

## **Community-owned and managed Water-Sanitation as catalyst for sustainable development The MANTRA approach of Gram Vikas**

*“Our village is better than the town. We have 24\*7 piped water supplies to all families, without exception. Every family has its own toilet and bathing room as well. When we seek marriage alliances, our daughters ask us – ‘would there be similar facilities there as well?’”*

Lalita Malik, Tamana village, Ganjam district, Odisha,

More than 80,000 families across 1300 villages in Odisha and Jharkhand, echo similar sentiments. These are people, who have participated in and, subsequently taken ownership of the village development process with water and sanitation as the entry point. Gram Vikas has been promoting this through its MANTRA – Movement and Action Network for Transformation of Rural Areas – approach.

Gram Vikas is a rural development organization working with poor and marginalized communities of Odisha since 1979. Starting 1995, Gram Vikas has been implementing the community-based sanitation and water supply programme in which every family in the village builds its own toilet and bathing room, with piped water supply from a common overhead water tank, ensuring protected piped water supply to all families throughout the year.

### **The Context**

#### ***Absence of adequate sanitation and water facilities and its effect on women***

In the early 1990s, Gram Vikas conducted studies and found that over 80% of the cases of morbidity and mortality in rural Odisha could be traced to poor quality of drinking water. This was, to a great extent, a consequence of the abysmal attitude towards human waste disposal. Human waste, in its raw form, found its way to the same water bodies, people are dependent upon. In the absence of proper mechanisms for sanitation, women have to bear the terrible indignity of defecating in the open. In order to achieve some level of privacy, women rise before dawn and have to endure the humiliation of searching for discrete locations to defecate.

Women spend a better part of their day fetching water for household needs. This drudgery is more acute during summers, when women have to spend hours together, traversing nearly four to five kilometres to fetch water. In most villages, the women would also take along with them, their girl children to fetch that extra little water they could carry. This meant that sending girls to school was given lower priority and as a result, attendance figures for girl children were abysmal

In the absence of a protected enclosure, women are forced to bathe in the common village pond. Due to presence of men on the other side of the pond, women are mostly forced to resort to insufficient and hurried cleaning of their bodies. Moreover, in summers, communal bathing in turbid waters of a shallow pond is a major cause for the spread of skin diseases.

#### ***Social exclusion***

The experience in Odisha showed that exclusion – of *dalits*, *adivasis*, backward castes, widows, and women in general – is the bane of rural society. Exclusion has grown into a deep-rooted hegemonic system, where the excluded believed that it is their fate to be excluded and those excluding them believe that it was their right to do so. To achieve an improvement in the health status and a better quality of life in rural areas, a process where communities go through an experiential learning of social inclusion is absolutely necessary.

## **The Rationale for the MANTRA approach**

Gram Vikas realized that water and sanitation might be a critical entry point through which an entire community could come together to have their first experiential learning of inclusion. It was important to have a win-win solution for all the stakeholders in the village. It had to demonstrate how a socially inclusive, gender equitable, people-friendly and financially viable model of sustainable and holistic development can be initiated, where everybody benefits. Those who had been previously excluded from most development activities, should become a part of the progress that the entire community is making. Those who have been perpetuating such exclusion should also benefit, since it is in their interest that every single individual in the village has access to a means of safe disposal of human waste.

The notion that rural communities need only low-cost (almost always taken to mean low- quality) solutions to their problems had become a part of the psyche of policy makers. There was abject neglect of the rural people's needs and their aspirations. Plans rolled out from the top and histories of short-term low-quality fixes to problems in rural areas have contributed to the low self-esteem and dignity among the rural poor.

It was necessary to address the feeling of helplessness that enveloped the minds of rural poor due to their inability to even attain a 'threshold level of quality of life.' The 'threshold level of quality of life' is the situation where communities have satisfied the most crucial basic needs of life and are in a position to dream of further improvements. We believe that this 'threshold level' is a pre-requisite for the rural poor to begin to feel a sense of dignity and self-worth – *of being second to none*.

An institutional mechanism had to be developed around this programme, which would be the first experience for a village community in managing its own village institution and financial resources. The marginalized sections of the community had to be given opportunities to sit together with the more powerful sections and negotiate issues regarding the village on equitable terms. This would help build the capacities of the people and instill in them high level of confidence. Villagers would learn how to deal with conflicts and act as pressure groups against vested interests within their village and outside. They learn to question and hold accountable the Village Committee elected by them. They would learn the ropes of maintaining public accounts, organizing general body meetings and elections

## **Infrastructure, Institutions and Finances**

In the MANTRA approach, institutional and infrastructure systems are established in the participating villages. The systems package consists of the following components:

- Twin-pit pour flush toilets and bathing rooms (TBR) for every household in the village
- Piped water supply system (PWSS) with a source (bore well/sanitary well/spring) pumped diverted using electric/solar power or gravity flow into an overhead water reservoir/sump and distributed through two or three taps in every household
- The Village Executive Committee/Village Water and Sanitation Committee (VWSC) for the ownership and management of the Water and Sanitation systems
- The Village Corpus Fund, set up with initial contribution of Rs.1000 on average per household, maintained in a bank fixed deposit, whose interest income is to be used by the

VWSC to provide financial assistance to new households coming up in the village to build TBR

- A maintenance fund managed by the VWSC to pay for regular upkeep and repairs of the PWSS

## **Key elements of the MANTRA Approach**

### **100% inclusion**

Gram Vikas' support to a village is contingent upon every household (100% of them) in a village agreeing to be part of the MANTRA intervention. Staff of Gram Vikas works together with key opinion makers/ influencers in the village to ensure that every household is made aware of the intervention and motivated to be part of it. It is a time and effort-intensive process and the mobilization strategies adopted vary from village to village.

### **Institution building**

The village institution represents interests of all sections, and attempts are made to develop necessary capacities so that they are able to manage conflicts. The Village Water and Sanitation Committee is a registered entity. It is formed by the Village General Body that consists of adult male and female heads of all households. Each village finds its own way of selecting/electing their representatives to form the Village Committee. The committee has proportionate representation of all caste and class groups in the community. Gram Vikas helps build capacities of women and the excluded so that they can participate on an equal level.

The legal status enables villages to leverage development resources in a more effective manner. It takes a lot of time and energy to build the capacities of erstwhile un-represented, excluded sections of a village community, and for them to demand accountability from other committee members and also for themselves, to be accountable when in positions of responsibility. Gram Vikas ensures that the communities learn how to deal with conflicts and act as pressure groups against vested interests within their village and outside. Villagers learn the ropes of maintaining public accounts, organizing the general body meetings and elections.

### **Corpus Fund for 100% coverage at all times**

A 'corpus fund' is established by the village, to which every single household contributes Rs.1,000 on an average (the poor give less and the better off more, but the poorest widow also contributes at least Rs.100). Completing the collection of this upfront payment is considered to be an 'acid test' of commitment for the communities, where people collectively confirm that they are willing to be a part of this programme. The corpus fund ensures that 100% coverage is maintained at all times in villages and when new households are added to the village, the interest accruals from the fund is used to extend cash incentives to them to construct their own toilets and bathing rooms.

### **Household and Village Infrastructure**

Every household in the village constructs for itself, a toilet and bathing room, with 24-hour piped water supply to both the toilet and bathing room as well as to the kitchen. The water is supplied from an overhead water tank constructed on the basis of per capita requirement of 70 litres per capita per day, projected for the population twenty years hence. This is done so that every household can have 24-hour running water supply from their taps. The water is pumped up using solar or electricity powered pumps where necessary and suitable. In the hilly areas water is sourced from perennial springs using the gravity flow system.

### **Cost sharing**

People contribute at least 50% of the cost of toilets and bathing rooms (costing about of Rs. 26,000 to Rs.28,000 at current prices) and between 10-20% of the cost of establishing water supply system. The idea is to make people contribute substantially, to bring in a strong sense of ownership for the assets created. People construct their own toilets and bathing rooms with technical and organizational assistance from Gram Vikas' field personnel. Gram Vikas facilitates eligible households to access the Rs. 12,000 grant available under the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*, to meet the costs of construction. Households raise the remaining funds by collecting locally available materials (sand, stones, aggregate etc.), providing unskilled physical labour for the construction and in some cases cash contribution.

Gram Vikas firmly believes that the poor can and will pay for their development. However, it also feels that the rural poor must have access to services fulfilling their basic needs as a matter of right, and not due to any form of patronage dispensation. To put the issue in perspective, in urban areas enormous subsidies are granted to people in form of facilities ranging from electricity connections, drainage and sewerage etc. Urban consumers are charged anything ranging from 3-12% of total costs incurred on maintaining water supply system in cities. Compare this with villages that have implemented their own systems, where people would be paying for the complete maintenance of such facilities after the initial installation.

There are social costs involved in making basic services available to the disadvantaged, which governments and society, at large, must bear. It is towards bearing this social cost that Gram Vikas attracts government and CSR/donor funds.

### **Maintenance Fund**

The village is mobilized to set up sustainable mechanisms to meet the costs of operations and maintenance of the Water Supply system. In MANTRA villages, once all toilets and bathing rooms are constructed and the piped water supply is in place, families are expected to pay a monthly fee fixed by respective village committees. The fee amount will be sufficient to cover the salary of the pump operator, pay electricity bills and maintenance costs of water supply systems. The monthly collections are routed through the maintenance fund managed by the Village Committee. In several villages, a proportion of the gross product at the time of harvest (0.25%-0.50%) is contributed towards the maintenance fund. Several villages have developed their common property resources to generate cash for the maintenance fund. The village pond is brought under intensive pisciculture, once pressures of other uses are lifted off it. Common wastelands are developed as wood lots or orchards. One or two village youth receive training in plumbing and in handling electrical equipment and are able to service the infrastructure, reducing the village's dependence on external support.

### **Behaviour change processes**

The key determinant of the success of the behaviour change process initiated by the intervention is whether 100% people in the village are using toilets and bathing rooms regularly and also keeping them clean. Once the toilets and bathing rooms are constructed and water supply systems established, the village committee lays down codes of behaviour for everyone. Gram Vikas supports the village with motivational and educational inputs to build and sustain the adoption of safe sanitation and hygiene practices.

## Integrating and Deepening Rural Water Sanitation & Hygiene Outcomes

The second part of the MANTRA intervention takes place in villages where the infrastructure and institutional mechanisms have been completed. Gram Vikas provides technical and implementation support to the Village Water and Sanitation Committees to deepen their activities in the following areas:

- Safe Disposal of Excreta
- Personal Hygiene
- Kitchen Sanitation
- Water Management

Gram Vikas is now working towards interventions in the area of solid and liquid waste resource management in villages where the village community is interested.

### Coverage

Over the past two decades, Gram Vikas has been able to gradually expand the coverage of the MANTRA approach across villages in Odisha. Since 2016, it is also working with rural communities in Jharkhand. Demonstration projects were also taken up, in partnership with local organizations, in Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

### Data of Gram Vikas Water Sanitation coverage as of March 2018

		Odisha	Jharkhand	Other States	Total	
District #		25	2	2	29	
Block #		134	5	2	141	
GP #		505	15	5	525	
Village #		1,373	54	8	1,435	
Households #		79,174	3,399	247	82,820	
HH Category-wise	SC	9,132	15	52	9,199	11%
	ST	37,141	1,578	82	38,801	47%
	General	32,032	483	113	32,628	
Population	Male	2,10,468	5,964	627	2,17,059	
	Female	2,05,424	5,846	637	2,11,907	
	Total	4,15,892	11,810	1,264	4,28,966	
Toilets-Bathing Rooms	Completed	75,073	2,049	247	77,369	93%
	In progress	4,101	1,350	0	5,451	
Piped Water Supply	Complete	1,170	7	8	1,185	83%
	In progress	59	1	0	60	
	Not Started	144	46	0	190	