Joe Madiath

It Takes a Faucet

Realizing Village Development Through Water and Sanitation Initiatives

Innovations Case Narrative:
Gram Vikas

An often-quoted proverb states that "it takes a village to raise a child." At Gram Vikas, which means "village development," we have for a number of years struggled with a different question: how can one raise a village, not into maturity, but out of poverty and despair. We engage in activities aimed at improving the living conditions and economic standards among these impoverished and social marginalized people, particularly the area's indigenous groups, called adivasis; those belonging to India's lowest caste, known as dalits; small farmers; and landless laborers.

Since I founded Gram Vikas with a group of friends thirty years ago we have experimented with a variety of approaches. Over time we came to understand that we can use water and sanitation projects as points of entry for whole-village development, which brings pride and dignity to the villagers' lives. By overcoming barriers of class, caste, and gender, we seek to nurture truly unified communities wherever we work. This then empowers and motivates the community to further develop themselves and thus start to take their destinies into their own hands and work to improve their lives.

At Gram Vikas we base our activities on Mahatma Gandhi's vision of sustainable "village republics" as the foundation of India's political system. We seek to do this by developing institutional capabilities and harnessing resources to augment the economic strength of villages. Self-reliance and sustainable long-term development guide all our activities. We do not initiate any projects without the consent, support, and active participation of the communities themselves. We accomplish this during the initial phases of implementation through education, training, and participatory planning, and by establishing contributory village funds. This may seem counter-intuitive, at least in comparison to dominant development para-

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digms based on a fundamentally charitable model. However, our insistence on a community contribution ensures that the community develops a sense of ownership of the project, and therefore ensures long-term sustainability. We firmly believe people can and will pay for beneficial development services; however, there is also a social cost, which society at large should meet.

Meanwhile, this approach contends with other dominant development paradigms also associated with charitable giving. Low-cost and low-quality solutions to problems of poverty, as opposed to workable, sustainable ones, further embed into the national psyche the idea that the poor are of little value. This idea has contributed immensely to their low self-esteem and lack of dignity, and we seek to address this feeling of being sub-human. We need to demonstrate repeatedly that the cheapest solution does necessarily result in the most economical outcome, which we illustrate with creative problem-solving, appropriate uses of technology, and first-hand knowledge of the needs of the villagers with whom we work.

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Before we put our current programs into place, we developed solutions that encapsulated the above commitments through our core activities in the Integrated Tribal Development Program (ITDP), the Biogas Program, and the Rural Health and Environment Program (RHEP). We began to enter into villages with the ITDP program platform, and it served as our laboratory for experimenting with new development strategies. We began by mobilizing and organizing the *adivasi* people to demand their rights; that work evolved into initiatives to support livelihoods, education, and health. Over the years it shifted from a welfare-driven and service-oriented focus towards a program emphasizing people's personal ownership of their resources and endeavors and more clearly defined what one means by quality of life. Parallel to ITDP's development, Gram Vikas promoted the use of biogas as a cooking fuel in homes. Over the decade from 1983 to 1993, we helped to establish over 54,000 biogas plants across Orissa, in conjunction with the development of a substantial engineering training program. This program helped to train masons, construct locally-run brick kilns to help provide construction materials, and build capacity among local people as biogas technicians and supervisors.

In the early 1990's, Gram Vikas began to take stock of its development strate-

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gies and the effects on communities. Poor living conditions and a lack of sustainable livelihood options often recurred as an obstacle to the development we sought to facilitate. Our observations convinced us in the organization that unless every family in the village had healthy living practices and the overall “quality of life” improved, there was no hope of total development. This conviction formed the backbone of the Rural Health and Environment Program (RHEP). Here the focus was on quality-of-life issues, such as quality education, sustainable livelihoods, health services, and a minimum level of infrastructure. Although we had already established programs advocating for the rights and representation of *adivasi* communities and linked them to educational and health resources, the sense that quality-of-life issues are related to economic development took hold. The water and sanitation program to which this sensitivity gave birth would come to serve as the primary point of entry into new villages, and the model we used to implement it would come to form the cornerstone of our entire approach to village and community development.

With the successes experienced through the RHEP program and the strategies we used to employ it, in addition to the programs already in place through the ITDP and Biogas programs, we overhauled the organization according to goals for the new millennium and brought all of our village interventions under a single umbrella. We call this unified, integrated approach to village development MANTRA, or the Movement and Action Network for the Transformation of Rural Areas. Through this, we intended not only to refocus all of our myriad programs on a single set of goals but to integrate them into a single habitat-development strategy.

Though our model is replicable, Gram Vikas still manages to design all community interventions in context, based on the needs and priorities of the people with whom we engage. Given the diverse social and economic situation of the people who form a part of this process, the relative importance of one kind of activity over another varies from one community to another. However, using what we had learned made us more effective in everything we did, and each intervention would build on a similar method that made so many things possible, based entirely on the five tenets of 100% inclusion, social equity, gender equity, sustainability, and cost sharing.

According to 2001 census data, 86% of Orissa's 38 million people lives in villages, and over 60% of the population lives below the poverty line of INR 12000 per family per annum. As of 31 March, 2009, 48,091 families across 698 villages, mostly in Orissa, have developed and continue to develop according to Gram Vikas’s MANTRA method. Women, and parents of young women, from villages with piped drinking water and toilets in their homes now insist that they marry into families from villages with similar facilities. Instead of us pushing into new villages, telling local populations about the benefits of this kind of development, the villages neighboring those where we have already worked will ask us to come in. As such, Gram Vikas, in partnerships with other NGOs working in the area who replicate the MANTRA method, pushes to form a critical mass of villages. Over the

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next decade, we aspire to work with 1% of Orissa's population (about 80,000 to 100,000 families), through direct outreach and in collaboration with other non-government organizations. That 1% of the population would form a critical mass, i.e. the proportion of the population who can influence and pressure local government bodies so that democratic ways of working within these bodies take strong root and things like corruption and nepotism are avoided. The process of clustered expansion will occur around current areas of our operation, and will mobilize the many villages with which we began working as long as thirty years ago.

In the future, Gram Vikas will continue the expansion program, working with partner NGOs to implement MANTRA in other states throughout India, and indeed other countries with a continued focus on the poorest and most marginalized communities. The exclusion of these populations throughout history and into the present has burdened our society and hindered true development for our society at large.

FROM EMPATHY TO ACTION (1971-1979)

I was born in a poor place, but not to a poor family. My father was the owner of a large rubber estate. I grew up in the presence of exploitation, but was not a victim of it myself.

When I was still a boy I came to the realization that my own father was exploiting his workers. One day, when I was eleven years old, I went to the laborers who worked on my father's rubber estate, and asked if they should organize themselves so they could demand better facilities from my father. They agreed, and asked if I would act as their union leader. Naturally, I was thrilled to accept their invitation. We organized an informal union and staged a strike outside my father's house. He saw me, and didn't say a word ... but he soon suggested that I would fit in very well at boarding school. Two months later, that's where I was.

Years later, when I was a student at Madras University, I founded the Young Students Movement for Development (YSMD), and led a group from YSMD to West Bengal to help those affected by the war in Bangladesh. While I was assisting with aid there, a terrible cyclone caused a tidal wave to hit the coast of Orissa. The suffering was enormous and widespread, affecting over a million people. The refugee crisis had stretched thin the government's resources for disaster relief, and a group of forty YSMD volunteers travelled to the Cuttack district of Orissa to assist in whatever way we could. I was among that group, and among those who stayed for over a year after the initial assistance efforts to help locals rebuild roads and desalinate agricultural land.

While there, we learned a great deal about Orissa and its people, specifically the poorest groups who resided there. These groups are largely composed of what the Indian constitution calls "scheduled" castes: *dalits* (untouchables), and tribes, called the *adivasis*. For centuries, administrative authorities have considered these groups to reside at the lowest levels of society. During this time we became acutely aware of the poverty and underdevelopment these people face. No NGOs or

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other development agencies were working there, except for some missionary and Gandhian groups mainly focused on health issues. Over the next few years, we experimented with projects to help build the economic capacity of these poorest communities, making agreements between land owners and workers and forming co-operative production schemes. However, it soon became clear that the problems were very deep-rooted and we needed a different approach. A problem we experienced was that few groups had worked exclusively with tribal people, so no one had much knowledge about or access to information on the best ways of working with them. The poverty of the region's most poor ran very deep, and any sense of social equity or healthy living conditions for them simply did not exist. As we saw it, their problems also reached to broader themes of identity and integration. We began to ask ourselves if there was not something we could do to support these people in an effort to bring them out of their social exclusion and into the life of the district.

Land and indebtedness have long been closely interlinked, and they still are. Access to credit, which these impoverished people needed for almost everything outside of normal everyday expenses (and even some of those), came almost exclusively from local money lenders, called sahukars.

We began to pay close attention to the *adivasis* of the region, whose plight exemplified the condition of the poorest and most marginalized groups of local society. Though they were initially very distrustful of outsiders like us, we began to make entries into *adivasi* communities through the local health clinics. Once inside the communities and able to speak to their members, we learned that what most held them back was the loss of land and indebtedness. One cannot understand the plight of tribal people without considering the fundamental question of land rights. The very term tribal or indigenous group connotes that these people originally inhabited the lands where they reside now. For centuries, they lived in harmony with the forests, relying on them for food, shelter, and fuel, and to practice their religion. Their peaceful way of life and belief in community ownership of land has made them especially vulnerable to acts of aggression.

Land and indebtedness have long been closely interlinked, and they still are. Access to credit, which these impoverished people needed for almost everything outside of normal everyday expenses (and even some of those), came almost exclusively from local money lenders, called *sahukars*. Community members would mortgage what little land they might own, the products of fruit trees found on that

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land, and virtually anything else they might possess. The terms of the mortgages were egregious and wide-reaching, spanning over several years and trapping debtors in an inescapable spiral of poverty. Worse still, the presence of liquor producers, called *shundis*, in many of the villages created more sources of debt, taking property in payment for liquor. Fathers even offered the unpaid labor of their children in exchange for the liquor produced by the *shundis*.

To counteract this phenomenon, in 1978 the government of India had declared a moratorium on rural indebtedness. This policy provided the legal support to launch a campaign to mobilize the tribal people around the issue of land mortgaging. My colleagues and I began the process of organizing communities, helping individual debtors to acquire strength in numbers and get from the government what it had declared to be their right. Working within the legal confines laid out by the new moratorium on indebtedness, we discovered that many of those who held mortgages had no right to further repayment because the produce had been collected from the land or the debts were already paid off. The *adivasis* formed themselves into an independent advocacy group, called the *Kerandimal Gana Sangathan*, and created a tribal court to hear each debtor's case against their lender. The tribal court, on behalf of all the *adivasis*, served notices on all the *sahukars* that all the tribal property they had previously mortgaged or otherwise appropriated would return to the possession of its original owner unless the *sahukar* presented a counter-claim. By the end of 1979, the court had settled nearly all the cases in the Kerandimal region in favor of the tribal people.

The impact of an organized community resonated beyond money-lending schemes. The *shundis*, who had themselves become involved in debt cases, began to feel the anger of those whose families they had trapped in their cycle of impoverishing addiction. Women's groups, wives of those who had indebted their families and whose children's labor had become collateral for debts, ran many of the *shundis* out of their villages, entirely destroying their liquor manufacturing equipment and making a clear statement that the residents of the villages, not the *shundis* or *sahukars*, had control over their lives and communities. During this time, as we lived among the *adivasis*, and persistently pursued a trial-and-error approach, we realized the time had come to create a new identity separate from our Madras-based parent organization. We realized we had developed our own local vision and character with specific aims related to our local context. Therefore on 22 January 1979, Gram Vikas was officially established and registered as a society.

SEEKING INITIATIVES TO BRING ABOUT REAL CHANGE (1979-1992)

We organized our efforts to bring development to the tribal peoples through Integrated Tribal Development Program, creating partnerships with government funders and other NGOs in any field we could to improve the quality of life and the income-generating activities of the *adivasis*. Gram Vikas and the tribal peoples took a major step forward in the campaign to recover mortgaged land. Though we had all reached a significant milestone, the movement quickly reached a plateau.

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Long decades of bonded labor had eroded any sense of initiative among most of the tribal people. To the *adivasis*, getting back all that they had was bigger than life, but this also meant having to own their own resources, protect them, and behave in a responsible way. As a result, providing support for them to manage their own resources became a key task. We realized that we could not simply win the battle; we had to consolidate it and bring them to a level where they could handle their own affairs, and prevent them from slipping back into old disruptive ways.

Surely in spirit this perspective made sense, but finding initiatives that would bring about real change presented new challenges. The problems in this scenario were compounded, and perhaps created by, a historic fact. In the years after independence, the government wrested all initiative from the people in practically all spheres of life: control over forests, wastelands, infrastructure, development, health systems, revenue generation and utilization. Limited development resources and an apparently huge demand have meant that only a few benefit, often not the most deserving. In the absence of reliable measures for assessing poverty, the system must make subjective assessments, driven largely by political patronage and bureaucratic concessions. This said, most development interventions tend to address individual rather than collective needs. Take, for instance, interventions towards economic development. Livelihood assistance, whether from the government or from development organizations, targets enterprising people in the community, and not necessarily those who are economically weakest. The leaders decide who should get housing and other assistance. Rarely do the crafters of government development initiatives hear the voice of the very poorest, nor do they invest the time or energy necessary to make that voice heard.

In the years after independence, the government wrested all initiative from the people in practically all spheres of life ... Limited development resources and an apparently huge demand have meant that only a few benefit, often not the most deserving. In the absence of reliable measures for assessing poverty, the system must make subjective assessments, driven largely by political patronage and bureaucratic concessions.

As such, people must first have an awareness of their rights before they can assert them. The fight against the all-pervading monster called corruption, which

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over time has become integral to the system's functioning, makes this imperative far greater. Pressure groups must organize themselves to demand transparency and accountability from elected representatives and government functionaries. Effective community action requires that people have first reached a threshold level of quality of life. Communities should have satisfied their most basic life needs and have the capacity to dream of further improvements. Effectively addressing issues like food and income security, health and medical care, education and literacy, safe and hygienic habitations, and basic infrastructure all help to reach that critical threshold.

It was under the auspices of the ITDP that we experimented with programs devoted to all these issues, initially paying special attention to health and education. At the village level, we provided non-formal education for children in the 6-14 age group. In retrospect we realize that offering non-formal education, as opposed to the formal pedagogy recognized by the mainstream, only reinforced the divide between the marginalized and their cultural counterparts. Still, many of the schools we established during this time did develop into formal educational institutions that operate today. Many of them utilize mechanisms that we have developed over time to ensure that schools operate in every village and encourage female students to attend with reduced or even waived fees. Now channels exist to reward successful students and teachers, and we consistently reach out to those who have trouble and whom we must bring back into the fold. These schools, in addition to the network of high-quality clinics we established, characterize many of the activities of ITDP on the village level.

Over the years, ITDP began to shift toward new programs that took account of the larger societal issues facing marginalized people and their ownership stake in their environment. These programs began to integrate strategies for Gram Vikas' withdrawal and adopted more measures of sustainability. In addition to our village interventions in education and health, we started a campaign for community forestry: we encouraged people to plant fuel, fodder, fruit and timber species over private and common lands, many of which had been reclaimed after the new government policy allowed tribal people to reclaim their mortgaged land. Between 1985 and 1996, in collaboration with the National Program for Wasteland Development, we assisted in redeveloping over 10,000 acres of wasteland. Gram Vikas also helped communities to obtain legal titles over the revenue-producing wastelands they regenerated and protected. In this way we began to move toward being facilitators and catalysts, linking the indigenous people's organizations with government and private-sector services.

Parallel to the ITDP program, in the early 1980's we became involved with issues related to energy poverty in remote homes and villages. This issue came to my attention as early as 1975 when I had worked in Mohuda, and saw no access to electricity or energy sources other than timber from surrounding forests. Gram Vikas's Biogas Program, and the engineering and masonry programs that developed as offshoots of it, came as a result of this awareness and problem. The program and its offshoots focused on demystifying helpful technologies on the village

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level and making them available to village inhabitants. Overall, the programs emphasized technologies that we could train village inhabitants to build and maintain themselves.

For the Biogas Program, we helped households build their own simple biogas plant, which used cattle manure. The manure is placed in the biogas plant, and mixed with water; as it decomposes, it produces gas which is then used for cooking. As this reduces the amount of wood needed, it not only reduces the pressure on local resources, but also removes the burden on women of having to collect firewood for cooking. During the process, the waste overflows as slurry, which can then be added to the fields, providing several benefits. It adds moisture to the field, it forms a layer on top that prevents too much moisture from escaping, and it is an extremely good fertilizer. The government of India had spearheaded a program to construct individual household biogas plants all over India, but with only mixed success. A key reason for this lack of success was the poor construction. The quality of masonry was very poor, and it often cracked, so that gas escaped. Soon the plants became unusable, and people abandoned them. As a result broken plants lie scattered across Orissa, stark reminders of failure across already depressed areas. To build confidence in the people, I knew it was necessary to put all the defective and defunct plants back in order. New plants also had to meet an appropriate standard of quality and required an infrastructure and people with some technical skill to support it.

At Gram Vikas, we modified the program the government established to continue promoting biogas technology. We helped to find financing for those willing to own and operate biogas plants, and trained a cadre of local barefoot engineers in masonry and in 'barefoot engineering,' therefore ensuring local knowledge to construct and maintain the biogas plants in districts throughout Orissa. These barefoot engineers would not only provide a valuable service to those using this important technology, but would acquire new marketable skills and the potential to earn an income. We also began to promote the masonry trade, so that more of those trained in construction would be available to build new plants. We also encouraged women to take part in training, although getting them to participate has been challenging. This new group of trained persons, supported by Gram Vikas, would also be offered work on our projects for at least one year, but many go on to secure lucrative urban contracts, often earning more than three times the salary they earned before training. We began promoting the construction of local kilns to produce bricks, utilizing the team of engineers we had available to provide the necessary expertise for such endeavors. To date, around 6000 men and women have been trained as qualified masons.

All these programs sought to demystify technologies appropriate for rural village development, providing better access to materials and skilled technicians, as well as providing important new sources of income and the goods those income-generating enterprises produced. We branched out to promoting other new technologies throughout Orissa, such as micro-hydropower plants and other types of renewable energy technologies. We have always favored sustainability, not cutting-

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edge technologies for which local communities had no use, and eschewed the low-quality equipment the government often provided simply because it cost the least. Often we do not need any heavy R&D, just some creativity, encouragement, and the courage to take risks. Basic solutions like fitting a ball bearing to a water-lifting device to draw water from a well, or a designing a better bullock cart, can make incremental changes in the way poor people live and work. However, our experiences with government programs to implement new technologies have also taught us lessons. The liberal use of appropriate technology in development parlance has often reduced it to outdated and outmoded technology. The poor need appropriate technology, that most suited for their situation and not necessarily whatever is cheapest. If it costs little, that is an additional advantage, but that should not be the precondition.

Women had the most to gain from having clean water piped directly into their homes, not only for purposes of hygiene, but also because they had to bring in the clean water the family needed every day. In some areas, women would trek 3 to 4 hours each day to visit wells or streams where they could collect water and bring it back to the village. Nor were girls excluded from this duty. They either carried water or stayed at home to care for younger siblings, which meant they had to miss school.

This dichotomy—between providing technologically-based tools to rural communities and searching for the most appropriate and helpful versions of them—has led to a conflict in current development paradigms. Gram Vikas addresses this problem by improving technology, demystifying processes, and directly applying improvements in food and livelihood security, as well as alleviating poverty. In these poor and rural areas, access to grid electricity seems very remote, so we have electricity produced locally: to light homes, to provide power for lift irrigation, and to generally enable people to generate an income. Here interventions like micro-hydropower, biomass-based gasifiers, and solar photovoltaic power can open up possibilities for economic development. We continue to support these programs that explore and implement these options, and experiment with new programs in LED lighting and biodiesel production from under-utilized local oil-bearing seeds.

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We have always struggled to support the many biogas and technology promotion programs across the state, but over time we have managed to create the mechanisms for self-sustenance. In 1994, we started the process of spinning off the Biogas Program. We hoped that our supervisors and trained masons could function as independent turnkey operators and entrepreneurs with little difficulty. They could help interested farmers access loans and subsidies for constructing plants and provide the necessary technical support. The large pool of skilled and experienced personnel would work independently or with other local voluntary organizations, to promote biogas projects all over the state. We encouraged the supervisors and masons to become entrepreneurs, either individually, in small groups, or in association with other local bodies. Gram Vikas could continue to provide the technical backup support and the credibility they needed to establish their enterprises. We also made an offer to each one of them that they could return to Gram Vikas should they fail in their effort. At the end of two years, out of the 600 supervisors who left at the time, only six came back.

RURAL SANITATION AS AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE (1993-2001)

Started in the early '90s, the Rural Health and Environment Program aims to find ways in which the community as a whole has a stake in development. We began by dealing with the immediate problem of sanitation practices. We became involved with the sanitation and water issue as we began to explore how best to improve the living conditions of village dwellers: creating a clean environment and safe, healthy housing. In fact, in our approach to housing we did not initially promote toilets and bathing rooms, or a supply of protected water to all families. But as we became more closely associated with rural communities, we realized that a large percentage of women were suffering from reproductive and gynecological ailments: as they were forced to bathe in the same pond as the rest of the village, they had an especially hard time keeping clean during their periods. For them, it was a real boon to have a secluded space for bathing in addition to toilet facilities, and it recognized their need for privacy and dignity.

Women had the most to gain from having clean water piped directly into their homes, not only for purposes of hygiene, but also because they had to bring in the clean water the family needed every day. In some areas, women would trek 3 to 4 hours each day to visit wells or streams where they could collect water and bring it back to the village. Nor were girls excluded from this duty. They either carried water or stayed at home to care for younger siblings, which meant they had to miss school. Certainly, for these poor communities to lack clean water, one of the most basic necessities of life, was closely connected with the other social and gender equities that constrained rural residents from even marginal development.

I had encountered the connection between gender inequity and the problem of sanitation many times before, beginning back in 1978. I had worked on a project in the Cuttack District of Orissa which provided quality toilets for every family in the village. We assumed that everyone would bring the water they needed for

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the toilets from nearby hand-pumps. However, this job was relegated to the wife, daughter, or daughter-in-law. One day, one daughter "accidentally" dropped a small stone in the U-trap of the toilet, making it unusable. Pretty soon, similar accidents were taking place in other households, and it wasn't long before people went back to using open fields for their sanitation needs. The lesson was clear: if we wanted water-based toilets to function, we needed to make running water available.

The concept of developing villages by building toilet and sanitation units was a difficult one for anyone to accept. In order to ensure effective protection of water and sanitation in any habitat, 100% coverage is essential. Even if one family were left out, that would result in continued pollution of the environment, most immediately of the surrounding water bodies they used for bathing or for other personal needs.

The concept of developing villages by building toilet and sanitation units was a difficult one for anyone to accept. In order to ensure effective protection of water and sanitation in any habitat, 100% coverage is essential. Even if one family were left out, that would result in continued pollution of the environment, most immediately of the surrounding water bodies they used for bathing or for other personal needs. Because those bodies of water had to be clean, any pollution would further feed into the cycle of morbidity, mortality, and loss of productivity. Taking this into account, we would have to ensure that every member of the village, male and female, would comply with the program, and commit fully to this program and to one another.

Additionally, we felt strongly that villages should have an ownership stake in the project: they would willingly buy in, and have a reason to maintain the facilities and remain committed to new sanitary habits. This would overcome the major hurdles already facing many health and sanitation programs. Only because of the lack of water, toilet blocks converted into storage units riddle underdeveloped areas of India, rather than being used as intended. However, even water supply systems fall into disuse with the slightest of defects, if people do not bother to repair them. This happens because users do not value the service enough. It became clear to us that an effective sanitation development project required three things: it had to use running water piped directly into the toilet block, it needed the full consen-

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sus participation of each resident in the village, and everyone had to have an ownership stake. Everyone would have to save money and contribute to a general corpus fund that would cover at least some of the cost of the materials and construction. The village would have to manage the fund, and villages would have to make future provisions for new houses constructed in the village. Early on, we knew about the possibilities extending well beyond sanitation and water that would become available if villages could reach the measure of participation and cooperation necessary for such a program.

The program that we developed to meet these challenges would become the centerpiece of RHEP. The preparatory process of developing the organizational structure within the village begins with a series of negotiations with the communities. This mobilization phase ensures that all families in the village have access to the same level of products and services arising from the intervention: piped water supply from a central community water tank, and a private toilet and bathing room for each household, providing privacy and dignity, important especially for the women in the household. This necessitates engagement in a difficult process of resolving intra-village conflicts, and the willing participation of everyone in a village-wide program. People have to communicate with one another and work across generations-old societal barriers and family feuds.

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Furthermore, our insistence on women participating in community-level decision making delayed the process considerably. Tackling this, the most pervasive of inequities, would challenge us tremendously. Gram Vikas had experience in dealing with these issues through the ITDP program when we were organizing village women to combat the influence of *shundis* in *adivasi* communities. Women would again play a strong, if not central, role in the RHEP program. In order to ease the community into this kind of active participation, men and women meet separately at first to discuss and deliberate. This helps women to find their voices and feel comfortable expressing their views in front of others. These bodies then combine into a single group, where people of both genders actively discuss the proposed benefits and necessary steps.

This preparatory phase has taken two to three years in some villages, but it provides the foundation for the process towards village-wide development. Once the villagers reach a consensus, a typical sequence of events begins to unfold, starting with the formation of a village committee to oversee the work and the collection of funds for the village corpus. The poor can and do pay for necessary services, and Gram Vikas provides training to those on the committee to manage the funds and

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maintain balanced accounts. This corpus fund is invested in a high-interest bank account, and the interest from it is used to buy the external materials needed to extend the same facilities to new families entering the village, thereby ensuing 100% inclusion at all times, regardless of whether Gram Vikas is still present in the village. Although we believe fully in the necessity of villagers paying for much of the work, we also believe that basic infrastructure like water and sanitation has a social value, the recognition that access to water and sanitary facilities is a basic human right.

Through our barefoot engineers program and our decades of work training masons through the biogas and ITDP programs, we have local technicians available to build the facilities. We recruit additional members of the village to train in other trades such as plumbing, wiring, bar-bending, and stone dressing; this provides the necessary capacity within the villages to maintain the system, and it generates additional income. With the help of these new tradesmen, the village gets a water collection unit and water distribution system, and each household gets a toilet, a washroom, and running water piped into the house for the family's use. The toilets and bathrooms with running water have two leach or soak pits per toilet. Once the first pit fills, the family turns the waste over into the second pit. Households plant bananas or papaya near these leach pits to absorb excess water, reducing any need to empty them. The solid waste in the leach pit decomposes safely in the time it takes for the second pit to fill, and can then be safely removed and used as a fertilizer.

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housing, Gram Vikas' role was to help villagers access loans from the Housing Development Finance Corporation, a private housing bank, and to act as guarantor of those loans, while local masons assist in the construction.

The experiences of Gram Vikas in development over the two decades leading up to the RHEP made us believe that people recognize their power and believe in their abilities when they reach a threshold quality of life. With the water and sanitation intervention, many new ways emerged for people to take control of their lives. By 2005 we were working with 400 villages. Most of these villages consist only of *adivasi* and *dalit* residents, really the poorest of the poor, which makes their success all the more remarkable. In none of these villages has the system collapsed, and Gram Vikas never had to pay for any maintenance. Given the relative success of this model in our effort to improve the quality of life for *adivasis* and other excluded classes of people, RHEP began to drive the organization in a more focused direction by the turn of the millennium.

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED HABITAT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM (2001 TO THE PRESENT)

The village organizations developed in the communities where Gram Vikas works have transformed them, and created a network of communities empowered to pursue greater improvements and begin to challenge the barriers to further progress. As of 31 March 2009, over 48,000 families in 698 villages have recognized their collective strength, playing an influential role not only in their own villages, but also in the *panchayats* of which they play a part. The unity in the villages helps community members take stronger political stances, particularly in the area of local self-governance. In recent elections to the *panchayati raj*, the lowest rung of elected people at the village level for a cluster of villages, many of these villagers made informed and considered choices for their representatives. They have begun to access government funding and resources from financial institutions for other development activities such as community halls, roads, and the development of ponds where they can farm fish. Together, these communities have also worked towards effective functioning of government-run schools and health services.

As the twentieth century came to a close, Gram Vikas sought to consolidate its efforts that had facilitated these positive and transformative pursuits, refocusing our many programs toward a single set of goals and reorganizing our group to ensure we could more effectively execute all our projects. Seeing what empowered and organized communities could accomplish, Gram Vikas began to take steps to replicate the RHEP model. First we enhanced the program with additional, sustainable, community development projects that villages could undertake, and then we rolled it in together with the ITDP program. An integrated habitat development program, known now as the Movement and Action Network for the Transformation of Rural Areas (MANTRA), resulted from this reorganization.

MANTRA evolved as the participatory, equitable and replicable approach of RHEP combined with the lessons learned from ITDP, as well as the experiences of

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staff and the organization working with rural communities in Orissa for more than twenty-five years. The key values of MANTRA are 100% inclusion, social and gender equity, environmental sustainability, and cost sharing: elements of the model that had worked so well while in development under the RHEP. Sanitation infrastructure and the supply of drinking water all through the year to all houses would remain the entry and core rallying element to bring people together, cutting through barriers of patriarchal systems, caste, politics, and economic differences. With MANTRA, Gram Vikas has given rise to an integrated habitat development program with a holistic approach based on villagers' needs, but retaining a replicable method to ensure that the program would continue to expand.

Existing projects were rolled into MANTRA's new model for village intervention, and began to work on every side and angle of village development. Villages could work within any of the new program areas for their village's improvement based on their community's particular needs. Gram Vikas administers these projects under the following four area headings: enabling infrastructure, livelihoods and food security, education and health, and self-governing people's institutions. Each program fundamentally deals with the administration and development of the village's resources, through developing existing lands and forests, teaching people to read well enough to participate in local government, finding new income-generating endeavors for village inhabitants, and ensuring that a formerly marginalized and excluded population takes its place in the society at large and participates. Village dwellers are beginning to claim what the government promises them, and actually begin to make changes in a largely corrupt and ineffective government bureaucracy that has failed to provide the people with what they need.

REACHING A CRITICAL MASS TO BRING ABOUT NATIONAL CHANGE

As rural residents begin projects to provide themselves with the most basic services like health, education, and power, they must take the last crucial step in asserting themselves. The 73rd amendment to the Indian constitution speaks of precisely this: allowing the people to have real powers to enable them to determine their development processes. I believe that without significant improvements in the lives of the poor and marginalized, all talk of self-governance is mere wishful thinking. The people must have dignity and pride in themselves, provided only through the presence of a basic quality of life, before they begin to assert their rights on larger issues such as property and injustice.

Gram Vikas's millennium development goal—a critical mass of villages to pressure the government—reflects this philosophy. To prove the feasibility of models and to demonstrate its impact, Gram Vikas would have to work with around 100,000 families consisting of around 500,000 people in Orissa by 2011. This would be approximately 1% to 1.25% of the projected total population of Orissa at that time. If these villagers have the means to become aware of their rights and gain the knowledge and confidence to lobby local government and effect change, as well as demand beneficial policies, then the tribals, the dalits, the small farmers

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and fisher-people, the landless, and the women will all achieve a better quality of life.

The families of these people, bound in clusters, will form the critical mass that can influence development processes through a people's movement. This will be a movement with political overtones, which aims to create an enabling environment for a politically assertive community; in this movement people can assert themselves in the *panchayati raj* and hold positions from which they can influence and thus steer the larger policy framework in development. Gradually increasing in confidence, villagers will influence the systems of management and democratic governance of these institutions from the ground up.

Gram Vikas acts not only to spread these tools of empowerment, either on its own or in partnership with others, but to acquire a position within Orissa where it too can bargain with the government. The issue of achieving a critical mass becomes important here. When the government fails to deliver the goods, NGDOs must step in, utilizing their unique position of understanding the challenges facing target groups. The government has stood in the way of many programs for income generation among the poor, yet is noticeably absent when it comes to providing basic services. Gram Vikas must achieve a strong bargaining position vis-a-vis the government on behalf of the communities it works with. The work that we do demands a conducive policy environment that, at the very least, does not impede growth and development.

Gram Vikas is making progress towards these goals—towards creating a critical mass of people who have a stake in their development as well as the wherewithal to demand that to which they have a right. This rights-based approach has begun to make headway, and communities have forced governments, political organs, and private-sector enterprises to react to their demands. Particularly in the livelihoods and infrastructure sectors, government finances have become increasingly available to communities through self-managed mechanisms. With continued baseline development, and the stronger administrative and self-governing activities among villages that Gram Vikas has helped to create, we may soon see a groundswell of change. No longer do we have to engage new communities to adopt the values guiding the MANTRA project, as they invite us instead. Ironically, government apathy has created the space in which such a large network of villages, each responding creatively to difficult situations, can develop. This critical mass of formerly marginalized peoples will have an impact on government for many years to come, with formerly excluded and marginalized people at the vanguard of those who have taken responsibility for their own development.

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