

**HARNESSING NGO INTERNSHIPS FOR STUDENT LEARNING: PROJECT
REPORT SUBMISSION TO THE GAJE SYMPOSIUM 2021**

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INTRODUCTION

Non-Governmental Organisations (“NGOs”) are amongst the most important actors in the field of legal education. They offer to students what the classroom never can – an opportunity to contribute to addressing real life issues, while equally contextualising what they learn in the classroom. Yet, the role of NGOs in developing pedagogical innovations in clinical education is often overlooked. Similarly, there exists a discord between the internship model and the clinical legal education model. That is, while many NGOs offer internships, such internships rarely provide the level of cross learning expected from a clinical program. Instead, students are delegated clerical, sometimes meaningless work. A well-designed internship in coordination with university faculty provides an invaluable opportunity for students, NGOs and universities to share and co-construct knowledge. However, the potential of such an arrangement is rarely explored, at least in the Indian context.

With this as the point of departure, this report captures the experiences and learnings of Centre for Social Justice (“CSJ”) in promoting practice-oriented learning rooted in field realities through its internship program. While a broad overview of CSJ’s internship program is provided, the predominant focus is on the organisation’s work during the COVID-19 lockdown.

ABOUT CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

CSJ is a socio-legal NGO, working in the sphere of rural access to justice and legal empowerment in India. The organisation currently has a presence in three states in India – Gujarat, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. Inspired by Freirean, CSJ uses the law to fight for the rights of marginalised communities such as women, Dalits, Adivasis, minorities, labourers etc. In doing so, the organisation works at three levels – providing legal representation to vulnerable communities, building capacities of communities to respond to rights violations and influencing State actors for more sensitive policy responses. Drawing on this rich field experience, CSJ has developed a unique pedagogy of legal education that is profoundly grounded in grassroots realities. CSJ has thus conceptualised and taught courses in various leading universities across the country on topics such as Agrarian Reform, Law and Identity, Law Poverty and Development, Legal Training Pedagogy etc. CSJ was also the lead trainer for organisations from seven

countries as part of BRAC University's SAILS program. In addition, CSJ has conducted multiple faculty development workshops.

CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

INTERVENTION

As an organisation deeply committed to upholding the rights of the marginalised, CSJ began executing its intervention as soon as the nation-wide lockdown to curb the transmission of COVID-19 was announced. Commencing in March 2020, the lockdown continued for almost 4 months. Its impact on internal migrant workers, unorganised workers, farmers, fisherfolk and many other groups whose livelihoods were jeopardised was devastating. CSJ's intervention during the lockdown consisted of the following:

- 1) Facilitating cash and other Government entitlements announced for the poor during the lockdown;
- 2) Facilitating return travel and pending wages of internal migrant workers stranded due to the lockdown;
- 3) Pushing for policy responses to address the vulnerabilities of groups for whom no support package was announced; and

- 4) Activating the District and State Legal Services Authorities to facilitate the above three points as per their mandate under India's Scheme for Legal Services to Disaster Victims ("Disaster Scheme")¹

Considering the volume of work, and the need for timely response, CSJ engaged interns extensively in its lockdown intervention. CSJ's reflections on student engagement from this process form the foundation of this paper.

INTERNSHIPS AT CSJ – GENERAL OVERVIEW AND THE COVID-19

LOCKDOWN EXPERIENCE

For CSJ, internships represent a priceless opportunity to sensitise the youth towards the issues of vulnerable communities, and to introduce a grassroots lens to their university curriculums. Internships are therefore a core feature of CSJ's broader theory of change. Since CSJ engages in both field operations and legal pedagogy development, interns at CSJ are exposed to a learning environment that offers far more than a formal on-campus clinical program. To achieve this, CSJ offers four kinds of internships. Each format offers students a unique learning trajectory.

¹ For more details on the intervention, see: *Tala-Tod: Facilitating entitlements during lockdown (Case Study X)*, published in Azim Premji University, 'Stories of Change 2021-2022 Volume III Special Edition: Response to COVID-19 crisis by Civil Society', <https://cdn.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/apuc3/media/resources/Stories-of-Change-Vol.3-Aug-4-Web.pdf>.

- a) Intense organised trainings: These internships focus on core legal skills and exposure to field realities through visits to CSJ's field areas. Currently, CSJ runs this program in collaboration with the Institute of Law, Nirma Univeristy ("ILNU"). This experiment was recognised by AGAMI, a Law and Justice Innovations Incubator, and shortlisted as a finalist for the AGAMI Prize 2018. The defining feature of this format is that students are expected to immerse themselves in the field, in all its complexity and wonder, and develop skills that are relevant to field engagements. For smooth functioning, a tri-partite agreement is drawn between the students/parents, the faculty, and the organisation, setting out expectations of the program.
- b) Ongoing in-house training: Under this format, interns come to the office after their classes and assist in regular work. This could include research, drafting and filing Right to Information Applications, field visits, generating legal awareness material etc. Again, the focus is on equipping students to develop skills relevant to field realities and inculcating critical thinking/questioning abilities.
- c) Announced internships for specific tasks: Here, students are engaged for specific tasks for a short period of time. This could include analysis of data received through the Right to Information Act, translating legal learning materials, summarising landmark judgments, assisting in field-based campaigns etc.

d) Online desk research internships.

The announcement of the lockdown represented a significant threat to CSJ's immersive internship model, and to legal education more broadly. However, it also opened up an opportunity to experiment with remote models of crisis response. Moreover, the fact that students' classes had moved online meant that they were able to get involved in the work more flexibly.

CSJ worked with a total of almost forty students in three batches during the lockdown. The first batch of students came from ILNU and Hidayatullah National Law University ("HNLU"). These students helped track stranded migrant workers and coordinate with authorities to arrange their food and transport. Over 12000 migrant workers were able to return home safely due to the efforts of CSJ's interns. The second batch of students from Gujarat National Law University ("GNLU") assisted CSJ in collecting information on pending wages of the migrant workers whose travel CSJ had facilitated. This data is now being used to influence authorities to take action to settle pending wages. The third batch consisted of students from the previous two batches who continued to remain engaged with the organisation and have been assisting with post disaster tasks.

Overall, the students undertook the following:

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- Desk research to seek latest government announcements and case law related to COVID-19 and the lockdown.
- Tracking stranded migrant working through newspaper reports, social media posts etc.
- Registering migrant workers wanting to return home on the Government-run free transportation portal.
- Coordinating with Government Authorities regarding transportation as well as food for migrant workers and poor communities.
- Interviewing migrant workers regarding their pending wages.
- Making audio-video print material on various lockdown entitlement packages for the poor.
- Translating recommendations submitted by the organisation to various authorities aimed at mitigating the impact of the lockdown on vulnerable communities.

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR LAW STUDENTS

This section will adopt the competency framework developed by the Santa Clara University² to expand upon the key learnings of students involved in CSJ's lockdown

² Santa Clara University, 'SCU Law Competency Model', viewed on 15 May 2021, <http://law.scu.edu/wp-content/uploads/Competency-Model-Grid.pdf>.

internship. Through this, it will draw out how a well-designed NGO-led internship program can maximise student learning. For ease and succinctness, four competencies have been addressed. These include a balance of cognitive, skill and perspective-based competencies (head-hand-heart). The reason for doing so is to highlight how NGO-based internships are critical for holistic learning that extends beyond information / cognitive heavy classroom learning methods.

COMPETENCIES: Legal Knowledge (knows the relevant rules and can assimilate new information into the structure of law) and Legal Analysis (can use analytical skills and reasoning to evaluate legal issues)

Students engaged in CSJs program developed a strong understanding of critical legal documents that are not usually taught at university. Most of the students' work fell broadly within the realm of labour law and disaster response. While some universities have a labour law course, legal instruments of particular import in practice such as schemes of the National Legal Services Authority are not included in the curriculum. Furthermore, very few universities teach students about India's legal framework for disaster response, including the Disaster Management Act 2005 and the Disaster Scheme. Most of the interns' work required them to understand the intersections of labour law and disaster response in theory and practice, giving the students a wholly unique perspective on often ignored legal instruments. They were simultaneously exposed to the

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structure of the administration and the different roles played by various officials. This method helped break the silo-based approach to learning practiced in university contexts, wherein different topics are dealt with in isolation, leaving integration and application entirely to the imagination of the student. As part of the internship, the students had to conduct a thorough situation analysis and apply otherwise disconnected pieces of information to the situation at hand, while maintaining a critical awareness of the possibilities of a response mechanism. This allowed them to piece together a complex puzzle and imagine a solution-oriented response, thereby allowing for a more integrated and holistic understanding.

COMPETENCY: Research (knows how to find appropriate legal and factual information)

The state of research-based education in Indian universities is alarming. Even some of the better universities that encourage student research only equip students with the skills to undertake secondary research. Field based data collection, synthesis and consolidation is conspicuously absent from university education. The tasks involved in the internship helped students develop exactly these competencies. This included interviewing migrant workers to ascertain pending wages, gathering facts on rights violations, managing and consolidating data etc. The students were also engaged in regular primary research, such

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as identifying policy announcements relevant to vulnerable groups affected by the lockdown through monitoring official portals.

For most students, this was their first experience of conducting primary research. More importantly, it was the first time that the students were engaging with people from such vastly different backgrounds to theirs. Furthermore, the nature of informal labour arrangements is that seemingly simple questions such as those related to the amount of pending wages do not always have straight-forward answers. The students therefore had to develop the ability to sift through information, and ask relevant questions to arrive at the information needed.

Moreover, the internship was designed to introduce students to action research methodologies. That is, the research conducted by the students fed directly into the organisation's efforts to activate State institutions to respond to the plight of migrant workers. The students were thus exposed to ways in which research can come alive outside the classroom setting, and were supported in developing the core skills needed for this type of research.

COMPETENCY: Interpersonal Skills (understands how to communicate and work efficiently with others)

The internship helped students develop interpersonal skills in two critical ways:

Coordination

Since this was an ambitious initiative involving multiple stakeholders (CSJ team members, government officials, labourers, students etc.), the students had to develop their own internal and external coordination mechanism. The experience of the students from HNLU typifies student learning in coordination. The student team appointed a leader to coordinate with the CSJ team, who in turn communicated regularly with the student team. All updates were added to a common Google Sheet to ensure that all parties were kept in the loop. The smooth system put in place by the students helped them keep track and facilitate the return of 12,000 migrant workers. Two things are of particular note here: Firstly, the coordination systems set up by the students were developed and led entirely by the students. The real-life disaster context, to some extent, pushed the students to develop problem identification and response skills. Secondly, the system put in place by the students helped them develop core program management skills. The students were not only feeding information to CSJ, but also independently operating a small-scale project. By providing a context for grounded and situated learning, the internship program enabled the students to immerse themselves in real time disaster response and develop the necessary coordination skills.

Communication

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The project involved engaging with a range of stakeholders from very different cultural backgrounds to the students. The two main stakeholders that the students were engaging with were migrant labourers and Government officials, each with their own set of communication challenges.

As mentioned above, the migrant workers often spoke a different dialect to the students. Compounding these communication barriers was the fact that most labourers were speaking from remote areas with limited network connectivity. The students thus had to develop the ability to communicate succinctly and clearly. Moreover, the students were speaking to workers in high stress, and often traumatic, situations. They therefore had to learn how to communicate empathetically in the limited time available.

On the other hand, the Government officials that the students spoke to were often overworked, and sometimes insensitive to the plight of the labourers. Navigating this required the students to be mature, yet firm in their communication.

This engagement helped the students overcome their inhibitions in communication across cultural and societal barriers, and evaluate and re-align their communication style to a given need. Moreover, they developed the ability to seek support, provide and ask for feedback, and find solutions through frequent communication. This ultimately forced

them to step out of their comfort zones, and address common communication and interpersonal blocks that hamper efficiency in the workforce.

COMPETENCY: Conscience and Compassion

Most of the interns came from urban and financially secure backgrounds. The internship was thus an eye-opening experience for them. Exposure to the realities of the urban and rural poor compelled them to confront their middle-class apathy. Dealing with real life problems during a crisis forced students to view their legal education beyond deadlines and half-hearted projects. Engaging with a real face who would be impacted by their failure to perform encouraged them to focus and deliver. Dealing with hunger and poverty first hand also made them question their own privilege. Additionally, the apathy caused by consuming mainstream media (which fails to depict ground realities) was broken as the students confronted a very different reality to what they previously knew. Many “fence-sitter” students were able to re-evaluate their beliefs.

At the same time, students came face to face with an overburdened and under-equipped State machinery. This allowed them to appreciate the many systemic barriers that deprive the vulnerable of resources. The result of this was the transformation of the intern from a student to a responsible citizen. As a result, many have selected more social justice-

oriented subjects in subsequent semesters, while some have continued their engagement with the organisation in formal and informal capacities.

The richness of student learning through the lockdown internship program is testament to the potential of student-NGO partnerships. However, as will be discussed in the next section, institutional university involvement is essential if this potential is to be truly realised.

LESSONS FOR INTERNSHIP-BASED / CLINICAL LEGAL EDUCATION

The lockdown experience has led to important insights for strengthening internship-based legal education.

Need for faculty involvement through formal engagement

Informal student led internships are beneficial in that the limitations of university attendance and other bureaucratic requirements do not hinder the program. However, from the lockdown experience, it became clear that faculty involvement is paramount. Of all three universities that CSJ engaged with, GNLU was the only University that entered a formal partnership with the organisation from the very beginning. Despite this, faculty involvement was low. In the case of HNLU, CSJ approached the University's legal aid society and entered into a semi-formal arrangement. ILNU students were all associated

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with CSJ informally. This partnership was later formalised. Again, faculty involvement was low. As a result of this, the universities lost out on the opportunity to develop insights into field realities and integrate this understanding in their curriculums. This also meant that some students dropped out without completing their tasks due to university commitments such as assignments, exams and attendance requirements. A potential solution to this can be seen in the GNLU model, wherein students were marked by CSJ. This encouraged greater student accountability.

Mismatch between university commitments and community needs

Another concern is that university calendars do not always coincide with needs from the field. For example, programs aimed at registering migrant workers under labour laws would need to take place in the few months immediately preceding migration season. This may not coincide with holiday / internship season or it may clash with exams. During the lockdown, many interns left the program due to exams and assignments in the midst of the peak of the crisis. Universities therefore need to make an effort to introduce flexibility so that students can be engaged when most needed.

Accounting for intern preferences

It is not always possible to account for individual choices and preferences of interns, especially when working with a group for a specific outcome. Other times, the pressures

faced by NGOs mean that interns have to be engaged in mundane tasks. To address this, universities need to be more actively involved in assigning students to projects that match their interests.

Artificial Distinction between NGO Internships and Clinic Education

In many Indian Universities, the department in charge of clinical education is different to the department responsible for NGO internships. Internships are often not viewed as contributors to clinical legal education in practice, thus creating an artificial and unhelpful distinction. Furthermore, while most law colleges offer NGO internships for first year students, clinical courses are offered from third year onwards. It thus becomes difficult for students in later years to accommodate internships. This again takes away the potential of internships to contribute to professional growth of a student in a designed manner. Universities therefore need to collapse this distinction, and begin to understand NGO internships as an integral part of clinical legal education.

Based on our experience, universities can partner with NGOs in the following manners to increase the effectiveness of university-NGO learning partnerships:

- Institutionalising NGO internships as clinical legal education. This could be done by having a dedicated faculty and unit that is responsible for coordinating civil society – university – student partnerships (including clinical legal education and

NGO internships). The faculty would in turn be responsible for balancing college priorities and project needs. The NGO internship model adopted by Azim Premji University (“APU”) is a pertinent example. APU students are assigned to a faculty member, who works closely with the student and the NGO. This creates opportunities for greater student learning and more meaningful knowledge sharing between NGOs and universities.

- Long term partnerships between universities and specific NGOs which are not dependent on a select group of students. This would require universities to enter institutional arrangements with civil society partners for interventions with a clear and specific scope. This would ensure that the project does not suffer due to students graduating or dropping out of the project. A successful model of this can be seen at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (“TISS”) Mumbai where Prayas, a project on prisoners’ rights provides ongoing learning opportunities to students while maintaining a dedicated team to address the needs of the prison population.³
- More active involvement and support from college administrations (for example, by allowing accommodation in attendance requirements, adjusting assessments and providing credit for NGO internships).

³ A detailed overview of Prayas can be found at <https://www.tiss.edu/view/11/projects/prayas/>.

- Engaging civil society practitioners as teachers to integrate the learnings discussed above in the university curriculum.
- More active pedagogical partnerships between civil society and universities so that learnings from field internships can be integrated with the students' academic studies. This would mean universities and civil society co-designing internships that allow for input (information needed to successfully engage in the civil society project) – action (implementation through field internship) – reflection (consolidation and internalisation of learnings).

CONCLUSIONS

As CSJ's lockdown experience has shown, a well thought out internship program can catalyse immense student learning. However, the prevalent tick-box approach to internships is a considerable barrier to such learning. Moreover, the failure of the academic fraternity to see NGOs as partners in pedagogical innovations, as opposed to merely field associates for their students, has further undermined the learning potential of internships. There is thus a need to recognise the potential of student internships for holistic growth, and to involve NGOs as equal knowledge partners.