

Adarsh Gram Yojana: Ensuring Success

Prime Minister Modi offered India a strategically important opportunity to promote inclusive development with Sansad Adrash Gram Yojana (SAGY). Thus far, this opportunity to fulfill Mahatma Gandhi's dream of achieving gram swaraj has had an inauspicious start. Only a few hundred MPs have selected gram panchayats to be developed as model villages. Mamata Banerjee has directed Trinmul Congress party MPs not to participate. Even MPs belonging to BJP have been slow in selecting villages. Deliberate attempts to spread misinformation about SAGY have created misunderstandings. Rahul Gandhi charged that no special funds were allocated for SAGY, and that priorities were decided by government officials and MPs. In fact, funding for implementation is available from myriads of government schemes and MPs' local area development. The program's clear intention is to develop from the bottom up by finding out what villagers want. Engaging and mobilizing citizens is the key for success.

Critics who have questioned the fairness of selecting only some communities, to be developed as models, may need reminding of how difficult it's been to create even one model village in India. Prime Minister Nehru declared Adarsh Nangla in UP as a model village in the 1950s. Foreign dignitaries were shown the village as an example of how well India was succeeding. Adarsh Nangla is in ruins today due to residents' indifference and government apathy. The UPA government adapted the Pradhanmantri Adarsh Gram Yojana (PAGY) program in 2009-10, developing about 1,000 villages in five states the first year. None are considered model villages today. During the 12th Plan, developing 44,000 villages was yet another impossible task.

Only four villages in India today are considered model villages: Raegoan Siddhi in Maharastra, Hiware Bazar in Maharastra, Punsare in Gujarath, and Gangadevipalli in Telangana. The success of the first two can easily be attributed to outstanding leaders. The others are shining examples of people participating in a democratic process to develop their villages.

Good Rural Governance

A small NGO, Sehgal Foundation (SF), has worked in one of the most backward districts of India (Mewat) for 15 years. Though located near modern Gurgaon, the poverty level of Mewat's 431 villages is greater than 80 percent. India's welfare programs have failed miserably to reach Mewat. SF's "Integrated Sustainable Village Development" model targets grassroots actions in water management, agriculture development, and rural governance with a multidisciplinary approach to make programs sustainable,

replicable, and scalable. Operating with the understanding that ending poverty is a matter of human rights, SF works to mobilize citizens and build active village level institutions. SF's "rights-based" approach has reached all villages in Mewat during the last four years.

SF demonstrates that money, although important, is *not* the critical success factor in developing a village. The key factor is changing the mind-set of villagers so they become the stakeholders in shaping their own destiny. SF's "*Good Governance Now!*" (GGN) campaign focuses on developing a critical mass of actively participating villagers to bring about effective governance in their own communities.

Citizens trained in GGN have improved PDS delivery of quality products on a timely basis. Mid Day Meals now meet mandated standards. Education quality is improved and illegally collected fees returned. MGNREGA salaries are paid on time and scams are fewer. The anganwadi center has better service and regular attendance. Roads are cleaner, there is less garbage, and toilets are built for BPL families. Overall, villagers make better use of RTI to ensure government assistance and reduce corruption.

Lessons Learned

Sehgal Foundation transformed one village into a demonstration model village in 2008 to show villagers what was possible. The community of Notki had an engaged and active sarpanch at the time. Improvement included household toilets, paved roads, roadside plantings, solar streetlights, waste water disposal, and a fully equipped and properly managed maternity clinic. An orchard generated funds to ensure the maintenance of the infrastructure by the panchayat. When the successful project was completed, SF shifted its role from direct implementation to support.

When some deterioration in the roads and loss of trees occurred after two years, the newly elected sarpanch expected SF to take care of repairs. The SF team worked with Notki citizens for almost a year before successfully countering this expectation. GGN training helped villagers understand the importance of taking responsibility for their own development and exercising their rights with appropriate government programs and services.

Sehgal Foundation remains an active partner with the people of Notki to continue building the capacity of their village level institutions and supporting citizens in demanding their rights. Meanwhile, five other villages in Mewat surpassed Notki in becoming demonstration villages during the same time period, because they started the development process with *Good Governance Now* training first.

Suggestions for MPs adapting SAGY successfully

Even the best-conceived government projects are difficult to implement. So heed the all-important lesson learned: the absolute necessity to obtain involvement, engagement, and commitment from villagers in the development process from the beginning.

To avoid joining the list of past failures, attention must be paid to the selection and training of people to implement development. Use the concept of the successful Bharath Nava Nirman initiative, and Sehgal Foundation's GGN model, to mobilize and train village youth as volunteers to help citizens avail themselves of various government programs.

Create an assessment index with well-defined development criteria: income generation, water and energy resources, health, education, transportation, environmental issues, and governance. Engage independent evaluators to provide timely feedback. Create an accessible, interactive SAGY portal for MPs to provide monthly development activity updates.

Despite the usual objections and criticisms, NDA government has an opportunity with SAGY to demonstrate how, with national cooperation, we can promote inclusive development and play a part in ushering in Mahatma Gandhi's dream.

Photo captions (3)

Villagers in Mewat agreeing with school development suggestions made by SF

One of 70 check dams SF built with community participation in Mewat to improve sweet water supply for drinking and agricultural purposes

Good Governance Now training in Mewat