

ALL ABOUT Rebuild's Chennai Regional Gathering

SOUTH INDIA
19th July 2025



A gathering that brought together 80+ stakeholders to meaningfully engage and explore synergies.

33

Organizations

80+

NGO leaders & team members

11

Funders & intermediaries

84%

of leaders stated they made meaningful connections

11

Facilitators from the Rebuild portfolio





A Day of Firsts. A Day of Power. A Day in Tamil.

A day of shared power, collective reflection and solidarity

The Rebuild India Fund–South regional gathering in Chennai was more than a meeting, it was a space reclaimed by grassroots leaders who have been building, dreaming, and sustaining together. Over 80 participants from across the region came together to reflect, connect, and celebrate. The day was intentionally designed to honor local leadership, make visible the steady and powerful work of grassroots organizations, and create room for dialogue, care, and shared imagination.

All of it happened in Tamil. Not as a translation, but as a deliberate act of inclusion. It was evident that language is power. Proximity is power. Shared space is power.

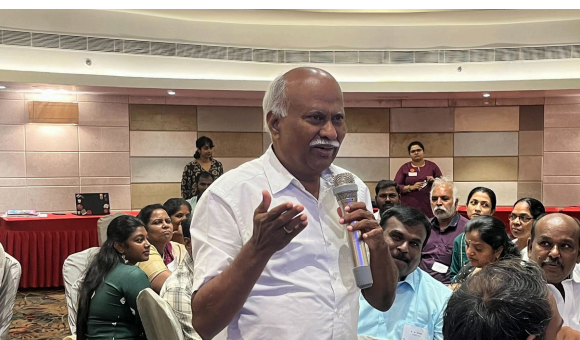
And when grassroots leaders co-create the room — they don't just show up. They rise. Together.

This wasn't just an event.

It was a participatory, heart-led space: where regional diversity was honored, where cohort led ownership and facilitation replaced rigid agendas, and where the line between “participant” and “organizer” no longer existed.

As we look ahead, expressed by you, we are looking to build :

- A Regional Core Committee
- Quarterly Virtual Regional Meetups
- Gender Small Group
- Peer Learning & Mentorship Circles
- Online Repository
- Donor/CSR Mapping & Visibility and funder connections
- Thematic Support Hubs





OPENING CIRCLE

GROUNDING, INTENTION AND CO-OWNERSHIP

The day began with an opening circle led by Chitra Shah from Satya Special School. It wasn't a formal launch but a space to arrive, settle, and set shared intentions.

What emerged was a quiet acknowledgement: this gathering wasn't being hosted for grassroots leaders; it was shaped by them. There was gratitude for the journey so far and a sense of ownership in what was to come.

"Everyone kept saying 'try speaking in Tamil.' But this space intentionally allowed us to. That's what made it so rich and real."

— M.A.Britto, Vaan Muhil

"We're all on the same boat. Same challenges, same aspirations. This space is where we learn to stay afloat together."

— Chitra Shah, Satya Special School

GALLERY WALK

NETWORKING AND PEER LEARNING

Each organization had set up a table - displaying stories of navigating systems, educating adolescents, protecting children, and building healthcare access.

The walk sparked rich, spontaneous conversations. Leaders reflected on how others had found unique ways to document and present their work. Many said they were inspired to try new approaches in their own contexts.



"We are listening to organisations working so closely with communities—and we realise there's still so much left to do. It's motivating."

- Maran Thangavel, Vizhuthugal Social Education and Development Trust (VSEDT)

"We are a community-based rehab organization, but we've struggled with how to think about sustainability. Seeing how SPT hands over programs to the community showed us a model of sustainability that is truly inspiring."

— Karthikeyan Ganesan, Sristi Foundation.



BRIDGING GRASSROOTS AND PHILANTHROPY

FUNDERS MEETING GRASSROOTS LEADERS

Later in the day, members of Social Venture Partners (SVP) Chennai chapter joined the gathering. There were no PowerPoint decks or formal presentations. Instead, organizations shared openly, about what it takes to sustain work in underserved communities, what “impact” looks like beyond numbers, and why flexibility and trust matter.

For many funders, this was their first time hearing directly from grassroots leaders in such an open setting. The conversation wasn't about gaps or deficits but rather was about possibilities. What would it take to truly shift power in philanthropy? What does meaningful support look like?

The session left behind an important message: that curiosity, accountability, and mutual respect can shape stronger funding relationships.

“As someone new to the sector, the gallery walk gave me rare insight into the real work on the ground. It was deeply curated and accessible.”

— Sheela Sundaresan, Partner, SVP Chennai



COMPLIANCE, DEMYSTIFIED

MAKING GOVERNANCE PARTICIPATORY

In the next session, Kumar from Dasra and Arockiasamy Britto from Vaan Muhil led a practical and approachable conversation on compliance.

What is usually seen as a dry and intimidating topic became a space for clarity and shared learning.

Questions about FCRA, board renewal, financial reporting, and deadlines were addressed in real, accessible terms. The focus wasn't on getting it all “right,” but on strengthening accountability to the communities' organizations serve.

Participants appreciated the tone, serious but supportive. Laughter and lived experience kept the session grounded. It became clear that compliance doesn't need to be isolating. It can be collective work, too.



THEME BASED DISCUSSION

UNPACKING ISSUES, SHARING VISION

In the afternoon, participants split into smaller groups to explore four key themes: Child Rights, Education, Livelihoods, and Gender. Each session was led by peers from the cohort and focused on current challenges, structural barriers, and pathways forward.

CHILD RIGHTS AND PROTECTION FROM VIOLATION TO CULTURE CHANGE



Facilitators : Devaneyan Arasu, Thozhamai & Dr. Jim Jesudoss, Sakthi Vidiyal

The session challenged reductive understandings of “child protection.”

Rather than viewing children as “future leaders,” participants insisted on recognizing children as holders of rights in the present. The group reaffirmed that dignity and respect - மாண்பு தன்மதிப்பு are the foundational principles from which all rights stem.

Discussions explored the four core rights—survival, development, protection, and participation and unpacked tensions in the terms “child protection” versus “child’s protection.” Key challenges emerged: the pervasive use of violence in discipline, online abuse, and the invisibility of rights violations within families, where, as shared, 92% of violations occur.

A powerful takeaway was the need to move beyond a post-violation, ‘post-mortem’ approach and build a culture of child rights, transforming institutions, families, and governance from reactive to preventative, from compliance to care.

THEME BASED DISCUSSION

UNPACKING ISSUES, SHARING VISION

EDUCATION

INFRASTRUTURE, EQUITY AND WHAT STILL REMAINS



Facilitators : Alamelu V, Rural Women Development Trust (RWDT) & R. Karuppasamy, Rights Education and Development Centre (READ)

This group reflected on Tamil Nadu's strong education infrastructure and legacy of reform. Leaders like Periyar and Kamaraj were acknowledged for building inclusive systems.

Positive highlights included:

- 34 government medical colleges
- 207 Dalit students studying abroad through scholarship
- Hostels and English-medium
- instruction for Dalit and tribal students

But key challenges remain such as dropout rates among marginalized youth, poor education quality, and uneven standards across different boards. The group called for a single, equitable education system that works for both rural and urban communities.

THEME BASED DISCUSSION

UNPACKING ISSUES, SHARING VISION

LIVELIHOOD

FROM INCOME TO INTERGENERATIONAL SECURITY



Facilitators : Karthikeyan Ganesan, Sristi Foundation & Mary Ann, Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development (ACCORD)

This session redefined livelihood not just as income, but as the ability to meet one's needs consistently and with dignity.

Stories were shared, including:

- A group of children with disabilities in Pondicherry who now run their own shop, supported by CSR-funded training
- ST forest communities struggling with land rights and middlemen, and how Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) are helping reclaim control

Participants used a 7-question tool to think about skills, gaps, and sustainability in their own contexts. The session sparked new ways of thinking about livelihoods grounded in values and long-term change.

THEME BASED DISCUSSION

UNPACKING ISSUES, SHARING VISION

GENDER

REALITIES FROM THE GROUND



Facilitators : Bimla Chandrasekaran, EKTA Resource Centre for Women & Chitra Shah, Satya Special School

The session opened with a simple question: *What is gender?* The answer—power and imbalance.

The discussion moved across many layers:

- Women are often elected but not empowered to make decisions
- Boys leave school early to earn; girls stay but struggle to find meaningful work
- Laws like Prevention of Children and Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) and the Domestic Violence (DV) Act exist, but duty-bearers often lack sensitivity
- Disability and gender-based marginalization also intersect in sharp ways; for example, Puducherry, for example, still doesn't have a District Disability Officer.

The group ended with a shared commitment: to create a “Rebuild Gender Network” for continued learning, collaboration, and advocacy.



CENTERING WELL-BEING

A MOMENT TO PAUSE

Towards the close of the day, a well-being session co-facilitated by Karthikeyan Ganesan, Sristi Foundation & Suganya Sankaran, Viswa Bharathi Vidyodaya Trust (VBVT) created a rare, gentle pause. Using grounding techniques, music, and storytelling, the session invited participants to check in with themselves, their bodies, and each other. It was a quiet counter-narrative to the constant doing that defines grassroots leadership.

Many spoke of how burnout, grief, and moral injury go unspoken in their work. This space of collective rest offered not solutions, but recognition, and that was deeply healing. It was needed to debunk what sustains leaders who carry everyone else.

CULTURAL GALA AND COLLECTIVE EXPRESSION

A MOMENT TO PAUSE

The evening ended with celebration, music, performance, and movement that carried meaning. There was a stirring Parai performance by the students from Thozhamai, followed by powerful acts by trans and queer artists from Blossom Trust.



LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

The gathering was a small reflection of a larger dream, which is for grassroots leaders to build spaces where leadership is centered, folks can listen, and they are held together through trust, care and collective resilience. The day concluded with resonance of the fact that it wasn't just about dialogue but of movement building.

"There is power in networking, It is important to speak to others and know about their work. That's where movement building lies, otherwise grassroots will remain grassroots"

— Kamalakannan R,
St. Thomas Charitable and Educational Trust
(STCET)

In a sector that often moves fast, this was a space that chose to move slow. It made room for stories, for learning, and for rest. And in doing so, it reminded us of what it means to build together, not just for a day, but for the long road ahead.