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Verifying open defecation free status: experiences and insights going to scale in India

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Verification is a process to assess the open defecation free (ODF) and hygiene status of a community. Certification is the official recognition of ODF achievement. Verification and certification of village sanitation achievement may take place simultaneously, or may be undertaken apart. They may be conducted by the same agency, or by different agencies. There are a wide variety of practices used in verification and certification in different countries, and often within countries. In this paper we present background of the Government of India's Nirmal Gram Puraskar clean village verification program, our field experiences verifying open defecation free communities, and challenges, opportunities, and recommendations for achieving quality sanitation verification at scale.

The Government of India has been conducting Nirmal Gram Puraskar (NGP) verification since 2004. The NGP is a reward scheme for verifying and recognizing community open defecation free (ODF) achievement in rural India. Through the NGP program, the Government of India may award NGP status to Gram Panchayats (GPs) (village-level government entities), Block Panchayats, or District Panchayats achieving environmentally clean and sanitary environments. The President of India honours leaders of qualifying GPs and local government offices each year in Delhi. Along with national recognition, leaders of NGP villages receive substantial financial rewards.

Nirmal Gram Puraskar verification
The NGP verification process begins when a 15-member NGP team from the Government of India selects verifying agencies at the national level, authorizing these agencies to verify ODF status. From 2004 to 2008, standards and processes for NGP verification remained largely unchanged. Initially NGP application was very strict. A GP in Mandi District, Himachal Pradesh, which had made a great effort, failed to receive NGP because "TOILET" had been painted on the doors of two store-rooms (and this despite the fact the rooms had no toilet pans). Inspectors would look under the fingernails of children in school as an additional crosscheck of village hygiene.

Later, as NGP gained recognition and the number of NGP applicants multiplied exponentially across India into the thousands, verification and certification were contracted out to NGOs. The contracted NGOs in turn subcontracted to secondary NGOs, which in some cases subcontracted yet again to tertiary individuals for a fraction of the original remuneration. There were many complaints that NGP evaluators had taken bribes from the GPs to falsely grant NGP achievement. The result of lax NGP verification practices was unreliable reporting and non-existent sanitation achievement in many GPs; one source described NGP verification as "a joke."

NGP verifying agencies
From 2004 to 2008, NGP verifying agencies were also the recommending agencies. In 2008, the Government launched a policy requiring 10 per cent cross verification of recommended panchayats by a third party. In 2009 the requirement for NGP cross verification by third party became 100 per cent. The verifying agencies that carry out the surveys in GPs are now separated from the recommending agency.

Every verifying agency sends three people (two investigators and one team leader) to each gram panchayat (GP), where they spend 24 hours.

NGP survey format

From 2004 to 2009, the survey format contained four sections - Village Profile, Community Focus Group Discussion, School and Aganwadi (child care centre) Sanitation Facilities, Solid and Liquid Waste Management and General Cleanliness. Since 2010, five sections for NGP surveying have been used by Government of India, including:

- General information about GPs - revenue of villages and habitations, and discussion with panchayat members, teachers, aganwadi members, etc.
- Household survey - if households are less than 500 the verifier has to visit 50 households. If households are more than 500 the verifier visits 100 households for door-to-door latrine verification.
- School and anganwadi survey – the verifying agency documents the number of students, classrooms, and sanitation facilities for boys, girls and teachers, etc. Investigators make a separate report for each school and anganwadi.
- Solid and liquid waste management and general cleanliness.
- Photographic proof that investigators have been to the community. Each investigator must take a photograph in the presence of a community leader and a local landmark.

For detail information please see-Government of India. (N.D) *Guidelines on Nirmal Gram Puraskar*.

NGP online monitoring system

As a result of the high failure rate of NGP villages, the Government of India adopted an online monitoring system to identify those GPs who qualify for the NGP award. Third party verifiers from NGOs or research organisations from other states would be required to stay in the communities overnight. Verifiers are required to supply data to the online monitoring system for each visited GP, which then determines pass or fail status. In case of failure, states have three weeks to appeal with proof. If the Government of India is satisfied with the appeal, then a second survey team visits the GP to check the facts.

Reflecting on NGP verification

Arguably India was too tough at first, then too lax, and now very strict again, possibly too strict. The NGP verification system entails little to no community participation or learning as part of the process, and so villages that do not receive NGP may never learn why they failed or how to achieve true open defecation free status. The major lesson from the Indian experience is that if sanitation verification is lax and linked with financial rewards, the verification process is highly vulnerable to widespread abuse. NGP criteria can be found at http://www.ddws.nic.in. A comprehensive account of the NGP verification procedure can be found in WSP Monitoring Systems for Incentive Programs: Learning from large-scale rural sanitation initiatives in India, Water and Sanitation Program, World Bank, November 2010.

Experience verifying NGP villages

In 2008 and 2009, my team at the Uttarakhand Academy of Administration, Key Resource Centre, Water & Sanitation, Nainital, was commissioned to verify the ODF status of NGP communities, state by state. In 2008 we inspected 1,018 GP applicants in 6 States (Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, and Karnataka) and certified 417 GPs and 3 Block Panchayats as NGP. In 2009, we inspected Haryana and Bihar, and the pass rate became minimal with only 1 out of 621 NGP applicants successful in Haryana, and not one successful NGP village in Bihar.

The revised NGP process is more strict and impartial than the old, though this top-down, target-driven approach is still vulnerable to abuse because of the large financial rewards that follow certification. NGP verification in India has motivated and remains challenged by fake reporting because every district management wants to be able to report increased achievement annually. Many states still have a large number of NGP awards for GPs that are actually not open defecation free from years of invalid NGP certifications. There is minimal community involvement or empowerment in the verification process.

Challenges and opportunities

Going to scale with verification has numerous challenges and corresponding opportunities:

- Identifying and standardising good practices for consistent application at scale.
- Recognising that good verification practices vary with country contexts, e.g. the way ODF and improved sanitation are defined varies by program and country.
- Determining who should conduct verifications. This is one key to the credibility of the process and becomes increasingly important as programs scale up.
- Making the verification process a positive experience for communities so that they learn, are empowered and improve their practices.
- Ensuring that verification and certification can keep up with communities' claims to be ODF without excessive waiting time.
- Maintaining verification standards at levels, which are not so strict that almost all fail, and not so lax that almost all pass.
- Managing to go to scale while still encouraging celebrations of ODF verification and certification.
- Ensuring resources and capacity to conduct verifications in a timely and effective fashion on a large and sometimes exponentially expanding scale. This critical challenge needs to be anticipated, confronted, and planned for at the start of programs.

Recommendations

Drawing on the experiences and approaches above and other sources, recommendations for improving verification of open defecation free status include:

- Plan ahead in anticipating the need to go to scale with verification. Avoid the situation in one country where there were over 200 communities waiting, and only some 20 had been verified. Identify who or which organisation will be able to handle rapidly expanding demands for verification.
- Ensure resources for verification are sufficient. Funds needed for verification at scale will need to be substantial and need to be budgeted for well in advance, especially when a programme is ambitious and expanding rapidly.
- Prefer third party verifiers. Those with interests in positive outcomes should not be involved in NGP verification. Verifiers should be rewarded for impartial thoroughness. Choices of third party verifiers may include – Natural Leaders and others from neighbouring communities, NGOs from other areas, local Health Workers, and other officials or volunteers. Verification should not be subcontracted.For more information please see Chambers, Robert (2009) Going to Scale with Community-Led Total Sanitation: Reflections on Experience, Issues and Ways Forward. *Practice Paper Number 1*. IDS Sussex, UK, pp. 28-30.
- Train and monitor those in third party verification organisations. Encourage community involvement as part of a learning process. Whether failing or passing, make verifications positive experiences, looking to future pride and self-respect, sustainability and/or achievements. With participation and transparency in verification, a non- ODF community will learn what is needed to achieve ODF status and may be motivated to do that soon. Verification findings can be shared in open meetings, with care to avoid humiliation. Please see Kar, Kamal with Robert Chambers (2008) Handbook on Community-Led Total Sanitation pp. 54-5, and Knowledge Links (2011) Mapping CLTS in India: terrain and trajectory, on CLTS website
- Do not treat verification as a one-off occurrence, but part of a continuing process. In Pakistan, and other countries, a verifying team may revisit a community after a period of six months. In Kenya, there is a revisit to confirm ODF status before celebration takes place. Some national protocols include different levels of open defecation free verification (i.e. Ghana, Malawi).
- Probe very high rates of passing (over 70 per cent) and very high rates of failure (over 70 per cent). With very high passes, raise questions whether criteria and their application are adequate. With very high failures, consider stopping triggering and concentrating on post-triggering follow up.
- Use celebrations after verification to build community pride and confidence, and to encourage other communities to achieve ODF. Government officials, politicians, local leaders, and other stakeholders should be invited, and natural leaders from verified communities should be honoured. Reporters from television, radio, and newspapers should be present at ODF celebrations, as appropriate. Masons, trainers,

and others involved in the sanitation achievement process in one community should use the ODF celebration to build their networks and opportunities, leading to moves up the sanitation ladder in the wider area. For more information see KWAHO (2011) ODF Third Party Verification: Nyanza and Western Provinces, Kenya Water for Health Organization and GOK-Unicef WASH Program, and Mukherjee, Nilanjana. Wartono, Djoko and Robiarto, Amin (2011) *Managing the Flow of Monitoring Information to Improve Rural Sanitation in East Java*. Water and Sanitation Program, World Bank.

- Recognise that in going to scale, communities may increasingly have to organise their own sanitation achievement and ODF celebrations with reduced outside involvement as improved sanitation and verification scales. To the extent possible, all involved parties should provide encouragement and support.

Photograph 1. WEDC – Residents showing self-pride during NGP verification

Photograph 2. WEDC – Focus group discussion during NGP verification

References
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Note

We conducted Nirmal Gram Puraskar verification in villages of seven States of India and covered nearly 1,100 villages, 8 Block Panchayats and one District Panchayat with the support of the Ministry of Water & Sanitation, Government of India.

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