

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Spotlight on Sanitation
The Power of Women's Collectives
By Vishal Kapoor

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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.”

Pakzan Dastoor leads Advisory Research and Due Diligence at Dasra.

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.

Photograph courtesy of Gramalaya



That is, if you're a man. If you're a woman, relieving yourself in the open during the day makes you a target for harassment and even assault. So you drink very little water and hold your bladder for up to 15 hours a day. It doesn't matter if you are menstruating or pregnant, you relieve yourself in the open only before dawn and after dusk, under the cover of nightfall. The practice increases your risk of urinary- and reproductive-tract infections, as does the act of defecating in the open itself. But there is no alternative.

Fifteen years ago, this was the reality that women living in the slums of Ahmedabad, Gujarat's largest city, which has a population of more than seven million, said Bijal Brahmhatt, director of Gujarat Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (MHT). It's what compelled MHT to use the power of women's collectives to transform the sanitary conditions in Ahmedabad, marking one of the biggest challenges that the organization had ever faced. Today, those same women are building on success and setting their sights on other goals that will help their communities thrive.

GRASSROOTS EFFORTS

To tackle the sanitation challenge, MHT initially helped establish a community-driven sanitation movement called Parivartan (Change). The organization sought out women who seemed to be the informal leaders in the affected communities, and those women, in turn, helped MHT organize small groups of women into Community Based Organizations (CBOs). CBO members

were trained to plan sanitation solutions and to demand entitlements such as household toilets and water connections under various government programs. CBOs also made sure that the movement would sustain its momentum by monitoring the upkeep of facilities once they were built. MHT also tapped government programs to help fund the toilets.

Ultimately, community members have paid for one-third of the project costs, in installments—with the government paying the rest. And in the 15 years since its inception, the Parivartan approach has reached communities in seven Indian states. Additionally, MHT has overseen the establishment of 746 CBOs in 895 slums, helped train more than 13,000 CBO leaders, and provided toilets to nearly 90,000 households.

BROADENING ASPIRATIONS

Successfully gaining sanitation entitlements from the government has proved to be a transformational experience for CBO members. As an additional benefit, the initiative prompted many women to open bank accounts for the first time, giving them a financial identity that would hold them in good stead in the future. And once women had the skills to effectively advocate for their communities, they turned their attention to other pressing needs.

For example, one woman leader approached a private company to get electricity for her slum. At first, the company was wary. Fresh connections cost INR 6,000 (\$90)—could slum dwellers afford this, and would they ever be a profitable market? With MHT's backing, however, the company agreed to pilot a program that turned out to be a resounding success. At the end of the pilot, it rolled out a program for the urban poor that did away with the connection fee, folding it into their monthly bills instead. This practice led to the installation of more than 180,000 new

Ahmedabad, where they advise on government programs affecting the city.

As CBO member Meena Soni says, "When I heard of MHT and became a part of the CBO, I never thought we'd form a city-level federation. Working with the local government was unthinkable, but things worked out with time. Similarly, devising small solutions and preparing ourselves and the community for the future is not a faraway goal."

MHT's next goal is to extend coverage to even the most isolated women and their families. "The last 20 percent is always



MHT members showcase a new community water tank in Ahmedabad, India's sixth-largest city.

electricity connections, serving nearly one million people.

What's more, many of the original CBOs have since organized into larger, citywide federations and now help guide city planning. CBO leaders are members of the City Sanitation Task Force and Zero Waste Management Committee in

the hardest, because it involves changing the behaviors of people who have been the most marginalized," says Brahmhatt. "No one yet knows how to achieve that last stretch—but then no one knew how women from Ahmedabad's slums could get household toilets or join urban planning bodies, either." ■

Vishal Kapoor leads Dasra's US operations. He previously co-led Portfolio Services at Dasra.