

ACORN FOUNDATION (INDIA)

&

WOMEN'S RESEARCH AND ACTION GROUP (WRAG)

ACTIVITY & IMPACT RECORD

2021-22

About us

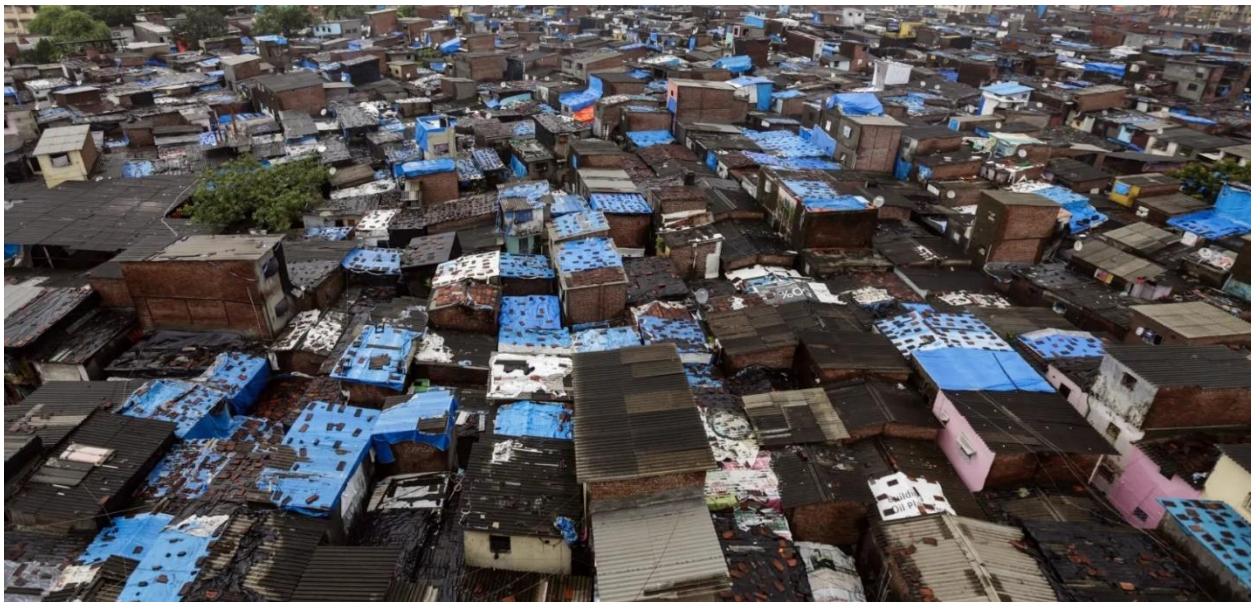
Implementation Organization: ACORN Foundation (Dharavi Rocks)

Founded in 2008, Acorn Foundation (India) is a non-profit organization and a registered charity trust in Mumbai. Under the leadership of Advocate Vinod Shetty and trusted volunteers, Acorn launched the 'Dharavi Project', an initiative for the welfare of rag pickers/ waste collectors and their families.

Key Activities Record

- In 2009, Acorn started a community centre in Dharavi with its own resources to serve as an office, recycling centre, library, studio and school for the community.
- In 2017, as part of the Lab 13 project supported by the British Council, Acorn collaborated with Dr. Ben Parry, course leader at University of Bath Spa, Dr Graham Jeffery, professor at the University of Scotland, Ms. Sharmila Samant associate professor at Shiv Nadar University and the late Mr. Tushar Joag, also of Shiv Nadar University, to start an Innovation Lab in Dharavi. The lab's aim is to expose and train the children and youth of Acorn in cutting-edge digital technology such as 3D printing, robotics and computer graphics along with humanities and art.
- Currently, the Dharavi Project is educating more than 150 children in the Dharavi area in its informal classrooms and its multi-media community centre. Offering training in music, 3D printing and robotics, spoken English, short filmmaking and fine arts.
- A result of this project was the formation of a junk band, 'Dharavi Rocks'. At any given time, the band consists of 30-35 children between the ages 14 and 25. In the last 12 years more than 5,000 boys and girls have received training in music from popular Indian musicians (among them are Suneeta Rao, Shankar Mahadevan, Rajeev Raja and bands like Agnee) and international musicians visiting Mumbai and performing at Blue Frog (a jazz club). As of now, the band has performed in more than 200 shows all over India and in the UK.
- As part of their skills-training and livelihood project, Dharavi Rocks band members have been training and mentoring students of schools in Dharavi in music.

- The foundation has been spearheading efforts to inculcate civic and environmental consciousness in schools where it is working with The American School (ASB), The Dhirubhai Ambani School (DAS), The Oberoi International school, and The German School (DSB). It is also working office establishments such as Bloomberg, Marsh Insurance, and Amazon.
- As part of its initiative, the foundation also sources, collects and segregates dry waste from schools and offices on a regular basis and recycles it in Dharavi, ensuring a livelihood for the recyclers.
- Lastly, as part of its outreach program Acorn plays host to many academics, researchers, artists, international students and volunteers from universities and schools.



Dharavi- Field of research

Promotor Organization: Women's Research & Action Group (WRAG)

The Woman's Research & Action Group (WRAG) is a non-profit organization and registered charitable Trust having 80G and FCRA registration. It was founded in the year 1993 by a group of women and academic researchers led by Adv. Vahida Nainar and Dr. Vibhuti Patel. It is a research and advocacy group working to create a gender-just and secular society. The organisation aims to protect the social and legal status of women and youth especially those from the most vulnerable sections of society. Ensuring that a woman regardless of her class, caste, and ethnic identity has an opportunity to fulfil her potential. Towards these objectives, WRAG partners with movements, networks and community-based organisations such as Acorn.



Session on body movement by Artscape

The Dharavi Project by Acorn

Vision & Purpose

In the last 12 years, the Dharavi Project's vision and purpose has evolved - from supporting rag-pickers and their families; to supporting the intellectual development of children in Dharavi, eventually guiding and actively working to build livelihood pathways; to giving the youth of Dharavi a voice through music.

Today, it is at the stage of creating **leadership within the community (ensuring sustainability of all the above initiatives).**

The revised vision and purpose, is based on the belief that 'vulnerability creates the best leaders.' For such leaders are not only empathetic, compassionate and hardworking, but they know what it means to be at the bottom. Their lived experience of having survived and made it makes them the best mentors for the generations after. 'They are the change they want to see in the world'.

Whether it be the Dharavi Rocks band members imparting music training to youth in the Dharavi schools, or Laxmi Kamble, a single-mother from Dharavi now the Lead Manager of the Acorn Centre or the children part of the Acorn community who hope to grow up and start their own developmental-initiatives, Acorn Foundation, as of today, is training and mentoring 'leaders for change'.



Children of Dharavi alongside Amol Lalzare interviewing a godown owner



English class at Acorn Centre



Online session with American School of Bombay

The Situation

Dharavi is a densely populated informal settlement in the north of Mumbai. Population estimates vary widely from 500,000 to 1,000,000 people. People live in rooms of less than 100 square feet, accessible only through narrow lanes. Many of these structures also double as manufacturing units and there are hundreds of small-scale enterprises of various kinds, including a number of recycling centres. In ordinary times it is a hub of activity. The residents include relatively well-off entrepreneurs as well as the poorest of the poor who earn barely enough to survive.

Dharavi was a major focus in the covid-19 response in Mumbai. It was feared that the virus would spread like wildfire through the dense population; controlling the virus' spread in Dharavi and similar localities was key to winning the battle against Covid-19. However, preventive measures such as physical distancing and mask wearing are unrealistic when people live in tiny rooms with no ventilation, and use communal toilets.

Residents of Dharavi were subjected to particularly harsh treatment and confined to their homes. Barricades were put up, and those who stepped out of their houses often faced lathi charges by the police.

The lockdown also deprived the residents of all work, whether employed as staff in offices, or household work, or self-employed as taxi drivers, small vendors, and other manual labourers. Without an income, many residents who were migrants from other parts of the country walked back to their villages. However, the long-term residents of Dharavi, many of whom live a hand-to-mouth existence, were left locked-in with no source of income to pay for food and other basic needs. As the third wave peaked the members of Acorn Foundation bravely went door to door distributing flyers and spreading awareness on the precautionary measures for Covid-19.



Acorn staff distributing flyers

Acorn Foundation Initiatives, 2021-22

1. The Covid-19 Hunger Project

At no other time, has the importance and impact of Acorn's initiatives been more clearly seen or stood the test of time than in the Covid-19 lockdown. Dharavi was stigmatised as a locality with high infection rates. For this reason, it was also subjected to the harshest government-initiated lockdown. Acorn Foundation's volunteers faced with this crisis in their community got together with a single mission – to provide food to the most vulnerable in Dharavi. Since April 2021 to March 2022, Acorn Foundation has distributed 1.25 lakh meals. The Foundation distributed supplies of dry rations (packets that included wheat, rice, oil, pulses, potatoes, onions and spices, sufficient for a family of four) and hygiene products (including soap, disinfectants, sanitizers, sanitary napkins).

- Provisions were sourced from nearby shops, transported to the Acorn office by cabs from Dharavi, made into packages at the office, and distributed by Acorn volunteers navigating the narrow gullies on motorcycles to reach rooms deep inside the settlement. Volunteers sometimes faced harassment from police for breaking curfew. They also faced personal risks.
- Households in need were identified by the volunteers using their networks. Provisions were delivered on a rotational-basis (every 15 days) daily (7-days a week), to 30 households each-day for a continuous period of 7-months. A record was kept of all deliveries and the identification documents to maintain continuous supply and avoid repetitions within the rotation cycles. Ensuring maximum outreach.
- For those without the means to cook, the team packaged and delivered ready food packs consisting of vegetables, dal and chapatis, twice a day. In addition, to keep the spirit going, the team distributed sweets during the festivals of Eid and Diwali. The mammoth task carried out by the Acorn community leaders and volunteers also helped strengthen the foundation's relation with the children and parents associated with Acorn. Without the support of the parents and children, the task would have been difficult to accomplish. After a decade's worth of work, this perhaps, was our most important and humane engagement with the people of Dharavi. With the help of donations from American Express Bakery, currently the members of Acorn Foundation are also receiving loaves breads every week.



Food distribution Vidya Mandir School, Dharavi



Acorn Community Kitchen at Sanaullah Compound, Dharavi



Acorn Community Kitchen at Mahim



Acorn member collecting ration from centre at Dharavi

2. Despite All Odds

In January 2022, as the third wave peaked the centre shifted all their classes to an online mode. Providing each member with additional internet access so that they could continue to learn and grow even in difficult times. As the reported Covid-19 cases started to drop, the lockdown eased, and the barricaded life of Dharavi residents started coming to an end. On the insistence of eager Acorn children and the Dharavi Rocks band members, the Acorn team then started working on plans to restart classes while ensuring:

- Physical distancing
- Provision of hygienic conditions (clean water for drinking and hand washing, soap, sanitizers, etc.),
- Access to educators at minimum risk.

To meet the above condition, the Acorn community centre was upgraded with smart TVs, computers, and high-speed wi-fi network. Post which, the Art and English-speaking classes were immediately restarted with the instructors delivering the lectures online. Students attend the classes in batches of approximately 12 to ensure following of physical-distancing norms. Eventually, the drumming and music training too were restarted, but in person.

By February end, the centre also started hosting in person film-making classes for the children; introducing them to the world of experimental film making and reading, making each one of them capable of identifying problems and developing documentaries (to be the voice of their people).

At the present there are several workshops being conducted at the centre, which include- Regular online sessions and interactions with American School of Bombay, in which they develop their communication, leadership and group working skills. by weekly physical sessions conducted by Artscape on art therapy. A carpentry percussion workshop conducted by Gautam Kabir, in which they learn to make their own recycled instruments under professional supervision. Benjmin Yangal a former student of Acorn foundation and a rapper by profession conducts a weekly workshop on rapping along with weekly music classes. Abhijit Patro a film maker, as part of the artist's residency programme holds sessions on the processes of production and editing. Children at the centre are receiving all round English classes every week as well. We have recently set up a library at the centre with books from all genres and for all age groups, with a dedicated reading space. The Acorn community centre is now back to functioning fulltime. Classes are held for a

total of about 50 children (divided in to 2 batches) from 4-6 pm, Monday to Friday (after school hours); and 12-5 pm on Saturday and Sunday. In addition, the Acorn team creates an atmosphere that enables development of healthy socio-emotional and educational skills. Lastly, children accessing the centre are also provided with nutritious meals at the end of every class.



Online body movement, dance session by Sairaj Methari



Offline film making session by Abhijit Patro

3. Music and Celebrations Continue

Last but not the least, in the spirit of Dharavi, the Acorn community centre continues to celebrate the efforts of its leaders, volunteers and children. The centre hosted a Christmas party get-together for the children.



Christmas- new year celebration



Dharavi Rocks performance at JW Marriott



Dharavi rocks along side LalaLab

Media Coverage of Acorn's Work

Acorn continues to be a platform voicing the needs of Dharavi and its people, shedding light on their struggles, needs and achievements, sharing their joys, their stories, and their lives.

- Laxmi Kamble, Acorn community centre lead manager, features in Bijal Vachharajani and Radha Rangarajan's book 10 Indian Champions Who are Fighting to Save the Planet. (<https://www.firstpost.com/living/in-10-indian-champions-who-are-fighting-to-save-the-planet-stories-of-pragmatism-amid-climate-change-8748011.html>)
- Shedding light on the lockdown in Dharavi, Acorn India founder Vinod Shetty speaks with BBC (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3csz7xz>)
- Acorn features in the Washington post. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/dharavi-coronavirus-india-slums-mumbai/2020/05/11/beb2a4fe-8e1b-11ea-9322-a29e75effc93_story.html)
- A film documenting the lives of the children part of the Dharavi Rocks Band (<https://youtu.be/Smu0JsvyEsk>)

Social Media Presence

To stay updated on the work of Acorn Foundation India's leaders, volunteers, children (Dharavi Rocks Band) in their neighbourhoods in Dharavi-

- follow on: <https://twitter.com/acornindia1>
- visit website: www.dharaviproject.org
- view YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMbAnsSRq0_0ZK6ncHTAHBw
- contact at: dharaviproject@gmail.com