

Volunteerism: A New Approach

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Introducing a new approach to community mobilization, the Nandapur team decided to use volunteers to bring a large part of the community that had been left out of the development process, knowing that if normative and cultural changes were to take place, large-scale mobilization is imperative

Background: The Nandapur team is located in Koraput district in South Odisha region, where PRADAN initiated its work in November 2009. Koraput is part of the infamous KBK (Koraput-Bolangir-Kalahandi) region of Odisha that is known for its abject poverty, remoteness, under-development and a high level of Maoist activity. It is one of the least literate districts among all the districts in which PRADAN works. It ranks 631 among the 640 districts surveyed in India.

By March 31, 2015, the Koraput team was able to mobilize around 7,000 village women in 600 Self Help Groups (SHGs), and helped raise the income level of around 2,500 families through improved agriculture. In addition, in collaboration with two other Non Government Organizations (NGOs), the team was able to facilitate the promotion of another 400 SHGs and introduce 2,000 families to improved agriculture practices.

The team has also been associated with government flagship programmes such as the Odisha Tribal Empowerment and Livelihood Programme Plus (OTELP Plus) and the Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) with a fair bit of success. During the restructuring of PRADAN, the Koraput team was divided into two teams, that is, Lamtaput and Nandapur.

This write-up encapsulates some of the new approaches that have been taken up, as well as some of the old approaches that were tried differently by the Nandapur team.

Bringing Women into the SHG fold through Community-to-Community Extension:

With the restructuring of the Nandapur team, a new approach to community mobilization was put in place. Earlier, the responsibility of promoting and nurturing SHGs rested with the Executives of PRADAN. When planning for the promotion of new SHGs, the team thought that the Executives were constrained for time.

With its new approach, the team began to bring into its fold a large part of the community that had been left out. Large-scale mobilization was necessary, if cultural and normative change had to be brought about in a short period of time.

After intense brainstorming, the team came up with the following strategies to bring women into the SHG fold on a large scale.

First, the team discussed what the journey for the old SHG members had been like in the last three to four years; they were asked what they had gained by being in the SHG and what changes had these SHGs had brought to their life. We also asked them about the village women, who were not yet part of the SHG in their own village and in the villages nearby, where PRADAN had not yet reached. The team impressed upon the women that families that were not part of the SHGs fold may require some support in joining SHGs. When asked if the women would be willing to help others, who were left out, some agreed. The team arranged the transport and the members went to visit the villages. They made groups of two or three and went to different hamlets and gathered the women and men for a meeting. They shared their experiences of being part of

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SHGs and motivated women to form SHGs of their own.

Second, in villages where Village Organizations (VOs) had been formed, the team discussed the issue of those of the same village or of nearby villages, who had not joined SHGs. The team told the women how important it was to bring everyone on

a similar platform so there could be holistic change in their villages. If they had benefited from SHGs, was it not their responsibility to involve those women, who were not part of it as well?

In some villages, the team got a lukewarm response. However, in many villages, the SHG women responded positively and understood the importance of bringing all families into the SHG fold. They realized that the addition of these families would make their institution stronger as well. The increased membership would lead to more negotiating capabilities with the stakeholders.



Didis of Aanlaghati village explaining about SHG modalities to women in Mulda village

Third, women from the new villages were brought to the nucleus villages to experience how SHGs functioned. They took back their learning and, in turn, influenced the women there, inspiring them to join the new SHGs being formed.

During the discussion on the issues of women who had not joined SHGs, some women said that they knew of villages of relatives where there are no such SHGs, and that they were interested in helping their relatives. Transport was arranged for these women, who went and persuade their relatives and their neighbours to join the SHG fold.

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SHGs were a part of each group. However, this did not have the desired impact at the village level. Only some members of the village attended such forums, and the percolation of knowledge at the village level was limited. In addition, attendance was an issue in such meetings through the year.

Through these approaches, in very little time, a large number of women became SHG members. This helped in the geometric progression of the number of SHGs in the area. These increased from 130 SHGs (2013–14) to 270 SHGs (2014–15) to 510 SHGs (2015–16). In 2016–17, the hope is that the same trend continues and around 8,500 women join around 750 SHGs.

Evolution of VOs in Place of Area-level Clusters: Earlier, on the secondary level of community institutions, Cluster-level groups were formed, in a 5-km radius, and 10–15

Development discourses at the team level looked at how to strengthen these forums so that these are more effective in bringing about societal change. A new idea emerged. The suggestion was that secondary level tiers be promoted at the village level. This may help increase participation and may also evolve as a forum of overall village development.

The question was: When was the best time to form secondary level institutions? The prevailing practice was that SHGs were formed first, and after they stabilized over six months, and if the need for a secondary level tier arose, Clusters were formed. However, in most



VO meeting in S.Pujhariput village, Malibelgaon panchayat, Nandapur block, Koraput

cases this was not an organic development. As facilitators, PRADAN triggered the process.

Another thought that emerged in the developmental discourses was to seed the concept of the village-level organizations from the very first day, with whatever primary groups were being formed. It was also suggested that the task of saturation of the village, that is, taking all the women into the SHG, be left to the VO.

The old way of doing things was to start with the savings and credit, and gradually move into the field of livelihoods and other activities. In the new approach, it was decided to leave the stage to the village women from the very first day; they were allowed to discuss anything that they thought was pertinent to their lives.

This approach worked miracles. It has broken all old conventions and textbook knowledge. It shows how, with a little encouragement, village women can start taking charge of their lives and the village, without the initial gestation period.

At Nandapur, in February 2015, formation of SHGs in the Mali Belgaon *panchayat* began. SHGs and VOs were formed simultaneously in three to four villages. The savings and credit activity was begun immediately at the SHG level; in addition, as mentioned earlier, the women were also asked to discuss whatever issues they thought were pertinent. They were asked to list the areas in which they would like to bring some change and how they thought that change could be brought about. The women were also given training on citizenship and governance, which included an understanding

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of the rights and responsibilities of a citizen, the various schemes available to them as citizens, the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders such as the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), and the different line departments of the government.

There were some initial hiccups as the participation in the VO meeting was not uniform across the villages. But some of the VOs started holding their meetings fortnightly. They identified the issues affecting their lives such

as lack of drinking water, electricity, roads, etc., and gradually began to approach *panchayat* officials by attending nodal meetings. *Panchayat* officials were taken aback by the presence of women in the meetings; initially, they ignored the women, hoping it was a one-time attendance. However, the SHG women continued to approach them in a series of nodal meetings and began to follow-up on their applications. The results are there for all to see. New open wells and tube wells have been sanctioned, and implemented. Impressed by the perseverance of the SHG women, the *panchayat* came forward and opened up some road construction work, to engage the women.

In the meantime, the power of solidarity was being discussed in VO meetings. They were made aware of the advantages of uniting and demanding for their rights. The village had been able to witness so much change just because the women had become aware and involved. They realized that there was tremendous potential if a large number of women got together under one umbrella. There were discussions about the value of extending the self to others, of supporting other struggling villagers to achieve what they had as a VO, and of including the women

of their own villages and the neighbouring villages, who were not yet a part of the collective.

Inspired by their success, VOs began extending themselves to the nearby villages and started promoting new SHGs and VOs. Within six months, nearly 52 SHGs were formed, covering around 600 women out of a total of 1200 women in the *panchayat*. Currently, 10 VOs are in place, holding regular village meetings. With the principle of increasing their strength and solidarity, the women have constituted a *Gram Panchayat* Level Federation (GPLF). This was unimaginable a year ago. In 2015–16, there were 40 VOs holding regular meetings. In 2016–17, the team has planned to bring 75 VOs to such levels.

Creation of Voluntary Resource Persons (VRPs): The role of Community Service Providers (CSPs) or Community Resource

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Persons (CRPs) has been important in helping expand the reach and manage operations. The CSPs/CRPs provided a service/training to the community and, in return, the community paid them; they are accountable to the community. However, largely, these cadres have been used as extended hands of PRADAN professionals, and have helped in implementing projects and have

imparted training on PRADAN's behalf and, in return, have been paid directly by PRADAN, or through Clusters, Village Development Associations (VDAs) and Federations and have, by and large, remained accountable to PRADAN.

In Nandapur, the situation was no different. Moreover, because the literacy rate is very low (almost nil among women), the CSPs/CRPs engaged were mostly men. Their main role was to follow up on our SHG and agriculture



A volunteer imparting Group Process training in Dasaput village, Kumargandhana gram panchayat, Nandapur

activities. In the beginning of 2015–16, however, two ideas started taking shape through different developmental discourses within the team.

Questions were raised about why illiterate women could not be considered as Resource Persons (trainers) and why the more articulate women could not extend themselves to educate other women?

To ground the first idea, it was necessary to design training modules that would require no reading and writing at all, and to create material that women Volunteer Resource Persons (trainers) could use at the village level to educate the other village women. Picture Led Discussion (PLD) tools that had been developed earlier, on themes such as the SHG, came in handy for the process. We started developing more PLD tools for other themes as well.

In VO meetings, we asked the SHG women to volunteer for learning so that they could, in turn, help others to learn. We also asked the VOs to nominate persons, whom it thought could help them learn about various aspects of life. There was some apprehension among the women. They wondered how they would impart training to others when they could not read and write. But after they were assured that no reading or writing would be required for learning and imparting training, some women (usually one from each VO) either volunteered or were nominated by the others. And, thus, began the journey of creating a pool of VRPs (trainers).

To ground the second idea, the value of volunteerism was used. Discussions were held at length about how some people are more fortunate than others and how it is important to help those who are less fortunate than us and how helping others would give

us satisfaction. The consequences of good karma were discussed at length. It made many women come forward to take up the role of VRPs.

Measures to keep the workload of the volunteers to a level, which they could do happily, without facing much resistance from their family members were discussed. Also, as they were volunteers, a decision was taken that they would not be monitored by PRADAN. It was left to the VOs to take care of the monitoring roles and they were told that if someone was not able to give the required time as a volunteer, the VOs had the liberty to change the person.

In 2015–16, forty such women underwent training at the PRADAN office in Nandapur. They attended the training every fortnight, and imparted the same in their villages. They have gone through two phases of training on group processes, and savings and credit, six phases of training on agriculture, four phases of training on governance and citizenship, one phase of training on gender, and they are currently imparting the same at the village level with the help of SHG leaders.

Leaders are leading the way: Educating some volunteers, however, and expecting that they learn and take the entire load of educating others was a little too much to expect. Therefore, the leadership group of the VO (one representative from each SHG) was entrusted with the responsibility of making sure that the trainings percolate down to all SHG members of the village. The decision was taken at the VO level about which day which SHG or group of SHGs would be given training. Whereas it was the responsibility of the VRP to impart the training, it was the responsibility of the leaders to organize trainings. In this way, much of the work of the volunteers was shared by the leaders.

In some villages, the leadership groups were not active, and therefore, the VRPs found it difficult to conduct trainings. It was, thus, decided to conduct leadership training with all the selected VO leaders so that they understood their roles well and acted accordingly. Three residential trainings were conducted for these leaders from all the VOs where VRPs were engaged.

Observing the current VRPs, other women are now evincing interest in attending trainings and imparting them. To share responsibility, it was discussed that VRPs and Leaders should work on a rotational basis. This year, accordingly, a new bunch of VRPs are being groomed, who will impart the training at the village level with a new set of leaders.

Reflections of VRPs and PRADAN Executives:

From time to time we conducted meetings to consolidate the learning of the VRPs. Here are some glimpses into their experiences over the past year:

Lessons learned

- ◆ Group processes: We have learned how to conduct meetings, about the norms of SHGs, how to address topics beyond savings and credit such as village problems.
- ◆ Agriculture: Earlier, in agriculture we were not able to identify crop diseases and their remedies. We have now learned about the different diseases and the medicines we need to apply.
- ◆ Citizenship: We have learned about our rights and responsibilities and the roles of different stakeholders such as PRIs.
- ◆ Gender discrimination: We have learned about the patriarchal system that is impeding the growth of women.

Learning that strikes you the most

- ◆ Earlier, when we were doing agriculture we were following instructions; now we are learning about agriculture and are guiding people.
- ◆ MGNREGA and its nuances.
- ◆ The patriarchal system and its effect on women.

Experience that you liked most

- ◆ When some of the men ask us questions to clarify their doubts to understand some aspects of agriculture.
- ◆ In some cases, after our training, the VO approached the *panchayat* and we were able to access drinking water and even roads for the village.

Facilitating factors during the last one year

- ◆ Banner and picture training helped us to facilitate with ease, and members learned about medicines for different diseases and pests.
- ◆ Getting a high yield, after applying nutrients and pesticides on our advice, is making the members happy. At the time of any disease or pest attack, the villagers come to us to ask about which medicine to apply.
- ◆ When village women understand our training and take action, we feel very happy.
- ◆ After acquiring knowledge, we apply that knowledge for our own good.

Hindering factors during this period

- ◆ Sometimes we had to neglect household chores because we had to go for training.

There are a large number of SHGs that we have to train..

- ♦ Some women commit to the VO that they will apply the learning but do not follow what they have learned.
- ♦ It becomes hectic when the leaders do not support us and when we have to call people to come for training.
- ♦ Sometimes, it became very difficult to make the *didis* understand the content of the training.
- ♦ In some cases, the *didis* sprayed pesticides and medicines but ultimately it was in vain because the plants died due to heavy rain
- ♦ We feel sad that in spite of taking so many effort, many women do not understand and they take no action in the area of governance citizenship or gender for their own development and dignity

Things we want to learn in the future

- ♦ Seed selection: We would like to know which is hybrid and which seeds are good for our soil.
- ♦ We produce a large number of agricultural products but we do not get proper rates when we sell them. We would like to know what we can do to get better prices.
- ♦ There are other developmental issues in the villages such as pension schemes, health issues and education; we would like to know what to do about them.

After these consolidations, the team held discussions periodically, through the year, and took a different course of action, when necessary, as described below:

1. As the service is given purely on a voluntary basis, the lower the load for women, the better. VRPs are able to give time for up to

three or four SHGs happily; beyond that, they begin to face difficulties. To address the situation, the team has decided to train one VRP for every three or four SHGs.

2. In smaller villages, the VO was formed by SHGs of two or three nearby villages. Here too, the VRP raised concerns about having to leave her own village and go to the other villages on a regular basis. This led to many of her household chores remaining unattended. After discussions, it was decided to have one VRP for each village.
3. In some cases, the VRPs had to organize meetings as well as impart training. The community soon decided that volunteers would not organize meetings. VO leaders would be responsible for organizing these meetings, and volunteers would only conduct trainings. The team conducted leadership training for all the leaders so that they could play their roles effectively. This decreased the workload on VRPs.

Strategies to Strengthen VRP system in 2016–17

(Hatia-based Volunteer Development System)

PRADAN's reach spread to almost 150 villages; going by last year's (2015) strategy, it would need to invest in developing at least 150 VRPs. In addition, we discussed the following:

1. Women of far-off *panchayats* find it difficult to come to the PRADAN office to receive training.
2. To reach the central trainings at PRADAN office, women leave their homes early in the morning and returned late in the evening. A decision was taken that travel costs and some food cost would be reimbursed, that is, on an average, Rs

100 per training would be given to each woman. Therefore, two trainings a month and almost 20 trainings in a year for 150 women would cost Rs 3,00,000. This was costly and may not be sustainable.

3. In some cases, PRADAN found that when only one woman learns and, in turn, imparts the training in the villages, the quality of the training becomes diluted. Therefore, instead of giving training to one volunteer per village, it was decided to train one volunteer per group. At the village level, the volunteer could choose to conduct training alone or take the help of volunteers of other SHGs.

Looking at all these aspects, the team has decided to decentralize the system. Because volunteers are not paid, the training would be held at a place the volunteers regularly frequent for their personal needs. The *hatia* (weekly market) was considered most suitable because the women went there regularly and, therefore, it would not be an additional burden on them to reach it.

For the two *panchayats*, there is at least one weekly *hatia* that the women access for groceries. The following table shows the list of the *hatias* and the number of SHGs that access them.

Days	Name of the Hatia	Name of the Panchayat It Caters	Number of SHGs It Caters to
Monday	Gunthaput	Gunthaput, Subai	40
	Raising	Raising, Kasandi	80
Tuesday	Paliba	Kumarpaliba	70
Wednesday	Nandapur	Khurji, Nandapur, Hikimput	150
Friday	Pujariput	Malibelgaon	70
Saturday	Thuba	Thuba, Bheja	50
Sunday	Tiakanta	Tikarpada	50
		Total	510

Through this strategy, PRADAN expected to train at least 500 women volunteers in various aspects of life on a fortnightly basis; in turn, they would be able to conduct training in the villages.

Agriculture with a difference: In Nandapur, agriculture is the major source of livelihood for the villagers, followed by wage labour and migration. Income from the forest is minimal. Therefore, we also have been focussing on helping the community to strengthen agriculture.

Up to now, even though this activity was being conducted by SHGs, both men and women participated in the training events; somehow, men took the centre stage and women the backseat.

This year, a lot of thought went into how this activity could be implemented fully by women and for women. It was also an experiment to see if women could extend themselves to participate in the activity.

With this in mind, this year, the VOs were left to take care of the intervention completely. Volunteers were trained in PLD tools, and they were given the same material to disseminate the knowledge at the village level. The VO



Standing tomato crop of Moni Bhoi didi of Muliaput village, Khurji GP, Nandapur

took the responsibility to arrange the training and to help the SHG women adopt various improved practices. In addition, the VO was responsible for monitoring whether proper measures were being taken or not.

The model worked well. The penetration of knowledge to the women was much higher than in the earlier years. Each VO had printed 3'x 2' IEC (pictures) to refer to, for the Package of Practice as well as for Pest Management. VRPs conducted the training with ease and SHG women found the pictures interesting and remained glued to the material during training.

Participation in agriculture, following this, increased to almost three times the previous year. Of a total reach of 3,000 families, around 2,200 families used the improved agriculture practices and increased their income substantially, that is, in the range of Rs 20,000 to Rs 60,000 for *kharif* (2015).

And to our immense satisfaction, all these achievements were taken care of by the women volunteers, SHG members and the leaders themselves.

This may be the way forward for the years to come. Through the method discussed earlier, substantial agriculture training is being planned with at least 5,500 families during 2016–17.

Change within leads change without: After numerous developmental discourses at the team level, a consensus was reached that extension out there cannot be achieved without achieving the same inside the team. To put theories of a renewed stance and approach into practice would require a lot of brainstorming, innovation and experimentation. All the people have to actively participate in the whole process to convert these theories into reality. This is a path less travelled by almost all of us; therefore, before we try to bring the normative change in the villages in which we

work, the extension to each other in the team itself is non-negotiable.

Lanjigarh Team Visit to Koraput (Nandapur and Lamtaput)

Listening to our experiences in different forums, other teams of South Odisha Development Cluster visited us through the year. The following is an excerpt from the sharing of a visiting team:

“As a team, we have learned a lot. The overall experience was enriching and it has opened a window to innovative ideas for us. The Koraput team’s major focus on nurturing and strengthening SHGs under the lens of the spiritual and the concept of ‘relatedness well-being’, is stirring. It was well-demonstrated when the women of Koraput SHGs shared how satisfied they feel when they extended themselves to vulnerable sections.

“Also it has been interesting to see how villagers envision a better quality of life because of their association with, and being a part of, the collectives in large numbers and to see how they have formed new groups as a token of their contribution to the holistic well-being of their life, village *panchayat* and block. The model, which abolishes payments to the CSP or the CRP and adopts the concept of voluntary rotational leadership, is conducive to knowledge transfer at a bigger platform and holds within it the power of change within the community. Presumably, this approach will minimize inequality within the group, which tends to happen if only one woman is chosen to be trained. Taking stock of the status of the activities within an SHG is another strengthening pillar. The formation of a Village Level Women’s Organization (VLWO) and catalyzing the positive energy of the women into fruitful results, leads to the development of an independent sustainable institution.

“The overall learning around the SHG and its promotion is entrenched at the individual as well as the team levels.

“Regarding agriculture, as a team we realized how important it was to identify traditional agricultural practices and make technological advances within that domain, rather than introducing a non-practised crop. This was evident by the huge patches of potatoes and ginger sown in line as per the crop POP seen throughout the exposure visits, where potatoes and ginger are traditional crops of the area.

“Post the exposure visit, changes are clearly visible in the community also. The SHG members, who were part of the visit, took the responsibility of organizing a meeting of all SHG members in each *panchayat*. They worked out different strategies in the area of saturation and large-scale agriculture promotion. At the *gram panchayat*-level meeting, a demonstration was held of the different tiers of SHG promotion and nurturing, after re-organization (SHG, VO, GPLF and block-level Federation), and the role of the CRP in this process. A block-level meeting of five to ten members from each *panchayat* was also organized; and they plan to organize all the women of Lanjigarh block through large-scale SHG promotion.”

Conclusion: When the Lanjigarh team visited Nandapur, one of the visiting Executives shared that this is what she had been dreaming of for a long time. She exclaimed, “The Nandapur team is actually working on an exit strategy. We had never thought along these lines.” After her sharing, it struck us that it was actually possible to work on an exit strategy. And it is indeed possible to work on an exit plan by 2022, instead of working on a perspective plan up to 2022.