

## COVID-19 February and March Report

### LEARN FOR LIFE EMPOWERMENT PROJECT

It has been one year since the global pandemic began, and the Learn for Life Empowerment Project (LFL) India has never stopped its work to guarantee health and social protection for her workers and beneficiaries, as well as to bring substantial help to the larger public -- as such a global emergency calls for.

In terms of relief work, food production and distribution from our bakeries is ongoing in both Delhi and Varanasi, and LFL has actively reached out with concrete help and logistical support to as many people in need as possible, as per previous reports.

In brief:

1. LFL has distributed medicines to 10,000 people in villages around Varanasi.
2. As part of the sustainable **COVID-19 Relief Program**, LFL kept sourcing food (mostly organic and natural ingredients sourced from small farmers and women cooperatives with whom we have strengthened the collaboration), medicine, hygienic products and cotton masks (which are produced in our Tailoring Project atelier), and distributed the same to:
  - 740 students of our Badi Asha School and their families in Varanasi collect their daily rations of food, medicine and hygienic products from the premises of our school.
  - 550 malnourished women and children in urban and rural areas in Varanasi (additionally, we provide sanitary pads and condoms in order to improve their reproductive health).
  - 500 poor families: (approx. 2500 people) in rural areas surrounding Varanasi.
  - 100 slum kids and their families in Varanasi.
  - 55 street kids in Delhi living in a shelter home managed by a partner NGO.

The biggest challenge has been the fact that much of our management staff has been working remotely all these months. We managed to put in place successful and innovative methods to work and organise the staff from afar, and the proof of this is the uninterrupted activities that the various projects in India are carrying out quite efficiently. Video meetings between staff in Europe and in India occur on a daily basis. The Manager of each project is constantly in touch with his/her Project Coordinator in India. The Teacher Meeting is held regularly once a week via Zoom as well. In fact, we find that the distance plus our contact adds confidence, as the staff has to be independent, but still has immediate support from abroad if needed. A true empowerment.

Given the ever-increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases by the end of March, we introduced a new **Safety Rules Policy** by starting regular tests of staff at all locations. LFL pays for the tests and if the result is positive, employees are sent into a period of monitored isolation for which we provide also quarantine rooms at our Varanasi and Delhi Guesthouses (in case it is not feasible to do in their own homes). In any event, the staff keeps getting their salary even during an isolation period. Moreover, regular weekly video meetings about hygiene and safety measures are held between the Project Managers and Coordinators. We believe this help us work with a higher level of safety for everyone.

In Varanasi, the bakery vocational training and production is active as usual and recently we have started purchasing raw materials for production from small-scale tribal farmers near Varanasi. Moreover, we completed the training of two women who joined our administration team to help with office work. The vocational training in professional cooking on the premises of our guesthouse and restaurant is going on very well with the same 6 trainees who showed a great level of interest and participation; we are now ready to take more trainees onboard. The cooking classes are managed by a female teacher three times a week and aims to provide the participants with marketable professional skills, all while receiving a salary for their livelihood during these hard times. The cooking classes' syllabus includes: healthy and cost-effective Indian recipes made

with mostly organic ingredients, methods of conservation of ingredients and stock and the professional hygienic standards of a restaurant kitchen. The final goal is to build a team of trained woman chefs who can prepare ready-made meals to distribute to children and people in need on a daily basis in Varanasi, as well as able to work in our or others' restaurants. The teacher takes weekly tests to assess skill improvements of the trainees and updates us on their progress through weekly reports.

Concerning Badi Asha School, during February and March the Government allowed schools to open for a small period of few weeks, so we restored classroom lessons for all the students from grade 1 to 7 by implementing a turn-system in order to avoid too many students in the building at the same time. Unfortunately, given the quickly rising level of infected people in India, by the end of March schools had been closed again and we shifted back to online classes for grade 5, 6 and 7. Class 7 only started this year and it was managed successfully although through online classes and we are planning to start class 8. In addition to the above, all of the Coaching classes we undertake, have been successfully shifted online.

With LFL as a bridge, the German Embassy in India has granted funds for the Telemedicine Project designed by the Ramakrishna Mission (with whom we have been collaborating and sponsoring for years). Indeed, the RKM representative Swami Amit, a scientist and educator, is now training our Badi Asha School teachers on effective and innovative methods to teach Math and Science online to our class 6 and 7 students. By using different and new platforms and methods, the math and science teachers have weekly video meetings with Swami Amit to implement and improve online classes. With the Telemedicine helping grow village online classes even, the advantages for our endeavours in this project are many.

Also, we are in the process of renting a former hospital building near the school in order to have more space which can be used for COVID-19 quarantine rooms, as well as bakery and tailoring workshop' space. Moreover, when schools will open again, we plan to make bigger classrooms in this building.

The women tailors from our Tailoring Project work as usual to produce garments, masks and other new products for our distribution as well as for our Online Shop in Italy, as well as for distribution to our newer Bosnian efforts. We are also trying new cloth products in the Online Shop, and seeing the results with new promotions on Google and Facebook for the Italian Social Enterprise. We continue to try to secure the Fair-Trade designation from Germany.

Also, the collaboration with Bindaas Collective goes on: apart from sourcing all fabric (natural, unbleached cotton with natural dye) from them, they are implementing weekly video classes for our lady tailors on tailoring techniques, quality check, design of our garments and how to set up a successful atelier. Now the results of this collaboration begin to show: our women tailors are raising their skill level and our team has become more professional and structured, supported also by the presence of external coordination that helps in the organization of their work.

Our bakery in Delhi, which is currently our main source of income, is doing quite well with the home delivery service; our bakery stall at the Sunder Nursery Market every Saturday and Sunday, organized by The Earth Collective, is now well known and appreciated by the local clients.

In Delhi, in addition to the two boys from Rainbow Centre for Equity, the two boys from Salaam Balaak Trust and one boy from Karam Marg's shelter home, an additional new boy from Karam Marg's shelter home has just joined our Bakery vocational training and he is now receiving a salary, healthcare, food and lodging through LFL. Moreover, we are very happy about the return of the girls and boys from shelter homes, who had been part of our programmes but were not allowed to attend for some time due to Lockdown; for now, this situation is alleviated, and this restriction no longer applies.

Both our bakeries started sourcing raw ingredients, mostly organic (like pulse, grains, fruits, and the like) from small scale **Tribal farmers** as well as from **Women Farmer Cooperatives**, all of which are implementing sustainable models for the benefit of the farmers' incomes, as well as on the preservation of the environment. These goods are for production as well as distribution.

We are dedicating this time to structure our work. Due to the pandemic, we cannot work at full capacity, so we want to efficiently use this period to organise and implement those changes which are required to be able to restart at full potential when the time comes.



*Food and blankets distribution in rural areas, Varanasi*



*Organic German Bakeshop stall at weekly market in Delhi*





*Preparation of high protein bars for food distribution, Varanasi*



*Badi Asha School, coaching class*



*Cooking class in Varanasi and Vocational Training in Delhi*