

SOCIETAL REINTEGRATION THROUGH CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH IN POKHARA, NEPAL

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Abstract

Nepal is home to over 29 million people, with children younger than 15 years old making up more than 40% of the population. Entrenched poverty and almost two decades of violent political instability have taken their toll on Nepal's youth, leaving many orphans, street kids, and victims of poverty, trafficking and child labour. Child Welfare Scheme Nepal (CWSN) was established 15 years ago to improve the lives of poor and marginalised young people through improved health, education and protection. As one of the programs initiated by CWSN, Jyoti Vocational Training Centre (JVTC) aims to provide a safe and nurturing environment in which disadvantaged adolescents can make a successful transition into independent adult lives. Given the difficult social, educational and cultural backgrounds of the trainees it is important that JVTC not only produce well-trained graduates, but also adults capable of contributing to their community. Beyond the role of a traditional training centre, JVTC offers psychosocial support and counselling, residential services, health education and career guidance to trainees. In recent times Engineers Without Borders Australia has assisted JVTC through volunteer placements producing updated curricula and focused, appropriate practical classes for the electrical and solar-photovoltaic courses. This paper will present the holistic approach implemented by JVTC, and outline the effectiveness of this method. Through evaluation of data focusing on a range of lifestyle indicators and case studies from trainees past and present, JVTC's work across the past decade will be contextualised against current societal standards. Furthermore this paper will examine how holistic capacity development equips those in the program to reintegrate into society and build on existing strengths to influence sustainable community development.

Keywords: EWB, Nepal, Youth, Education, Development

1. Introduction

1.1 Context

Nepal is a naturally beautiful country with a population of over 29 million people. In November 2006, a decade of violent civil war ended when the Nepalese government and Maoist insurgency signed the Comprehensive Peace Accord. The country has since been in a phase of political and social redefinition, led by the development of a new constitution. Although the current outlook is the brightest in a long time, entrenched poverty and almost two decades of political instability have taken their toll on the Nepalese people. Nepal is among the poorest and least developed countries in the world, with 42% of its population living below the poverty line [1,2].

Children younger than 15 years of age make up more than 40% of Nepal's population. The climate of uncertainty and destitution has made these children a vulnerable target, and issues such as human trafficking, child abuse and child labour have become widespread. Studies have shown that 2.6 million children are engaged in different sectors of child labour, over a third of marriages involve children younger than 15 and Nepal has the world's highest rate of child disappearances [1]. Furthermore, 52% of children fall out of the education system before they reach the tenth grade [3].

As this generation of children, scarred by war and poverty, move into adolescence and then adulthood, there is a great need for integrated support in order to shape well-rounded individuals, capable of contributing to all aspects of Nepal's growth as a nation. Efforts must be made to address not just traditional education or health gaps, but also employment skills, all-round health education, trauma counselling, on-going mental wellbeing, and lifestyle planning and development.

1.2 Supporting Organisations

1.2.1 Child Welfare Scheme Nepal

In 1997, Child Welfare Scheme Nepal (CWSN) was established as a grassroots NGO working in the remote hill villages of Nepal's Western Region. At this time the already difficult situation of the people in these villages had been further complicated by the outbreak of civil war in early 1996. Children were particularly adversely affected, many living without access to primary health care and basic education. In order to address these issues at a local level CWSN initiated its first ever program, the Day Care Health Centre, an innovative and unique centre combining early education and primary health care [4].

Since its establishment in 1997, CWSN has grown into one of the leading child-centred grassroots organisations in the Western Region of Nepal. Although now operating more broadly, the aim remains to create sustainable change in the lives of the poorest and most marginalised children and young people in Nepal through improved health, education and protection. CWSN currently manage four major programs, of which Jyoti Vocational Training Centre (JVTC) is one, as well as several other projects in areas such as research and advocacy. Brief descriptions of the four programs are given below:

- Day Care Health Centre
A community-based project, Day Care Health Centre provides early childhood care and education services to children aged two to five, from 14 villages across the Kaski and Lamjung districts. The centre encourages learning through play and provides a child-friendly and safe environment. The whole centre is operated by a local committee with support and training from CWSN.
- Asha Health Care
The Asha Health Care clinic provides primary health care to vulnerable social groups, including street-based and working children, urban slum communities and women in rural areas. Specific goals of the clinic focus on reducing child mortality and improving maternal health.
- Jyoti Street Project
Jyoti Street Project works to support street children through the operation of a day-time contact centre, night shelter and the Children's Development Khajana (Children's Bank) and through the provision of family reintegration, education and health services.
- Jyoti Vocational Training Centre
Located in Pokhara, Nepal, Jyoti Vocational Training Centre (see Figure 1) has been providing trade courses and basic educational classes since 2002. The centre targets disadvantaged youth from all over Nepal between the ages of 16 and 20, who have not completed a secondary education, providing them with an opportunity to find employment and support themselves and a family. Beyond the role of a traditional training centre, JVTC also offers psychological support and counselling, social assistance and career guidance to trainees.

As is evident from the constitution of CWSN's work, an integrated approach is often undertaken allowing several child welfare issues to be addressed simultaneously. This method is useful in showing beneficiaries the relationship between lifestyle factors, influencing holistic development.

Currently, CWSN is expanding its initiatives beyond national boundaries through regional networking. An active member of the South Asian Alliance for Grassroots NGOs (or SAAGN), CWSN has been working together with two Italian NGOs (The Trade Unions Institute for Development Co-operation and Italian Association for Aid to Children) to implement a multi-national advocacy action – the Civil Society Alliance for Child Rights in South Asia. Under this action, a national alliance of 70 organisations in Nepal was successfully established [5]. CWSN's main donor is Luxembourg's National Federation of Scouts (FNEL). In addition to

their constructive, year-round recipient management, FNEL visit Nepal each year to tour the facilities.

1.2.2 Engineers Without Borders Australia

Engineers Without Borders' Australian Chapter was formed in 2002 by a group of engineering students from Melbourne who wanted to use their skills to create lasting change through development work. The group noticed a gap in the development engineering sector – while experienced engineers were sought after for complex projects, there was a lack of opportunity for many (particularly young) engineers to become involved in grassroots humanitarian engineering. The group decided Australia needed a framework through which many more engineers, students and engineering companies could become involved in meaningful community development. Such an organisation would be more than just an overseas placement network - it would be a community of like-minded people who were inspired to learn about the issues facing the world and were prepared to strive to improve the living conditions of disadvantaged people [6].



Figure 1: Jyoti Vocational Training Centre

Ten years later, Engineers Without Borders (EWB) Australia has a financial membership base of more than 1,150 people, including approximately 200 active volunteers, and operations both in Australia and across South and South-East Asia. EWB Australia remains a member-based, not-for-profit organisation with a strong focus on capacity development, implementation of appropriate technology and human empowerment. EWB Australia works with established community partnerships to build technical capacity in the areas of water, sanitation and hygiene, renewable energy, information communication technology, small-scale structures and engineering education. It also runs a suite of national initiatives in education, training, research and leadership development, complemented by numerous local events delivered by Chapters and Knowledge Hubs (thematic communities of practice). By working with partner

organisations, EWB Australia is able to undertake well-informed, needs-based assessments of the communities they operate within. The cultivation of these partnerships enables mutual knowledge exchange through which the capacity of local professionals may be enhanced and EWB Australia may gain a greater knowledge of contextual and cultural factors affecting their work.

EWB Australia and CWSN (through JVTC) formed a working partnership in 2010. EWB Australia provides technical assistance to facilitate the development of JVTC's electrical and solar-photovoltaic curricula. To date, the partnership has yielded several important outputs including full solar-photovoltaic curricula for two levels of nationally recognised accreditation, completion of several commercial-scale electrical and solar-photovoltaic projects, and creation of two EWB Australia research projects. In addition, there have been several positive qualitative outcomes such as strengthened networking between JVTC and organisations in Nepal's renewable energy sector and capacity building of JVTC staff (particularly those involved with JVTC's electrical and solar-photovoltaic courses). Currently, an EWB Australia volunteer is working with JVTC to develop targeted practical classes for the electrical and solar-photovoltaic courses, and build staff and trainee knowledge on large-scale electrical equipment such as power transformers and industrial wiring.

2. Jyoti Vocational Training Centre

2.1 Overview

JVTC was established by CWSN to provide vocational training, health education, counselling, mental wellbeing, and lifestyle planning and development in an integrated and complementary manner, resulting in sustainable impacts for beneficiaries and their local communities. The centre, established ten years ago in Pokhara, Nepal, targets disadvantaged youth between the ages of 16 and 20 who have not completed a secondary education. JVTC identifies candidates for the program across Nepal through its close connections with various child services organisations. Candidates are assessed on a needs basis, with the most disadvantaged children given priority. Trainees live at the on-site dormitories for the duration of the one year training program and are assisted with housing (as well as other services) for two years after the program. All of JVTC's services are provided to beneficiaries for free.

Through the training program at JVTC, students gain competency in one of four trade skills (plumbing, electrical/solar-photovoltaic, care giving or computer secretarial) as well as a basic comprehension of English, Nepali and mathematics. Each trade has its own theory classroom and practical workshop (or computer room for the computer secretarial trade). This separation allows teaching areas to be arranged in a manner appropriate for use. A maximum class size of 15 and a student-to-staff ratio of approximately 3:1 ensure trainees are closely guided through their studies.

Beyond the role of a traditional training centre, JVTC also offers psycho-social support and counselling, residential services, health education and career guidance to trainees. Through this holistic approach it is hoped the trainees, almost a third of whom come to JVTC suffering from childhood trauma, can be empowered not just to find work but to constructively reintegrate into society.



Figure 2: JVTC trainees completing a practical class in the electrical workshop

2.1.1 Similar Programs

Underprivileged Children's Educational Programs (UCEP) Nepal works with underprivileged and disadvantaged children and youths who do not have access to formal education and livelihood opportunities. UCEP Nepal operates the Sano Thimi Technical School in Bhaktapur, Central Region; a program very similar to JVTC. This residential vocational training centre provides training courses and on-the-job training placements to beneficiaries, as well as housing, psychosocial support and life skills classes [7].

In the Kaski District of Nepal's Western Region, the Pokhara Chamber of Commerce and Industry runs a program aimed at freeing children from child labour. The Child Labour Elimination Program provides beneficiaries with formal education opportunities through financial support and vocational courses. There is also a focus on family reunification, and technical and financial support in villages where the problems are prevalent. Unlike JVTC this project is non-residential, and has a greater focus on school-level education than career development [8].

2.2 Methodology

JVTC aims to make a lasting contribution to the improvement of society by promoting well-informed lifestyle practices which encourage beneficiaries to adopt physically, mentally and emotionally healthy lifestyles. By offering a range of trades, JVTC hopes to empower its students to pursue interesting and fulfilling professions. By supplementing trade skills courses with career counseling and on-the-job training, the students are shown (many for the first time) that they have options and choices in the development of their lives.

The residential set-up of JVTC aims to facilitate social development in the trainees. To build communication skills, trainees take part in an active social schedule involving sport, arts, dance, field trips, and other extracurricular and cultural activities. By living in sectionalised dormitories the trainees learn to interact, share and live with others. Trainees are encouraged to clean, assist with cooking, and use their trade skills to maintain the centre's amenities, building a sense of ownership and pride. These characteristics are extremely important in any individual who will ultimately contribute to their community. Given the background of the trainees it can often take time for them to adjust to this way of living; however the psychosocial support at JVTC helps the transition.

Post training services have a strong focus on societal reintegration. As is the case with the on-the-job training during their stay at JVTC, trainees are assisted in their search for work by a placement officer. The placement officer not only finds work and training but also networks with businesses and contractors across various sectors in different regions of Nepal. Former trainees are welcome to contact JVTC at any time if they are looking for work or to change the direction of their career. Upon graduation, beneficiaries are also offered up to two years board at one of a number of mid-way homes. The mid-way homes are provided at subsidised cost allowing trainees to save money and establish themselves. Furthermore, the homes provide a steady transition from the dormitory at JVTC to a working lifestyle, with graduates living in small groups with former classmates while they learn to manage their new responsibilities. Throughout the search for employment and accommodation, all former trainees are offered psychosocial and health support.

2.3 Outcomes

The following outcomes have been observed from quantitative and qualitative data collected by JVTC and CWSN. Quantitative data is collected throughout the year for each intake batch. Qualitative data is collected in three forms: through case studies submitted by each of the trade instructors in their monthly or quarterly reports, interviews conducted personally by JVTC's intake coordinator or by running workshops for former trainees in Pokhara and Kathmandu.

In the outcomes are presented below, quantitative data has been used to identify trends in the behaviour exhibited by former trainees, while qualitative data is used to give an indication of the lasting impacts of JVTC's work.

2.3.1 Education and Employment

Education and employment have been considered together as they are inextricably linked. Education, both basic and trade, forms a fundamental part of JVTC's program. It is through the challenges presented by learning that the trainees gain confidence and a sense of self-worth. These characteristics, as well as technical competency, lead to increased employment opportunities after on-the-job training.

Figure 3 shows the proportion of trainees to graduate from each of the nine intake batches that have completed JVTC courses thus far. Also shown for visual comparison is the proportion of trainees who did not graduate, i.e. the proportion who 'dropped out'. In the first three years there were a relatively high number of drop-outs. However as the trade courses and social programs were refined, trainee retention increased sharply. 2011 was the first year in which 100% of the intake batch graduated. This is a great achievement for a one-year course considering the average trainee had not received an eighth grade education.

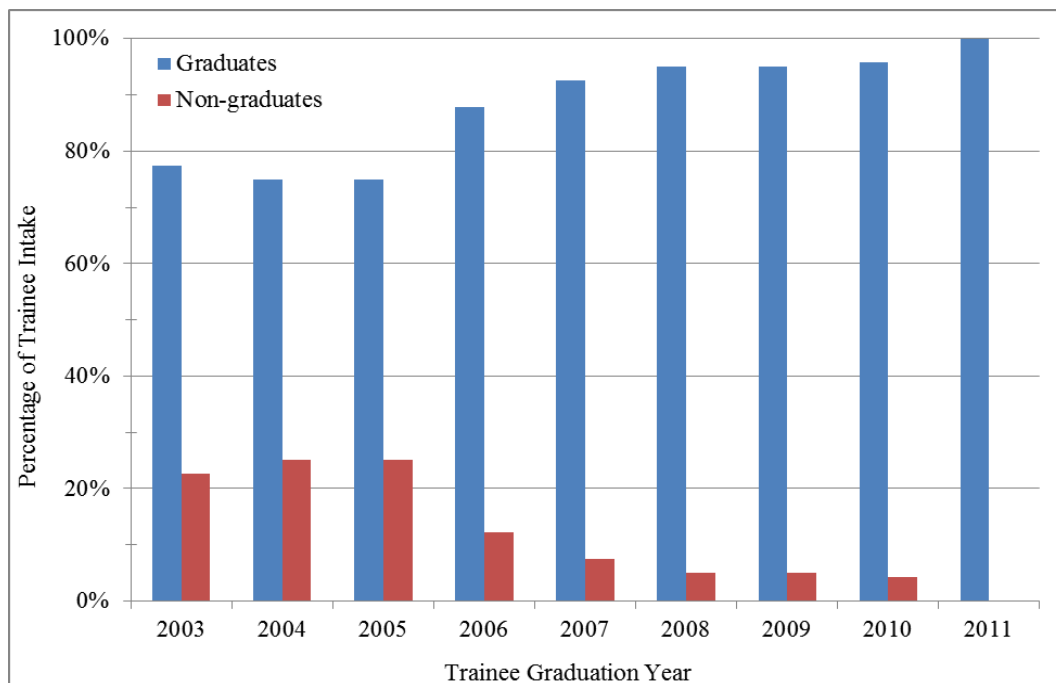


Figure 3: Graduation success rate of JVTC batches

Figure 4 shows the employment rates of trainees from each intake batch after graduation. Once again, with improvement in the program over time the proportion of trainees able to find jobs has increased. It is important to bear in mind this trend occurred with an increase in the number of graduates, meaning the actual number of jobs filled by the centre's programs is rising substantially.

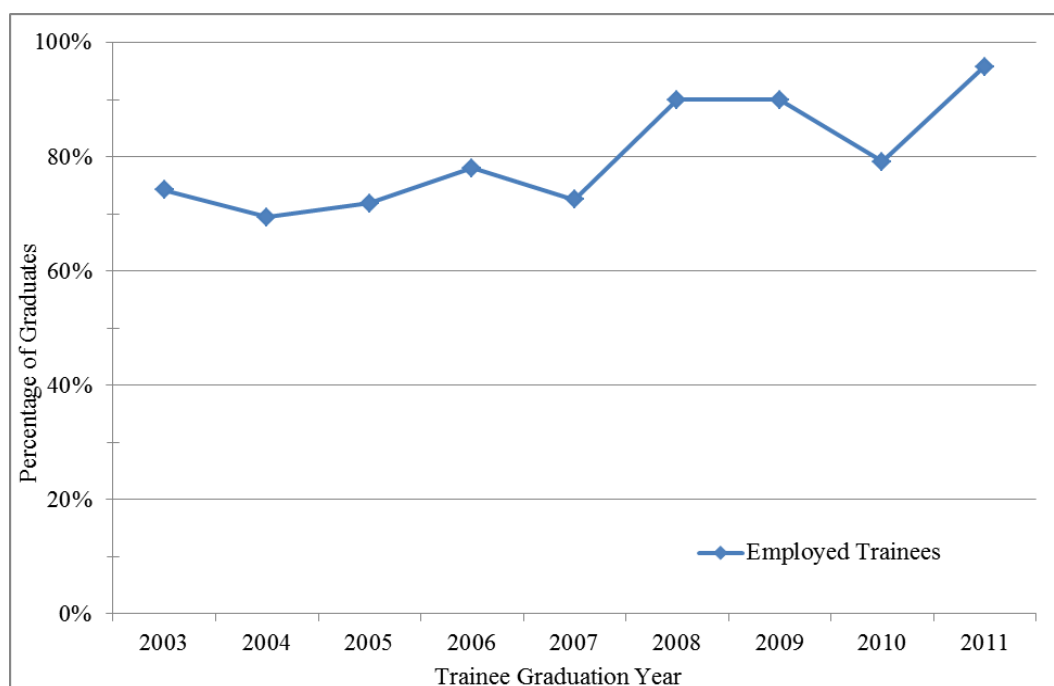


Figure 4: Employment rate of JVTC graduates from each intake batch

As shown in Table 1, the employment rates achieved by JVTC graduates in each batch are higher than the national employment rates across a number of demographics, especially in recent years [9].

Table 1: Comparison of JVTC and national employment rates

| <i>Demographic</i> | <i>Employment Rate (%)</i> |
|--|----------------------------|
| <i>JVTC 2004 Batch (Lowest)</i> | <i>69.2%</i> |
| <i>JVTC 2011 Batch (Highest)</i> | <i>95.8%</i> |
| <i>JVTC Average (over program life)</i> | <i>80.9%</i> |
| <i>Western Region, Nepal</i> | <i>73.2%</i> |
| <i>Nepal Urban Areas (country-wide)</i> | <i>59.3%</i> |
| <i>Ages 15-24 (both male and female)</i> | <i>72.8%</i> |
| <i>Greater than Secondary Education</i> | <i>72.4%</i> |

Case studies, interviews and workshops have shown that beyond graduation job retention rates are high. The main reason trainees leave employment is marriage (this factor is only present among female trainees and represents a significant cultural trend). Furthermore, a number of former electrical/solar-photovoltaic and plumbing trainees have started their own businesses as contractors. Many of the graduates work regular day jobs and then contract their services after hours in order to establish a customer base. Others now have their own businesses and take on

current trainees for on-the-job training. While the number of graduates contracting is still relatively low, approximately 5-15%, this trend indicates a strong drive and will to succeed.

2.3.2 Physical Health Care

The physical health facilities at JVTC are provided by an on-site Asha Health Care clinic. There are two main aspects to the physical health program, curative and preventative. Curative measures include procedures undertaken to address existing conditions. Preventative measures include immunisations against common diseases and precautionary treatment, as well as health education and awareness classes the trainees are required to attend.

CWSN data shows that, per trainee, approximately 3 and 3.5 curative measures are taken for males and females respectively. These numbers jump to 11 and 17 for males and females respectively for preventative measures. These numbers are much higher than the societal average. Easy access to the clinic ensures that curative procedures are administered as soon as possible. JVTC uses this practice as an example of the mentality trainees should adopt towards health care. Provision of a full immunisation course does a great deal to help trainees towards a healthy future, as many trainees have not had access to protection against common illnesses when they were younger. As a part of the preventative aspect of the physical health program, trainees are given otherwise inaccessible classes on sexual health, HIV/AIDS and common local health risks. With appropriate education and access the health services trainees develop a mature approach to health care, emphasising their responsibilities to themselves.

2.3.3 Mental Health Care

The mental health care program at JVTC is constantly evolving and improving. It began with group counselling sessions and has evolved to the point where 137 individual sessions were held for the last batch of trainees (approximately 3 sessions per trainee). Mental health is a crucial part of JVTC's program as a significant portion of new trainees are dealing with traumatic experiences from their early lives. The mental health program aims to assist trainees in dealing with trauma and then help them to re-socialise and build confidence and self-worth, all the while closely monitoring their progress. Mental health facilities are offered to trainees after they graduate to ensure they receive help if necessary. Further to counselling, trainees are offered courses in areas such as stress management, anger management and positive thinking.

Through open discourse on mental health, JVTC breaks societal trends and encourages trainees to seek help, and help others with mental health issues. This level of self-awareness shapes individuals who will be honest and helping when they begin their life in local communities. Counselling reports submitted to JVTC show a pattern of improvement in the mental health of the trainees over time, and also point to an overall improvement in mental health as the program matures.

3. Conclusions and Expected Outcomes

This paper presented the holistic approach implemented by JVTC, and outlined the effectiveness of this method. By giving context to the operations of CWSN and JVTC, the necessity for an integrated method of capacity development was established. By studying the recent history of JVTC graduates it was shown that a holistic approach can be used to build a beneficiary's technical skills while improving social skills and instilling a sense of self-confidence. These characteristics, when applied to a constructive exercise such as vocational or job training, promote a sense of pride in achievement influencing an individual to take the steps towards an independent and fulfilling adult life.

It is difficult to assess the long term impact of the program given JVTC has only been operating for ten years. It is expected that over time graduates of JVTC will fully reintegrate into society, using the technical, emotional and social skills gained at JVTC to pursue their goals. However, beyond this it is expected graduates will embrace the honest, accepting and caring outlook of JVTC and build on existing strengths to influence positive and sustainable development in their local communities. Initial results have been very encouraging with a number of graduates showing intelligence and determination in establishing their own businesses, and then using their resources to provide employment opportunities for current trainees. Further, many of graduates have expressed a desire to undertake community work and help others living in difficult circumstances.

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