

# NATURAL LEADERS' NETWORKS

*In Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh*

The study aims to understand the context for Natural Leaders' work in two states and the feasibility of forming them into a network to accelerate the process of attaining Open Defecation Free status. Data was collected primarily through observations during visits to the villages and discussions with members of the community to understand the role played by Natural Leaders. Interviews with Natural Leaders provided necessary insights into their work as a team, about the network, the challenges and their vision of achieving ODF status across the state and country.

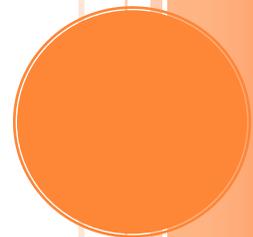
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**CLTS  
Knowledge  
Hub**

Strengthening and broadening  
Community-led Total  
Sanitation at scale



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# Natural Leaders' Networks

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## 1. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

India has the largest number of people defecating in the open. There is an urgent need to understand the various factors that enable Open Defecation (OD) in India, to understand what has worked and who are the key players in bringing about a change in behavior. Community led Total Sanitation/Community Approaches to Sanitation (CLTS/CATS) methods have been showing tremendous progress in villages across Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. The organization responsible for this work is Knowledge Links with expertise in capacity building related to CLTS and sanitation. Through a grant from UNICEF first in Guna, Madhya Pradesh and subsequently in Chhattisgarh, Knowledge Links took on the challenge to demonstrate the successful conversion of a village into an Open Defecation Free village through CLTS approach.<sup>1</sup>

Knowledge Links (KL) was working in Guna block of District Guna, Madhya Pradesh for promoting community led total sanitation (CLTS) from May 2012- Mar 2013. Some 25 villages in Guna achieved ODF status and around 80 natural leaders (NLs) emerged. As a strategy to ensure sustainability of results achieved and also to strengthen local capacity to carry out CLTS in other villages of Guna District, KL along with Art of Living (AOL) facilitated the evolution of a local non-profit organization of NLs. This organization is known as Madad Samiti. The KL's mission of creating strong local organization for spearheading the movement of sanitation in villages of Guna is becoming possible through Madad.

In Chhuria block of Chhattisgarh, UNICEF began a pilot to demonstrate CATS to bring about collective behavior change through Knowledge Links

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which was the technical agency facilitating the process on the ground, from May 2013- Feb 2014. At the time of the pilot in 2013, not a single village across 99 Gram Panchayats (GPs) was found to be open defecation free (ODF). This included 8 GPs that had been awarded Nirmal Gram Puraskar (NGP) during 2006-2011. Around 84% of the total 34,429 households in Chhuria Block were defecating in the open (This included 64% households without toilet and another 20% with defunct toilets). KL was successful in demonstrating creation of 20 ODF villages without any external financial assistance using the CATS/CLTS approach. A guild of trained and committed Natural leaders emerged from the ODF villages through this process.

The concept of Natural Leaders is not one that is new or unique to Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh but is quite common in CLTS methods to drive local ownership. Natural leaders are purposively identified (among those who show the interest and inclination towards ending OD) and provided training (differs in quality and duration) to implement the activities. KL also worked with a similar concept to identify, nurture and train individuals with a strong interest in CLTS and ODF processes. As KL worked on a fixed timeline, a deliberate attempt was made in Guna, Madhya Pradesh to form the NLs into a network so that they could continue to work on their own. Similar attempts are underway in Chhattisgarh.

The study aims to understand the functioning of the NL networks in these two states and to determine the feasibility of forming such networks for scaling up CLTS to achieve ODF villages. The study includes fieldwork in both the states for 6 days each, data collected through interviews with NLs and village members, and through reports compiled/written by KL.

## 2. WHAT WORKED IN MADHYA PRADESH?

Knowledge Links did not have prior experience in demonstrating how to achieve ODF villages but were limited to providing training on how to effectively conduct CLTS triggering for behavior change. However, they took on the challenge for achieving ODF as the opportunity arose. UNICEF chose Guna, as they believed that if it can happen there, it could happen anywhere else. As KL began to settle down in Guna to identify places for the team to live and for an office, they were informed that Sirsi was a village that had an old farmhouse with a toilet (could not find accommodation with toilet anywhere) and the team began living and functioning from Sirsi. Villages around Sirsi were first studied and triggering was conducted in a few of

them. Devgarh and Somer were the first villages to become ODF in a span of 2-3 months with the team gaining valuable lessons.

Firstly, the ethnic composition in Devgarh and Somer villages was the key. Pateliya community, a tribal community was the dominant group in these villages. There were no households with a toilet and none of them had previously heard or been asked to construct a toilet, from the government side or otherwise. The Patelias lived in small habitations and were spread across several villages around Sirsi and across Guna. They were a homogenous group who placed a lot of trust and obedience to the village leaders. As all of these characteristics are ideal for CLTS, KL decided to work in the Pateliya villages. Several Pateliya NLS also emerged from these villages and began working alongside KL team to trigger, train and follow-up.



*Credit: All photographs used courtesy of the author.*

As the Patelias were tribal and poor, their decision to become ODF had a tremendous impact on the upper class and affluent communities that lived close to the Pateliya villages. The upper class households began feeling humiliated that the poor, tribal communities were protecting their women's dignity and ensuring their good health while they were still defecating in the open, despite having the economic capacity to build the toilet. They began

approaching the NLs to start work in their villages (triggering and other steps) and to help make their village ODF.

Secondly, the lack of government presence in the villages ensured community ownership and collective action to stop OD while constructing and using low-cost toilets in a short period. As there was no pressure of financial incentives from the government, the communities did not have to wait for release of funds to start the processes and were free to design their toilets (mainly super structure) based on their economic means. The local leadership of Sarpanch and Patels (leaders at a habitation level) played a strong role in ensuring all households within a community stopped OD. The village as a whole decided to levy fines on those that were practicing OD despite the decision to stop it and to provide rewards for those that would stop others from doing so. Meetings were organized once a week to discuss the activities and progress. The Sarpanch of some villages, as per the need, also provided material and other support.

Thirdly, the Natural Leaders that emerged from ODF villages showed a strong interest in helping other villages become ODF. They were interested in learning from the KL team the triggering tools and to be skilled in constructing toilets. Women and men emerged and started working in other villages, training them on toilet construction and following up with the communities on the progress. A handful of NLs gained enough experience (through assisting and observing KL team in several villages) to trigger on their own. A trained local resource emerged with momentum and energy to continue the work, without specific support from KL.

At the time of my visit to Guna, the Madad Samithi had not worked for a few months due to an internal conflict and fraud perpetuated by one of the non-NL members. Due to this reason, I was unable to observe the NLs work in the field and therefore, I am not able to provide direct comments/evidence on their skills and impact on the communities. Most of the information has been gained from talking to the NLs themselves and discussing with the villages that the NL teams worked in.

### 3. WHAT WORKED IN CHHATTISGARH?

Building on the experience gained in Guna, Madhya Pradesh, KL team began working in Chhuria block of Rajnandgaon district of Chhattisgarh. KL team participated in a day-long orientation along with the District and Block officials related to Sanitation, organized by the Chief Executive Officer of the Public Health and Engineering Department. The KL team was informed that

one of the members from the District Team belonged to Chhuria block and lived in that area. He had a good knowledge of that area and helped KL identify villages (small, tribal dominated, with not a lot of prior sanitation work) and clusters for the team to live and work in. The team wanted to live close by so as to build trust among the communities and to gain confidence in their work.

KL team had much more experience and confidence in initiating activities in Chhattisgarh due to the positive experience in Guna. The systems in Chhattisgarh were also in better shape and the villages were better off economically, compared to Madhya Pradesh. NLS from Deogarh and Somer in Guna visited and worked in Chhattisgarh for several months which led to a tremendous impact on the villages in Chhattisgarh. They began to understand how local solutions for ending OD are possible and how farmers, and tribal households were able to achieve this.

The team gained its first breakthrough in Rana Matiya village, with the members being mostly tribal and farmers. There were 12-15 HHs that had toilets, however they were not being used. But after the triggering, it became very difficult to accept OD and made a collective decision to stop OD and construct toilets immediately. Several NLS emerged from this village. Similarly work was done in other small villages and habitations around Rana Matiya to achieve ODF. Around 20 villages became ODF in a span of 8-9 months through the work of KL and NLS that emerged.

Subsequently, the contract for KL ended and the NLS began working with an NGO hired by UNICEF to provide logistical and facilitative support. Here, the NLS were formed into groups to conduct triggering, train and follow-up but the villages were selected by the NGO and the transportation and other details were taken care of by the NGO. The NLS functioned merely as triggering agents and did not have any role in planning and overall administration of the work in Chhuria. The duration of KLs work was very short and fairly recent, therefore not a lot of lessons can be drawn here about the functioning of NL networks, as the network was not yet established. In addition, due to problems with the NGO they were working with, the NLS at the time of my visit had not been working on the field for more than month. Therefore, I didn't have the chance to observe them in action to comment on their skills and impact on the communities.

## 4. FUNCTIONING OF NLS

NLS work in teams of 7-10 members when initiating activities in a village. As only a few members are proficient in facilitating the triggering sessions, this phase has the most number of people. Facilitation is conducted by 2 members, however, the remaining members divide amongst themselves the tasks of communicating and gathering all members at a designated place, collecting materials required for triggering and managing the crowds during the triggering. Subsequently, some members with expertise in construction provide a live demo to the villagers on low-cost toilet construction using local materials. After triggering, the teams are smaller in size in these villages and focus mostly on construction related training/counseling and on (regular and timely) follow-up with the communities to check for any hindrances to complete the tasks.

Another reason for teams to have around 7 members is due to the logistics involved. In both the states, transportation for the NLS is through private vehicles that are hired to pick up NLS from their villages or a designated spot, drop them off to the villages where the work is underway and then drop them off at their villages, at the end of the day. As this was a time-intensive and costly exercise, a team of 6-7 members was assigned to each vehicle and was assigned a number of villages to be made ODF. In addition, some of the 7 members may have to stay back in their village to attend to personal duties, at that time, the remaining members in the team share the workload. As the nature of work for a NLS is flexible, the team members adjust among themselves if some members are not able to attend on some days.

The process of functioning in a village by the NLS is as follows:

- Day 1: Meet the local leaders (Sarpanch, Patel, Anganwadi (government run pre-school) Teacher, other village elders and leaders) and inform them of the purpose of coming to their village. Get their support and commitment for the activities. Get information on a convenient place to hold the triggering session and spread the message in the community
- Day 1 or Day 2: Conduct Triggering session with at least 60% or higher proportion of the village population present. Assess the impact based on community's response and exit the village without discussing or emphasizing ways to end open defecation.

In the villages that show a strong response to triggering and to become ODF, the next steps take place.

- Day 2 or Day 3 (the next day after triggering): Follow-up with village leaders/elders on the impact of triggering, if any discussion is happening around ending open defecation. The NLs wait for two to three days to generate internal discussion on this issue before returning to the village.
- Day 5 or Day 6: Return to the village and have a meeting again with the village members. This time they are asked what they would like to do to stop open defecation. The concept of low-cost toilets to stop open defecation, improve the dignity and quality of life of women and overall health and wellbeing of everyone is introduced, followed by a live demo
- Day 7 onwards: NLs provide technical training to the households that need help and continue to motivate and monitor the activities in the villages to ensure all households have a toilet that is being used. The village may become ODF in a matter of 15 days to 3 months, depending on the size of the village, their level of conviction at the time of triggering and the internal drive by local leaders or natural leaders within the village.

In the villages that do not show a strong response to triggering, the NLs assess the situation by following up with the local leaders and elders the next day. They find out if the issue is related to preference/dependence on government incentives, lack of unity in the villages with members of different communities not able to function together or if the members still feel comfortable defecating in the open as there may be large open spaces around the village. These are strong deterrents to villages becoming ODF and therefore, the NLs are not always successful in ensuring such villages become ODF. They try to provide examples of other villages that have changed, their roads and environment being much cleaner, etc. The NLs work with such communities for around 2 months but if no change, they inform the communities they will be back after 3 months (to resolve issues such as waiting for government incentives, etc.) to assess the situation in the village.

As the work of NLs began to show impact in villages with a supportive environment for CLTS, a network of NLs was formed to sustain this momentum. The next section discusses this network and the implications for scaling up efforts along these lines.

#### **4.1 Madad Jan Kalyan Samiti- A registered Society of NLs**

As mentioned in the background to the study, Madad Samithi is a registered society of Natural Leaders, which came into being on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2012. It was possible through support from Art of Living organization that was functioning at the time in Guna, Madhya Pradesh. Art of Living is a

worldwide-established organization that spreads the message on yoga and meditation for better health. As sanitation and health could go hand-in hand and as members of AOL could help NLs function as a society (as they were established and seasoned in running an organization), the Samithi had members from AOL also. Madad consisted of 9 NLs, 1 Team Manager and 1 Chairperson, a total of 11 members. The Team Manager and Chairperson were from AOL. As most of the NLs were illiterate and could not handle the paperwork required of a registered society, especially those related to grant proposals and others, the AOL member was a likely solution for the position of Team Manager and to take care of the documentation.

Madad Samithi involved teams of 6 members (4 Trained NLs, and 2 To-be-trained NLs). The teams comprised of a mix of ethnicities and capacities as they may work diverse communities, and also had a mix of men and women NLs. The Samithi was provided a target of achieving 10 ODF villages in 4 months. The teams triggering 50-60 villages and monitored the progress to select 10 villages that showed the most promise to achieve ODF status in the given time frame. The teams would then immerse themselves into these villages to achieve the targets.



*Credit: All photographs used courtesy of the author.*

As part of their work in the Samithi, NLs were paid Rs. 200/- per day (if they worked as a agricultural laborer in the fields they would earn Rs. 250/- per day, to put it in perspective). The work was flexible and they were paid for the days worked as an NL, were free to pursue household work and

weddings, etc., with the understanding that

other NLs would fill in for them. Food costs were also borne by the NLs themselves leading to a total of Rs. 150/- per day to each NL. Payment was supposed to be monthly but there were times when the NLs were not paid for three months. The NLs did not mind as they were doing it as a service, however, as they were responsible for their families, they wanted adequate and timely monetary incentives.

## 4.2 Chhattisgarh Experience: Evolution of the need for a Network

In Chhattisgarh, after the exit of KL team, the NLs began working with an NGO contracted by UNICEF to provide transportation, daily incentives for the NLs and support the teams with timely follow-up to achieve ODF status. Transportation is only possible through private cars that can accommodate an entire team (7 members), to drop them off at various villages where activities are taking place and to drop them back to their villages, as buses could not be relied upon. NLs were paid an incentive of Rs. 200/- per day of work.

The NLs were severely disappointed with the NGO as they felt they ‘were treated like servants’, according to Sonsai, NL from Ranamatiya. The car was not sent according to the schedule and at regular times. The villages were not selected based on need but purely based on the convenience of the NGO members. The activities were hampered due to this dependence on vehicles that were not regular. The NLs are primarily farmers and as mentioned earlier, belong to nuclear families. This makes it crucial to carefully plan their day’s activities. If they end up waiting for the cars to pick them up, they end up losing work in the fields as well. As time is very precious, they were quite disheartened by the uncertainty brought about by the NGO.

Another important reason for their dissatisfaction with the NGO was the lack of timely follow-up. The NLs felt insulted and vulnerable as they provide their names and that of their villages when they trigger and follow up in other villages. If timely follow-up does not occur, the villages question them when they see them later causing them to lose face for not completing the tasks as planned. During this time, a cross learning exercise with members of the NL Network (Madad Samiti) was arranged by the KL team. The Chhattisgarh NLs began thinking about forming a network to have an identity, to ensure autonomy in deciding the best way to allocate resources and ensure the maximum villages are made ODF.

# 5. NATURAL LEADERS NETWORKS

## 5.1 Purpose and advantage of a NL network

The NLs in both the states believed that it was their duty to help communities eliminate OD and improve their living environments. In order to achieve maximum coverage and impact, teamwork was seen as an integral component. It was also important to work continuously so their

energies were recharged, could gain varied experiences and could think on their feet.

NLs needed a network to gain identity, to be able to gather funds and have greater control in the selection of villages, allocation of resources and effective management of costs. Continuity of activities within villages required a local body that could visit the various villages, monitor and support the communities. The communities seemed to respond well to people from their own communities and localities that stopped OD on their own and improved their living conditions. As change in behavior requires consistent follow-up and support from a dedicated team of individuals, the NL network is one such platform that can aid and support activities around sanitation.

## **5.2 Challenges faced by NLs**

When CLTS tools did not generate enough momentum within the villages to stop open defecation, the Natural Leaders did not have additional tools in their disposal or did not have support from the government to come up with suitable solutions for the village at hand. As the selection of villages was carefully done to show proof of concept by KL (due to short contract periods), the low hanging fruit were picked first. In other words, the villages that met the criteria for CLTS were successfully converted to ODF villages by NL teams. But when faced with very large villages with diverse communities dependent on subsidies or show a strong preference for OD despite months of follow-up and counseling, the NLs were helpless and were to wait for the communities to decide on their own to construct and use toilets. Thus, when CLTS is not sufficient, NLs must be trained and supported with other strategies for bringing about an impact.

## **5.3 Challenges of Madad Samithi**

After the exit of the KL team sometime in February-March 2013, Madad was on their own in terms of CLTS and ODF work as well as guidance to run the organization. As the members were illiterate and inexperienced in managing an organization, the Samithi faced some challenges that are important lessons for similar networks across the country and elsewhere.

### ***5.3.1 Accountability***

This is a major issue in the formation of a NL Network. For the Samithi's first grant proposal, KL team helped prepare the documentation and UNICEF provided the grant to the Samithi to achieve ODF in 10 villages. With the NLs being illiterate, the Team Manager mostly did the documentation. Over time, it led to the complete alienation of the NLs and

fraudulent paperwork by the Team Manager, as there were no checks and balances kept in place. No authority or official that provided immediate grievance redress and no specific norms to dissuade such practices.

The Team Manager forged the signatures of the NLs and applied for a second grant from the UNICEF with a grossly exaggerated salary for himself. This led to some unrest and the NLs soon found out that this second grant was received through fraudulent means. The bank account was then closed and both the UNICEF and KL team was informed of the same. The Team Manager however, has locked away all the paper work and documentation of the Madad Samiti making it difficult for the NLs to present their case to the Officiating Authority of Registered Societies in Gwalior, five hours away from Guna.

### *5.3.2 Monitoring and Certification of ODF status*

During my visit to both the states, I did not have an opportunity to interact with the UNICEF officials and therefore, did not get a sense of their role in monitoring or evaluating the ODF status of the villages as part of their grant requirements. This is an important area of enquiry as sufficient measures must be in place to eliminate any self-reporting that may occur. Madad is dependent on the grant funds to sustain its activities and due to the target based approach (as outlined below), the tendency to self-report may be observed.

### *5.3.3 Target Based Approach*

Another major issue is that of *setting a target that is too short or impractical*. ODF takes longer in some villages and failure to meet the target leads to stopping of funds or proposal not being accepted for the next project. Target based approach to CLTS dilutes the core principles and does not provide the NLs the necessary space to decide their activities.

## 6. FUTURE OF NATURAL LEADERS NETWORK

As observed in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, most villages are still untouched by the subsidy culture for toilets as is common in other states. The communities respond well to CLTS and are able to become ODF through repeated counseling and follow-up by the NLs. However, with the increased incentive under Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan or the current Swacch Bharat

Abhiyan, the dependence on incentive is likely to increase. In this situation, it is not clear how the NLs will function. In other states such as Andhra Pradesh, the self help groups (SHGs) and their federations have been made responsible for disbursing the government incentives to households that have completed construction and are using their toilets.

In Chhattisgarh, based on the instructions issued under National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), the state administration is exploring ways to involve self-help group members who are essentially all women in this fight against open defecation. These women are to be trained by the NLs that are working currently and KL have been given a second contract with UNICEF for 9 months to create a team of CLTS facilitators across three districts of Rajnandgaon, Ambikapur and Dantewada with focus on Rajnandgaon. In this situation, it is not clear what the role of NLs will be over time as SHGs will be mainly responsible for ODF related activities. However, as was observed in both the states, households respond to men and women and since it is such a formidable task, the NL network will be very useful in training, assisting and ensuring the momentum is sustained.

Additional strategies such as Enterprise Models through SHGs or NL Networks or both where applicable may need to be explored. Enterprise Models is a phenomenon where triggering, technical training and financing for becoming ODF are all taking place through the same body, which could be either the SHG federation at the village level or through a NL network that's established at the district level. This needs to be explored further and custom solutions may be adopted.

In conclusion, NL networks are an important resource and asset to have in place. The experience, motivation and commitment among the NLs must be preserved and invested in to assist any scale-up efforts to be undertaken by the district and state. However, the roles and responsibilities and their influence needs to be expanded after the most convenient (low hanging fruit) villages have been converted to ODF. The changing environment due to subsidies and with new players coming into the fray, NL networks functioning must be imagined creatively.