

## 2020 Annual Report

### General Information – Summary

The Learn For Life Empowerment Project (LFL) works through three interconnected paths: 1. Schooling – in Early Childhood Development (ECD) and primary and secondary schooling at the Badi Asha School; 2. Vocational Training – in bakery, tailoring and hospitality and tourism services; 3. Connecting the two by offering training to students and young community members (computer skills, basic tailoring and English).

The year 2020 saw the following notable highlights:

- The novel Coronavirus had a strong impact on our projects and we had to restructure many of our activities. Despite these challenges, we managed to successfully maintain our work to guarantee the livelihood and to protect the healthcare for our beneficiaries as well as our staff. Also, we initiated a major **Covid19 Relief Program** for food and sanitary products distribution and funded other partner organisations involved in the same, all ongoing.
- One of the major milestones was that Learn for Life started providing classes for secondary school students until 7th grade, a major breakthrough considering the students jumped directly into online class mode in the middle of a global pandemic. We are also in the process to get a similar recognition for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, delayed due to the COVID19 crisis.
- After COVID19 we reconverted our Restaurant and Guesthouse building in Varanasi to set up a professional cooking class training, as well as being also reconverted into quarantine rooms for staff when needed.

### Statistical Overview

The following number of beneficiaries has been reached in each field

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<b>ECD and Schooling – The Badi Asha School</b>					
Pre-school (for children 4-6 years old)	31	36	34	35	16 **
Primary school (for children 6-14 years old)	89	99	102	98	93
Secondary school (for children 14-16 years old)				12	27
Post-primary support (for alumni)	3	31	22	25	25
	<b>123</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>161</b>
<b>Vocational training for young adults</b>					
Tailoring	8	10	16	15	11
Bakery	8	15	17	20	17
Cooking classes					7
Office work, administration training					4
	<b>16</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Practical training to students and community members*</b>					
Computer	20	26	27	59	61
Stitching	8	8	13	7	8
	<b>28</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Total number of beneficiaries</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>231</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>269</b>

*\*Stopped in March 2020 due to Lockdown \*\*stopped new admission due to COVID19*

From the very beginning of the novel Corona virus pandemic, LFL implemented in all locations a **Sanitary Precaution Training** through different means.

## Project activities 2020

### **1. ECD and Schooling in the Badi Asha School**

Learn for Life is offering schooling at three levels: Early Childhood Development (or pre-school), primary school for children between 6 and 14 years old, as well as secondary school for children between 14 and 18 years old.

The school follows the official NCERT English medium curriculum and most textbooks are in line with that standard. Schooling approaches draw from a number of different philosophies and pedagogic theories, notably the Montessori method, Krishnamurti's teaching philosophy and the Waldorf / Steiner methodology. Teachers are encouraged to supplement the curriculum with creative activities and interactive lessons, also with the use of the smartboard, moving away from textbooks and toward learning-oriented lesson planning. Alternative teaching methods such as drama activities, hands-on games and activities, educational movies, discussions, and project development address concepts from a variety of different perspectives to be more inclusive of children with different learning needs. Students are given the chance to show their work, to feel proud of their accomplishments, to gain confidence speaking in front of large groups. This brings students and teachers together and it creates a greater sense of community and camaraderie.

Unfortunately, in 2020 most of our school activities were totally disrupted due to COVID19 and the consequent lockdown imposition. Moreover, at the beginning of the year we had planned or had even started many new activities which later were interrupted due to the pandemic. For example, towards the end of 2019 **History and Environmental Education Classes** were introduced for the students of class 5, to make students aware of their historical and cultural heritage and, by connecting the preservation of heritage with the preservation of the environment, providing inspiration for sustainable ideas and values. Some examples of this program include gardening classes, outdoor activities visiting heritage sites in the city, and cleaning some of these places - inspiring them to pursue an educational path or career related to tourism and heritage promotion, or at the least inspiring this in their awareness. Another such activity promoted a series of workshops designed and organised by our partner organization Muheem, targeting our elder students on topics connected to pre-adolescence issues like relations between boys and girls, health equality, children rights, etc. All of this ended with the lockdown in March 2020.

Badi Asha School's class schedule was interrupted one week before official lockdown was announced on March 24th 2020. Although the classes had stopped, LFL organised food rations distribution to the students and their families at the premises of the school. By the middle of the next week when lockdown was announced, school Director Nicole Seregni started the **Online Teachers Training Program**. Thereafter, the Badi Asha School's teachers continued to work uninterruptedly even from their homes, adapting their teaching methods to online classes. Indeed, soon after online classes started for the students of class 6. LFL has been distributing food, masks and soaps for free to the families of Badi Asha School students, Alumni students and the afternoon coaching participants at the school itself every day since the very beginning of lockdown. Some of these families live in slum areas and, especially in the beginning, it had been difficult for them to get out during the lockdown. In October, the School received a donation of 30 new tablets. From then, the class-5 and class-7 also students started online classes from home, joining the class-6 students. Along with the tablet, each student and teacher are provided with a stable Wi-Fi connection in their homes which is paid for by LFL. Moreover, around that same time we had reopened the school library so that students were able to visit (in turns) to get books on a weekly basis. The collaboration with the Rama Krishna Mission has brought LFL in contact with Swamiji Amit, who has been training teachers on how to use the new digital teaching tools and software. This has helped us to improve our Maths and Science online classes, and together we will continue to improve

the quality of the schooling we provide also in the coming years. Moreover, since October 2020 our teachers are performing regular home surveys at the children's homes to monitor their family situation.

### School Infrastructure

The rooftop garden (which was still maintained by the students during the first two months of 2020 when they were attending their gardening class) since lockdown has been cared for by the bakery staff and the teachers, who also feed the animals and take care of the compost.

The school building had undergone a deep disinfection right after lockdown, and this was repeated regularly. After the interruption of classes, the school building was reconverted into a bakery, and lodging for staff and trainees, storage and the tailoring workshop have been also shifted here with help of Rama Krishna Mission, who listed us as 'mask and food supplier' for their relief work in rural areas around Varanasi.

## **2. Vocational Training for Young Adults**

### **Tailoring**

Towards the end of 2019, an Italian costume designer joined the team for seven months and took charge of the Tailoring programme. She reorganised the division of work and tasks among the tailors as well as the space in the production unit, which shifted in January 2020 to a more spacious atelier. She taught new skills to the tailors, implemented regular quality checks of production, taught new models to tailors and trainees, all with the help of a local master tailor, who started coming three times a week. This addition of a local tailor was very important to the sustainability of the project in the long run. In India, most professional tailors are men - and that is why it is truly empowering to train women as professional tailors.

The religious diversity (Hindu and Muslim) of the tailoring team is tangible proof that a peaceful and harmonious coexistence is no utopia. The social backgrounds of these women are different from case to case, but are always problematic in their own way: some are mothers of the students in the Badi Asha school, others are divorced or widows and all come from very poor families.

The syllabus includes an introductory section (embroidery, stitching craft and tapestry), followed by the main stitching course (sewing skills and pattern design making). The purpose is to train them on textiles and fashion design in order to increase their prospects for future employment and income generating capacities. The trainees have continued to work on collaborative projects and skills, as they learn to reproduce and make new designs with both sewing machines and using hand-stitching techniques. Another big component of the training is teaching basic economics and math skills to the women. This includes learning how to measure and calculate the amount of cloth needed per piece of clothing, the costs of materials and learning to price their work. The tailors also receive weekly English and computer lessons that are part of the vocational training program.

Immediately after the first lockdown was imposed, the English classes shifted online for the women of the tailoring project, the LFL shops ladies and a few workers from the restaurants in Varanasi; the Italian costume designer trained them to make face cotton masks which since then have been largely produced by our tailoring team for free distribution as part of the relief program, and also for sale through our Online Shop.

The Online Shop was restructured and improved after April 2020. We completed some bulk orders from shops in Europe with whom we had a long relation; our goal was to expand our European and International customer pool through extensive promotion. For this, the Online Shop was rebased in Italy during the first Lockdown. The participants of our Tailoring Project kept working and producing garments, masks and other new products shipped to Europe and sold through our Online Shop in Italy. All fabric is natural, unbleached cotton with natural dye sourced from the Bindaas Collective, with whom we started vital cooperation over this last year: they give weekly video classes for our lady tailors

in tailoring techniques, quality check and techniques of how to set up a successful atelier. They also provide support in sourcing materials and the design of our garments. We started a few new collaborations with Italian and German shops interested in purchasing our facemasks in bulk.

As already mentioned above, in 2020 Learn for Life Italia was restructured and reorganized to be legally allowed to import and make retail e-commerce sales through the Online Shop whose full profit goes to the Indian projects. Throughout December, the main focus has been the Online Shop Christmas Campaign, as Learn for Life Italia has invested in social media management and marketing in order to promote sales during the holiday season and so far, the campaign has been very successful.

## **Bakery**

The extensive vocational training program is threefold: 1. Bakery and kitchen training, 2. Computer classes, and 3. Basic Math, English and Business training. This skillset should prepare the youths to support themselves in the future, whether they choose to work with the company or elsewhere. Many of the people involved come from difficult backgrounds, often with very little prior education. Some are ex-students or family members of students from the Badi Asha School. In Delhi we provide some residents of three children shelter homes with orientation classes, targeting 16 to 18 years old, and once they turn 18 years old (when they have to leave the shelter home) we offer a bakery vocational training, providing them with salary, healthcare, food and lodging.

Even after the COVID19 crisis began, nobody was left behind and everyone's salaries and health care were guaranteed. Someone preferred to go back to their villages to stay close to their families. Some of them returned after some time, and we were always happy to have them back.

In 2020 our Bakery was supposed to expand its action drastically. Indeed, already since December 2019 we had started a weekend Bakery stall at the German Embassy and Chamber of Commerce in Delhi, and the Italian Embassy started purchasing regularly our in-house produced cheeses for their events; in addition, in Varanasi we had a stall at the Weekend Market on the lawn of The Surya Hotel, offering bakery products as well as garments from the Tailoring Project.

As a results of all these good connections we have built, we had a plan to start in April 2020 a series of partnerships and events which would have increased enormously our outreach: a weekly stall at Italian Embassy in Delhi where to sell our Bakery and cheese products; food catering for German Embassy and German Chamber of Commerce events in Delhi, with whom we were also supposed to organise events for German Embassy staff, like football matches (to be shown at our Restaurant in Delhi) and Baking classes organised at our Bakery (which was undergone major renovation specifically for this purpose) for the German school and the Chamber of Commerce staff.

Moreover, in partnership with the Italian professional chef school Alma Mater we were organising an exchange program where some of our bakers would have been hosted in Italy and some of their students hosted by us in India, in order to share knowledge and skills, and to offer a mutually enriching cultural experience to all the participants.

Unfortunately, all these amazing plans were cancelled by the global pandemic in March 2020; our hope is to restart these plans soon.

During the first Lockdown, in both Varanasi and Delhi, we have been able to keep on our own home-delivery service to private costumers for bread, cheese, cookies and other packed organic products with long shelf-life. The Home Delivery Service gave us the opportunity to raise some funds for the Free Food Distribution Initiative, where our customers can choose to donate whatever extra they could on top of their bills.

Anticipating supply problems, well in advance we started purchasing and storing big quantities of ingredients in order to ensure uninterrupted bakery production during the lockdown, and part of this went towards the distribution of food for relief work. In Varanasi, during the first lockdown, the school building was reconverted into a bakery, with lodging for staff and trainees, storage and the tailoring

workshop also having been shifted here. The Varanasi bakery started production of “energy cookies” and protein balls commissioned by Rama Krishna Mission, who distributed food to migrant workers along with large quantity of masks, rice, pulses and essentials which had been donated by LFL to RKM, and to other NGOs involved in relief work for migrants as well.

Also in Delhi, the bakery started production in support of NGOs involved in relief work and food distribution. Our bakery in Delhi coped quite well with the home delivery service and the bakery stall at the Sunder Nursery Market, Organised by The Earth Collective (which started around October 2020), have been our main source of income during the pandemic. In November 2020, we consolidated our already-strong connection with the Italian Embassy in Delhi, which started to regularly sourcing cheese from us. Most of December was focused on promoting our Christmas Products Marketing Campaign. Like every year, the funds collected from the Christmas products sales have been used to purchase products to protect poor people from the cold, and are distributed as part of the relief work.

Since 2018, the program has partnered with Salaam Baalak Trust, an experienced and reputable NGO which provides education and basic needs to street children in Delhi. The collaboration with Learn for Life seeks to provide vocational training and jobs for some needy Delhi youths. In 2020, despite the pandemic this program has expanded to other such NGOs. Indeed, two boys from the Rainbow Centre for Equity’s shelter-homes and one boy from Karam Marg’s shelter home joined our Bakery vocational training, receiving a salary, healthcare, food and lodging through LFL. Another two boys from Street Connection (a social enterprise organizing walking tours in Delhi), have been hired for our bakery stall at the Sunder Nursery Market. And we hired another man to help with the market and back office in order to allow Naresh to focus on training and bakery production. To be able to create job opportunities even in this current employment scenario is an achievement that needs to be recognized as such.

Both bakeries in Delhi and Varanasi started sourcing mostly organic raw ingredients for bakery production and food distribution from small scale farms, which are implementing sustainable and ecologically minded agrarian models.

## **Restaurant, hospitality and tourism**

In 2019, Learn for Life started a new vocational training unit for tourism in Varanasi. In the first group, 4 trainees have started training as tour guides. In this field as well, Learn for Life seeks to combine vocational training with spread of awareness about social issues to youths and future clients. As such, theoretical training includes lessons about the history of Varanasi and its heritage, as well as the practical improvement of English conversational skills along with the design of novel walking tours. This sensitivity is also relayed in the tours to clients: tours are mostly by foot and avoid the use of motorboats, showing that the promotion and preservation of heritage and environment are strictly interconnected. Tour itineraries are quite different from the standard offer in town, and are characterised by a storytelling style that connects local myths and mythologies with social issues (e.g., caste, poverty, patriarchy) that affect India today. Another type of tour is **the Learn for Life Tour**, which takes tourists around the several projects of Learn for Life. In all cases, the elaborated tours try to provide insight into real life in Varanasi. In early 2020, the same model was replicated in Delhi with walking tours including both historical and heritage places of the city along with our Projects, mainly our restaurant and bakery in Delhi. As part of this project, we had been able to organise a leg of the trip for a German Travel Agency (<https://www.inti-tours.de/> which is part of [forumandersreisen.de](https://www.forumandersreisen.de/)) in both Delhi and Varanasi, including also food catering for a group of 8 people. We were invited by INTI Tours to take part to the Fair-Trade Tourism Forum in Stuttgart in April 2020, which got cancelled due to COVID19.

In Varanasi, in November 2020 we started a brand-new project on the premises of our guesthouse and restaurant. Since the global pandemic cancelled the 2020-2021’s tourist season, we decided to be resilient and reconvert the restaurant and guesthouse to become a new site for additional vocational training in professional cooking, targeting mostly women and young adults. The cooking classes are



managed by a female teacher three times a week and aim to provide the participants with marketable professional skills, all while receiving a salary for their livelihood during these hard times. Apart from learning how to make healthy and cost-effective Indian recipes with mostly organic ingredients, the trainees are also taught methods of conservation of ingredients and stock as well as on the professional hygienic standards of a restaurant kitchen. The final goal is to build a team of trained lady chefs who can prepare ready-meals to distribute to children and people in need on a daily basis in Varanasi and, even after the emergency is over, they will have acquired professional skills which will help these ladies find a job as chefs.

### **3. Practical training to students and community members**

Learn for Life goes further and also provides very basic computer classes and vocational training to adult members of the community. Computer courses are offered to community members, mainly women, so that they may learn about such technology, to have access to the internet, to be able to improve their income generating options. This has been taken up by an impressive 61 people in only the first two months of 2020. Additionally, very basic vocational training in tailoring and bakery has been offered to a total of 8 people, mostly mothers of Badi Asha School students. This activity as well was interrupted after March 2020.

### **4. COVID-19 Relief Program**

In India, COVID-19 and its consequent lockdown came with serious socio-economic and sanitary implications. In a country where most people are involved in the informal work sector (millions of day labourers have to work every day to provide food for their families) the lockdown represented a potential death sentence from starvation for millions. Migrant workers, left with no other mean of survival in the big cities, started walking hundreds of kilometres in the attempt to reach their native villages during the first phase of lockdown, which contributed for the virus to spread to even the remotest areas. In April 2020, an estimated 120 million people in India lost their job, leading to a spike in the unemployment rate of 27%. A hardly-existent Public Healthcare System (which has been compromised by a strong privatization of the sector over the last 3 decades) made evident the total collapse of Indian Healthcare in the attempt to encounter the pandemic. This also meant that other common pathologies like diabetes and malaria have not been treated as they should.

LFL immediately understood the need of the moment and therefore we took up the challenge in order to bring substantial help to as many people as possible.

The first actions in Varanasi were:

- to distribute free food to the families of Badi Asha School students at the school itself every day, while maintaining the necessary social distancing rules.
- in support of two other NGOs from Varanasi and Delhi involved in distributing food, masks and medicines during lockdown, LFL donated significant quantities of essential food products for distribution.
- in partnership with Rama Krishna Mission, our bakery started the production of nutritious cookies and protein bars distributed to people in need.
- apart from these, the Bakery restarted and increased the production both for donation and sale. In the same way, the tailoring project started the production of cotton masks, also both for donation and for sale.

Also in Delhi, Learn for Life reached out to give support by donating bread and cake to Salaam Baalak Trust, and all the trainees from SBT got paid full salary. LFL supports 5 SBT graduates, who recently have started their own businesses which got shut because of the pandemic, by providing them with daily food rations.

In 2020 LFL Italia supported local NGOs in Italy that are committed to rescue missions of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea and needy homeless people.

In terms of relief work, food production and distribution from our bakery continues, and LFL has actively reached out to as many people as possible, giving concrete help and logistical support. In specific, by December 2020, both independently and in collaboration with other organizations, LFL contributed to the distribution of:

1. Medicines to 10,000 people in villages around Varanasi.
2. As part of our sustainable **COVID-19 Relief Program** we have been providing food (mostly organic and natural ingredients sourced from small farmers and women cooperatives), medicine, warm clothes, blankets and hygienic products to:
  - 740 people who are the students of our Badi Asha School and their families in Varanasi.
  - 550 malnourished women and children in urban and rural areas in Varanasi.
  - 500 poor families (approx. 2500 people) in rural areas in surrounding areas of Varanasi.
  - 100 slum kids and their families in Varanasi.
  - 55 street kids in Delhi.
3. We transferred 40 grants in support of migrant workers who had no other choice but to leave Delhi by foot to return to their native villages at the beginning of the lockdown.

The biggest challenge to our relief work has been the loss of Ramakrishna Mission's Project Director, Swamiji Varishthananda, who passed away on September 10<sup>th</sup>. Besides being a long-time friend, collaborator and well-wisher of LFL, he had been an important link in the collaboration of our two realities before and during the pandemic relief work. Fortunately, we were able to restart the food distribution in rural areas after a little delay.

Furthermore, LFL has supported a school outside Varanasi (ca. 70 children). This support has amounted to food rations, blankets, masks, stationary items as well as a grant to cover part of teacher salaries.

### **Financial Sustainability**

All commercial entities owned by LFL serve a dual purpose: one, the profits they make are used to support the LFL charitable activities (the schooling program, food for the pupils, uniforms, healthcare for staff and beneficiaries etc.). Additionally, these production units also serve as places where the youths can complete their vocational training apprenticeships, along the lines of the European dual training approach.