Mass mobilization of youth volunteers to end open defecation among tribal communities
Ernakulam District, Kerala

Strengthening Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan and National Service Scheme
ABOUT THE PROJECT

In partnership with Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India, United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the project ‘Strengthening Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS) and National Service Scheme (NSS)’ aims to provide catalytic support to the Youth Volunteer Schemes in the country and facilitate greater youth participation and voice in peace and sustainable development programmes. The project has been initiated to promote innovation in volunteerism among youth in India and strengthen existing volunteering infrastructure, particularly NYKS and NSS. A total of 29 UNV District Youth Coordinators (UNV-DYCs) are deputed in 29 districts, i.e. one district in every state, to work on NYKS and NSS programmes and to strengthen youth volunteerism in line with national and international good practices.

GOOD PRACTICE CONTEXT

The Government of India aims to make the country Open Defecation Free (ODF) by 2019 through its flagship Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM). Responding to the target set by the government, in September 2016, the Chief Minister of Kerala decided to work toward making the state ODF before November 1, 2016. The district administration of all 14 districts in the state were instructed to work on war footing to achieve the target. The district administration of Ernakulam, in consultation with all the Gram Panchayats, prioritized difficult areas that needed urgent attention under ODF. Kuttampuzha Gram Panchayat in Kothamangalam block is one such difficult area. Some of its wards lie in remote, densely forested areas, populated predominantly by scheduled tribes (STs). Using contractors to build toilets in these settlements was not feasible since transporting the building materials through the difficult terrain would mean a huge spike in the construction costs, over and above the per unit cost set by the government for building a toilet. The tribal community also lack resources and knowhow to build the toilets themselves. Due to lack of education and limited connect with the outside world, the tribes continue to adhere to primitive traditional practices, including defecating in the open. Along with constructing the toilets, behaviour change communication initiatives would be required to get the tribal community to actually use the facilities.
STRATEGY

Mass mobilization of youth volunteers to build toilets for tribal communities in hard to reach areas

Awareness generation to trigger behaviour change using innovative methods such as street play and film screening

Skill upgradation training programmes to empower tribal community

In collaboration with the district administration, the Gram Panchayat and the local community leaders of Kuttampuzha, the UNV-DYC in Ernakulam led a ‘100 Volunteers, 100 Toilets’ mission, targeting two of the most difficult to reach tribal settlements in the Gram Panchayat, namely, Vairam and Kunjipara. Twenty five members of the most active youth club in Kuttampuzha, Yuva Arts and Sports Club, volunteered to help construct the toilets. In response to a WhatsApp message posted by the UNV-DYC, 80 to 90 volunteers from other blocks also signed up for the mission.

The mission was implemented in two phases with the twin objective of:

Providing physical labour in the initial stages of the toilet construction (digging pits and transporting material)

Using innovative means to spread awareness on the benefits of using toilet facilities among the community.
PHASE I

On September 24, 2016, the UNV-DYC along with a group of 25 youth volunteers from the most active youth club in the district, Yuva Arts and Sports Club, travelled to Variyam, one of the remotest tribal settlements, nestled in thick forest area, with around 40 households. The team carried tools and raw food material from the mainland. The response of the Muthuvan tribal community in Variyam was discouraging; the people were disinterested in the concept of toilets, the lack of water compounding their indifference. The Gram Panchayat member and the volunteer team led by the UNV-DYC took the help of the elected tribal leader as well as the traditional chief. The community was mobilized to attend the inaugural meeting where the NYK team shared information on the kind of diseases that can arise due to open defecation and how these can spread. Next, the volunteer team organized itself into groups of two and three and dug pits for the toilets over three days. The building materials were transported to the site by jeep. Around 37 pits were dug entirely by the youth volunteers without any help from the tribals, while living in difficult and unfamiliar living conditions, without electricity, piped water supply, sanitation facilities and phone connectivity. Once the pits were dug, the completion of the construction work was allocated to the Gram Panchayat member. The stone foundations and superstructures were later put in place by external masons.

PHASE II

On October 1, 2016, around 80-90 youth volunteers from 15 youth clubs across the district, including Yuva club, accompanied the UNV-DYC to Kunjipara village. Once again, the team carried their own tools and raw food. The team's brief in Kunjipara was different from that in Variyam. The pits were already dug here, but the place lacked building materials like cement, sand, rocks etc. The youth volunteers, including 20 females, quarried sand and rocks from the riverbank, manually carried the material on their heads and loaded them into jeeps for transportation to around 80 sites in the village. A group of volunteers distributed leaflets produced by the State Government’s Suchitwa Mission (Total Sanitation Campaign) to all 97 households in the area and explained the benefits of using toilets to the largely illiterate community. The youth volunteers also performed a street play/skit to educate the tribal community on the importance of using toilets and not defecating in the open. Following the play, a short informational film was screened on the topic. The community in Kunjipara, mostly the Ulladan ST, was responsive and worked along with the youth volunteers.

INNOVATION

The UNV-DYC took a risk, and without any financial support and scope for advance planning, took on the challenge of mass mobilizing youth volunteers to spend a few days in a difficult area working for tribal communities entrenched in age-old practices. The project exemplifies the true spirit of volunteerism, since the work involved hard manual labour and staying in challenging conditions without any benefits.
IMPACT AND ROLE OF YOUTH VOLUNTEERING

The 100 volunteers, 100 toilets mission’ kickstarted the ODF campaign in two of the most difficult tribal settlements in Ernakulam district within the space of two weeks. As of date, all 100 toilets have been constructed in Varyiam and Kunjipara as per target. The mission is an illustrative example of the potential of youth volunteerism. According to the Tribal Extension Officer, Kothamangalam Block, the youth “also demonstrated the power of collective action to the tribal communities.” Inspired by the activities in the two tribal colonies, other tribal settlements also started building/requesting the administration for toilets. The youth volunteers also employed innovative ways of creating awareness on the benefits of using toilets to the community. The mission also serves as an example of productive coordination between the district administration, Gram Panchayat, Suchitwa Mission, Tribal Department, and Forest Department, catalyzed by the spirit of volunteerism.

The Volunteers

The youth volunteers, including college students, community workers and daily wagers, were ready to sign up on a mission to benefit others, despite having to compromise on their education/wages while on mission. Living with tribes in deep forests in extremely challenging and unfamiliar conditions and doing manual labour was over and beyond the routine volunteer activities of these youth.

UNV-DYC, Ernakulam
NYK helps us with funds and with monitoring of the programmes they allocate us with. Implementing NYK core programmes serves as a motivation for us, while the community feels good that youth clubs are working for them. Our club was able to take on such a massive challenge because of the motivation and guidance provided by the UNV-DYC. The UNV-DYC played a significant role in motivating us and helping us realize our potential to do work for the marginalized communities.

Siby, President, Yuva Arts and Sports Club, Kuttampuzha
WAY AHEAD

Although the toilets have been constructed as planned, the real task remains to ensure that the tribal communities use the toilets. Water supply and increased awareness generation and behaviour change communication are critical to ensure the utilization of the toilets. The beneficiaries view the building of toilets as the beginning of positive change.

The Kuttampuzha Gram Panchayat plans to use NYK youth volunteers for other flagship schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. Thousands of volunteers are ready to be mobilized; catering to their basic needs and acknowledging their efforts would ensure the spirit of volunteerism sustains.

We were not expecting the ODF campaign to succeed in the difficult areas. The NYK youth volunteers contributed significantly to the ODF campaign in our Gram Panchayat through the ‘100 volunteers, 100 toilets’ mission. They demonstrated the true meaning of volunteerism. Lack of funds did not hamper their efforts. This was also an example of impactful collaboration. Our Gram Panchayat, the Forest Department and district administration could get on with the task of creating toilets in a remote and densely forested area because of the momentum the youth had created. This is just the beginning, the work is done 80%. The next step is to repair existing toilets and build new ones and ensure water supply in these tribal colonies.

*All Images from Project: Mass mobilization of youth volunteers to end open defecation among tribal communities, India (UNDP 2016)
Strengthening Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan and National Service Scheme is a joint project of

United Nations Volunteers India Office
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
Post Box No. 3059, 55 Lodhi Estate
New Delhi, India. Pin Code - 110 003
Tel: 91 11 46532333.
Fax: 91 11 24627612

Web: www.in.undp.org/unv
Email: info.in@undp.org
Follow us: https://twitter.com/UNV_India
          https://www.facebook.com/unitednationsvolunteersindia/
          https://Instagram.com/UNV_India