

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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*Spotlight on Sanitation*  
**Fostering Sustainable Sanitation**  
By Pakzan Dastoor

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to buy raw materials and pay masons. Once the toilet is complete, they pay back the loan by depositing their entire government subsidy into the fund. So far, only families who qualify for the government subsidy are eligible to participate. But even this limited effort has made a notable difference. In six months, the fund has enabled approximately 620 households in 11 villages to have toilets.

Now, given the success of the model, AKDN is encouraging more communities to find sustainable and community-based ways to finance the construction of toilets. The key, Umar explains, is to make sure the community does not fall into debt while financing the construction of toilets. “They do not want to take a loan from local moneylenders who charge high interest rates.”

#### HUMAN CAPITAL AND RAW MATERIALS

Even with funding, AKDN has noticed that locals needed better supplies and more help to construct toilets that meet government guidelines. While the government already runs a number of shops that sell construction materials and toilets (Rural Sanitary Markets, or RSMs), these outlets are often low on stock. “That’s because demand is low,” Umar says. “RSMs have been unsuccessful in making toilet construction easier and have not been economically viable for the local entrepreneurs managing them.”

To drum up more interest in building toilets, AKDN held a series of community meetings and street plays around one of the RSMs in the state of Bihar.

The network also facilitated wall paintings in the area that illustrate messages pertaining to sanitation. The results were positive. “We saw an increase in demand for toilet construction,” says Umar. What’s more, the RSMs are now linked to a network of masons; customers are more likely to shop there these days because they get access to masons as well as raw materials. As of this writing, in the seven locations where AKDN is promoting RSMs, more than 4,000 units have been constructed.

The third prong of AKDN’s sanitation efforts involves training more masons in order to build a larger network of skilled people who can build toilets according to government guidelines. To date, the network has trained 601 masons in four states using three-day-long courses that go over the details of installing toilets and also stress the importance of the job. “With large-scale toilet construction activities, trained masons are more in demand,” Umar notes, and now district officials in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh are asking AKDN for help in training new masons.

While it may be tempting to simply install toilets throughout India, Umar says, the answer to India’s sanitation problem rests on citizen engagement: “The proposed sanitation initiative will be successful only if communities understand the health, educational, and economic benefits of improved sanitation and adopt it themselves.”

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## Fostering Sustainable Sanitation

GRAMALAYA COMBINES COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION WITH EDUCATION AND MICROFINANCE.

By Pakzan Dastoor

Thirty years ago, more than 98 percent of villages in the Tiruchirappalli district of Tamil Nadu lacked household toilets. As a result, residents were compelled to defecate in the open. Diseases such as cholera and typhoid were rampant, as were instances of stunted growth and cognitive impairment in children.<sup>1</sup>

Fast-forward to 2016, and toilet statistics have reversed. Thanks to Gramalaya, an Indian NGO that was founded in 1987, 90 percent of those villages now have access to functioning toilets in every home. In fact, a majority of the villages in which Gramalaya works have eliminated open defecation. Compare that with the rest of rural India, where three out of five people continue to defecate in the open.<sup>2</sup>

Gramalaya’s success in supporting the installation of more than 150,000 toilets in five states can be attributed to its approach, which combines community mobilization with access to financing so that families can afford to build high-quality toilets. The model gives community members ownership in the initiative, which also fosters better, and sustainable, hygiene habits. As Sue Coates from UNICEF explains, “Just building toilets is not going to

solve the problem, because open defecation is a practice acquired from the time you learn how to walk. When you grow up in an environment where everyone does it, even if you later have access to proper sanitation, you will revert back to it.”<sup>3</sup>

#### HOW GRAMALAYA WORKS

Gramalaya begins its work in a given area by conducting a survey, which identifies villages that have the lowest toilet coverage (the percentage of people with access to functioning toilet facilities). A team then visits those villages, meets with local leaders, and goes door-to-door to collect more detailed information about sanitation habits and behaviors. In this triggering exercise, Gramalaya members bring villagers to an open defecation site, which is then used as a backdrop to talk to the community about safe sanitation and how toilets can help.

Next, Gramalaya encourages community members to form and join Association for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (AWASH) committees. These committees will become sanitation champions and technical implementers, responsible for coordinating the order in which households will receive toilets,



managing subsidies and loan disbursements, and constructing toilets.

Smart loans then come into play. These loans are the lifeblood of Gramalaya’s model. At first, the organization relied on government subsidies to finance the construction of sanitation infrastructure, but that approach proved inadequate. So, in 2007 Gramalaya helped create Guardian Microfinance, the only microfinance company in India with a loan portfolio focused exclusively on water and sanitation. Guardian’s support allowed families to take out small loans to build or upgrade toilets, and to install household water connections and septic tanks with cost-effective leach pits, freeing them from an over-reliance on subsidies. Guardian works through women’s self-help groups to disburse loans, which range from INR 5,000 to 20,000 (\$75 to \$300) and have a repayment period of 18 months.

Banumathi Rengar, from the village of Keelakottamedu, is one loan recipient. Rengar and her husband work as daily wage laborers and formerly practiced open defecation in nearby fields. With three

**The launching of the Fecal Sludge Management program in Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu state.**

teenage daughters, fears about their safety prompted Rengar to approach Guardian. As she explains, “I decided that no matter what, we had to build a toilet.”

**OTHER SANITATION WORK**

Beyond toilets, Gramalaya recognizes that disease-causing fecal matter will eventually filter into water bodies if left untreated—and so it has partnered with the Consortium for Decentralized Wastewater Treatment System Dissemination Society (CDD) since 2015 on fecal sludge management initiatives to ensure the safe disposal of waste. (See “Fixing India’s Sewage Problem” on page 3.) Ten months ago, Gramalaya joined a fecal sludge management pilot program in two cities in Tamil Nadu. The project, launched in 2015 by the government of Tamil Nadu with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, will build, maintain, and scale fecal sludge treatment programs there.

Gramalaya is now a national resource center for the Indian

government in four southern states, and it regularly provides training and capacity-building support on sanitation interventions to government officials, other NGOs, and international research bodies. The number of lives it has improved is significant; in Tamil Nadu alone, Gramalaya’s efforts have provided access to toilets for 350,000 people.

Despite these successes, the organization continues to look for ways to expand its reach. Last year, Gramalaya launched an ambitious Big Clean Up India campaign to install 10 million toilets in 10 states by 2019 by allying with similar organizations across the country.

Founder S. Damodaran recognizes that the goal is ambitious, but he is also optimistic. As he says, “Prime Minister Modi wants to make India open-defecation free by 2019. We have had great success with our model and hope to help India reach that goal.”

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**NOTES**

- 1 <http://opendefecation.org/#slide3>
- 2 <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/12/15/ending-open-defecation-achieving-clean-and-healthy-rural-india>
- 3 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-27775327>

## The Power of Women’s Collectives

MHT HELPED LAUNCH A COMMUNITY-DRIVEN INITIATIVE TO IMPROVE SANITATION.

By Vishal Kapoor

Imagine living in a slum in India without a toilet in your home. Every time you have to relieve yourself, you must walk 15 minutes to the community toilet, a run-down set of stalls that lack a water connection, electricity, and hand-washing facilities. Of the dozen or so toilets there, perhaps three still work, although the stalls’

windows and door latches are missing. In the mornings and evenings, when many people want to use the toilets, you have to wait a long time for your turn, and people often cut the line, jostling their way to the front. To avoid this chaos, you often find a gutter, a dumping ground, or a secluded place along the railway tracks to do your business.