COVID RESPONSE
VIDEO VOLUNTEERS

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE
Alternatives

Overview

Video Volunteers mission is to empower local communities with a voice. It has created a model that is anchored in citizen and media journalism, with a network of community correspondents, across 178 districts of India. It has identified and trained people who produce content on different rights violations of government programmes.

It is a grievance redressal model that inevitably empowers the producers of these videos, as they become the reporters who are the representative of their villages. The most significant aspect is the fact that it uses the power of media to amplify the stories that are told and thereon to seek resolution of issues highlighted.

Given that all their correspondents were homebound they created a work from home format. This required their citizen journalists to create content about their villages and distribute it through WhatsApp group. They created 150 such WhatsApp action groups. They also encouraged the correspondents to include the local level government functionaries in these groups. This alternative communication network was extremely useful and it created much needed action at the village level. The functionaries were more responsive when approached in this manner, their barriers were low, the absence of any formality lent the whole resolution process more ease than before.

However, resolutions on issues related to local governance dropped as most government officials refused to address any other issue apart from the ones related to Covid. Pre-covid data shows that their correspondents were able to solve over 600 issues annually which has now fallen to around 150.

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These times also made clear the digital divide. As more and more trainings and internal capacity building sessions were shifted on-line, they realized how few people truly had access to internet from their own homes. At the same time digital access had developed a strong bond between team members and people felt much closer to the organisation, with frequent online trainings and meetings. Towards the later months it became obvious that most team members also needed in-person contact and they had to organise live trainings with several groups of their correspondents.

LONG TERM SHIFTS
Data leading the way for local action

A Covid preparedness survey was conducted in partnership with MIT Gov Lab across 30 local villages. The idea was to juxtapose individual findings in the context of the overall data that emerged from the network.

A clear insight was the lack of tangible investment into the public health system, well into nine months after the first surge. This was to help individual correspondents understand the need gaps and issues that (s)he could address in their own local communities.

They are trying to create a programme for a small group of correspondents that would work at the grassroots, using village, block and district level data to bring alive a concept of Community Health Action Teams. Data collected at the grassroots level will then be taken to the concerned officials to seek resolution that could impact largely infrastructural needs of the public health system.

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"Why are you leaving when the government says they will provide you food and shelter?"

"There is no facility provided by the government"

Conclusion

At the back of the last year's experience, Video Volunteers is now actively engaging in research on how digital citizenship can possibly change the ways local groups are coming together, taking ownership and addressing local issues.

It is trying to identify and understand segments that are more active and why. It spent a large part of the last year focussing on the internal organisation. There were challenges of funding that got diverted to direct covid action. Video Volunteers spent most of its time attempting to adapt their existing strategies for the future.

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