



**Village  
Service  
Trust**

**Annual report 2023/2024**

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## Letter from the Chair

Reflecting on the past year for VST and our partners, it's clear we are continuing to develop as an organisation, with some new trustees and new ideas for how we can support our partners.

We wanted to do more for our partners in addition to financial assistance.

One valuable step we have taken has been to bring together our partner organisations for regular workshops facilitated by Satish Samuel. Some of you may remember Satish as he was director of Arogya Agam from 1995 to 2002. With his long experience of NGO development work, he has been working with us over the past year to run these sessions and provide advice and support our partners.

Two partner meetings have been held so far. The feedback from the partners is that it has been very beneficial to get together, sharing ideas and learning from each other.

It has been a particularly successful year for our partner ARUDECS which secured land rights for 55 tribal families in Chellong Colony and Nehru Nagar in October 2023 and for 18 tribal families in Notchoidai village in August. ARUDECS added to these achievements by winning an award for Best Performing Project in Tamil Nadu by NABARD, a

government development agency.

The women's development programme continues to go from strength to strength. It was very heartening to read of a recent visit by a number of our partners to one of the younger women's federations, KKPI in the Kodaikanal area. The partners reported how this trip left them feeling motivated. The women shared how when starting their self-help groups they had faced challenges from both their families and within their communities. However, they persevered and are now seen as doing good work in their villages. Their successes include obtaining road and water facilities as well as ambulance services. They have come together to confront child marriages, address children dropping out of school and they work through problems that arise in their communities.

One important development is that they have stopped borrowing money from moneylenders; instead their pooled group savings can be borrowed by members when needed.

We chose moneylending as the focus of our recently launched Global Giving campaign. You can find out more at <https://goto.gg/61393>

I used this to create my own fundraising campaign for an ultra-endurance cycling event around northern England in May this year. I



## **VST partners meet to exchange ideas and make plans for future cooperation**

rode 430 miles in four days and raised £1,400. If you're undertaking a challenge please consider raising money for VST through Global Giving – it's quick, easy and secure and we'd be more than happy to help you to set it up.

VST has been incredibly lucky to have longstanding trustees who have given their time, expertise and support to our work. This year several have stepped down and we extend our heartfelt thanks to Richard Garforth, David Mosse and Murali Shanmugavelan for their contributions.

We welcomed three new trustees, Ned Timne (who spent six months volunteering for us in India), and Ruth Njiri and Cheryl Joseph (who both bring considerable experience of working for international NGOs).

As an organisation run entirely by trustees volunteering their time we're

pleased to be attracting experienced new talent to our board, but we're also grateful to trustees who've been with us for a number of years now – thank you to Tony, Bryan and Rosie for all your continued efforts. To ensure the organisation is in the best shape to meet the challenges that no doubt lie ahead we have used this opportunity to redesign how the tasks of running VST are undertaken, making the most of this influx of energy and enthusiasm to distribute more equally the workload and take a more strategic approach.

I hope as you read this annual report you will also reflect on how much our partners have achieved and that this is only possible because of the support of donors like you. Thank you for continuing to contribute to this vital, meaningful work.

**Sophie Walker**

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## Women's Programmes

TSPI is one of the most successful of the federations of women's self-help groups that we support. Associated with our partner Arogya Agam, it has 290 women's groups, with seven being added in the past year.

The federations are the most effective mechanism for getting funds to the women and families that need it most. The federation has a rotating fund providing low interest loans to groups and their members. This mechanism stands in stark contrast to the high interest doorstep lenders who take advantage of the vulnerable.

In the past year, 73 million rupees (£670,000) was loaned to 1,432 self-help group members. A further Rs.53m was raised from other sources such as NABARD, a government rural development agency. More than half the loans were used to set up micro businesses. The success of TSPI is remarkable and we are hoping to replicate that

success with a younger federation, the Kodaikanal Kuringji Pengal Iyakkam. This federation is based in the Palani hills where its 47 groups are mostly from tribal communities.

Life is tough in the hills. They have to fight for the right to own land, which has often been worked by their families for generations, and income opportunities are scarce.

Our partners have been supporting the development of the federation with training days for group leaders to analyse their strengths and weaknesses.

Issues raised include stopping child marriage, what to do in cases of abuse and organising lobbying efforts to secure public infrastructure.

It has taken time for the groups to consolidate. Now that they are starting to see tangible results such as new roads and water facilities, more of the villagers see the benefit and are keen to join women's groups.



**KKPI leaders meet for a training day to discuss and assess strategies**

## Violence Against Women Committees

Two of our partners work with women's federations that form and support committees of volunteers who address cases of violence against women. This year the Malarchi federation (associated with the Society for Rural and Economic Development) has taken up 136 issues, resolving 95 of them while 41 cases are still in process.

Meanwhile Arogya Agam's federation, TSPI, has taken up 219 cases, with 183 being managed through VAW committees, 34 through Peer Support Groups and two through other federations.

Arogya Agam also works with the Theni district women's movement, which represents most of the federations in the district. This organisation is in the forefront of efforts to address violence against women. During the year it identified more than 1,500 survivors of violence. Many survivors were supported by violence against women committees and our partners' staff, while police warnings were issued to 628 husbands. Free legal services were provided to almost 50 individuals.

### Case study

Amaravati (name changed), a 35-year-old woman from Periyakulam taluk, married her husband in 2014. Her parents provided Rs.500,000 in gold and other marriage-related items. The couple have a daughter and a son. However, her husband became addicted to alcohol and drugs and behaved violently towards Amaravati. He accused her of infidelity, demanding a DNA test for their son.

Unable to tolerate the abuse, Amaravati sought help. With assistance, she approached the police, who filed a First Information Report, a written

document to initiate a criminal case. However, political interference hindered proper action.

She was supported in filing for divorce and in receiving maintenance for herself and her children.

Amaravati now lives with her father along with her children.

She is being supported by the VAW committee and is a member of the local self-help group. Thankfully Amaravati and her children are now safe and secure. Our efforts continue to assist countless other women facing domestic violence.

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## Tribal Projects

The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development is a big government agency providing loans and funding to marginalised communities in rural India. It works with our partner ARUDECS in the tribal areas of Theni district.

ARUDECS has been recognised as a leading contributor in giving effect to the Forest Rights Act of 2006. The act recognises the rights of people from tribal communities to live in and cultivate forest land.

Together, ARUDECS and NABARD initiated the Integrated Tribal Development Program. This

included giving 100 beneficiaries from 12 villages 11 varieties of saplings for cultivation, including cardamom, coffee, pepper, jackfruit and more. An initial 25,000 saplings were planted and after proving to be successful ARUDECS established the Farmers Producers Company. Its activities have multiplied to include animal husbandry and honey bee boxes.

This project has been named by NABARD as the best of its projects in Tamil Nadu in 2024 – a shining example of the livelihood development activities we support.



ARUDECS' director Raja Rajendran receives the NABARD award



**These heavy duty and durable tarpaulins will provide shelter for years to come**

**Our partners at NWTWS have for many years provided medical services to the local tribal people alongside efforts to assist tribal children to stay in school.**

**Now they are developing a new strategy to increase their community outreach. This means they are going out into the many villages that they serve to build closer relations to the people and develop a network of cooperative volunteers to help establish a more integrated network.**

**They have been conducting a comprehensive survey of the villages and recently went into the villages and asked the people what they most wanted. Many said that what they most needed was protection from the monsoon**

**rains. Most tribal people live in mud huts which face erosion or damage each year from the elements.**

**In one hut with torn and leaking roof coverings the NWTWS team found a new born baby lying on a damp mud floor. This was only one among many such situations the team witnessed.**

**VST has provided funding and NWTWS recently distributed tarpaulins to 22 families, which will provide necessary shelter.**

**The severity of monsoon rain in the Western Ghats mountain range in south India was illustrated in July when landslides caused by heavy rain led to 350 casualties in Wyanad district, just 50km from the NWTWS project area.**

# Arunthathiyars

Arogya Agam has made significant efforts to develop a network of children's groups, particularly for the Arunthathiyar communities, which are the most marginalised caste in Tamil Nadu. The project works in 58 Arunthathiyar hamlets in three development blocks of Theni District. Some 2,441 children are now enrolled across 219 clubs, which function to foster a sense of community and to encourage children to stay in school and to resolve any conflicts they encounter. They are training an impressive cohort of young leaders called the Forum for Children's Movement for the Right to Participation (FCMRP). These children are leaders of a cluster of around 10 clubs each, which they analyse, grade and recommend improvements for. Arogya Agam has been hosting training sessions for the young leaders



- **90% of students in children's clubs passed their 10th standard exams (equivalent to GCSEs)**
- **119 out of 135 children passed their 12th standard exams (A-levels)**
- **907 of the 1,080 eligible received scholarships**
- **In 31 groups children have started small savings**

to voice their concerns and develop an effective mechanism for monitoring the development and functioning of the groups.

The FCMRP are new, but with the support of Arogya Agam and the district women's movement they are evolving fast. They are now leading the way in organising events and involving the community. Their first effort was a function on National Day of the Girl Child on 21st January. This was a fantastic day with over 150 girls coming together. The young leaders spoke passionately and eloquently about children's rights and particularly young women's rights. Some groups performed dances and then the music was turned up and the whole audience got on their feet and started dancing!



# An unsung champion of social justice

Thengavelu's act of defiance and refusal to submit to discrimination serves as a symbol of progress for Arunthathiyars and all marginalised people



**Thengavelu and his granddaughter**

Thengavelu is 70 and lives in the remote village of Meenatchipuram. When he started as a sanitation worker 30 years ago he would receive Rs.2,000 per month. By the time he recently retired he earned Rs.5,000 per month. The sanitation work, known as scavenging, involved cleaning drainage systems and public toilets and handling human faeces. This latter aspect was officially made illegal in the 1990s. It has generally been phased out in recent years but persists in some rural places.

For many years, Thengavelu and one other person were the only sanitation workers for the local panchayat. Everything was informal in those days and so there was no record of their employment. By the time he retired he had a respiratory tract infection, having spent a lifetime breathing the toxic fumes of burning trash. He was

told to expect no pension and no compensation. Luckily, in 2018 our partners helped to found the Andipatti Sanitation Workers Forum to protect their rights. They advised Thengavelu that he was entitled to a lump sum of Rs.50,000 and Rs.2,000 per month as a pension under the Tamil Nadu State Sanitation Workers Welfare Board. After repeatedly being turned away from various local bureaucracies, he went to agitate by sitting outside the District Collector's office. After many days of protesting, the Adi Dravida Rural Development Agency stepped in and ordered the Collector's office give the payment due. This action has set a precedent and all sanitation workers now know their entitlements. Thengavelu's simple act of defiance has been decisive in driving forward the rights of thousands of workers.

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## Health

Our partner Arogya Agam works with the Tamil Nadu State Aids Control Society on two programmes in both urban and rural areas of Theni district. The project covers female, male and transgendered sex workers to promote and distribute condoms, STI/HIV testing kits and to encourage an enabling and safe working environment.

VST tops up salaries and supports additional staff and volunteers to promote safer sex in non-heterosexual relationships among men at risk who are not identifying as sex workers. These are an uncovered and very stigmatised group.

Some 136 new volunteer peer educators were identified this year and the project was also in contact with 92 old peer educators. They

interacted with and counselled 1,154 newly identified bisexual or gay men (in India men will usually not admit to an entirely gay sexual orientation).

In another novel scheme, in order to promote safer sex, the project worked with boys and young men displaying gay or gender dysphoric behaviour. It also interacts with their parents, neighbours and schools which helps to prevent these boys from running away and making them very vulnerable to sexual and physical exploitation and abuse.

In another pioneering initiative, teenage boys living in school hostels - which have high levels of male to male sexual activity – were taught about safer sex. Unsurprisingly, there was resistance and denial from hostel wardens.



**A peer support worker receives an award for his excellence in promoting safer sex**

# Financial report

Income	2023-2024	2022-2023
Donations	39,193	89,747
Grants	19,976	3,000
Legacies	51,570	128,325
Investment income	8,455	6,660
<b>Total</b>	<b>119,194</b>	<b>227,732</b>
Expenditure		
Partner support	3,184	3,424
Women's programme	17,084	11,670
Tribal projects	54,277	52,765
Child rights	2,886	6,080
Health programmes	0	1,036
Community organisations	1,381	3,067
HIV Prevention	558	284
Fundraising and publicity	778	685
VST administration	822	786
<b>Total</b>	<b>80,970</b>	<b>79,797</b>

## Commentary

Village Service Trust reports above on a second rather untypical year.

We again received some substantial legacies. Normally legacies are a rare event for us. On the other hand, whereas in the previous year donations were far greater than normal, last year they were not.

Grant income was much increased due to grants from other charities for specific tribal programmes.

Spending on tribal projects remained higher than usual as a result of these grants.

Our policy is to maintain our programmes at their planned level and in years of higher than normal income to spread that benefit over a period of years.

## Notes on spending

### Partner support

Assistance with hard-to-fund staff and establishment costs at Arogya Agam

### Women's programme

Training to women's self-help groups, their federation leaders and support for the Theni district women's movement

### Tribal projects

Programmes to promote school attendance and securing the rights and entitlements of indigenous communities

### Child rights

Work with Arunthathiyar and tribal children's groups

### Health programmes

Detection, referral and monitoring of leprosy, HIV and tuberculosis. HIV prevention projects

### Community organisations

Training and support for Arunthathiyar community organisations

## Trustees

Sophie Walker, Chair  
Tony Huckle, Secretary  
Rosie Oakley  
Bryan Osbon  
Ruth Njiri  
Cheryl Joseph  
Ned Tinne

The logo for Village Service Trust is a dark blue square containing the text "Village Service Trust" in a white, serif font, arranged in three lines.

Village  
Service  
Trust

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VST supports organisations of disadvantaged rural women, children, Dalits and tribal communities seeking lives free of poverty, violence, and injustice.

VST works mostly in Theni district in south India, focusing its efforts where it has long experience and close local knowledge.

Registered charity 277111