

Shantha Sinha (founder MV Foundation, till 2013 chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights) on her collaboration with ICN

Gerard Oonk, project officer at – and later director of – the India Committee of the Netherlands, visited Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MVF) more than three decades ago, when MVF was still a small NGO dedicated to the elimination of child labour in the remote villages of Ranga Reddy district, Andhra Pradesh (now Telangana). He was there as part of MVF's non-negotiable agenda for the abolition of child labour. Since then, MVF has had a long-term partnership with the India Committee of the Netherlands (ICN), now Arisa.

It seems like yesterday that we met - a little later - in the Netherlands. Gerard picked me up directly from the airport, lugging my suitcase, and took me, changing trains and buses, to the meeting location as if it were a usual daily routine. It was pure madness!

When my colleague Venkat Reddy and I first visited ICN in Utrecht, I saw a simple workplace, busy and full of books, posters and materials and an atmosphere of warmth and care instead of the huge, chic and well-endowed office I had imagined I would see.

From this precious little space, our journey together began.... We were introduced to like-minded persons who gave us the strength to do more. Over time, ICN showed us the power of lobbying with governments, international funding agencies, multilateral institutions and companies, and also taught us to network with NGOs, trade unions, school teachers and research institutions, cutting across countries, cultures and languages. It was quite overwhelming to meet EU parliamentarians and even address 'very important people' to tell our stories.

We felt so reassured that our stand on child labour was no longer just MVF's, but belongs to everyone who cares about children's rights. We were so humble that MVF was embraced as a model for the global Stop Child Labour Campaign that was spearheaded by ICN, HIVOS, SKA, FNV, AOB, Education International and many others. We are very grateful to everyone for this.

We learned during this incredible journey with ICN that engaging with state and civil society through dialogue and non-adversarial positions is a sign of strength, not of weakness; that the real divide in the world today is ideological, a divide between those who take a firm stand for human rights and those who compromise; that networking and building fresh and new alliances is a relentless and continuous process; that hope is power and that we are all needed to bring about justice for all.

ICN - and now Arisa - is a 40-year-old sturdy organisation, dynamic and constantly evolving, adding value to the ongoing movements in India and elsewhere in Asia enhancing the struggles of the deprived, discriminated against and marginalised people for justice. Her strong ethical positions on human rights are a benchmark of action and thought.

I cherish with fondness the journey we had together. I express my solidarity with Arisa in her mission to stand with all those who struggle for dignity and freedom. Congratulations!



Shantha Sinha on ICN meeting (May 2006)