



Empowerment Project

2019 Annual Report

General Information - Summary

The Learn For Life Empowerment Project (LFL) works along three interconnected lines: 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 2019 saw a few new highlights:

- One of the major milestones was that Learn for Life – after years of navigating the Indian bureaucracy – obtained official recognition by the government of the primary school (until 5th grade), which is considered to be a major breakthrough.
- Another highlight was the trial run in secondary schooling. Since it became clear that students have problems transitioning into public schools that follow traditional teaching approaches, Learn for Life has decided to see if they could expand into secondary schooling. Given the success of that pilot, this goal will be pursued further.
- After successfully conducting vocational training in 2 subjects already (Tailoring and Bakery) Learn for life introduced the new subject of Hospitality and Tourism. Again this has been received very well by the youths and will be continued.

On an institutional level Learn for Life could further mature and strengthened its administrative structures. This is considered to be an important step in providing the initiative with the institutional sustainability it deserves.

Statistical Overview

The following number of beneficiaries has been reached in each of the three fields:

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

Project activities 2019

1. ECD and Schooling in the Badi Asha School

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

The Pre-school Program:

The number of children in Badi Asha School's Early Childhood Development program has remained relatively stable since 2016, since the space and resources available allow only for ca. 35 children. There are currently no plans to expand the number of children admitted, but rather to seek to maintain as high a quality of schooling as possible.

Most Early Childhood Development programs in Varanasi only prepare for primary school by teaching kids to sit still, work and behave with the threat of punishment looming over them or "play-group" style nurseries with very limited didactic components. More pedagogically valuable pre-school programs are for profit programs, for those who can afford them and not tailored for extremely poor children. The approach of the Badi Asha Pre-School is based on a play-based curriculum, dedicating a large portion of each day to child-initiated investigations and activities including songs, games, reading out loud, practical activities and exploration of different toys and materials that help children to make discoveries on their own. Teachers facilitate this and observe the children, taking inspiration from the children's own interests for further activities. Textbooks are not used. Part of the daily routine is to refine gross and fine motor skills.

The Primary School Program:

Also in primary school the number of students has remained relatively constant for the past few years at ca. 100 (98 pupils in 2019), which is the limit in terms of space, resources, and number of teachers.

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, the philosophies born in post-war Reggio Emilia, Krishnamurti's teaching philosophy, and the Waldorf / Steiner methodology. Teachers are encouraged to supplement the curriculum with creative activities and interactive lessons 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 angles to be more inclusive of children with different learning styles. Every week students give presentations to give



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them the chance to show their work, to feel proud of their accomplishments, and to gain confidence speaking in front of large groups and bringing students and teachers together in this way has created a greater sense of community and camaraderie.

Classes 4 and 5 develop critical thinking and emotional maturity through weekly discussion groups on various topics, which are often considered taboo or are sensitive in Indian culture. In 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. It has been shown that this supports students interested in the topic to pursue an educational path and career relating to tourism and heritage promotion.

The Secondary School Program:

It has become clear that after completing primary school with Grade 5, many students who moved on to public secondary schools were having a tough time to adjust to the different, more traditional schooling approach leading to demoralization, frustration and often to dropping out of school. To respond to this situation, Learn for Life is seeking to expand and also provide secondary schooling. As a pilot class, 12 pupils were trained in what would be Grade 6. This has been successful. Keeping the teaching methodologies along the same lines as for the primary school, the students have learned well and not a single one has dropped out till now. Based on this positive feedback, Learn for Life has decided that it will continue with the introduction of secondary schooling until Grade 8, which would be the equivalent of a high school diploma. The main challenge will be to qualify for the secondary school certificate with the Indian government. Should this not materialize in the next 3 years, the students will be registered to take external exams.

Activities relating to schooling as a whole

Services Offered

The services provided by the Badi Asha School have remained the same in 2019 despite the growing number of students and the rising costs. Schooling is free of charge, as are all textbooks, school supplies and uniforms, students are given shoes, socks, winter clothing and other items such as backpacks, water bottles, hygiene items as needed. In 2019 each student also received a warm blanket. Two healthy meals are available each day where portions are unlimited; for some kids the only full meal of the day. Collaboration with the Ramakrishna Mission continues secure free healthcare for all students.

This year saw the beginning of an outreach initiative into a new slum, which is one of the poorest in the neighbourhood. The goal is to present the work of LFL so as to draw students from this very poor area into the school or the vocational training programs.



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School Infrastructure

The rooftop garden is now mature. The miniature jungle of flowers, vines, herbs, and vegetables produces enough to supplement a little the schools lunch program, especially for herbs and some vegetables. Most importantly, the whole garden is being cared for by the pupils, often leading to longer workshops on sustainability, composting, wastewater collection or rainwater harvesting. Rabbits and chickens are raised also. The goal of introducing animals into the program is to help children understand how to care for and nurture a living being other than themselves. In India animals are often treated very poorly, so adding this element has had an especially profound impact on the children and their attitude towards animals has changed over time.

Infrastructure improvements this year included a full whitewash of the school, the construction of the chicken house and the improvement of the compost area resulting in an increase of compost used in the rooftop garden.

Teachers and Volunteers

It is considered a very big and emotional achievement that for the first time, one of the newly hired teachers, was actually an alumnus of the Badi Asha School. This is also a very good indication of the success of schooling. Old and new teachers alike have received considerable and regular training by the school director, Nicole Seregni. Teacher meetings and training sessions occur every Saturday after lunch and once a month a collaborative workshop with teachers from the Jeevan School, which alternates between the two schools. While weekly training reinforces pedagogical development and allows for research and individual lesson plan elaboration under supervision, the exchange with another school team gives teachers exposure to other methods and other points of view, allowing them to compare different teaching approaches. The teachers can now work much more independently. Additionally, as of 2019 they are now also guided by a professional psychologist for work with students with learning disabilities, other types of challenges or special needs.

As the teachers' skill level increase, so do their salary levels. The Badi Asha teaching staff is a wonderful group of open-minded and enthusiastic educators, who are always up to the challenge of questioning traditions and old ways.

Since 2016, Badi Asha School has been collaborating with EurasiaNet and the French Civil Service who send two volunteers every year, for 6 to 9 months, who contribute with different skills and expertise. In 2019, volunteers helped with English lessons, geography lessons, music therapy, math, art and photography workshops as well as administrative and IT tasks. Even experienced teachers have volunteered to help in developing curricula and daily routines.

Extracurricular Activities

Regular extracurricular classes in the afternoons include music three times a week, yoga with a teacher once a week, dance classes once a week, daily creative stitching and embroidery classes led by tailors, and everyday opportunities to utilize the growing children's library, which is full of books in English and Hindi. Less traditional academic topics include yoga (From this year we hired a well-trained young Indian teacher who



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also holds one yoga workshop a month, in addition to daily classes every morning before the academic day begins), meditation, emotional health and managing anger and depression, gender equality, and women's health, which is often incorporated into the daily class schedule.

Such topics can also be relevant for the parents. The involvement of parents is sought via meetings once every three months throughout the year to provide feedback on their children's learning and to introduce soft-skill training topics (e.g. the value of education, why oppose corporal punishment, hygiene, etc.). Parents are contacted individually, when determined necessary (for e.g. repeated absence from class). As part of the admissions process, the home of each student is visited by a staff member. This helps to verify which students are truly in need of support and to understand and connect with the family of each student. These visits are repeated to monitor any changes in their situation.

Students of the last class of primary school (5th grade) were traditionally taken on a class trip to Delhi. This included cultural visits to old Delhi and the Red Fort, the largest mosque in Delhi - the Jama Masjid, the parliament buildings, Mehrauli Archaeological Park and Bangla Sahib Gurudwara (the most important Sikh temple in Delhi), which introduced the children to *Sewa* (service to others) –a core concept of the Sikh religion, which was an open canteen where food is served by volunteers for free to everybody without distinction of religion, class, caste, gender etc. Some children volunteered by serving food to visitors, while other students, along with teachers, cooked the bread in the Temple's kitchen. It was an all-round enriching experience.

Creativity and the Arts

Badi Asha School continues to put a strong focus on creativity and the arts, which is why every Saturday is dedicated to creative projects and non-traditional academic activities. The art and music therapy program is going strong. The director studies Art Therapy in Italy and incorporates what she learns into teacher trainings. The program currently includes therapeutic and social/emotional oriented group activities and private sessions for students with developmental, emotional or behavioural issues. Music teachers are encouraged to incorporate aspects of this into their classes as well.

Academic Performance

Learn for Life does not pressure children to achieve good marks in any competitive way. Instead, the school focuses on a more holistic and self-motivated approach to schooling. Unfortunately, one cannot forget grades entirely because Varanasi and India, as a whole, is very "grade focused" and the students need to be prepared for their further education where grades do matter. This approach has worked well so far; despite not emphasizing grades or testing, there has never been a student who could not get into a secondary school program after finishing class 5 and in general their performance is above average in the schools they enter.

Post-primary support for alumni

Since Learn for Life is not particularly happy with the quality of the local middle schools, it remains an ongoing process to seek out those schools that have the best quality



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schooling for the alumni of the Badi Asha School. The school now works with selected Hindi and English medium schools that provide adequate schooling.

In general, youths are often pushed to leave school early to start work and supplement the family income. Learn for Life would like to avoid this as much as possible by providing vocational training on the one hand (see below), but also by supporting former pupils in furthering their academic education. As already mentioned above, Badi Asha School introduced teaching the 6th grade this year. Despite this, Learn for Life still accompanies a number of former Badi Asha students in other private schools. In the past, once children qualify for schools that charge a school fee, Learn for Life has been working with the parents to make sure that children will not be barred from this opportunity because of a lack of funds. Currently, 25 alumni get full or partial secondary school tuition fee coverage, offering free coaching for them as well. This tutoring program is an excellent way to keep track of their progress, as well as continue engaging them within their community. Tutoring is offered every afternoon to help alumni with their homework and to deepen some of the subjects they study at school. This support to help students stay in school is particularly important for girls, since it delays their being married off early and the age of first pregnancy.

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 management of the Tailoring program. She reorganised the division of work and tasks among the tailors as well as the space in the production unit. She taught new skills to the tailors, implemented regular quality checks of production, taught new models to tailors and trainees, also with the help of a local master tailor, who comes three times. This addition of a local tailor is very important to the sustainability of the project in the long run. In India, most of professional tailors are men and that is why it is truly empowering to train women as professional tailors.

The two-year training program has continued to expand. The tailors are now working with 10 women aged 15 or older on skills necessary for professional stitching. Another 4 ladies from another NGO joined the vocational training towards the end of the year. The religious diversity (Hindu and Muslim) of the tailoring team is tangible proof that a peaceful and harmonious coexistence is not a utopia. The social backgrounds of these women is different from case to case, but always problematic in its 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 introduction part (embroidery, stitching craft and tapestry), followed by the main stitching program (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. They are learning to reproduce and make new designs with both sewing machines and using hand-stitching techniques. The quality of their stitching and finishing, altering and fixing techniques keeps improving with practice. They also study embroidery as well as different sleeve



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and neck designs. 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. In English, they learn vocabulary related to their profession, stitching terms and names of clothing as well as how to talk to customers. Their ability to communicate in English improves consistently. For computer training, they learn how to use excel in open office to keep stock lists and make orders.

In 2019, LFL obtained the Goods Export Licence which has represented an important milestone for the tailoring project as the production unit of the training initiative can now sell garments to several shops in Europe. Additionally, an e-commerce online based shop is being developed. This also served as a stimulus to increase standards and to always find new ways to innovate products leading to new suppliers of natural dyed fabrics, currently an Indian collective based in Delhi. Two more women have been hired as full-time tailors. As all full-time tailors, they receive a fixed salary, a production bonus and a percentage on the sales of garments in the shops. In 2019, the tailoring team has also taken over external production for Pallavi, a small clothing design firm, which collaborates with LFL and commissioned a collection of coats, kimonos, skirts and bags.

Bakery

The bakery vocational training program has grown substantially in the last few years. Currently 20 youths and young adults are taking part in the more extensive 2-year vocational training program. The main components of this program are 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 education. Some are ex-students or family members of students from the Badi Asha School.

Michael Schmid oversees the bakery vocational training program for employees and apprentice bakers at the *Brown Bread Bakery* and *Organic German Bakeshop* in Delhi and *Brown Bread Bakery Restaurant and Guesthouse*, *Vegan and Raw Restaurant* and *Pizzeria Nicoletta* in Varanasi. Most vocational training is of a practical nature. The head baker trains the bakers and the head chefs at each restaurant trains the cooks. Over the first year, they learn the basics of cooking and or baking. They learn about ingredients and terminology such as organic, vegetarian, vegan or gluten free, health and safety protocols, how to use and maintain the equipment effectively, and how to work together in a healthy employment setting. The learning process about sustainability and waste reduction is also offered to the employed staff. The Brown Bread Bakery utilizes solar energy in the restaurants, they partner with local organic farms to provide many of the ingredients and much of the cheese is made from the milk of grass-fed indigenous cows in Manali by a Swiss cheese maker who employs mostly women from disadvantaged social situations. The Bakery saves vegetable scraps for compost, reuses empty and washed plastic bottles for making ice and for gardening and sends unsold bread back to the bakery daily to be given to the students of Learn for Life's Badi Asha School in the mornings. The staff is taught not only how to do this, but, almost more importantly, why



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to do this. Trainees also learn basic economics and math skills, learning to scale the amount of ingredients needed to make different amounts of products and to calculate the cost of the combined ingredients, as well as learning to use the cash register and make change at the restaurant and shop locations.

The program continues to employ many ex-students, family members of current students and community members who are in need of financial assistance in the bakery and at the restaurants. Currently 8 mothers of current students are employed in the bakery in various capacities (kitchen, cleaning, muesli making, etc.), some of the are widows or divorcees. They are keen to get the more professional training so as to increase their future employment options.

Since 2018, the program has been 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 some of the children they work with vocational training and jobs. The partnership has proved successful: At this stage 12 of their former beneficiaries are now included in vocational training: 8 trainees are training full-time in the bakery and kitchen, (7 of them are provided with room and board). The remaining 4 former Salaam Baalak Trust beneficiaries are part time trainees who continue to live in the shelters.

Restaurant, hospitality and tourism

This year Learn for Life started a new vocational training unit for restaurant work, hospitality and tourism in Varanasi. In the first group 4 trainees have started training as tour guide. In this field also, Learn for Life seeks to combine vocational training with awareness raising about social issues to youths and future clients. As such theoretical training includes lessons about the history of Varanasi and its heritage, improvement of conversational skills in English and the design of novel walking tours. This sensitiveness is also relayed in the tours to clients: Tours are mostly by foot and avoid the use of motorboats, transmitting also 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 topics, real-life anecdotes and 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.

Another practical training component relates to direct customer contact in the Learn for Life guesthouse. Trainees take great pride in their job. They are also trained on a new management software to optimise the room reservation process. This has increased substantially the guesthouse bookings and revenues while reducing possible confusion and mistakes.

The response from all three parties – Learn for Life trainers, the clients, and the trainees – was resoundingly positive. For the youths one of the main benefits is that they can it allows them to generate income with next to no required investments in equipment or infrastructure. In the future, the program is expected to pick up in earnest and expand the number of trainees.



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Activities relating to vocational training as a whole

All students of vocational training are also trained in English and basic computer skills. This is offered to both the staff and to the vocational training students.

In Varanasi, two female English teachers were hired, one for the shopkeepers and the workers of restaurants and guesthouse, the second one for the tailoring team. Computer training is focussed on relevant skills such as how to create and use an email address, how to use excel and word in Open Office for making stock lists, sales sheets and billing, how to effectively use a search engine. All of this is done on tablets and laptops equipped with Linux and open source software, which have been provided by Labdoo in Germany.

In Delhi, the youths from Salaam Balaak Trust receive financial support from the Trust. English and computer training is based on learning-by-doing. The trainees receive practical training during work and practice English and computer skills with senior workers while they prepare orders and deliver to customers. In line with Indian law, trainees, who are 16-18 years old stay at the Trusts shelter home, come 6 days a week for 4 hours and receive only expense reimbursements. Those that are older are employed, get a salary, health care and three meals a day. They continue to be supported by the Trust in case they want to finish their schooling or get other types of training.

3. Practical training to students and community members

The two main work areas of Learn for Life – providing schooling and providing vocational training – increasingly learn from one another. The didactic and pedagogic skills used in the classrooms are (albeit adapted) just as relevant when training in occupational skills like tailoring or bakery. On the other necessary vocational or computer skills are increasingly relevant also for school pupils. While for the children, these vocational skills are primarily recreational, they are offered to students in the afternoon and are increasingly appreciated.

However, Learn for Life goes further and provides very basic computer classes and vocational training also to adult members of the community. Computer courses are offered to community members, mainly women, so that they may learn about computers and have access to computers to be able to improve their income generating activities. This has been taken up by an impressive 59 people in 2019. The seven people who received basic training in tailoring and bakery in the afternoons, were integrated into the vocational training courses toward the end of 2019 and now constitute a part of the regularly trained youths.

Financial Sustainability

To provide the Education Program of Learn for Life with a perspective of sustainability also on a financial level, commercial activities are combined with vocational training. This allows for a self-generated basis of income. In 2019, the bulk of this income is generated at the Brown Bread Bakery. Other income generating activities that have been started more recently are trying to diversify income. Two commercial shops have been opened for textile products and for food products in different areas of Varanasi. Also, in 2019, LFL obtained the *goods export licence*, an important milestone that makes



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it possible to sell garments to several shops in Europe. The next step to be implemented in 2020 is an e-commerce shop for direct global marketing. The prospect of the more demanding international market led to a new source of natural dyed fabrics, an Indian collective based in Delhi.

All commercial entities owned by Learn for Life serve a dual purpose: On the one hand the profits they make are used to support the charitable activities of Learn for Life (the schooling program, the training program, food for the pupils, uniforms, etc.). On the other hand, these production units also serve as places where the youths in vocational training can complete their apprenticeships along the lines of the European dual training approach. The Learn for Life Shops sell garments and textile products made in the tailoring unit as well as products made and processed in the bakery such as mueslis, cookies, jams, nut butters and organic grains. The salespeople from the shops are also trained in computers and English, while also gaining skills in retail management. As mentioned before, Learn for Life is currently in the process of setting up an online shop for unperishable products.

For the year 2019, it is estimated that up to 20% of the operating budget could be raised locally through these income generating units. This is considered a big step toward institutional sustainability.