

Co-creating Pathways to Transform Communities in Rural Meghalaya, India: A study on the Chief Minister's Youth Centre (CMYC) programme

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Research in Alternative Global Education (RAGE) is the research arm of Project DEFY dedicated to creating knowledge about alternative education and meaningfully involving learners and communities in the production of knowledge.

RAGE serves as a platform to identify gaps in the global knowledge landscape focusing on alternative education and bridge these through empirical evidence from 'Nooks'. Set up in marginalised communities with limited access to resources, Nooks are alternative community learning spaces that follow principles of self-designed-learning. Nooks are currently located in 32 locations across India, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Uganda.

RAGE provides a collaborative learning space for like-minded researchers, practitioners, and learners who wish to challenge the hegemony of dominant approaches within educational research.

This paper is the second in our 'Working Paper Series.' Read the first paper from the series here: [Challenging Narrow Conceptualisations of 'Education' through the Nook Model in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, India and Bangladesh](#).



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Abstract

Drawing on findings from a recent participatory research study, we discuss the contribution of the Chief Minister's Youth Centre (CMYC) in addressing challenges and aspirations in communities in rural Meghalaya in North-east India. CMYCs are spread across 22 locations, and are run in collaboration between the Government of Meghalaya, Smart Village Movement, Sauramandala Foundation and Project DEFY. Responding to educational and economic disparities stemming from the urban-rural divide in the state, the programme intended to bridge this gap by introducing novel methods of community-based alternative learning and initiating a culture of problem-solving in rural communities. Three years into the CMYC programme, we posed two key questions in this study: 1. How has the CMYC positioned itself in relation to aspirations and challenges in rural Meghalaya from the perspectives of learners and community members?; 2. In what ways can the CMYC programme address challenges and aspirations of the community in the future?

Our key findings include:

- CMYCs have been able to create a sense of hope (in terms of experimentation and new learning areas) and build a safe space where learners find comfort in expressing themselves beyond immediate project-related considerations.
- Learners and community members express a common desire to expand their learnings from the CMYC to create businesses and begin entrepreneurial ventures, highlighting an increasing recognition of the viability of such a pathway.
- They put forward aspirations around boosting the village economy through utilising local resources in creating products of day-to-day use, or opening workshops/ bakeries (drawing on skills learnt at the centre) in the village, indicating a desire for self-resilience and a potential of regeneration of rural areas in Meghalaya.

Finally, we highlight the scope and benefits of participatory research approaches in co-creating these insights and ensuring relevance to the contexts in which participants navigate their lives.

Keywords: aspirations, community development, urban-rural divide, alternative learning, self-designed-learning, youth, participatory research, Meghalaya, India

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Acronyms

RAGE	Research in Alternative Global Education
CMYC	Chief Minister's Youth Centre
NER	North Eastern Region
GoM	Government of Meghalaya
NSS	National Sample Survey
SDL	Self Designed Learning
PSREF	Prime Sauramandala Rural Entrepreneurship Fellowship
PAR	Participatory Action Research
TESF	Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures
SHG	Self Help Group
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services
VO	Village Organization
VEC	Village Employment Council
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

1. Introduction

1.1 Understanding Meghalaya's Unique Context and Challenges

Nestled in India's North Eastern Region (NER), the state of Meghalaya was carved out of Assam in 1972. Following India's independence in 1947, the region remained deprived of financial resources, and was embroiled in political and identity-based turmoil. NER's historical isolation vis-a-vis 'mainland India'¹ has been attributed to being "smaller in size, having hilly terrains, and consequently lower population density" (Rajeev and Nagendran, 2016, p25). While this historical neglect has begun to fade through initiatives such as the 'Look East Policy' and the more recent 'Act East Policy', both intended to acknowledge NER's growing strategic and geopolitical relevance (Observer Research Foundation, 2020), scholars argue that making sense of the development of the region requires going beyond regional generalisations and "geographical denotations" to appreciate the heterogeneity that stems from cultural, religious, and socio-economic variations within the NER (Sharma, 2021).

The focus of this paper is on Meghalaya, a state exhibiting this very heterogeneity with different tribes², food, topography, and variations in the development trajectories within the state itself. A recent report by The Institute for Human Development (2023) puts population estimates of Meghalaya (as of 2021-22) at approximately 3.3 million, an increase of 11% from the 2011 Population Census (where it was 2.9 million). These figures, however, hide differences in urban-rural population distribution and further correlate to availability of resources and opportunities. The report notes that Meghalaya is predominantly rural, with approximately 15-20% in urban areas and 75-80% in rural areas as per the 2011 Census.

In what has become symptomatic of patterns of rapid urbanisation in developing countries, challenges stemming from the 'urban-rural divide' have translated to concentration of resources in the more developed urban areas of Shillong (the state capital in East Khasi Hills) and Tura (one of the largest cities in Meghalaya in West Garo Hills). In terms of educational opportunities, this manifests through "the distribution of Secondary and Higher Secondary Schools and Colleges being highly skewed in favour of Shillong and to a certain extent, of Tura" (Department of Education, Government of Meghalaya (GoM), 2018, p9), exacerbating educational disparities between rural and urban youths. With regard to outcomes of school-based education in rural areas, the ASER 2022 Survey assessed foundational learning in 6 districts in rural Meghalaya and found that overall, 60.3% children in Standard 6-8 could read a Standard 2 level text.

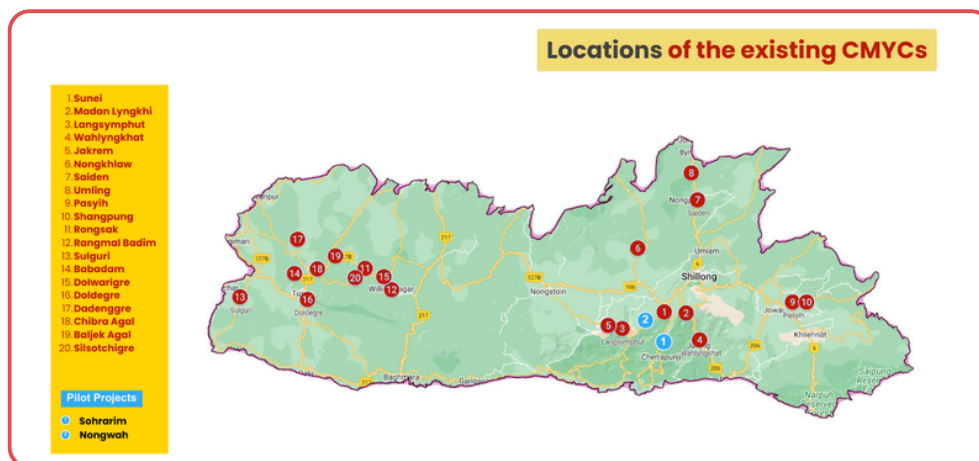
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- 1 While the dichotomy of 'mainland' and periphery in relation to the NER has been critiqued for reinforcing the region's historical isolation, it helps situate the neglect in terms of financial resources the region faced and suppression of identity-based movements in the decades following independence.
 - 2 The three major indigenous communities in the state are the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos. The Khasis and Jaintias primarily inhabit the central and eastern parts of the state, whereas the Garos reside in the western regions. To know more about the history of the tribes of Meghalaya, see '[Intangible Heritage in All Forms: A Study of Khasi and Pnar Tribe](#)' and '[Role of A Gate in Garo Society, Meghalaya](#)'

This average does not account for significant variations - with the highest figure at 89.1% in East Khasi Hills and the lowest in West Garo Hills at 40.7% (ASER, 2023). The hope of better quality education and more opportunities in urban centres drives migration of education and employment-seeking youth. This correlates with migration patterns - between 2001 and 2011, “in Khasi Hills (now split into West and East), there was a huge rise of over 50%, while in East Garo Hills and Jaintia Hills, the population had actually fallen [implying a] considerable intra-district migration” (The Institute for Human Development, 2023, pp.18-19). The urban-rural disparity is echoed in the increasingly ubiquitous digital sphere with 14.7% of Meghalaya’s rural population being able to operate a computer, in comparison to 52.5% of the urban population, as reported in the 75th round of the National Sample Survey, (NSS) 2017-18.

1.2 Bridging Meghalaya’s Urban-Rural Divide - Introducing Chief Minister’s Youth Centres

Recognising the urban-rural divide within Meghalaya in terms of limited access to quality learning and skilling for the youth, in 2021, the Government of Meghalaya partnered with the Smart Village Movement, Sauramandala Foundation and Project DEFY³ to pilot an initial iteration of what would evolve into the CMYC. The pilot sought to “improve the resilience and economic potential of underserved rural communities, by creating spaces for learning and self-improvement. Additionally, it aimed to bridge the rural-urban educational and digital divide through sustainable technology-driven interventions, and introduce practical and exciting learning” (Bradbury et al., 2023, p5). The success of the initial pilot, reiterated in an evaluation highlighting key challenges and opportunities, led to the scale-up of CMYCs in 22 centres (the first two pilot centres and 20 new centres) across 13 blocks in 8 districts (ibid.) - see map below.

Figure 1: Distribution of CMYCs in Meghalaya



Source: Sauramandala Foundation, n.d.

3 To know more about individual partners, see: [Smart Village Movement](#), [Sauramandala Foundation](#), [Project DEFY](#).

CMYCs are composed of three main components - a community-based learning space based on principles of self-designed learning (SDL) called the 'Nook', a concept by Project DEFY, a library and a sports component (different sports have been introduced - from football to frisbee and recently, chess). The centre physically accommodates all three components under its roof and is open to any member of the community, irrespective of their age, gender, educational level or socio-economic background.⁴

Nooks are driven by the idea of 'self-designed-learning', a concept where "learners— from a young age on—decide what to learn based on their own interests and passions, how they want to learn it, how long they want to learn about it, and how and in which ways they are using and applying their learning" (Neusiedl, 2021, p50). They operate on a cycle-based structure, lasting approximately six to eight months where learners can take up projects based on their interests, develop their ideas further, and eventually present it in an event known as the 'exhibition' which marks the culmination of each cycle.⁵

At the beginning of each CMYC set-up process, village representatives such as the village head and any other member nominated from the village enter into a 'social agreement' with the implementing partners of the project to ensure the former's support in the smooth functioning of each centre. These agreements, renewed every two years, serve as a critical link between the project and the community and ensure that the CMYC is seen as a community resource from inception. Moreover, in light of objectives under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution introduced in 1951 in North-eastern states of India, the importance of local self-governance and management of tribal affairs through Autonomous District Councils percolates to villages and confers immense power to local village representatives. In the context of CMYCs, the role of village heads and village executive members has been critical in cementing the position and spreading awareness of the centre within the community.

4 Find more information on the CMYC programme here <https://www.sauramandala.org/cmhc>

5 For details on the breakdown of the Nook cycle structure, read pages 10-13 in a previous paper by Project DEFY - 'Challenging narrow conceptualisations of 'education' through the Nook model in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, India, and Bangladesh.' Available at: <https://projectdefy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/RAGE-Working-Paper-Series-1.pdf>

1.3 Contextualising the Gap this Study Seeks to Bridge

A recent trend in the region is an increasing focus of governments on skill development initiatives to “meet the aspirations of youth through training, to enhance employability and employment” (Rajendran and Paul, 2020, p195). This is visible in Meghalaya's ‘Mission 10,’ a roadmap to a 10-billion dollar economy by 2028 (Department of Planning, Investment Promotion and Sustainable Development, GoM, 2024). Mission 10 notes 10 opportunities and guarantees each. The ‘opportunity’, “engaging and employing youth to leverage Meghalaya’s demographic dividend for growth” and the ‘guarantee’, “joyful and quality learning at all levels” (ibid.) further align to objectives of the CMYCs.

Other initiatives in Meghalaya have sought to enhance these objectives as well. One such programme is ‘Aspire Meghalaya’ which focuses on youth development in partnership with different educational institutions across the state. So far, they have enrolled 13,291 students across all 12 districts of Meghalaya in various soft skills training and personal growth interventions. This programme mainly focuses on educational institutions where youth’s emotional wellbeing, self worth and confidence, communication skills, recognising potential, identity and culture and funnelling skills, are some of the key elements which helped address the gaps in youths across Meghalaya (Aspire Meghalaya, n.d.).

Another programme is YESS Meghalaya which caters to empowerment of youth clubs, not-for-profit organisations, societies and cooperations and many such local initiatives or clubs, where they get access to financial support through subsidies or grants initiated by the GoM (Department of Sports and Youth Affairs, GoM, 2023). Such initiatives allow communities across Meghalaya to form independent societies, clubs, or organisations which can promote grassroots interventions in different areas - education, health, tourism, among others.

Building on the burgeoning entrepreneurial ecosystem in Meghalaya⁶, PRIME Meghalaya was established in 2019 with different programmes that offer interventions such as incubation, mentorship and training, funding access and networking opportunities. PRIME stemmed from a similar gap of concentration of entrepreneurs in urban areas, and an allied initiative, the Prime Sauramandala Rural Entrepreneurship Fellowship (PSREF) came into existence to cater to various rural entrepreneurs in different blocks of Meghalaya. The CMYCs have linked with the PSREF ecosystem, where fellows from PSREF have helped in various interventions for learners in the CMYCs who needed support to start their business ventures.

While these important initiatives in Meghalaya cater to needs of particular groups or individuals⁸, CMYCs differ in their approach by addressing concerns and gaps around equitable learning opportunities and providing community-based learning (outside the schooling system) in rural Meghalaya. Importantly, CMYCs

6 “Meghalaya was ranked the top performer in developing startup ecosystems for entrepreneurship in 2021 according to the ranking of states by the Centre’s Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade” (Times News Network, 2022).

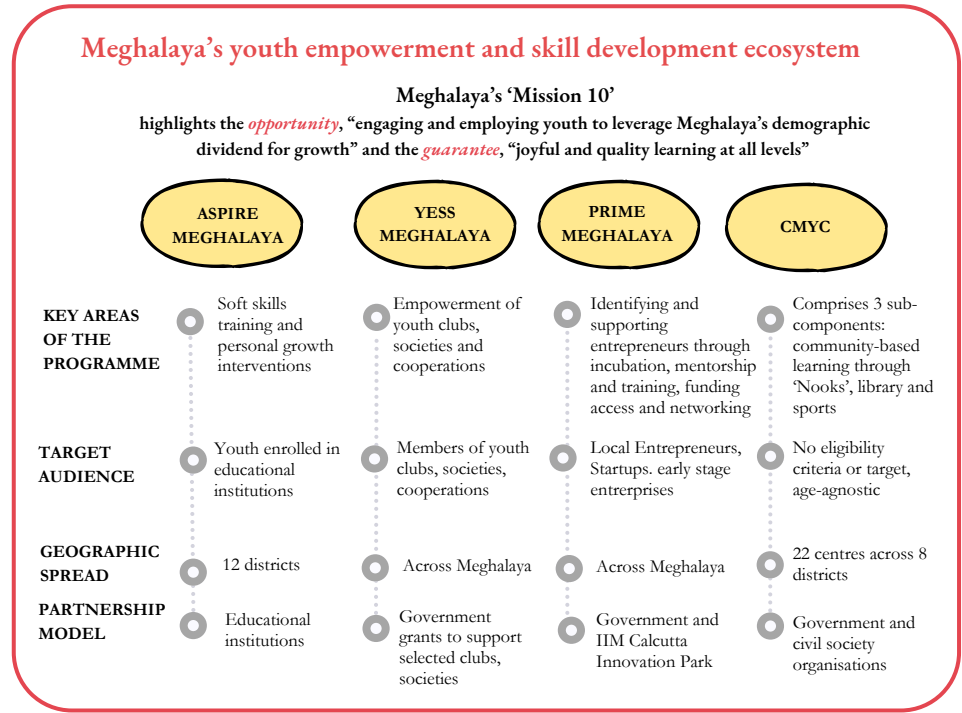
7 For more on PRIME, see ‘PRIME Startup Hub Yearly Report’ available here [PRIME-One-Year-Journey-Final-Printout-Booklet_compressed-1.pdf\(primemeghalaya.com\)](https://primemeghalaya.com/PRIME-One-Year-Journey-Final-Printout-Booklet_compressed-1.pdf).

8 For example, ASPIRE mainly associates with students in different educational institutions, YESS programme caters to specific clubs or societies that have already been established, PRIME and PSREF mainly caters to urban and rural entrepreneurs in Meghalaya

are age-agnostic i.e. there is no 'eligibility' criteria to come to the CMYC and the space is designed to be accessible to all members of the community. CMYCs aim to empower learners to "be engaged as problem solvers in their communities by using available resources to address some practical challenges their communities face" (Smart Village Movement, 2022).

Figure 2: Meghalaya's youth empowerment and skill development ecosystem

Figure 2 (right) summarises these different programmes that come together to constitute Meghalaya's youth empowerment and skill development ecosystem and shows how each covers different areas, partnership models, target audience and covers varying geographies within Meghalaya.



Source: Authors' work, 2024

Three years into the CMYC programme, plans on further scale-up are taking shape. It is imperative at this juncture to reflect critically on how the programme has fared along its intended objectives and responded to challenges in rural Meghalaya described in the previous section. Two studies in particular have been conducted to ascertain the centre's impact - the first, Bradbury et al. (2023)'s Trailblazer Lab Impact Report, an impact study of the first two pilot centres in Sohrarim and Nongwah; and second, an internal evaluation study of 12 CMYCs around the themes of learners' experience and relationship with the space, and community engagement. In previous studies discussing community perceptions, a common finding was that communities and learners ascribed 'value' to the presence of the CMYC. Building on this, this study attempts to decode the term to uncover the current (and potential) form of value CMYCs hold in two different locations. Unlike traditional methods used in research and impact studies, it is intended that this exercise will serve as a roadmap to collectively understand and chart pathways for the future with communities and learners. To further this collective understanding, the study takes a participatory approach to research, described in detail in the next section.

The study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How has the CMYC positioned itself in relation to aspirations and challenges in rural Meghalaya from the perspectives of learners and community members?
2. In what ways can the CMYC programme address challenges and aspirations in the community in the future?

2. Methodology of the Research

“The term research has often carried with it a set of assumptions linking a relatively small population of trained professionals from universities and professional research institutions with the privilege of being able to contribute to the production of knowledge” (Cammarota, 2011, cited in Sosnowski et al., 2022, p20).

Drawing on critiques of dominant forms of social science research that are largely extractive and exhibit a strong power asymmetry between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’, this study utilised principles of participatory action research (PAR). Defined simply, PAR entails a mix of “research, education and action” (Hall, 1981). While definitions have changed over time (see Kindon et al., 2007 for the history of PAR approaches), the approach is bound by a set of guiding principles. This entails researchers working with participants to define and refine the objectives of the study under question to counteract hierarchies involved in more traditional research. This collaborative approach is central to the research process envisioned under RAGE. PAR helps centre lived experiences of participants, ensuring that “the benefits of research accrue more directly to the communities involved” (Kindon et al., 2007, p1). Further, it has challenged the long-standing “assumption that knowledge arises from research outcomes [which] has been expanded in recent years to include the possibility that knowledge may also be created from the process of engaging in research” (Lind, 2008, p221).

PAR, like other methods, is not without its limitations. The authors note some drawbacks given the particularities of the present research study itself. Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures (TESF), a UK-government funded initiative with 67 projects guided by a co-created knowledge approach, released a methodological sourcebook detailing many of the challenges and opportunities in engaging in this form of research. They note, “the most common challenge identified across projects was related to time...many of the challenges [we faced] are common features of engaged research processes where relationships, trust and responsiveness are more important than pre-planned frameworks” (TESF Collective, 2023, pp.55-56). This particular challenge is critical in light of PAR where breaking down hierarchies of researchers and participants requires establishing trust-based relationships, factors that are severely constrained by resources, time and bandwidth. A second limitation relates to the difference in engagement between participants. Ensuring similar levels of participation has proved to be a challenge in other studies as well. For instance, Wattar et al. (2012) examined challenges of participation within the ‘Paamiut Youth Voice Research Project’ in Greenland and observed varying levels among the participants based on self-esteem, group dynamics and social norms. Group dynamics and social norms are relevant to the present study as well given the socio-cultural context where age signifies respect, and therefore it was observed that younger participants felt more inhibited to come forward in the presence of elders. Despite these limitations, PAR was chosen for fieldwork given the values it espouses in relation to breaking research hierarchies and co-creating knowledge. Moreover, authors felt that modifying elements of the research design were helpful in mitigating some of these challenges while parallelly centring participation and more equitable research partnerships.

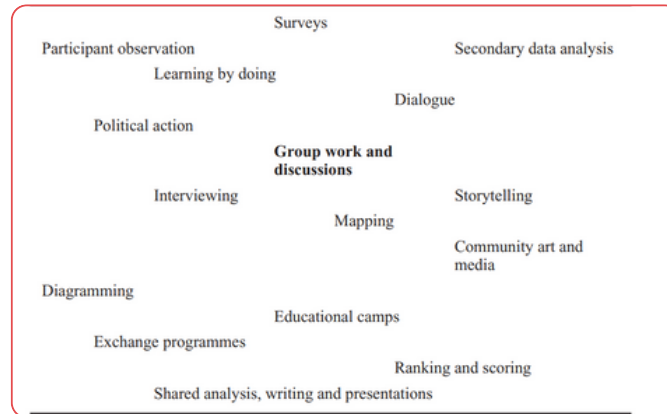
In the RAGE methodological approach, PAR is taken a step further post completion of the research study to learners and communities to collect insights and feedback on the paper. This is part of the research engagement process and is a key step in iterative design. An example of documentation of these insights drawn on a previous RAGE paper demonstrates this approach (see ‘Perspectives and Feedback on the RAGE Paper ‘*Challenging Narrow Conceptualisations of Education through the Nook Model in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, India and Bangladesh*’)⁹.

⁹ Available here <https://projectdefy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RAGE-Engagement-Paper.pdf>

2.1 Research Design

Drawing inspiration from PAR approaches described in Kindon et al. (2007), the study utilises methods combining visualisation techniques such as mapping, community art and media, diagramming, and action-research elements of dialogue, learning by doing, ranking and scoring (see figure 3 below). These methods were adapted to facilitate engagement of community members and learners in co-creating actionable insights around the community's context and address aspirations through the CMYC.

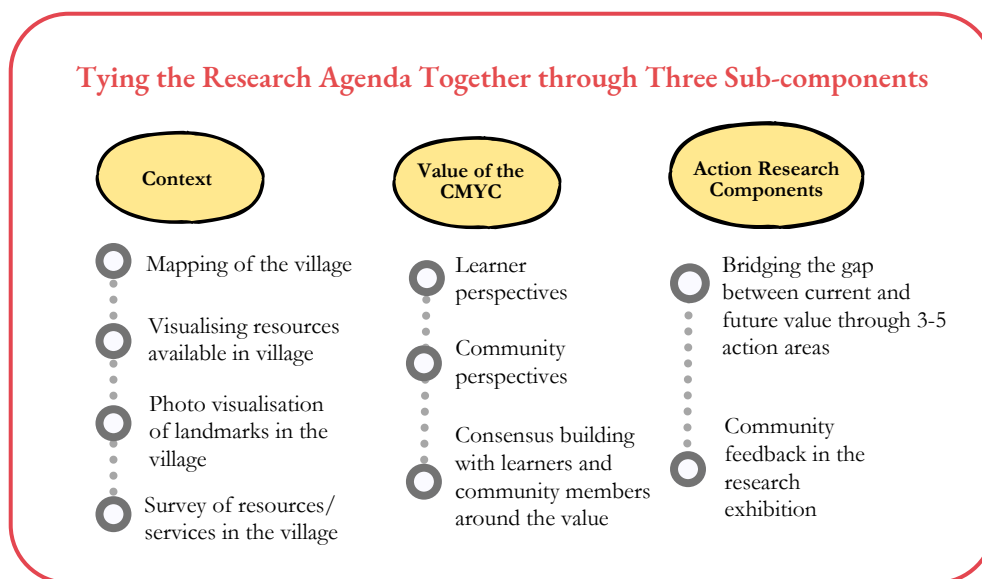
Figure 3: Common Methods in Participatory Action Research



Source: Kindon et al., 2007, p17

The study was conducted in two CMYCs - CMYC Pasyih in West Jaintia hills and CMYC Rongsak Songma in East Garo hills over 5 days in each location. Each day had a specific agenda, tied together to the overall objectives of the study. Day 1 and 2 were designed to build the 'context', Day 3 and 4 focused on understanding the 'value' of the CMYC through the lens of learners and community members and introduced the 'action research element'. The final day showcased the results of the previous day's activities (see figure 4 below). Before the research study, fellows were briefed on the 5-day plan over a series of calls to ensure a strong hold of the distribution of activities and how they tied into the research agenda.

Figure 4: Tying the Research Agenda Together through Three Sub-components

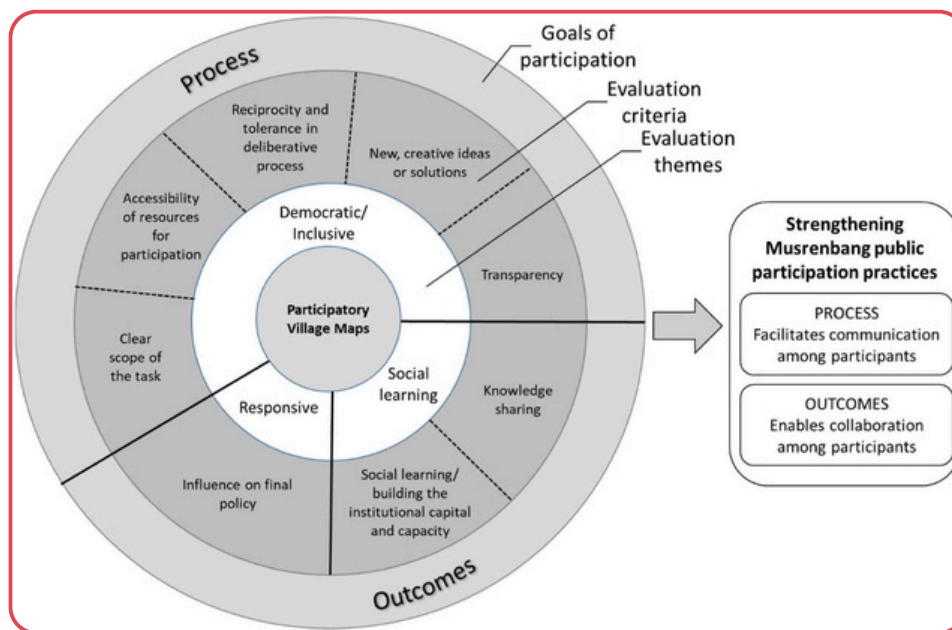


Source: Authors' work, 2024

The first day of the research began with conversations with the village head to seek their support and invite them to participate in the research activities involving community members. This was followed by introducing learners to the purpose of the study, seeking written consent, spending the day getting to know them, and finally dividing them into three different groups. Each group had tasks assigned to them for the following day. The second day began with groups assembling and going around the village based on the tasks assigned.

- Group 1 was responsible for mapping the village. This entailed going around the village and drawing a rough map demarcating the boundaries, key landmarks, distribution of assets and natural resources. This activity was inspired by Akbar et al. (2021)'s study titled, 'The Role of Participatory Village Maps in Strengthening Public Participation Practice' where authors discuss the role of village maps in social learning, knowledge sharing, and influence on policy (see figure 5 below).

Figure 5: Participatory Village Maps

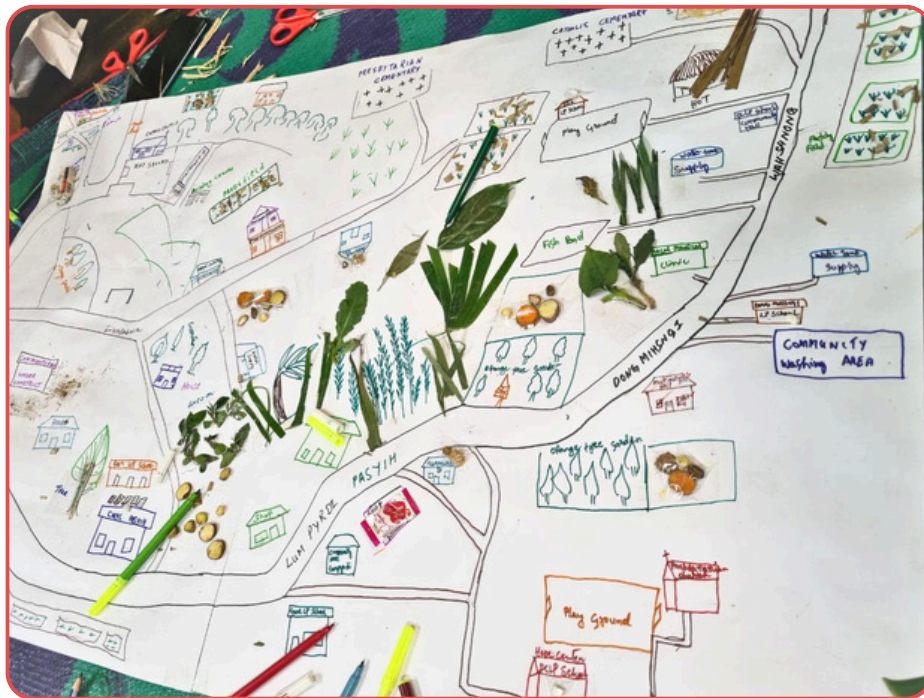


Source: Akbar et al., 2021, p3

- Group 2 was tasked with photography. This entailed photo documentation of landmarks, resources and facilities on smartphones. This team also collected memorabilia from different parts of the village to showcase local resources available.
- Group 3 conducted a survey based on a format where they observed the presence of specific basic facilities, economic assets, and natural resources in the village and ticked 'yes' or 'no' depending on availability and made a note on its functionality (for services and facilities like primary health care centres, banks).

The groups conducted the three activities parallelly and were spread out in the village in different directions. This took approximately 1-2 hours, given that both Pasyih and Rongsak Songma recorded a population of 2339 and 586 respectively as per the 2011 Census. Once each team returned to the CMYC, they began drawing the outline of the village map, marking the landmarks, boundaries and creating a chart with resources and memorabilia collected from different parts of the village. The final outcome of this activity was a map of the village with different resources, facilities and assets and was intended to begin looking at the village's 'context' from the lens of learners (see figure 6 for the map created by learners in Pasyih).

Figure 6 - A map of the Pasyih village made by learners on Day 2

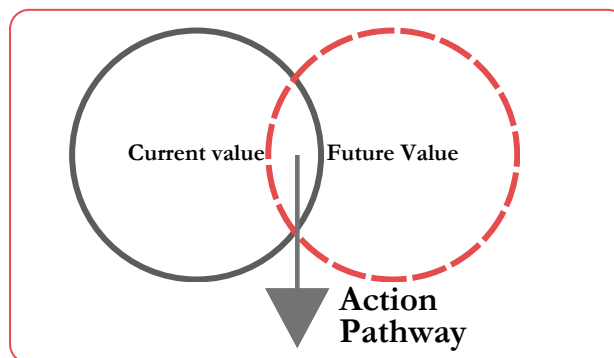


Source: Fieldwork in Pasyih, 2024

The third and fourth day focused on dialogue, ranking and scoring, consensus building and diagramming. The objectives of both these days were to break down the current and future value of the CMYC in the community. On the third day, learners were introduced to the diagramming activity of discussing and writing the value the CMYC held in their lives through venn diagramming methods.

The first circle was a reflection of the current value, followed by a second circle (overlapping with the first) to put down what they wanted to achieve through the CMYC in the future. This was not limited to the material resources available in the CMYC, and further included ideas of what the CMYC can become in the future to address aspirations and challenges facing the community. After teams shared their ideas around the current and future value of the CMYC, the overlapping part of the two circles was an 'action pathway' - a bridge between the current and future values learners had come up with (see figure 7 below). This action pathway entailed prioritising (using ranking methods) top 3-5 areas - steps or a roadmap to achieve future goals by utilising aspects uncovered in the current value of the CMYC.

Figure 7 - Venn diagramming activity and the 'action pathway'



Source: Authors' work, 2024

The fourth day, entailed a similar flow as the third, however, learners and community members were grouped on this day to identify community perceptions around the current and future value of the CMYC. Community members were familiarised with previous days' work - including the village map, local resources, and the diagramming activity by learners. The result was an 'action pathway' combining learners' and community members' ideas and how they can achieve these through the centre.

The fifth and final day of the study concluded with learners, community members and fellows showcasing findings of the previous days' activities conducted in an event called the 'research exhibition'. There was wider community participation in this event and study participants were able to not only present their work over the week, but also seek inputs on how to involve the community in achieving many of the goals identified in the 'action pathway'. This day saw different community members, village representatives, Self Help Group (SHG) members, Anganwadi workers,¹⁰ Village Executive Committee members as well as local groups participate in the event.

2.2 Sampling

The selection of CMYCs in this study was based on two key criteria. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the focus was not on scale and representativeness, but depth within a smaller sample. The first consideration was selecting centres based in two different geographical regions in Meghalaya. Accordingly, the first centre was located in Pasyih (West Jaintia hills) and the second centre in Rongsak Songma (East Garo hills). Geographic variation was used as a criteria to assess whether differences in participant responses emerged based on the context. Ideally, at least one centre from all sub-regions/ districts of the state would have fulfilled the first criteria. Yet, given restrictions on time and resources, two centres were finalised as the study locations based on a 5-day fieldwork plan in each location.

The second selection criteria involved snowball sampling where participants are selected based on identification of availability, operational viability and interest expressed by participants at the centre. Research participants over the five days included a wide range of individuals - from active learners who are doing projects in the current learning cycle, to community members involved in various livelihood activities - from daily wage work to school teachers to SHG members. The first half of the research activities saw an overall participation of 24 and 26 learners and community members in Pasyih and Rongsak respectively. The last day of the research activity (the research exhibition) saw participation of 40 learners and community members in Pasyih and 30 learners and community members in Rongsak.

¹⁰ Anganwadi workers are responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme in India. "ICDS aims at providing supplementary nutrition, growth monitoring, immunisation, preschool education, health check-ups and referral to children between the ages of 0 and 6 years, as well as health- and nutrition related education and facilities for pregnant women and lactating mothers. These services are provided through childcare centres, anganwadis" (Maity, 2016, p. 59).

3. Context

In line with the study's approach of participatory research, learners participated in the process of understanding local contexts through activities described in Day 2 of the Research Design in the previous section. The 'study location profiles' presented in Table 1 below are primarily drawn from these activities and supplemented with secondary data.

Table 1 - Study location profiles: Pasyih and Rongsak Songma

	Area	Pasyih	Rongsak Songma
1	District	West Jaintia hills	East Garo Hills
2	Major towns/ cities nearby	Jowai (12.1 KM)	Williamnagar (26.8 KM)
3	Major tribes	Pnar	Garo
4	Languages spoken	Pnar, Khasi	Garo
5	Basic facilities in the village		
5.1	Electricity connection	Both villages have electricity. However, during bad weather (especially during the rainy season) there are frequent and lengthy power outages. During this time community members gather at the CMYC to charge their phones (CMYCs run on solar energy).	
5.2	Mobile tower in the village	Jio works well in both locations. During bad weather conditions, the network has a tendency to get disrupted.	
5.3	Bank in the village	No bank in the village. Nearest bank is in Jowai (12 km away).	No bank in the village. Nearest bank is in Samanda (25.9 km away)
6	Economic profile of the village		
6.1	Self-help-groups (SHG) in the village	Pasyih has 2 Village Organisations (VO). Of these, one group received funds to build a creche (still under construction).	Rongsak has 8 SHGs. The SHGs conduct activities like making pickles and fermented dry fish. Some SHG members are also learners at the CMYC.
6.2	Local market for selling items	The main occupation for many locals is to sell goods in the local market.	There are grocery shops, medical shops and locals sell their home grown vegetables seasonally. There is also a weekly market.
6.3	Presence of non-agricultural occupations	Primarily agriculture dependent. Other common occupations include taking up Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act(NREGA) ¹¹ daily wage work.	Some common occupations include carpentry, driver, woodcutter, shopkeeper, businessman, mechanic and taking up NREGA daily wage work.
7	Local resources in the village	Silver berry, Bayberry, Turmeric, Ginger, Sweet potato, Pumpkin, Corn, Bamboo, soybean (see Annexure 1.1 for visualisation of local resources by learners)	Moringa drumstick, ginger, Okra, Jackfruit, bamboo, Betel nut, pomelo, pumpkin, guava, Chilli seed, sponge gourd, turmeric, blood fruit, papaya, gooseberry, sichuan leaf, tapioca, melon, pineapple (see Annexure 1.2 for visualisation of local resources by learners)
8	Pond/ lake/ river within 5 km of the village?	There are some man-made ponds. Rivers are a bit far from the main village, so sourcing water is difficult for locals.	The Simsang river flows parallel to the village. A protected fish sanctuary has been set up near the village as well.
9	CMYC-specific areas (information updated as of March 2024)		
9.1	Learning areas covered in projects in the most recent cycle *note - for both centres,, cycles are currently underway and hence, final projects and number of learners completing the cycle may differ	Baking (traditional cake with rice flour, cakes, cookies, muffin, bread and buns), Cooking (fast food), Jewellery making and facial make-up, Soap making, Welding cum electrical work, Carpentry (making wooden waterfall fountain), Miniature bamboo craft, Crocheting, Tailoring (jam- suit, girl frock , hand bag and pouch)	Baking (Cookie making), Macrame Bag, Tailoring (Making tops), Traditional turban, Soap making, Carpentry (Resin Terrarium Table), Welding (Flower Stand)
9.2	Male to female ratio in project groups	5:13	19:20
9.3	Total learners doing projects	18	39
9.4	Average age group of learners doing projects	26 years	19.8 years

¹¹ “For the last decade, India’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA, 2005) has been the world’s largest public works programme. This legal entitlement provided employment to 28 per cent of rural Indian households in 2019–2020” (Narayan, 2022, p779)

4. The Case

Themes uncovered through the exercise around situating the current value of the CMYC

1. Skill -Based Learning at CMYCs

Across both locations, skill-based learning emerged as a strongly attributed value of the space. Common skills cited by learners in both locations included soap making, tailoring, carpentry, and baking. These align to current learning areas being taken up in Cycle 2 of both CMYCs (see Table 1, 9.1) and indicate similar levels of access to common machinery to pursue these areas (sewing machines, tools for carpentry, fridges and storage for baking). In both locations, these areas were 'new' in the community, and learners mentioned the lack of other spaces in their vicinity to experiment with such ideas.

Expressed separately from 'technical' skills, communication in English was similarly pointed out in both locations. Learners valued developing their English language skills in the centre. In Rongsak, for example, using projects as an avenue to develop this further, learners mentioned taking up an "English language project which helped us learn the language. First we wrote the story in Garo, then got a dictionary from Garo to English to help with translation."

2. Specific Characteristics of CMYCs - Accessibility, Resource Availability and Flexible Timings

A common link in both locations was the presence of learners of all ages and genders. The diversity of age groups is reflected in the average age of learners doing projects - 26 years in Pasyih (range between 15 and 53 years) and 19.8 years in Rongsak (range between 14 and 38 years). A learner in Rongsak stated, "age and gender is not a barrier here - males do macrame and jewellery, whereas females do welding." The male to female ratio within projects was evidently more equal in Rongsak (19:20) compared to Pasyih (5:13).

Free access to the CMYC and availability of various resources - from laptops, a wifi connection, the internet, resources to undertake projects, solar-powered electricity - was strongly voiced by community members and reiterated by learners. Emphasis on the lack of fees to undertake learning was voiced in relation to other fee-paying institutes that offer specific skills in a course-based structure. Solar-powered energy was similarly discussed against the backdrop of regular power outages specially during the rainy season.

Beyond material resources, the expanse of options available within sports were highlighted by learners. In both locations, chess and frisbee were new sports that learners could dabble with. A learner in Rongsak mentioned, "Frisbee is a new sport in our village so we learnt a new game. Usually, we play football, cricket, volleyball. Through sports, we not only make friends but learn discipline."

Given the context of several learners being simultaneously involved either in formal educational avenues (primary and secondary schooling was most common) or livelihood activities (businesses, daily wage work through NREGA), flexible timings of the CMYC depending on one's availability were assigned high priority by learners and community members alike.

3. Emphasising Different Components of Self-Designed-Learning (SDL) and Supportive Ecosystems for Learning

The value of SDL was voiced most strongly through the usage of the words, 'learning' and 'skills' in both locations. However, without explicitly referring to SDL, learners in Rongsak and Pasyih pointed to different aspects of the learning approach envisioned through SDL that they valued.

Learners in Rongsak pointed to three specific aspects that underlie SDL - working with minimal support and figuring out steps required to undertake a project, the expanse of learning possibilities within the centre to experiment with, and improving depth of a particular skill.

Pasyih learners, on the other hand, emphasised personal development-related aspects. The most common value ascribed was around a reduced feeling of inhibition and shyness after coming to the CMYC and improvements in confidence. The link to supportive ecosystems where learners felt safe and a sense of bonding were highlighted by learners through the following statements, "getting support from peers with projects, the openness to ask for help from each other, and making friends at the centre." In Pasyih, community members who had seen the space develop from afar, separately pointed out how they sensed a collective identity - "Whenever I see the Nook, it comes across as a family. There is so much love. I see confidence in the children. They get a platform to display their talents." The value of socialisation and friendship, in and outside projects, is therefore seen by learners and community members as an experience associated with the CMYC in Pasyih.

4. Community-Specific Value of CMYCs

Due to differences in community outreach across CMYCs, community members naturally associate value depending on the activities each centre has carried out. In turn, this provides an indication of the frequency and depth of community engagement. Pasyih community members recalled, "learners did an awareness drive about plastic recycling in the village and how to use alternatives," pointing to the value of the space in relation to village development and addressing the problem of rampant plastic pollution.

In Rongsak, community members expressed the value from the lens of opportunities for the youth and pointed out, "many youth are getting better at things. Before the centre opened, youth wouldn't stay in the village. They now don't need to go out. They can stay here to learn things including music and make use of other facilities."

Across the four themes, this sub-section aimed to highlight similarities and differences in the current value of the CMYC for learners and community members. It is evident that while there are commonly cited areas related to learning specific skills, or accessing free resources, the differences are a function of the level of exposure to the CMYCs activities, how one makes use of various resources, and the differing importance attributed to personal benefits which range from valuing peer support to socialising at the centre.

Themes uncovered through the exercise around building the future value of the CMYC in the community

Three common themes were identified across both centres, albeit with variations in specific future goals (discussed below).

1. Entrepreneurial Ambitions

In both centres, there was an interest in starting various businesses, such as opening welding shops, bakeries or selling organic soaps. These were typically aligned to learning areas they had already undertaken in the learning cycle. Yet, there was a common articulation of wanting to move a step beyond completing a learning cycle to monetise the skill further in their respective villages. In both cases, entrepreneurial ambitions related to the paucity of a particular product/ service in the village and wanting to fill the gap. For example, referring to opening a bakery, Rongsak learners mentioned, “people have earlier learnt baking for personal consumption. Now we can open a bakery in the village since we normally get cakes from outside.” In Pasyih, community members mentioned opening workshops for jewellery making and soap manufacturing units. The emphasis on monetising skills, however varied - in Pasyih, community members stressed this more strongly than learners, whereas in Rongsak, learners themselves harboured these ambitions. Taking this a step further beyond the boundaries of their village, Rongsak learners pointed to a future where they could “sell products from the CMYC online in platforms like Amazon and Flipkart.”

2. Leveraging Local Resources to Create Different Products within the CMYC

Referring to the visualisation of local resources on day 2 of the research study, learners and community members came up with a plethora of possibilities of utilising these resources to create products of daily use. Most of the products fell under the umbrella of food items, clothing, and decorative pieces. In Pasyih, these included making cake from tapioca, biscuit or soap from ginger, hats and crafts from bamboo, medicine from Radoh and Tynkhieh¹², biogas from cow manure. Similarly in Rongsak, these included ginger powder from ginger, making cloth from the thread derived from banana stems, pickles from gooseberry and jackfruit, and bamboo baskets from bamboo. Community members in Rongsak added “creating disposable plates from betel nut leaves.¹³”

3. Knowledge Sharing between Learners and Community Members

Learners in both centres mentioned wanting to share the skill they acquired at the CMYC beyond the space specifically within the community. Learners in Rongsak who were working on the resin terrarium table under the carpentry project wanted to share their skills in resin design further with community members.

12 Radoh or fish mint (chameleon plant) and Tynkhieh (Indian pennywort) are common herbal plants found in and around Meghalaya, also used for different medicinal purposes.

13 Betel nut leaves are consumed throughout but commonly cultivated in warmer parts of Meghalaya, and used most often as a component of ‘paan’, betel leaf blended with lime.

Differences in themes related to future goals emerged in Day 4 of the research activities with learners and community members in Pasyih. Together, this group additionally added two new areas of future interest - the first was around social awareness which included “planting more trees to promote afforestation.” They also pointed out that “child marriage and alcohol abuse are issues in the village. We can bring more awareness to such issues through this space.” The second area was related to making agriculture more sustainable. The challenge they identified was around labour-intensive agricultural practices and posed a question of how to modernise agriculture. Additionally, the group identified quick expiration of fermented soybean as a challenge and wanted to collectively understand how to introduce preservation techniques.

Across these themes relating to the future value of the CMYC, while there were differences in type of products depending on local availability, participants in both centres expressed a future ambition of using local resources to create different products for day-to-day usage and building entrepreneurial avenues through skills acquired at the CMYC.

Based on this mapping of current and future values of the centre, the ‘action pathway’ described in the section 2.1 Research Design, led to the following areas that were prioritised as actionable areas and could be pursued through the CMYC (see table 2 below).

Table 2: Action Pathway results - bridging the current and future value of the CMYC

	Future Goal	Role of CMYC in achieving the goal
Rongsak	Creating brands and expanding to areas beyond Rongsak in Garo and even beyond Meghalaya. Example: soap, tailoring	Utilise the free resources in CMYC to build the business
	Creating bamboo-made products. Example: carpentry work with bamboo	Since bamboo is not utilised properly outside, one can use facilities in CMYC to make the bamboo products and improve skills in this area.
	Open bakery or factory for biscuits, cookies	Biscuits and cookies are usually brought from outside. We can start our own bakery in Rongsak by learning skills in CMYC.
	Expanding the skills and learnings for the entire community	In this village, CMYC is the only space where everyone can learn irrespective of age and gender. Here, gender does not matter for selecting projects. Example: Males - jewellery, Females - Welding
Pasyih	Learning English	Book with Khasi/ Pnar and English simultaneously
	Turmeric local production	Procure machinery required for the production
	Beautification of the village	Waste segregation project at the CMYC- learners bring waste to the centre and use vermicompost in the village (which is currently underutilised)
	Production of different items in the village	Learning the skills in the centre to produce items from bamboo (paper)

Community members' insights on the current and future value and the action pathway during the Research Exhibition on Day 5

In Rongsak, community members reflected on areas related to skill development and sharing between learners and community members, free availability of resources, and solar-powered electricity. The village headman of Rongsak commented, “those who come to the CMYC can learn more things and do really well in their lives. The centre offers a lot of opportunities free of cost as opposed to other places where you pay a fee to develop skills. The solar powered electricity in the centre is also a big benefit here as the electricity goes here very often.”

In Pasyih, community members supported goals around boosting local village resources with the SHG President adding that she felt there was a need to promote local traditional dresses in the village and Village Employment Council (VEC) President reiterating the “use of resources from the village and working together with the village and the centre.” Another Village Organisation (VO) member reflected on the challenge identified around rampancy of child marriage. She stated, “I resonate with the goal on child marriage. I feel shy when people ask me how many kids I have. I have witnessed how difficult it is for someone who has children at an early age. I feel there are many teenagers here, so I recommend taking advice from the CMYC.”

5. Findings from the Study

Through this study, we sought to understand how the CMYC has been perceived so far in terms of its value to learners and communities in rural Meghalaya, and collectively build an understanding of the possible futures of the space in bridging gaps in aspirations or addressing challenges. The study revealed key insights that can be further corroborated with programmatic objectives to adapt or build processes that respond to these needs. While Annexure 2 lists wider programme recommendations based on our study, this section sheds light on the research questions in relation to insights drawn from the exercise in Pasyih and Rongsak.

On the first research question around the CMYC's contribution to addressing challenges and aspirations of learners and community members so far, we note that the frequency and emphasis on particular aspects signals the current association with the space. From this lens, we find that learners and community members strongly value the accessibility and flexibility of the CMYC - in terms of free access, resource availability and timings, but also from a learning perspective. The latter was expressed through getting to choose one's learning areas and the sense of freedom that comes with experimenting in different projects without having to consider gendered or culturally-informed notions of what one should be doing. Moreover, the ease and comfort learners spoke about when they came to the centre signalled the value of supportive ecosystems for learning and experimentation. References to trying out 'new' areas that were previously not common in the village points to the introduction of new ways of learning and expanding options available to them, both of which are key objectives of the CMYC programme. We can compare these insights from learners to avenues such as vocational training institutes, where the major difference is that the design of such spaces discounts the flexibility to experiment across domains through their emphasis on a specific predefined learning area and rigid training module. CMYCs are designed as free and open spaces for creativity to flourish without restricting domain areas. As learners point out, this design is key in enabling experimentation - from learning new skills to imagining livelihood generation.

The CMYCs have been able to create a sense of hope (in terms of experimentation and new learning areas) and build a safe space where learners find comfort in expressing themselves beyond immediate project-related considerations. The latter was articulated through a reduced feeling of inhibition and shyness after coming to the CMYC and improvements in confidence. Yet, there is a need to critically evaluate whether, despite an emphasis on interest-based learning envisioned in SDL, the replication of a set of learning areas across CMYCs (tailoring, bakery, soap-making, carpentry) has reached a stage where there is limited experimentation into new fields.

While the current value of the space signals commonly associated aspects of the CMYC, the second research question focused on aspirations through a collective understanding of the future value of the space in the community. The common articulation of learners and community members alike around the desire to expand their learnings from the CMYC to create businesses and begin entrepreneurial ventures highlights an increasing recognition of the viability of such a pathway. This can be seen against the backdrop of the specific contexts where the study was conducted. In both locations, the livelihood base is largely agricultural and one of the largest sources of non-agricultural employment is through daily wage work under the NREGA scheme. Pursuing higher education or alternate livelihood opportunities had previously meant migrating to urban centres. While learners have not yet begun taking up entrepreneurial ventures in the study locations, the articulation of this goal points to a sense of hope they see through their association with the space and how it can potentially contribute to a more aspirational future.

Moreover, strong emphasis on boosting the village economy through utilising local resources in creating products of day-to-day use, or opening workshops/ bakeries (drawing on skills learnt at the centre) in the village similarly indicates a desire for self-resilience and holds potential of regeneration of rural areas in Meghalaya. Further, learners identify the role of the CMYC (as seen through the 'action pathway') in helping achieve these goals, pointing to an increasing recognition of the CMYC, not just as a space for learning, but as a community resource that can contribute to the development of the village.

6. Conclusion

While introducing this paper, we spoke of Meghalaya's diversity and challenges the state faces in terms of urban-rural disparity and inequalities stemming from concentration of resources and opportunities. The CMYC programme was envisioned as an initiative to address this gap and introduce new forms of alternative learning to rural parts of Meghalaya. Relating this objective to the study, we find that the programme has introduced learners to the expanse of learning opportunities in the space which further led to familiarisation with flexible learning environments and creating supportive ecosystems for learning. This has been a notable achievement given the long-term exposure of learners to school-based education where learning is approached very differently. Yet, the next set of aspirations relate to translating these learnings at the centre to building entrepreneurial ventures, or receiving further guidance to improve particular skills. Fulfilling these emerging aspirations would require the programme to pause, reflect and perhaps adapt before the next phase of scale-up. While this reflection can be beneficial for the future of the programme, our findings suggest that there is a resurgence of hope and possibility through the exposure provided in CMYC's.

The methodological approach in the study shows the significance of participation of learners and communities in articulating future goals and identifying pathways to achieve these. This ties back to Lind (2008)'s observation that "knowledge may also be created by engaging in the process of research" and is a marked departure from traditional social science research, where the insights or analysis derived from fieldwork is typically the sole domain of the researcher. Co-creating these insights ensures relevance to the contexts in which participants navigate their lives. For instance, while learners were mapping the village, many pointed out that they had never gone around the entire village, and were unfamiliar themselves with resources available in their vicinity. Similarly, the debilitated state of health services in the village were discovered through such an exercise. In conclusion, our learnings through this study have reiterated our belief that moving away from extractive forms of research hold immense power to come up with actionable insights that are relevant, contextual, and co-created with learners and communities.

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Annexure 2 - Programme Recommendations Based on the Study

The research study revealed several insights which can be further analysed to assess programme outcomes, and understand where gaps and opportunities may be potentially addressed. We make note of some recommendations for the future of the CMYC programme drawing on our findings from the study.

Some caveats to consider in our recommendations are that given the sample of the study, there could be different factors that inform the articulation of value in other centres. Some of these factors may include footfall of the centre, the existing relationship with the village headman and community members, learners' regularity and interest in centre activities, among others. Accordingly, while we have drafted recommendations keeping in mind broader implications for the programme, we suggest conducting this research exercise across centres to understand how the articulations of value and aspirations may differ.

Current Learning Areas and Expanding Options

1. Both centres were in their second cycles and we observed that experimentation into new learning areas was limited. Certain areas like tailoring, baking, carpentry, and soap making were being repeated across cycles. Given the essence of the learning envisioned through SDL, it is critical to retain a sense of the expanse of possibilities within learning, and provide further exposure to new areas. Connecting and collaborating in different areas of learning every cycle will help in changing the frequency of usual skills learners are familiar with. This will require a substantive push to move beyond the familiar and initiate experimentation. At the same time, the study did not parallelly consider the nature of learning areas covered in the 'exploration' phase (facilitated by fellows) and project learning areas, which may inform the latter. We suggest viewing this recommendation against this shortcoming and consider the two criteria together for future monitoring.
2. In our study, we found learners put forward several ideas around enhancing the value of local resources (by this we mean, adding value to raw materials leading to a raise in the cost price of the refined material as opposed to selling the material in its original form). This thought process was observed in learners while mapping the future value of the CMYC. Several examples emerged such as turning ginger into ginger powder, tapioca into cake, Radoh into medicine, and others. Therefore, we find that ideation and creativity beyond immediate learning areas is already present among the learners and can be helpful in project brainstorming in subsequent cycles.
3. A social platform for learners where they are connected to one another across the state and beyond (to the other Nooks in India and Africa) can help with exposure to different contexts and new project ideas. This can potentially inspire learners to experiment with unfamiliar domains.

Supporting Learners Beyond the Project Cycle

1. Learners from both centres have taken autonomy for their own learning journeys by identifying their interests and setting goals. However, learners still feel the need for further guidance and support. A feedback loop with timely feedback and direction when required must be initiated to ensure learners feel well supported. Moreover, initiatives like workshops and upskilling in learners' interest areas can help further the depth of skills.
2. Post-cycle plans for learners through feedback and assessments will help learners understand if jobs, entrepreneurship or upskilling will help them reach their respective goals or if they have other aspirations. Similar to the above recommendation, mentoring learners will ensure that they feel well supported.
3. Overall, we recommend initiating a process of 'opportunity mapping.' To take skills and a learner's passion forward, the team can initiate post-cycle plans of sorting and aggregating information about what and where a learner can go to either skill-up or who can help them start their entrepreneurial journey, or excel further in a particular craft.

Initiating Strong Community - CMYC Linkages

1. While community members held positive notions of the CMYC, the overwhelming value of the centre was expressed through the lens of the resources it offers or as a space where people can take up projects. For the CMYC to become embedded as a community resource and tackle contextual challenges facing the village, the community must be made more aware of its potential to bring in initiatives beyond the scope of individual projects. Connecting more with community members through well defined community engagement activities will help bridge the centre with the community members.
2. In this study, we observed that mapping of resources helped learners and community members in understanding their community better and contextualise the study to their immediate surroundings. The village headman of Rongsak pointed out in the Research Exhibition on Day 5, "the learners did the mapping very well. It is very important to do it and it is the first time such a mapping has happened in this village. More community members should see this work. We can put the map somewhere where a larger community audience can see it. This kind of exercise helps build the knowledge of learners and community members. Even though I am the headman of this village, I belong to a different village originally. Through this exercise I learnt more about this village." Doing such exercises in each CMYC can immensely help connect learners and community members with the centre, collectively visualise their own contexts, and understand how the centre can be a platform to maximise village resources.
3. In the exercise mapping local assets and facilities, we found an abundance of resources that may be leveraged further within village contexts to provide further guidance to learners. For instance, in both centres, SHGs and the VEC were fairly active and regularly engaged in some areas of overlapping interest with learners (examples: pickle making in SHGs). Initiating linkages between local entities and learner projects can additionally support a robust village economy rather than relying solely on external resources for guidance.

Supporting Community Aspirations

1. In Rongsak Songma, community members appreciate the current projects but were keen to expand horizons and try something like a CMYC Cooperative in the future which included Bamboo Merchandising and more. There are several avenues to support such aspirations. For instance, learners can experiment and prototype various techniques through projects. The CMYC, in collaboration with the newly formed position of the 'Entrepreneurship Manager', can further contribute to building small market ecosystems in the village to encourage cooperatives.
2. In Pasyih, the survey learners conducted on the second day of research activities revealed the state of functionality of various facilities and resources in the village. Beyond mapping the future value of the CMYC, learners identified several gaps in village resources that they wanted to address. For instance, they mentioned, "in the health centre, we want facilities and availability of medicine and injections." They also discussed how the village has one sub-centre with nurses who cater mostly to infants or minor medical needs. For any serious health issue, they had to travel outside the village towards Jowai and these challenges affected the quality of health and life in the village. Action-oriented discussions with village representatives on how to resolve gaps in health services with CMYC learners can further strengthen local action through the CMYC.



  
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