

# INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Wellbeing: Lifespan Perspectives & Practices  
for Sustainable Communities

## DIALOGUES



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## THE BIG PICTURE: PREVENTING YOUTH SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN ASSAM

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*Are you providing mental health care and would like to engage in staff development?*

*We are looking for organisations in Assam who support young people (15-24 years old) to join this novel project. As a thank you for help recruiting research participants, we offer an interactive staff development workshop to learn more about our visual methods of working with young people. Please contact Anna on a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk*

### **Who are we and what are we aiming to achieve?**

The University of Leeds and University of Brighton (UK) are delighted to be conducting research with MIND India and NIRMAAN Rehabilitation Facility. We want to understand how, despite risk and opportunity, some young Assamese people avoid harmful substance abuse. We also want to know how other young people, who may have become addicted to substances, successfully recover and regain control. Using photo-led interviews and film-making workshops, we will support young people to tell their stories of resilience and recovery in both words and pictures. Our aim is to convey these inspirational narratives to the public and to policy-makers. We will also work with practitioners to develop innovative services - such as assessments and interventions - that include images created by the young people with whom they are working.

### **Why focus on youth substance abuse?**

The Assam Report of The India Survey 2017 provides invaluable context and

describes adolescent substance abuse as an urgent problem. Substance abuse is particularly high in metro areas, such as Guwahati, and is widespread in young men aged around 14-16 years. There is a worrying level of solvent abuse amongst young Assamese people, particularly those from poorer families, and substance abuse tends to begin at a relatively young age, typically 8-13 years. The Assam Report recommends the creation of a State mental health policy, working closely with rehabilitation services, and creating better public awareness.

### Who are we working with and how?

We are working with two groups of young people: (i) those successfully refraining from substance abuse despite being at increased risk (aged 15-18 years); and (ii) those in successful recovery (aged 18-24 years). We invite participants to bring photographs, and other images, to an interview to help tell us about how they manage the risks of, and recovery from, substance abuse. This method is excellent for generating rich data on young people's experiences that provides novel insights to help us understand the challenges they face. For example, in our former work on transition to adulthood, one young Assamese woman brought a photo she had taken of a window to help convey the difficulties she had experienced trying to move forward in her life. She said:

*"The windows through which I tried to see a new world. The world which I had always ignored. The world towards which I didn't want to- I had never wanted to see. Okay for the first time I felt like opening the windows. Looking at that- at that new world. Every time I only found that the window is broken."*



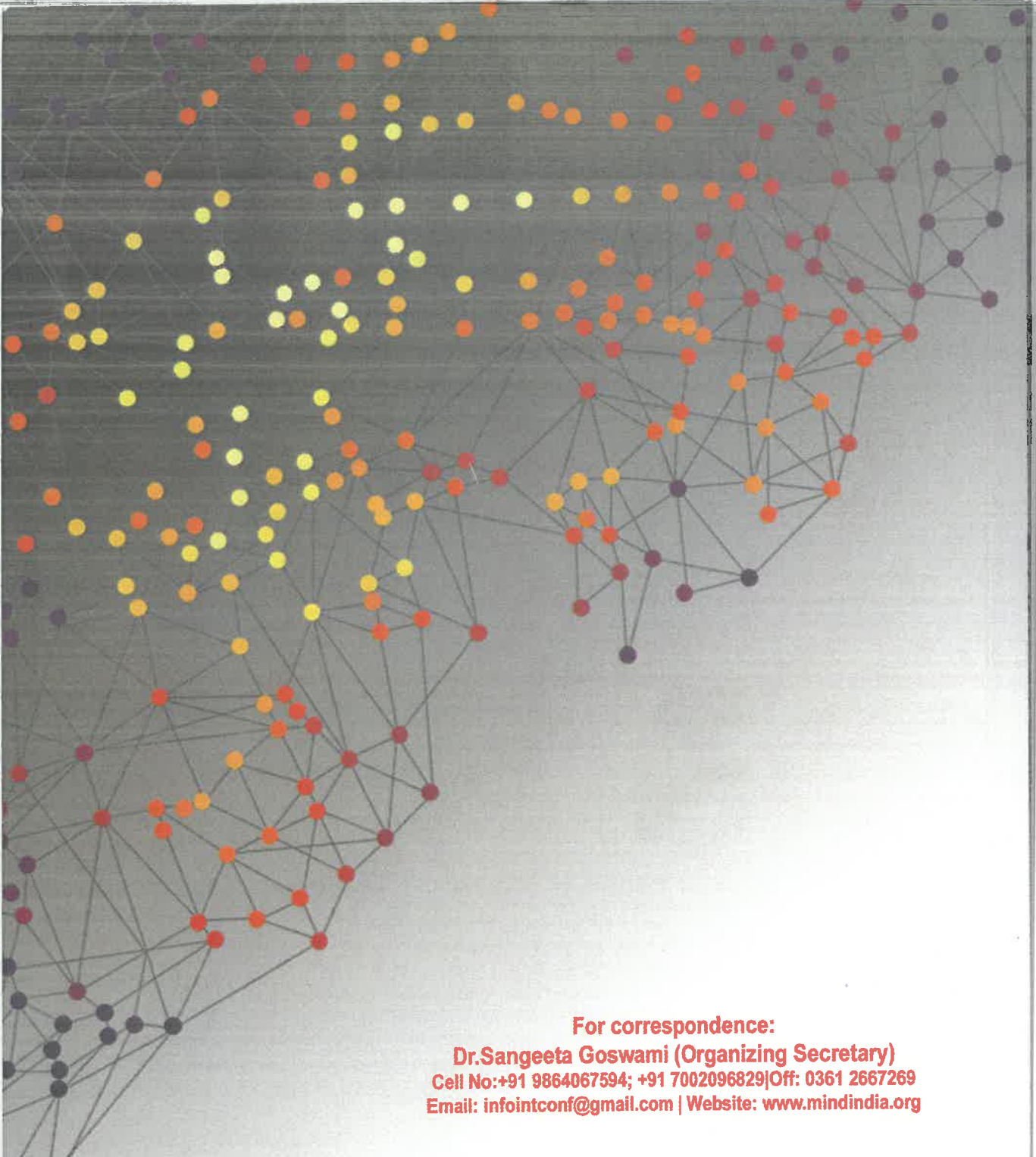
Our former work also revealed that people find photo-led interviewing empowering and that it can, in itself, have therapeutic effects. For example, a young Assamese man in our study said: "I felt good collecting photos. While collecting photos I kept recalling the past. Like making scenarios in mind. It felt good". This allowed him to gain some perspective and to reflect on how he had changed over time.

### How will we impact policy?

The India Survey recommends development of awareness programmes on mental health and substance abuse, de-stigmatisation, active engagement with the media, and positive portrayal of opportunities, rights issues, and recovery. Our team includes experts in participatory film-making as an advocacy tool, particularly with young people facing serious life challenges <https://vimeo.com/257217658>. Hence, we will work with young Assamese people at risk of, and in recovery from, substance abuse to support them make short films about the challenges they face and the strength they have shown.

With permission, we will promote the study findings, and inspirational films on a purpose-designed website and host events in Assam and the UK to engage policy-makers and the public. We also want to work with service providers in Assam to understand how to develop what we are learning into feasible interventions to prevent substance abuse by young people and for service development to support the recovery of young people from substance addiction.

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