

Action Research Villages Campaign

"Of every rupee the government spends, only 15 paise reaches the poor man in villages." - Rajiv Gandhi

The solution to this problem lies in spreading awareness of Right to Information (RTI) in villages so that the villagers themselves can monitor the flow of this money instead of relying upon a corrupt, failed system. In response, Action Research Villages (ARV) has been a year long experimental campaign in Uttar Pradesh to promote the extensive use of RTI and study the impact of using RTI on the following:

1. The day to day life of the villagers .
2. Overall village conditions.
3. The existing system of governance.

Throughout the work, another focus was replicability or the question: **Can this experiment be replicated elsewhere if successful?**

Jointly launched in December 2006 by Poorest Area Civil Society Project (PACS) partners ABSS from Dehat and Delhi based RTI activism group Kabir, the campaign was focused on five villages in various districts of state. The following villages were chosen for the experiment, which represent a wide range of different socio-economic and geographical backgrounds:

- Panchampur (Banda District)
- Bharthaul (Chitrkooat District)
- Quila Gadhwa (Allahabad District)
- Taaj Khodai (Behraich District)
- Nai Basti-Nishad Nagar (Behraich District)

The villagers were trained and encouraged to file a minimum of 300 RTI applications on various issues from each village. The experience and outcomes of the campaign have been encouraging not only in the targeted villages but also in the surrounding villages where the word of RTI has spread. In a few cases there has been district wide dispersal of RTI awareness and impacts.

IMPACT of the Action Village Campaign

The outcome of the campaign is a confidence in villager's life and their will to change the system which is full of corrupt and undemocratic practices. Here are some examples:

The Absent Teacher

Mr. Promod Dixit the only appointed school teacher of the Panchampur village school, has never taught for more than two days in a week over the past two years. The rest of the days the school remained closed. He could not have imagined that the villagers would use their right to information as a tool to teach him a lesson and force the administration to take necessary action against him. The families of the children studying in 6th, 7th and 8th Standards asked for information regarding the attendance records, leave records and medical records of the absconding school teacher. Fifteen villagers filed application regarding the same issue, and immediate action was taken. The primary education Officer summoned Mr. Dixit the very next day and asked for an explanation. The officer also appointed a new school teacher for the village school. Since then, an inquiry has been ordered against Mr. Dixit and he has been asked to report to the school regularly.

Missing School Uniforms

Despite several claims of the government, school uniforms of the December 2006-07 session had not been distributed among the students of the Gulrahai Primary School in Allahabad. On December 19, 2006 workers from Kabir and ABSS conducted a meeting with the villagers of

Gulrahai and taught them about the RTI Act. Immediately thereafter, nine parents prepared an RTI application to question the administration about the childrens' missing school dresses. The administration has yet to respond, but on the first week January 2007, less than a month from when the parents filed their applications, the school dresses were distributed to the children.

Similarly. in the Bharthaul Village primary school of Chitrakoot district school dresses were not distributed among the children till December. On December 18, 2006, under the Mere Gaon Ke Sawaal (Questions of my village) Campaign, Kabir and ABSS conducted a meeting with the villagers of Gulrahai and educated them about the RTI Act. The very next day parents of these children submitted an RTI application with the District Education Officer, and within fifteen days, the school dresses were distributed.

Suffering of Forest Dwellers

The most effective and successful example of empowerment comes from the Nai Basti – Nishad Nagar area where people form seven villages in forest area are forced to live a neglected life by Forest Department in the name of forest protection. Authorities have been treating these villagers like criminals and encroachers. However, as a result of the villagers' applications through the RTI Act, the authorities have been forced to reveal that only six charges of forest related crimes have been logged from among the hundreds of villagers. Incidentally, the charges mostly encompass daily activities of these people such as fishing. Similarly. under pressure of questions of the villagers, the local administration have started the work of maintaining a family register which is critical for all the village families who have fighting for legal recognition on paper.

These examples provide a glimpse of the overall impact of an extended use of RTI, but there are innumerable such examples where villagers have used the RTI Act to demand accountability from those who deny them their rights. For the first time these villagers have developed self confidence and have started believing in the power of the common man- the true meaning of democracy. Today even a poorest Dalit residing in these interior villages has started questioning the authorities and is making sure that they face the consequences should they fail to provide answers.

Conclusions from the Action Village Campaign

The overall outcomes of the Action Village Campaign can be summarized as follows.

1. When villagers questioned the authorities about legitimate rights of individuals such as receiving ration cards, certificates for age or caste, voter cards or minimum wage in government work, their grievances were resolved in 100% of their cases.
2. In three quarters of the cases related to schemes such as those related to welfare, old age pensions, scholarships, or homes, the villagers received the intended benefit of these schemes.
3. Absenteeism of teachers and doctors diminished significantly where RTI applications were used.
4. In cases related to land rights and entitlements of land *pattas*, the success rate was nearly 70%.
5. With regard to corruption in different schemes such as the those relating to mid day meals, scholarships and school uniforms, the authorities took RTI applications seriously. In nearly 90 % of the cases, the problem was solved.
6. Corruption related to NREGA scheme such as the refusal of job cards or denial of work, the authorities came under tremendous pressure for inquiries and in 80% cases the grievances were resolved quickly.

Bases on an analysis of the outcomes described in addition to their own experiences, Kabir and ABSS have learned the following and have drawn the following conclusions from the Action Villages Campaign:

1. Situation in the villages and condition of the villagers can be significantly improved by the extensive use of RTI Act by villagers themselves. Problematic practices and systems in the villages can be similarly challenged and improved.
2. Villagers catch up fast and are comparatively much keen to use RTI than people from towns or cities.
3. Illiteracy presents a barrier to the use of the Act. Villagers who are illiterate cannot start using RTI extensively unless they are provided with constant support. An orientation inspires them to use RTI, but they need help in drafting the application in addition to follow up in cases of appeals.
4. Within the due course of time, the literate population of the village can take responsibility of supporting RTI usage in the village.
5. Cast and Creed boundaries did not prevent villagers from joining the campaign.
6. Such an extensive use of RTI can make transform a normal village into a "RTI user model village," but while RTI is important, it is one of many reforms necessary to transform that village into the ideal all-encompassing model village.

For more information or to watch a short film on this campaign please visit <<http://www.kabir.org.in/content/arv.htm>>. A comprehensive report on the campaign is also available and can be requested by emailing ssen@kabir.org.in.