

Gram Vikas COVID-19 Response

Anchored in Resilience & Action



Gram Vikas began its COVID-19 response on 15 March 2020, four days after WHO declared the COVID-19, a pandemic.

Over the past nine months, we have worked with our village community partners, resource support organisations, local governments and the State administration to ensure that the negative effects of the lockdown and the continuing effects of the pandemic are reduced as much as possible.

Our response evolved over this period to cater to the needs from the ground. As the situation limps back to normal, it is time for us to take stock of what we did and move forward.

The four decades of our work and the trust reposed by the communities helped us to extend quick help to hard-to-reach communities with limited access to digital information, infrastructure and services in remote hamlets and villages of rural Odisha and Jharkhand.

Moral, technical and financial support from organisations, civil society groups and individuals bolstered our abilities. Panchayati Raj Institutions, field-level functionaries of line departments and Block and District level administration guided and supported us through this period.



Communities are slowly getting back to life after months of wait and uncertainty around work and incomes.

Photograph by Jaison Jose Thomas/Gram Vikas

Creating Awareness

Through our campaigns and assisting the outreach efforts of the local governments and frontline workers, we ensured that village communities got accurate and reliable information about the coronavirus, were screened for the disease and took measures to stay safe.

We supported the enumeration of individuals returning to the villages and setting up of the quarantine centres. We harnessed village institutions to make masks and sanitisers, set up community kitchens and organise relief distribution to get vital health services and material support to vulnerable families.

Over the following nine months, our responses continuously adapted to the shifting circumstances and needs of the communities to cope with the emerging crises of livelihoods, food security, health and education.

*We reached **25,000 households** across **750 villages** with information on COVID-19 & measures to stay safe.*



A community practice session on the proper technique for hand washing, an effective tool to prevent the coronavirus disease, in Kantabania village, Nayagarh district of Odisha.

Photograph by Pabitra Mohan Sahoo/Gram Vikas

Ensuring Wellbeing of Migrant Workers

Within a week of the national lockdown being announced on 25 March, we launched the 24x7, multilingual, Bandhu Helpline to redress the grievances of the stranded migrant workers from Odisha. We partnered and coordinated with organisations and governments in the destination sites to secure access to food and accommodation for workers.

The [Khelo Bandhu](#) initiative, using games and exercises, creatively and meaningfully engaged the young migrant men, experiencing isolation and uncertainty, to offer comfort.

[Rapid assessment surveys](#) highlighted the impact of the pandemic on their lives and livelihoods. Our ongoing [research](#) continues to generate new knowledge on labour migration from some of the most remote geographies in Odisha.

*We supported **15,696** migrant households across **857** villages.*

Gram Vikas Migrant Resource Centre mapped the skill-competency profiles of returning migrants. We used this to organise a Resource Directory that informed our plans for upskilling and finding dignified livelihood opportunities for the migrant workers.



A young Jagannath returned from Kerala to his village Maligaon, in Kalahandi, Odisha, during the lockdown. He has now started a fast food joint with two of his friends in the village.

Photograph by Sanjay Kumar Baral/Gram Vikas

Enabling Income Earning Opportunities

With the markets closed and job losses, work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) offered the much needed livelihood safety net for the poor.

Gram Vikas along with the Village Development Committees worked closely with the local governments to identify and generate work under the scheme.

The types of work initiated were geared to improve water security, help in soil conservation, improve land productivity; and create durable assets such as household toilets or community playgrounds.

Our team helped people get job cards and mobilised women and men, including the returning migrants, to take up the work to cope with the job and income insecurities.

*We supported **8368 households** across **227 villages** to find work under MGNREGS.*



The Tidasing village community, in Gajapati district of Odisha, engaged in land clearing work under MGNREGS. The activity not just provided work and incomes to 42 households in the village, during the pandemic lockdown, but also readied farm lands for cultivation.

Photograph by Aruna Sahu/Gram Vikas

Securing Social Entitlements

For the poor, severely affected by the pandemic, Government of India's slew of emergency relief measures to augment social protection to ensure food and cash support were particularly significant.

Gram Vikas developed a cadre of community mobilisers to identify vulnerable populations and share with them information on State and Central Government schemes and programmes.

We supported the rural households to fill applications, assisted Panchayati Raj Institutions and Gram Panchayats, and liaised with district and block administrations to enable linkages.

*We made **80,488** households aware about their entitlements, and **linked 21,194** with relevant schemes.*



Andriya Digal, a Gram Vikas community mobiliser collects details of the household members to apply for relevant social security schemes in village Partamaha in Kandhamal district of Odisha.

Photograph by Radhika Pradhan/Gram Vikas

Mitigating Food Insecurity

While most families received their PDS food grains, food insecurity continued to plague the most vulnerable as the continued crisis of no work left them with little income to buy essentials or save for the monsoon season. Moreover, the quantity of food received through the PDS was insufficient, and many did not have ration cards.

Gram Vikas rolled out the Food Support Programme, a collective effort, together with the Village Development Committees (VDCs). The VDCs identified the vulnerable households and finalised the list of those in need of extra support.

Women headed households, families without PDS entitlement or with only senior citizens, and households having people with disabilities or prolonged illnesses were prioritised.

*We made sure that **5734 families** across **154 habitations** did not go hungry.*



Gram Vikas Food Support Programme prioritised help to the most vulnerable, such as households with senior citizens.

Photograph by Jaison Jose Thomas/Gram Vikas

The VDCs led the process of vendor selection, procurement, packaging and distribution. Local procurement, instead of from the city, not only ensured transparency and reduced costs, but also gave business to local suppliers.

Food kits were customised as per the local needs and food preferences. For instance, in Kalahandi, soybean chunks, dried red chillies, and turmeric powder were preferred while milk powder was preferred in some others. Families collected the kits from the distribution centres set up in the village. Each of them committed to contributing 10 days labour for any upcoming village development work.

We mobilised the funds, about ₹2000 per household, through donor support, crowdfunding and staff contribution.

*We made sure that **5734 families across 154 habitations** did not go hungry.*



A food and essential commodities distribution camp held early on during the pandemic related lockdown in Chandaka, near Bhubaneswar, Odisha. Families who depended on daily wage labour were prioritised for getting the support.

Photograph by Chandra Majhi/Gram Vikas

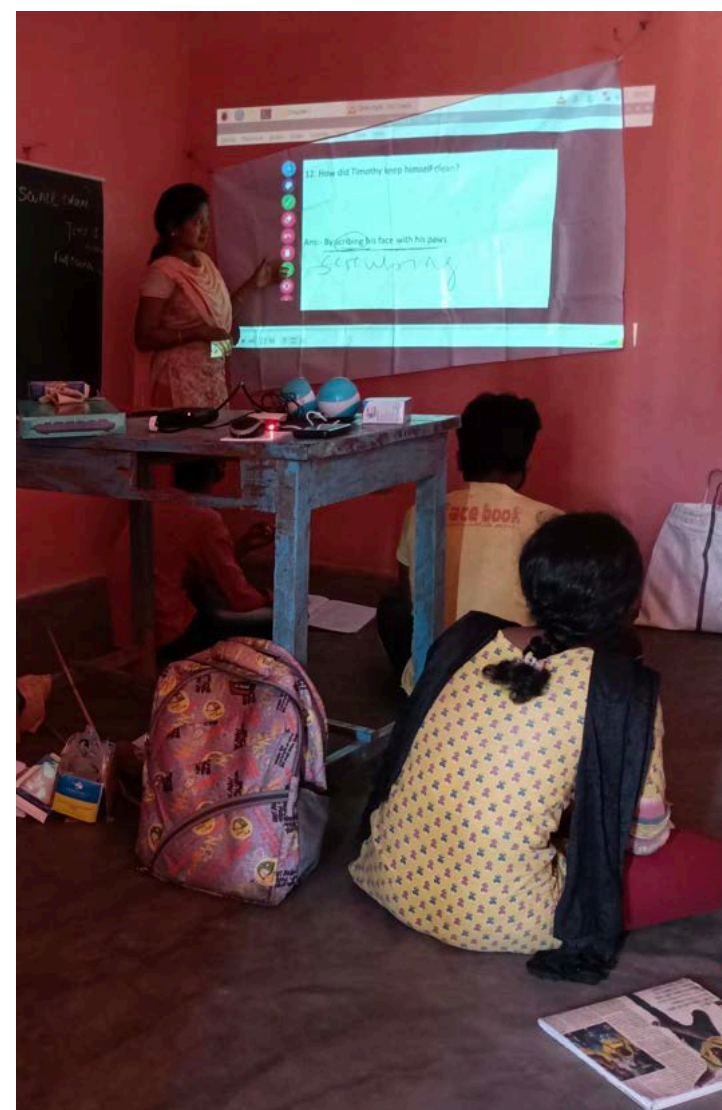
Providing Access to Education

Many first generation learners, from remote, hilly areas in Odisha, had their education disrupted due to the school closures. Poor internet connectivity, frequent power outages or not having the required devices made learning through mobile phones, computers or television impossible.

Gram Vikas enabled technology equipped Learning Centres (LC) that took the classrooms to the children. We set up a total of 20 Centres in villages in Kalahandi, Ganjam and Gajapati districts. Each LC catered to students of Class 10 from villages within three to five kilometres.

Community buildings or private houses that could accommodate 15 students at a time were chosen as the centres. The team took care to make sure that the space was sufficient for children to be seated while maintaining the required physical distancing.

*We made **continued education** possible for 306 children **through 20 Learning Centres.***



*A para teacher taking classes using a Pico Projector connected to a Raspberry Pi in Kuragadu village in Ganjam district of Odisha.
Photograph by Prasanta Kumar Naik/Gram Vikas*

Local volunteers, who were either Class 12 graduates or pursuing college education or with teaching experience, became para teachers. Thirty three such men and women provided the learning support in the Centres.

Teachers from the four Gram Vikas residential schools supported them in weekly and monthly sessions planning and clearing student doubts in addition to ensuring teaching quality.

The para teachers underwent training on the subjects they were responsible for teaching.

Each of the Learning Centres (LCs) were equipped with a Raspberry Pi, a single-board computer that plugs into a display board, and a projector to enable technology aided learning. Para teachers were trained to operate the devices and set up the sessions.

Students learned by watching preloaded, curriculum based, audio visual lessons with additional explanations and guidance from the para teachers.

*We made **continued education** possible for 306 children **through 20 Learning Centres.***

A total of 306 students attended classes for three hours every day for seven days a week. While they learnt the different subjects from Monday to Saturday, on Sundays, the teachers cleared their doubts from the week that just passed. Students appeared for tests twice a month to assess their progress and identify areas of improvement.

Students either walked or cycled to these centres. When the LCs started, Gram Vikas staff and school teachers made house visits, encouraging parents and students to use the facilities.

Parents were concerned about the threat of COVID-19 infection to their children but eventually sent their kids, when they saw other children attending the classes.

The team members also counselled the families to make sure that children continued to come to the Learning Centres and not drop out. They have managed issues such as children prioritising household work or dropping out in the middle of the sessions especially during the harvest season to help their parents.

With the Government of Odisha resuming schools for Class 10 in early January, the Centres stopped functioning. In a few cases, the village community has taken the lead to continue the learning centres to cater to the needs of children in Classes 8 and 9.

*We made **continued education** possible for 306 children **through 20 Learning Centres.***



High school students attending classes at the Gram Vikas Learning Centre in Katapatni village in Ganjam district of Odisha.

Photograph by Prasanta Kumar Naik/Gram Vikas

The Way Forward

"Events such as this pandemic, may hopefully be rare. Our partner communities face the brunt of various types of natural disasters on a regular basis. There is the need to build comprehensive methods and systems that help improve the coping mechanisms available to the communities.

Resilience has to become a common factor, in the day-to-day lives of the people. At Gram Vikas, we design programmes and activities to contribute to this. For instance, we continue to strengthen our efforts to ensure safe and dignified migration, and education equity for the long term.

As we move forward, the experiences from the pandemic period will help us evaluate our ideas, plans and actions through a much better organised prism of resilience. We hope that this will benefit our village community partners by helping build a more dignified, secure and equitable quality of life."

- Liby Johnson, Executive Director, Gram Vikas



Photograph by Jaison Jose Thomas/Gram Vikas

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