



Transforming communities: Scaling a socially inclusive model



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The purpose of this case study is to provide context and analysis about complexities of scaling social impact in South Asia. It does not intend to serve as endorsement or illustration of effective or ineffective organizational practices. This full series of cases can be found at innovation.brac.net.

Before my community worked with Gram Vikas, as a dalit, I had to sweep my footprints after I walked. Sharing a water source with others in the community was unthinkable—much less being part of a committee with them. Now I am the leader of our committee.

This story, expressed by Monu Nahak in Jharabandho village in Orissa, was a common experience. Many did not have a sanitary latrine and had to walk great distances to access water. Open defecation was normal and contributed to the disease burden, as it contaminated the local water sources. Gram Vikas chose to focus on improving health through improving water and sanitation. But it quickly realized that working household by household was ineffective. Even one household who continued to openly defecate could compromise the water source, impacting the health of the entire community. Gram Vikas would need to intervene at the community level—but convincing entire villages

to work together, given issues of class, caste, and local conflicts, was an ambitious task.

In the nineties, after 20 years of work with marginal groups in the Indian state of Orissa, leaders of the organisation Gram Vikas found themselves re-evaluating their approach. An internal survey found that they weren't reaching the poorest households with their biogas work. It also identified that 80% of diseases in the rural villages where they worked were caused by poor quality water, as the result of the lack of a waste disposal system.

Today Gram Vikas is heralded as a leader in the field of water and sanitation. They have worked with over 1,000 villages and nearly 63,000 families to help them access better water and sanitation facilities. But it all began with a group of idealist students responding to a humanitarian crisis. In 1971, Joe Madiath led a group of 400 students that called themselves the Young Students Movement for Development, from Chennai to help respond to the refugee crisis in West Bengal during the Bangladesh civil war with Pakistan. A cyclone hit the northern part of Orissa around the same time period, displacing over one million people. Many of them returned back after relief efforts, but Joe and a handful of students remained back to continue rehabilitation work in the region. Orissa was and continues to be one of India's poorest states, with significant inequality. Much of the population was comprised of people from scheduled castes, a group of historically disadvantaged people and tribal populations, known as *adivasi* communities.

Ideas in brief

- 1 Changing norms takes time and requires ongoing engagement with people at all levels—from the grassroots to national policymakers. Stakeholders will have to be patient and be willing to wait for buy-in if they are committed to the goal of social change.
- 2 By remaining small, organisations can remain nimble and better poised to respond to the needs of their clients, even re-inventing themselves if necessary.
- 3 Organisations can bridge gaps between the government service delivery and the people helping communities to access resources. However, partnering with the government increases the complexity of the work and may lead to significant delays.

The abject poverty struck Joe, and he made a life-changing decision to live and work in Orissa with communities to improve local circumstances. At this point, he founded Gram Vikas and became the executive director.

Gram Vikas was registered formally in 1979 and took up work with *adivasi* communities in tribal areas. Initial efforts were focused on addressing health, fighting for tribal entitlements over land and assets, combatting alcoholism and initiating micro-savings. Thereafter a group of people within Gram Vikas branched off into a technical project focused on the promotion of biogas plants for rural people. This was important because many people in this area did not have access to electricity or an affordable supply of fuel, but many did have animal waste. From 1983-1993, over 55,000 biogas plants were developed in Orissa, which contributed to 84% of the state's output at that time. However in the early nineties, Gram Vikas decided to spin off the biogas programme, feeling that the initiative had reached a level of scale that ensured its sustainability.

Witnessing health issues faced by the communities where the biogas programme was implemented, Gram Vikas decided to conduct an in-house study

to understand the local drivers of poverty. It quickly became obvious that the poor health of rural communities played a significant role in perpetuating poverty. Delving into the details showed the clear link between health and quality of water that people consumed, which was heavily affected by sanitary habits. Gram Vikas believed that improving sanitation could significantly improve people's lives, particularly health, and they worked to design a model that would create more social equality, because if even one household in a community practiced open defecation, it could contaminate the community's water source.

A socially inclusive model for water and sanitation

From these insights, Gram Vikas developed what would become their flagship initiative, the Movement and Action Network for Transformation of Rural Areas (MANTRA), a holistic development model using water and sanitation as a vehicle for social inclusion. Communities who participated in the MANTRA programme received a high quality sanitary latrine, bathing room, and a piped water connection in every home from a safe water source. Households also



received three water taps—one in their kitchen, and two in their latrine. It was based on 100% inclusion of all households, and one of the requirements prior to receiving assistance from Gram Vikas was the creation of a community corpus fund containing Rs. 1000 (\$16 USD) for every household. To reach this, sometimes wealthier households had to contribute more. Villages also needed to develop a committee, with proportionate representation of various castes and equal representation of men and women.

The national government offered a modest reimbursement for proper latrines to most families barring those categorised as big farmers, but it was not sufficient to construct a high quality latrine and bathing room that would stand the test of time. Villagers also needed to pay up front for the latrines, and then receive reimbursement via a cumbersome process. Many people could not afford to front the money. However, Gram Vikas devised a way to build on this cash transfer. It provided communities with a portion of the money up front, helped them navigate the process, and convinced them to invest more resources into building a better quality toilet, as well as a bathing room along with a piped water system from a central overhead water tank. Most of the fund for the latrines and water was mobilised from government funds, therefore it was important to engage government engineers regarding their plans early on in the process, to seek their approval and buy-in. Communities provided the bulk of the labor, with technical assistance from Gram Vikas.

Many people never imagined having a nice toilet or running water 24 hours a day right in their homes. It saved women, who typically had the responsibility

of bringing water for the household's needs a lot of time, and significantly reduced the burden of water-borne diseases. Communities, via the committee, had to ban open defecation. They established a fine system whereby anyone who was caught defecating outside of a latrine had to pay a specified amount to the committee. When new people moved to the community, they also had to comply by contributing to the corpus fund and constructing a latrine and taps that met the guidelines.

But perhaps most importantly, the model also forced them to work together as a community towards a collective goal and share resources. This was socially disruptive as many aspects of the caste system still existed in rural India. People who had never previously interacted as equals were now required to do so. Uniform toilets and water taps were a great equalizer; a huge dimension of disparity was essentially eliminated. It was often not the poorest community members who were the last to contribute funds and lend their support—it was the wealthiest and most powerful community members, who had the most to lose in what they perceived as a shake-up of village dynamics. The model also emphasized gender equity. As a result of the stipulation that women must be equally represented on the committee, they could experience a greater social standing and role in decision-making in their communities. Lastly, Gram Vikas believed that the dynamism generated in the collective action could catalyse more collective action. Communities that could work together might be able to find new opportunities to for development and poverty reduction.

The MANTRA model

Who	What they contribute	Output
Household in the community	Rs. 1,000 or its equivalent one time (poorer families may contribute labour or goods in kind) to the corpus fund. They must also contribute on a monthly basis to a maintenance fund.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sanitary latrine (one per household) • Bathing area (one per household) • Three taps (one in the kitchen, two in latrine)
Gram Vikas	Token incentive of Rs. 1,000 per family. Advance provided against reimbursement of individual incentive from government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to a potable communal water source close to their community • Corpus fund for future extension to enable 100% water coverage at all times
Government of Orissa	Incentive of Rs. 4,600 per family for latrines and for the entire village for water supply which includes water source, elevated water reservoir and pipe line system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintenance fund for operations and maintenance after water supply is established

It is easy to get to 80%, harder to get to 90%, and hardest to get the last 10%.

Once a community was “development ready,” which we define as having the confidence, sense of pride, and physical and mental preparedness to engage in development, it was easier to do other types of work with them. Depending on a community's interest and readiness level, Gram Vikas worked with communities on health, education, housing and renewable energy programs as well.

As a result of MANTRA, many communities developed a more collective outlook, rather than only considering their individual households' needs. Gram Vikas staff recounted stories about the time before they worked in communities, when if people or a community had extra money, they tended to give it to temples and have feasts. However after participating in MANTRA, they were more likely to use their funds towards the social development of the community, building a school or a clinic. An example of this collective mindset was exhibited after Cyclone Phailin hit Orissa in October 2013. Many communities in the region of Ganjam decided to pool their cash transfers from the government together and purchase a generator for the community rather than use the funds for their own consumption needs.

A Gram Vikas staff person shared, “During the relief work, we saw that the government was providing 50 kgs. of rice and Rs. 500 cash as relief to all card holders. When we discussed in the villages, an idea came that if the Rs. 500 of each family could be pooled, it would bring in some funds to procure a generator set for the village so that they could run their water supply system. In many villages, this idea was accepted and families gave Rs. 500 as contribution to the village fund.”

Insisting on 100% participation

Gram Vikas felt very strongly that the 100% participation aspect of the model could not be compromised, for both practical and philosophical reasons. Its perspective was, if they decreased it from 100%, where would it end? They believed that if they were able to make it work in, then it

must be possible everywhere. In terms of achieving social change, it was often times “the last 10%” that mattered most.

Gram Vikas had hoped that it would work in enough communities that it would eventually reach a tipping point, whereby it would become easier to convince later waves of communities to commit. Unfortunately this didn't take off the way that they had initially envisioned. Although over 20 *gram panchayats*, which is a locally elected government, achieved 100% coverage for sanitation and water, expansion overall was slow. The reasons varied from the political climate at the *gram panchayat* level to the prior work done by the government. Some community members had already received some sanitation infrastructure from them without a 100% criterion, so it was more difficult to convince them to participate.

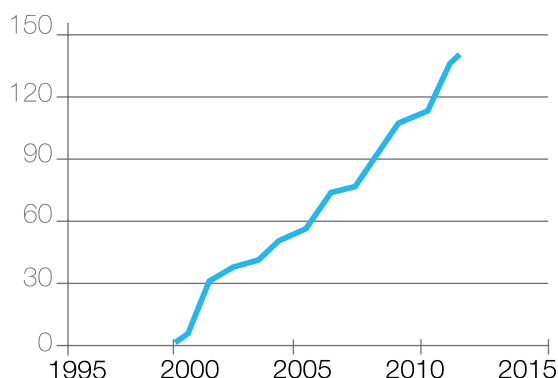
However, communities themselves were sometimes the best form of advertising. Occasionally when a woman from a MANTRA village married and moved to her in-laws' community, she found it difficult to live without water taps in the kitchen and latrine. Or, when the in-laws visited her parents, they noticed the taps and toilets and asked about how they could get them. Sometimes communities approached



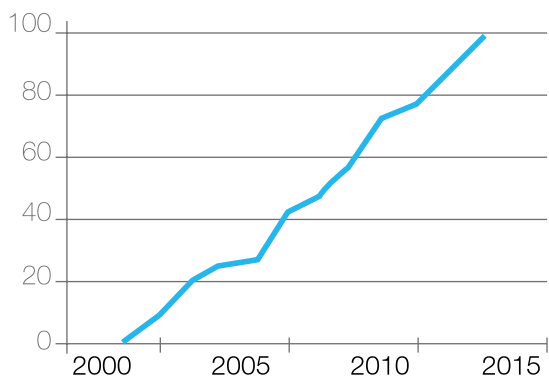
Gram Vikas with interest in working together, and Gram Vikas was happy to initiate the process with them.

However, the idea that they would achieve a tipping point in a specific geography, such as an entire *panchayat*, didn't work out as well as they had hoped. To help with this, they developed an incentive system whereby people who were a member of a successful MANTRA community could become agents of change in other areas and receive a financial reward for each household that they can convince to commit. While this strategy showed results initially, the incentive paid was not considered sufficient compensation for the time commitment required.

Village committees registered in Ganjam district, by year



Village committees registered in Gajapati district, by year



Source: Gram Vikas management information system

Fostering community ownership

If a community accepted the MANTRA model, Gram Vikas guaranteed an improvement in water infrastructure, sanitary infrastructure and other development work which usually led to an improvement in the health of the community. This type of work required a lot of patience. It was not unusual for a community to take four years to be ready to work together and have raised the corpus funds. In one case, two villages that were three kilometers apart had very different trajectories. One community responded to the programme almost immediately, but the other took eight years before they were ready. However, the time commitment was front-loaded—once a community built its water and sanitation infrastructure, Gram Vikas began to phase out. This approach ensured that the community felt a sense of ownership and accountability for their water systems and the village committee took responsibility. It was necessary from a practical and resource optimisation perspective, especially for the Gram Vikas team of 300 staff working in over 1,100 villages. But the primary reason for this design was ideological, as there was a strong belief that the community must take ownership for the model. From the beginning, Gram Vikas did not plan to stay in a community forever. This was a large part of why they included the village committee, and had the community contribute their own funds and labour.

Gram Vikas' leaders did not want to grow into a large organisation. They shifted focus multiple times to meet different gaps and needs. At times, they de-scaled to avoid displacing the role of the government or the private sector. At one time, they had large education and health programmes, but they became concerned that they were overstepping the government's role, and they scaled them back. They also decided to leave the biogas sector altogether, and have it taken over by the private sector. As Joe Madiath said,

“We were trying to fill a gap. So if the government could not do it and there was no mechanism to do something then we would do it, and that also was not forever. Only till it became mainstream, till it got assigned with the government programs, and so it was my philosophy to never do an activity forever—do an activity, demonstrate it over a period of time and mainstream it.”

In terms of the MANTRA model, there were important trade-offs for the organisation to consider. If Gram Vikas' goal was to simply provide improved

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water and sanitation to the maximum number of people possible, it could have lowered their 100% requirement. It also could have intensified its work with communities after the construction phase to support behavioural change instead of moving into other villages. However, Gram Vikas' objectives were larger, including empowerment and social change. Remaining small organisationally forced them to let the community do the work and set the pace.

Gram Vikas worked with government stakeholders at the national, state and local levels to build relationships and understanding about their work. Their longstanding relationships in the region have helped with their recognition and acceptance. However, elected representatives and bureaucrats often changed, and Gram Vikas had to continually invest in maintaining close ties. Changes in sector policies sometimes required discussions to iron out differences in the interpretation of policy guidelines and create a conducive environment for programme implementation. Gram Vikas takes credit for leveraging significant government resources of approximately Rs. 30-40 million (USD \$490,000-600,000) annually for water and sanitation projects, without having to pay bribes. Gram Vikas' staff developed relationships with everyone—from the local junior engineers and district collectors to the decision makers in Delhi.

Despite significant work behind the scenes, Gram Vikas framed MANTRA in such a way that a community's success could be claimed as a government success, a community success, and to a lesser extent, Gram Vikas' success. However, the underlying relationships and Gram Vikas "brand" was important to keep things running smoothly.

Taking the model beyond Orissa

After achieving considerable success in Orissa, Gram Vikas began to think about introducing its model in other states in India and even internationally. There were many requests from NGOs and state governments for the programme. Starting in 2008, one of Gram Vikas' main priorities was to scale to other Indian states and countries through a network of NGOs. It preferred to find partners and work with them in a very focused manner.

It designed a gradual, phased approach to ensure that partners who would like to replicate the model would be well supported. They had four distinct phases:

- 1.) informal collaboration
- 2.) transfer formalization
- 3.) implementation
- 4.) maintenance

This process was designed to take from five to seven years, but in almost all cases, organisations got stuck at the implementation phase. In particular, the 100% criterion was very difficult to adopt. Small NGOs lacked the necessary resources and had shorter-term targets from donors to meet. In a few other Indian states, Gram Vikas agreed to financially support the partner organisation as well as the community they served for the initial pilots, hoping to attract attention from local government officials and gain their support.

Building relationships at the relevant government level was also not the forte of many small partners who depended on non-government resources for their main programmes. Chitra Choudhury, a Gram Vikas senior staff person said that one of the challenges was teaching other people "the ropes" of the model, but that that wasn't the most difficult part—it seemed the challenge was more ideological—they had to see the value in the approach for themselves and the difference that it made. The challenge was for them to, "get a taste of success" that would inspire them to stick to the 100% requirement.

Gram Vikas in 2014

In 2013, Gram Vikas helped an NGO in Tanzania, *Don Bosco Saletians* to implement the model. The organisation worked on health issues with the community. A priest who happened to be an old classmate approached Joe and asked for his help. He assisted with getting its model off the ground. As of the writing of this case, Gram Vikas was in discussions with partners in Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand about expanding MANTRA to those areas as well.

At one point Gram Vikas' goal was to reach 100,000 households, through expansions at the *panchayat* level as well as to new regions. Scaling beyond Orissa, to other states in India and internationally remained a goal as well. However, the progress towards these goals has been slow. Gram Vikas' outreach as of March 2014 was nearly 63,000 families in 1095 villages. Changes in financial incentives and procedural delays at the government level have delayed outreach, especially in the past two years. Two departments were now involved in disbursing the incentives to the eligible households for sanitation. This led to a lot of confusion at the lower levels of the public administration, delaying the construction phase in many villages while they waited to see whether the reimbursements were still offered.

Most of the funding for hardware came from government sources. This dependency created uncertainty about the flow of funds and consequently delays. This negatively impacted the outreach, as it was hard to initiate new work without knowing how much funding they had.

Significant organisational changes were also taking place. In 2013 Joe Madiath, after 40 years of leadership, decided to retire from his position as the founding executive director. The governing board instituted a search for a new leader and was successful in putting in place a new executive director, Shubhasis Pattnaik. Shubhasis had worked previously in the corporate sector, and hoped to scale Gram Vikas' work beyond Orissa, as well as explore more self-sustaining models. Joe continued to oversee specific initiatives, such as the Schools of Excellence programme, and to assist with the scale up outside of Orissa.

Key lessons and recommendations

Gram Vikas approach was to take the long view to reducing poverty and improving health. They did not operate on donor timelines. They traced the root causes of the problems and then focused on reducing them. In this way, they affected long lasting change in the communities where they worked. They did this through emphasizing that the entire community must participate, building community infrastructure, such as the committee and creating ownership for the initiative.

They also built relationships with everyone—community members, local leaders, and junior government engineers. Their longstanding presence in communities and in the state of Orissa increased people's trust and familiarity with them. In terms of takeaways, other organisations can think about adapting their goals and timelines to community's pace, and seeking donors and stakeholders who understand that this type of social change and community ownership requires a significant time commitment and may not align with donor cycles. They also collaborated with the government, building upon their cash transfer system. This made their work much more complicated, and at times led to much uncertainty and delays. However, it was also a more sustainable way of working, and assisted the government in their service delivery. Other organisations might model this by looking for ways that they might build upon the government's work or engage them.

Gram Vikas avoided growing into a large, bureaucratic organisation. The result was that they were able to re-invent themselves multiple times. They shifted from offering relief aid, to focusing on biogas, to water and sanitation. However, the downside was that they were often resource constrained. They were adept at designing lean models, but more resources may have helped them to scale.

They were also keenly aware of the biggest challenges and the problems facing people at the grassroots level. They were prepared to adapt if necessary. For example, after Phailin hit they focused almost entirely on coordinating and delivering relief aid throughout Orissa. As a result of their community knowledge, they were well poised to do this.

References

Information for this case was collected over the course of a year as part of the "Doing while Learning" project. Methods included field visits, regular discussions, logbooks, and analysis of Gram Vikas' existing management information system.

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