

# Good grassroots GOVERNANCE

Volunteers have helped villagers in Haryana's Nuh district to have better access to government schemes. The initiative is worth replicating in other parts of the country

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**T**he success of a democracy is dependent on informed and active citizens. Over the years, a lot of emphasis has been laid on promoting citizen participation in local governance. Many platforms have been created by the government and civil society organisations to include voices of the people in public policy decisions. As a result, the past decade has witnessed substantial growth in scholarly work about citizen participation and on boosting the interest in active participation in the governance process.

The term 'citizen participation' has gained popularity in development theory and become a strong and effective instrument for bringing about national prosperity. Citizen participation refers to a process of engaging people in local governance to improve the accountability and ability of local authorities to solve problems, create more inclusive and cohesive communities, and orient government programmes to better address community needs. The origin of this trend can be traced to ancient Greece and colonial New England and

was institutionalised in the mid-1960s with president Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programme.

Rural development theory is based on the concept of citizen participation. A large number of people in the world live in rural environments, and their participation in the governance process is crucial. Researchers have highlighted the role of citizen participation in rural development, and attested that without citizen participation there is no accountability, no development, and no programme.

## Good Governance Now! A model for citizen participation

Sushasan Abhi (Good Governance Now!) is an innovative initiative in Haryana's Nuh district that engages citizens in the process of rural development. The model has been working since 2008 with an objective to make people aware about their constitutional rights and entitlements and promote transparent and accountable local public institutions that are capable of delivering social goods and services to its beneficiaries. Keeping the core goal of empowering rural people, the model generates awareness on the legal and constitutional rights of citizens and on accountability mechanisms such as grievance redressal and the Right to Information (RTI).

The model uses the methodology of "learning by doing" in order to encourage villagers to actively participate in monitoring the delivery of public services and to transform the region into a "good governance district".

The model works with trainees selected from the villages who are known as sushasan champions (good governance volunteers). The volunteers are trained in village leadership schools (VLS) and in block leadership schools (BLS) where experts discuss the rights, entitlements, and grievance redressal methods. The volunteers are trained to monitor the functioning of the local public institutions and become change agents at the village level. Organising community meeting is another component of the programme where these



champions share the gained knowledge with the community people.

Villagers also access information and necessary guidance through the citizen information and support centre (CISC), a toll-free helpline. The CISC is a resource centre where villagers receive forms, brochures and individualised assistance. The initiative makes the people capable of placing their views before the government functionaries and using the Right to Information (RTI) and other grievance redressal methods to address the issues like poor implementation of the government related programmes at village level. An estimated 5,382 sushasan champions are working in 403 villages across five blocks in the district of Nuh.

No fixed criterion is followed in the

selection of trainees. However, preferences are given for active, energetic people and the inclusion of women representatives, ideally 50 percent participation, is ensured.

#### Driving change

The champions share their knowledge with fellow villagers to generate awareness and provide hand-holding support to villagers to fight for their rights and entitlements. These champions monitor the functioning of government welfare schemes such as public distribution system (PDS), integrated child development services (ICDS), mid-day meal (MDM), and other related schemes. Over the last eight years, changes have come about in the lives of rural people, such as making

defunct institutions functional, improving the quality of deliverables, and identifying eligible beneficiaries for various government programmes.

A survey undertaken during 2015 revealed that, on an average, a sushasan champion attends six training programmes about the awareness of existing schemes. Results show that 90 percent knew about ICDS, 100 percent know about the MDM programme, and 98.6 percent know about the targeted PDS.

Comparing data from 2012 and 2015 established that the awareness level of villagers about the existence of anganwadi centres increased by 38.3 percent, and more than 50 percent of the anganwadi centres were regularly opened. Villagers in the surveyed villages reported that the efforts of sushasan champions have made anganwadi workers more responsible in their work. During 2015, more than two dozen anganwadi centres improved their delivery systems, and about 2,290 beneficiaries received their eligible benefits. Similarly, 46 ration depots were functioning well after the villagers collaborated with volunteers, benefiting 8,203 citizens. The quality of food served in mid-day meals in schools has also improved. Efforts by these champions have also led to the inclusion of 535 eligible people under the government's pension scheme.

To further improve the delivery system, sushasan champions informed fellow villagers about RTI and other grievance redressal mechanisms. This has resulted in benefits such as eligible beneficiaries getting entitlement amounts, regular distribution of ration, and others. In the past year, 980 grievances were addressed. RTI was used in 188 cases and the remaining were addressed through other methods such as written applications and verbal complaints. Out of 792 complaints filed, 249 responses were received during the year. Many have said that they have received their entitlements.

Sushasan champions are able to speak before the gram panchayat (village councils) and bring about change in rural governance. "The structured





orientation programme about the welfare programmes helps them to lead village development by improving the functioning of government programme,” said Vikas Jha, director, governance and policy advocacy, Sehgal Foundation.

In the panchayat elections of 2015, 205 sushasan champions, including 40 percent women, were elected across all three tiers: gram panchayat, block samiti, and zila parishad (district council). A survey undertaken during 2015-16 by Sehgal Foundation showed that 27.5 percent and 4.7 percent of sushasan champions held positions in village level institutions, i.e., school management committee (SMC) and village health sanitation and nutrition committee (VHSNC). In their new capacities, they are trying to improve the functioning of key government programmes.

#### Case study 1: Sushasan champion helps villager get pension

Bharto, 61, from Mundaka village was helped by a sushasan champion to avail her pension. Her husband works as a gardener in a private company and earns a monthly salary of ₹2,500. Bharto says, “Ladka to apna kamaata hai aur apna khata hai [my son earns and spends as per his will]. However, I have to take care of our [her husband’s and hers] needs and save something to buy gifts for my daughters who visit us.”

Although Bharto was eligible for

an old-age pension, she never applied, thinking the process was long and cumbersome. Like others, she thought she had to depend heavily on the sarpanch to get her documents processed and wait for years to get her entitlement. “The sushasan champion made the work easy for me. He asked me to get a copy of the ration card and ID proof along with other necessary documents,” she says.

Bharto got the form stamped by the sarpanch and went directly to the block development officer to get her pension. Now she receives her pension regularly and is happy with the additional source of income.

#### Case study 2: Unlocking the locked stock

Sangeeta, along with the other residents of village Udaka, was upset with

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the headmaster of the primary government school who often arrived late and was reluctant to distribute uniforms and other stationary items to the underprivileged students.

Despite several reminders from villagers, the headmaster did not distribute the uniforms. She instead locked up the stock in a school room. The school management committee wanted that school uniforms be distributed to the eligible students, but the headmaster did not hand over the key.

In December 2012, Sangeeta filed an RTI query against the headmaster. Within a week of her complaint, government officials arrived at the school to investigate.

The room was unlocked and uniforms, along with shoes and other stationery items, were distributed to the students. The headmaster was suspended in January 2013. Since then, there is timely and regular distribution of the stationery items.

Yashwanti of Udaka village says, “Ab to school ke baaki teachers bhi darte hai gaonvalo se. Kahin koi fir shikayat na laga de.” [Now other teachers are cautious as the villagers might file a complaint.]

Over the years, Good Governance Now! has received a positive response from villagers, civil society organisations, and the people interested in these issues. Running the programme in Nuh was the beginning of a significant change in the rural landscape.

A replication of the model is needed in other rural districts where poverty is a result of poor implementation of government schemes. Maintaining the spirit of work among the champions and ensuring ongoing citizen participation is a must in the process. Efforts are needed to identify the most energetic and dynamic people to make the programme even more successful. More inclusive and strengthened practices in participation are the most important tools to achieve the objective of good rural governance. ■

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