



Case study – India

'SAMADHAN': citizens' action for governance

Challenge



Despite a recent law to stamp out corruption in Indian governance there are still major obstacles standing between citizens and their state entitlements. The Right to Information (RTI) Act was introduced in 2005 to tackle the problem by allowing citizens to request any information (other than defence and national security) from government bodies. There have also been new laws to provide the most economically disadvantaged sections of the population with government subsidies, food and employment security.

The problem is that many people in India remain unaware of these rights, or do not know how to exercise them. Odisha, a state in the east of India, has a population of nearly 42 million people, amongst whom vast amounts of people are not accessing their food, security, pensions and education entitlements. The population also has a relatively low level of political engagement and empowerment, with little opportunity to communicate with government.

Catalyst

What started as the germ of an idea in 2010 between The United Nations Millennium Campaign (UNMC), VSO India, South Orissa Voluntary Action (SOVA) and the Government of Odisha has become a participatory reality in 2012. The aim was to create a citizens monitoring hub to hold the government of Odisha to account and bring citizens and the government together on one platform, using technology. SOVA is a state-wide NGO working with local communities to empower local people, which VSO have worked with for a number of years.

This citizens monitoring hub was given the name 'SAMADHAN', which means 'solution' in Hindi. Citizens can access the service via their mobile phone (in total one billion mobile phones have been sold in India) or computer. The service allows users to lodge complaints about government services and monitor delivery of services. The complaints are then forwarded on to the relevant authority, and followed up before being fed back to the service user.

By using up-to-the-minute technology the project's aim is to strengthen governance systems at the grassroots level by providing an opportunity for poor and marginalised communities to get answers from the government and access their entitlements.

VSO volunteer Corey Grone was able to use his experience in Information Technology in his role as Management Information Systems advisor with

SAMADHAN. He assisted them in the initial stages of technology planning, whilst also coaching the project coordinators, so that there would be follow-through on the project even after his placement finished. Kristiane Kronsbein is the VSO volunteer currently with SOVA. VSO India is involved with both the Koraput project, and the other pilot project in Sehore district, where Samarthan, another organisation which has a long-standing partnership with VSO, is one of the key players in the local SAMADHAN project.

Results

The citizens monitoring hub was launched at the beginning of 2012, and has so far seen hundreds of cases submitted. Because of its efforts to ensure complete transparency, the data about the numbers and types of complaints and the actions taken by the government are open to the public. This means that the district magistrate, the press or local NGOS can put pressure on government departments that aren't addressing the issues raised.

Over 100 lead volunteers have been recruited and trained on the various features of SAMADHAN, so that they can in turn provide training to over 900 community volunteers who can mobilise participation in governance at community level and carry out further advocacy work. This 'cascade method', of training up volunteers allows for better value for money, a wider impact and a more sustainable path of change.

Since its launch, a substantial proportion of cases have been resolved, including a previously ignored application to build a school in a village with over 60 children of primary school age but no school for them to attend. Thanks to SAMADHAN the building work is now underway. In the coming months government officials will be trained up on how to use the system, at the request of government authorities, and volunteers from other organisations are also to be trained in its use.

Corinne Woods, Global Director of the UN Millennium Campaign, says "With less than five years left to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, it is very encouraging to witness that the District Government itself, with the full support of State Government, is initiating such a participatory tool for citizens to monitor and track their entitlements and for improving service delivery."

See the SAMADHAN website for the Koraput District, which has a real-time log of all cases filed : <http://koraput.samadhan.org.in>

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