and the leaves formed the specific initiatives and activities within those sectors. These values, sectors, and initiatives were picked up from various discussions since Day 1 with the aim of discussing them further in this session.

With the aim of making the Framework more relatable and experience based, some keywords were picked up from the Jhol Jhamela exercise to elaborate the 5 spheres – Ecological, Cultural and Knowledge Systems, Economic, Social, and Political mentioned in the Alternatives Framework. Thus, introducing the 5 spheres of the Framework, a discussion was initiated on what is the need for such a framework, what is an alternative, how do people understand the concept of an alternative.
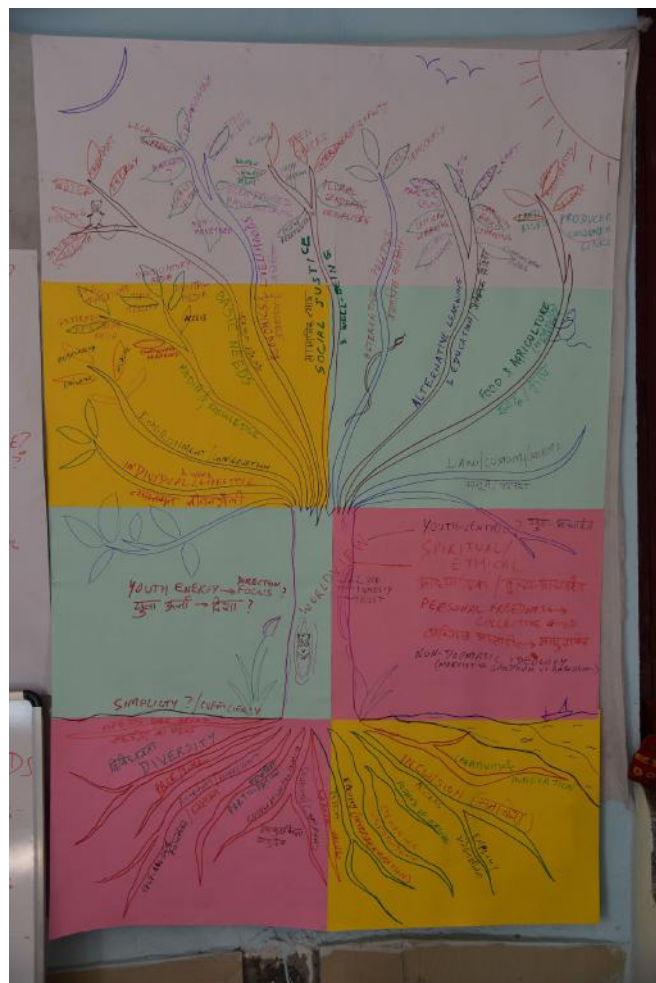
Tree Illustration of the Alternative Framework

This discussion brought forward the significance of values which form the basis of the entire framework. Different activities and initiatives affect the 5 spheres, the values and vice versa. Thus, in order to envision an alternative future there is also a need felt to engage with the fundamental values which give direction or create a foundation to carry forward the work.

These discussions were crucial in order to create an understanding about the Alternative Framework and identify gaps or lacunae in the note. The tree illustration was further elaborated by filling in additional points and missing gaps. Various issues related to the framework were brought up during these discussions, for example, how do we tackle the issue of scale, false solutions, difference between reforms and transformations, revival of meaningful traditional practices, identifying the difference between needs and wants, the interconnectedness of all the 5 spheres and our activities, and most importantly highlighting youth perspective in this alternative envisioning.
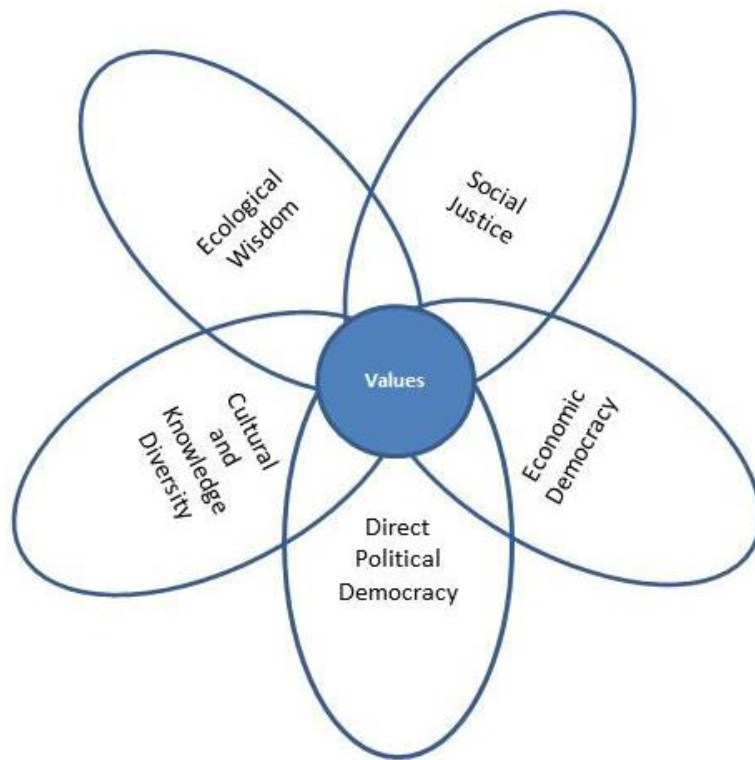
Five Sphere Chart

Group Discussion

The participants were then divided into groups and asked to think about their organisations work with respect to the alternatives framework, as well as look at it through a youth lens.

Some of the key points of discussion that happened in six groups on the alternatives framework were as follows:

~ How to make the framework accessible for youth and crisp/easy to understand. Relationship between 5th Space framework and Vikalp framework.

~ How can the Constitution become a part of the framework?

~ Individuals are what make organizations and the framework can offer a reflection tool for personal values and organizational values and their alignment with each other

~ Any good thing may face resistance. How do we counter these resistances? There might be cultural resistance in spreading of values.

- Organizations need not focus on all aspects at one time. However, they should be considerate that the work is not negatively affecting one of the other spheres of the framework.

- How to use the framework to evaluate and not pass judgments. Take care to ensure the framework does not get reduced to a checklist.

- How do we integrate values into discussion of specific issues? Dealing with the conflicts and trade-offs between values.

- Is there scope to add spirituality as an additional sphere?

Aage bhi jaane na tu - Mehfil

Post dinner there was another Mehfil but this time it was by all the participants who could fight sleep**.** Singing, mono-acting, jokes etc brought a lot of mirth and bonding between some of the participants, while others preferred one-to-one conversations till late into the night.

Day 3

Open Space Sessions

The workshop schedule had two slots for Open Spaces where any of the participants could host a session for others interested. The Open Space followed the Law of Two Feet with the hosts introducing their sessions in the plenary and the participants choosing which sessions they wanted to attend in break-outs.

The Open Space Sessions in the two slots are as follows:

Mandi - Open Space I

1. Alternative learning process for young people
Madhur Anand

The session focussed on Madhur's experience of Swaraj University and on how to design a learning process. The key areas of discussion were:

- Why Madhur went to Swaraj university, dilemmas of a 19 year old
- What are the capacities/competencies that contemporary mainstream higher education is not developing in youth? – empathy, communication and critical thinking, emotional intelligence, alternative lifestyles, sustainability, social justice, cooking & life skills etc.
- Structure and learning processes at Swaraj
- Major thought shifts – anybody can be a guru, knowledge beyond books, importance of values, deconditioning the mind, seeing the urban, rural and industrial realities
- Economics of self-directed learning
- Life without degrees - Is one accepted?

2. War Of Oranges session [Win-Win Negotiation]
Sagar Gangurde

This was a structured session where the participants got an opportunity to analyze their own style of negotiation and factors that limit them from arriving at a win-win negotiation in their day to day life. This was a role-playing strategy game where two sets of buyers with seemingly competing needs (to buy maximum oranges for their respective organizations) negotiate with the seller who has the objective of maximizing their profit. Following negotiations in a stipulated time, none of them were able to strike a deal, let alone a win-win. The session brought in the realisation that we are often so engrossed in our own needs/wants/greeds/results/outcome that we never ask the simple question - "What you want?" and due to this, we often miss out on opportunities for "Win-Win" in our life.

3. Examples of Vikalps (alternatives) to understand the framework better –
Ashish Kothari

Ashish took up examples like Mendha, Deccan Development Society, Kuthambakkam, and Kachchh / Bhuj urban initiatives, moving amongst the Vikalp Sangam posters to show pictures, and to the 5-sphere transformation chart to explain the connection with larger conceptual and value issues.

Questions that came up and issues discussed included:

- How do initiatives sustain themselves across generations?
- How are they sustained financially?
- What happens when communities start earning a lot of money due to the initiative, does it fall into the trap of mainstream development?

These and other issues became much more real and easier to understand using the examples illustrated in the VS posters. The participants felt that it would have been useful for all the participants to have done this exercise.

4. Disability and its perspective - [Progress of disability movement, definitions, and global perspective]
Rajiv Rajan

The session on disability began with a few questions that may seem very simple but are not. These questions force one to think on the term 'disability' and the societal construct that defines, or rather confines, people who are differently abled into specific boxes. These questions were:

- What is disability?
- How does one define being 'normal'?
- How can you say you are truly independent?

The discussion steered from disability being defined as 'not being able to do everyday activities' to 'freedom from the thought of being dependent'. The term 'normal' was seen by the whole group as

'sticking to the society's norms or values' and anything that happens beyond this domain was deemed 'not normal'. And "independent" was, for some, freedom from authority, free will to speak, do and think what they want and how they want to.

Rajiv then brought in the medical perspective where normal has been defined and he also pointed out that there are several ranges of what is deemed as normal. The normal that has been defined is just a prototype and will have the flexibility to change over time. He said that human beings are all interconnected to each other and the world. Interconnectedness is what keeps the world going. Then why do we assume that those who are differently abled should be 'independent'?

He ended the session by recalling the UN convention document that defines disability as including those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

5. Mendha Lekha : Experiences of Self-Rule
Naresh Pundalik Komoti and Shivdas Suman Tofa

This session saw the screening of two films about Mendha Lekha, the village in the Dhanora tehsil of Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, which declared self-rule with the chant, "Our forest, our rules". One was a Hindi documentary, "Forest Rights" and the second a news report "Aamhi Mendhiyache Lok". Both the films documented the journey of the village to the present context.

The hamlet has 84 families of "Gond tribals" with a total population of 500, with the villagers largely dependent on the forest for their livelihood.. The Gaon-Samaj-Sabha of Mendha has all the adult villagers as its members and following discussion and consensus building, the decision of the Gram Sabha finally prevails. This village is the first in India to get community rights over the forest.

A lively question and answer session followed the screening of the films.

6. Youth Interventions in the Indian mainstream media and alternate media [Overcoming the mistrust between media and NGOs]
Kumar Sambhav

The session focused on exploring the challenges and the ways forward to engage with the media. The key points that came up are:

Challenges:

- The media lacks sustained engagement with the majority of population especially the non-urban population
- Management policies in the media are often in conflict with journalistic values.
- Commercial interest of the media houses take precedence over social concerns. Their focus is on getting money and eyeballs.

- There is no transparency in funding.
- The media space is not democratic.

Way Forward:

- Citizens' voices should be given more space in the media. Alternate media has good models of this. One example could be 'Nanhe Lekhak' a newspaper in Maharashtra that publishes articles by children.
- Disengagement of civil society with the mainstream media is no solution. Civil society needs to engage with the popular media and the popular culture to send their word out to the masses.
- We should not run after media to get our stories out. Engage with them as intellectual partners. Create a space with them so that they are exposed to our work and thoughts and they see stories in our work.
- Apart from the 'human stories', also focus on giving hard stories to the media. They can change existing structure.
- We have enough data to counter the current mainstream media discourse. We need to work on effective data visualisation.
- We need to work on crystallised messages (effective communication)
- We need to create a social media army to promote discourse on social issues to counter the narrative and race of "eyeball journalism".

Mela – Open Space –II

1. Can we tell stories in a powerful way?
 Nitin Das

Nitin Das, a professional film-maker who makes powerful one-minute short films under the Filmkaar banner, conducted a short impactful practical session on telling short yet powerful stories. Starting by asking the participants to tell a story in one line, with a hero and a villain, he gave them interesting tips on strengthening the villain for the hero to shine better, breaking down the formula for films and the importance of turning points in the story to keep the audience's interest going. After examining the plot and storyline of a few famous stories like Ramayana and Sholay, the participants were paired up and asked to write their own stories in just 3 lines. This was an interesting exercise as many were able to make interesting short stories of their own lives. Finally, Nitin emphasized that what differentiates a great story from an average story is how it connects with the audience and stays with them. The success of the story is when people see themselves in that story. He ended with the quote, "A good story is when it begins as my story and ends as your story."

2. Rethinking community work
Ravi Badri

The discussion on "Rethinking community work" began by identifying challenges we face as community workers. Improving our capacity to intervene in policy formulation and influence policy makers, improving our networking skills, the telling of our stories and the contradiction and conflict between our personal life struggles and social struggles were some of the topics that were identified

for further exploration. We spent a few more minutes on the last question. A person working with the community often find the self sandwiched between the needs of the community and the needs of the self and family.

Some questions that emerged in the discussion in response to this internal conflict are:

a) Are we engaged in a struggle to serve others or is it somewhere also our own struggle ?

b) The people are quite happy to give their own power and responsibility to the community worker. It is a worthwhile engagement to think about decentralization of power and responsibility and explore facilitative leadership

c) The issue of crowd funding our work was explored as an option and in this context we discussed Gandhi's working style of declaring account statements of all publicly funded campaigns. Drawing from Gandhi, we also can explore the question of improving our own moral strength to be incorruptible, non-compromising and improve transparency and accountability while using public funds.

3. Questions on Kashmir
Fayaz Dar and Lubna Rafiqi

The session began with a brief introduction about Mool Sustainability Research and Training Center in Kashmir and their seven core values: Dignity and trust, Equality and justice, Freedom and responsibility, Inclusivity and participation, Individual, family and community wellbeing, Coexistence and collaborations, Self sufficiency and sustainability

While acknowledging that it is difficult to have a good group conversation about the complex situation and challenges in Kashmir in less than an hour, they instead decided to respond to questions from the participants. The discussion invited people for a long and indepth conversation for a nuanced understanding of the situation and to explore collaborations. They also felt that Kashmir was also suffering due to the current model of development, with problems of consumerism, diminishing agriculture, traditional knowledge, and were also in need of alternatives. Creating a society based on these core values will help address the situation.

4. Gender and Patriarchy – Envisioning Gender Peace
Arushi Mittal

This session had participants envisioning a world where gender norms do not govern the society and listed how they saw people making decisions and interacting in that state. Then they discussed the norms that they would like to change in their homes and communities, for e.g. Considering daughters as someone else's property, considering women impure during menstruation etc., as these led to discrimination and violence in their homes and communities.

5. Community-led social spaces for safeguarding cultural heritage
Vinod Nambiar

This was an open discussion where people shared their experiences. The participants from Maharashtra forest area shared their attempts and efforts to teach the young generation about their art and crafts. The main challenge they face is with migration, and non availability of youth to participate in such activities.

Vinod shared the importance of creating community lead social spaces to make sure that youth get an opportunity to experience and learn. The process should be a unconscious process and there should not be any pressure to teach or learn.He also shared his experinec with Vayali in Kerala where tourism helped to create such a space while also providing an income.

Rewind Zindagi and Way Forward

In the morning, participants were asked to note down any burning questions that were uppermost in their minds when thinking about the Youth process. These were analysed and grouped into 5 heads which formed the basis of the Aglekadam or the way forward sessions. These are: Values, Making the Alternatives Framework more youth-centric, Taking the Youth Vikalp Sangam process forward, Engaging with the State and policy, Collaborations

The key points that emerged from the discussion on the 5 heads as shared in the plenary are as follows:

Values:
- Convergence of thoughts leading to self-reflection
- Assimilation of action with theory
- Important not to force a common conclusion, but keep the conversation going.
- Focus on diversity and bringing in diverse perspectives
- Breaking/ blurring boundaries of our individual work for a holistic understanding
- More mindful and deliberate design
- Vision of the framework – replacement or reformation?
- What is alternative learning
  - has to transform the status quo rather than further reinforcing the system.
  - Collectively reimagining the world based on a different set of values
  - Also look at who defines these values. And how do we as organisations live these values in our work.
  (Team: Madhur, Ashish, Fayaz, Shilpa, Ashraf, Shrishtee)

How to make the alternative framework note more youth centric?
- Engage with young people keeping in mind their aspirations
- In the form of a Learning journey; self to society
- Experience through experiments (OK to make mistakes; Action to reflection)
- Overall perspective building
- Understanding of youth centric frameworks and capacity building of organizations
- Co creating *with* young people

- Focus on youth leadership
- Inclusion of Youth centric values: Fun, love, care, madness, ownership
- Focus on building youth facilitators
  (Team: Vimal, Kejal, Nishok, Rajeev, Nirupama)

Taking the Youth Vikalp Sangam process forward
- Finding a common platform for Learning and Advocacy processes
- Mechanism to integrate smaller processes into larger ones
- Moving towards organsing more sangams without dependence on external agencies for funding
- Possibilities for organizing Youth Sangams at State levels
- Creation of support groups
- Stressing on claiming spaces within existing processes as well as forming of a critical mass that is inclusive
- Decisively look at being economically self-reliant to free up time (depends on the prioritization of the processes)
- Include spaces for self reflection in future processes
- Common purpose: for collective action and learning
  (Team: Navendu, Abhishek, Mohsin, Gaurav, Radhika, Vijay, Lubna,Yasar)

Engaging with the State, policies
- Holding politicians accountable
- Accountability and transparency
- Planning and budgeting in governance
- Democratic and bottom up processes
- Reactive vs proactive
- Legal literacy is important especially at local level
  (Team: Vimal, Akshay, Mohsin, Supriya, Vinod, Nishok, Rajiv)

Collaborations
- Why: Because we have limited resources and we want to reach out to diverse youth
- How: By creating a framework of collaboration which will have:
  - Profiles of organisations (needs of youth and organisations)
  - Offerings of what an organization can make and what are the learning and needs that you want met or addressed through collaborations
  - Defining the values and the existing challenges for collaborations
  - Best practices that have worked (collaborations and nurturing the existing spaces)
    (Team: Nida, Prahalatan, Lubna, Vijay, Sambhav, Sandeep, Zeeshan, Vimal)

Feedback

Participants were asked to give written feedback on the sangam in terms of what went well and what could have been better. This was analysed and consolidated around different clusters as follows:

- Design
- Facilitation
- Participants

- Learning Around Issues
- Outcomes
- Space

The detailed consolidated feedback is available in Annexure 3.

The workshop closed on a warm note with the revealing of the names of the "Secret Friends" who had been sending secret gifts to their designated friend over the 3 days. Besides adding an element of fun and suspense, the secret friend activity helped build stronger relationships within the group.

Glimpses of the Youth Vikalp Sangam