

Ensuring Accountability at Grassroots through Legal Literacy Camps: An Initiative of Sehgal Foundation in collaboration with DLSA, Mewat

The Constitution of India promises a dignified life to everyone but even after this assurance people aren't able to enjoy their basic minimum legal rights bestowed upon them by the constitution. It is often felt that though India has many good government programs in place but the recipe for success in each field is to ensure their effective and efficient implementation at village level. These programs mainly include Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Mid Day Meal (MDM), Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBM), Old Age, Widow, Handicapped and Orphan pensions and programs under District Legal Services Authorities (DLSA). Villagers face a plethora of problems on daily basis while accessing the benefits under these programs at various levels. Only a microscopic minority of the people are able to avail their due benefits. Further complications arise as there prevails a huge information deficit and trust deficit between the people and the government. More often than not people are unaware about their lawful entitlements and are clueless of the process to avail them. The problem is compounded by the fact that very few people are aware about the various layers of grievance redressal mechanism in the system, if there exists any on the ground. A lot of valuable resources apart from money, mind and time go into the formulation of these programs but very few people are able to derive benefit from these and make transition in their lives, if not transformation.

The Governance and Policy Advocacy Center (GPAC) of Sehgal Foundation creates awareness among rural communities regarding the various government programs that help them to secure their rights as envisioned in the Constitution, through organizing Legal Literacy Camps at village level in district Mewat of Haryana under its Good Governance Now (GGN) initiative. The aim of the GGN initiative is to make people aware about their basic minimum rights, their lawful entitlements and above all to empower them. These camps have been organized to effectively address villagers queries, related to various government programs on food, social security, employment, legal aid and also to address those grey areas where the villagers are facing most of their problems related to the implementation of the government

programs. We had organized 8 camps in collaboration with DLSA in the villages of Mewat, Haryana this year. These camps were held at the villages where Legal Care and Support Centers had been established by DLSA and which were manned by the Paralegal volunteers (PLVs) and counsels trained and hired by the DLSA.

DLSA¹ have been given the mandate to provide free legal service, including civil legal service to eligible citizens through their Legal Care and Support Centers at district courts, block courts and villages, Legal Literacy Camps, Lok Adalat and Public Utility Courts under the Legal Services Authority Act. The irony is that most of the villagers are neither aware about the existence of DLSA nor their activities that of legal centers in their respective villages even when they are in their proximity. Further in the absence of adequately trained staff, necessary infrastructure and callousness on part of employees; the villagers have a harrowing experience. The frequent absence of PLVs and Counsels when they are required to effectively engage the communities and sheer negligence and unprofessional attitude on their part breaks the moral of community as a whole. Incidents of corruption have also been noted such as support center lawyers charging fees to fill out the pension forms of the villagers.

Objectives: The objective of the camps is to make villagers aware of their rights and entitlements focusing on government programs, providing legal assistance to citizens in filling up their forms, submitting applications and complaints for access to public services, also to provide platform for interface with officials from various government departments and to make these Legal Care and Support centers functional.

Challenges for Camps under DLSA: The DLSA is currently facing humongous challenges on many fronts for its relevance in a rural society. The DLSA faces acute shortage of infrastructure particularly human i.e counsels, PLVs and whatever little present are inadequately trained. Further there is a gross lack of interest on their part for their duty. The camps are not scheduled at regular intervals, but on ad-hoc

¹ <http://hslsa.nic.in/Schemes.htm>

basis based on a rigid beforehand schedule, not taking into account the ease and participation quotient of villagers for e.g. Camps being held during the harvest or

Festive season or under adverse weather conditions which are marked by extremely low participation of villagers. This is further compounded by the lack of information and awareness of the villagers. No prior information is dispatched to the villagers. The lack of proactive measures to inform the people prior to camps through various mediums such as use of community radio stations, advertisements in local newspaper, distribution of pamphlets and other related material etc. is appalling. There is hardly any mobilization drive to enroll the people. Further the camps are held at places far away from the community. In addition to that there is hardly initiative to inform aware or empower the people regarding the various policies or schemes run by the government for their benefit in their own backyard.

Process of Mobilization:



The field teams from different blocks of Mewat, which consist of block coordinators and governance guides, start by mobilizing the community in the village and in the surrounding 3 to 4 villages a week before the camp. They make door to door visits disseminating information about the camp's details such as its importance, objectives, relevance to their lives along with the pre requisites such as venue, date and timing. The information is also

disseminated to villagers through advertisements in the local newspaper, use of posters and distribution of pamphlets, use of loudspeaker in the peak hours and through a host of other platforms such as various sessions of the Village Leadership School², the group and the community meetings conducted by the field staff in the respective villages.



² Village Leadership School is the village level training program of selected villagers conducted in selected villages twice a month which aims to train a cadre of villagers on their rights and entitlements under various government programs as well as accountability mechanisms.

Community radio station as a tool to empower the community as a whole is also used. The ground staff also keeps in touch with the elected representatives (ERs) in their villages, officers from various government departments and other influential people in the communities and hand them invites to attend the camp, thereby attempting to provide a platform to the citizens to directly interact with the ERs and other Government officials. The community leaders also often take active part in the mobilization drive. All the necessary permissions like use of loudspeakers, venues etc. from the government authorities are well taken in advance.

Activities in the Camp:



A total of around 8933 people including 5582 males and 3351 females from various villages had gathered at our forum which we had organized to empower the people and thus help them solve their grievances and other problems related to governance. Basic infrastructure is set up at the nearby community centre or school as per the ease of villagers and students including make

shift seating arrangements and other basic amenities. Registration stalls are separately set up for male and females, along with that IEC materials like pocket booklet of contact numbers and addresses of grievance redressal officers of various government departments, four page pamphlets imparting information on government programs, materials from government departments on SBM, MGNREGA are distributed. A stall is set up for sharing information related to one government program only. The GGN team members along with the volunteers are available at every stall set up for sharing related information, which basically includes information related to TPDS, ICDS, RTE, MDM, RTI, MGNREGA, Various Pensions Programs, Haryana PRI Act, SBM, DLSA and other miscellaneous complaints.

Villagers often visit the camp with the problems they face in their day to day lives regarding ineffective service delivery under various government programs; they not only seek information about various entitlements but are also looking for information and other solutions to empower themselves. We act as a conduit to channel these people to the right departments and right people and help them with other means such as writing applications, complaints as and other things when deemed necessary. The major grievances against the administration include not getting ration regularly, dysfunctional Aanganwadi centers, not getting the job cards, mid day meal not cooked according to menu, encroachment in the common places in the villages, pension applications, and many more.



A total of 1386 old age, 26 disability and 50 widow, 28 orphan , 29 Social Security, 351 Job Cards, 2 Priyadarshni Indira Gandhi Vivah Shagun Yojana (PIVSY) and 121 Ladli, 87 SBM applications were drafted for the rural citizens who visited the camp. Beside above 64 applications were also written based on common complaints related to housing, electricity, non availability of ration and encroachment of land.

The highlight of above was that the Secretary DLSA Mewat who also happens to be the Chief Judicial Magistrate attended all these camps along with legal counsels and PLVs and made personal one to one interactions with the villagers directly. He shared information about the different programs of DLSA with the villagers and also told them about the help line numbers at district and state level. He further advised them to make use of these facilities provided by his department and also told them the process to avail those facilities. Other than him, various officials from the, Women and Child development, Food and Supply, District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), Agriculture, Health and other departments visited the camps and were engaged in discussion with the villagers. Sarpanches from the villages in which the camp was held and surrounding villages were also made themselves available throughout the camp and also at times even to verify pension applications, as when required.



Follow up of the Camps:

The initiatives of organizing these camps helped us to make the rural citizens more aware about the grievance redressal system, effort to increase their legal literacy, empowering the community as a whole and thus trying to make them active participants in governance. Due follow up is being taken on the number of issues raised, large number of applications filed along with other governance issues. Citizens are now filing complaints related to TPDS, ICDS, MDM, PRI applications in appropriate departments in required format. Out of total applications filled in the camps, 865 pension forms and 74 Ladli forms have been deposited in the

respective departments. 64 villagers have started getting the pension they were entitled to. 64 complaints were filed in the different offices and 35 had been settled till now. The villagers are now not only aware of the required format to submit their applications but are also informed of the various documents to be attached while submitting their forms. The field team of all the blocks is committed to follow up on each of these written applications so that the citizens can actually derive benefit from these programs. Further the field teams keep a village wise record of all the villagers visiting the camps. Some of the intended outcomes include: 42 names have been included in the list of Priority Card Holders who will be getting ration under TPDS; 250 water tanks have been distributed to SC families by the Sarpanch. Even though the follow-up of these applications is a long, difficult, time-consuming and arduous process, yet we are addressing the concern of each one of them individually by maintaining regular contact with the villagers and the district/ block level government departments. After our interventions, a depot holder was forced to return 115 BPL Cards to the villagers which were in his possession unlawfully. There has been a remarkable improvement in the functioning of TPDS in 15 villages. Various problems related to the functioning of ICDS have been settled on the spot as the villagers got a chance to directly interact with the concerned officials. Villagers became aware about the mandate and activities of DLSA of which they were completely ignorant of. Regular visits of villagers are now being scheduled to DLSA. Secretary DLSA has been taking a keen interest in the follow up of the camps. He himself visited the department of the Social Welfare on that particular day on which the pension forms had to be deposited. Further, he even wrote letter to Department of Education about the shortage of teachers in some of the schools. Acknowledging the shortage of teachers, the Department later fulfilled the same. He had also enquired about the status of the pension forms which were deposited in the respective department.

Story of Change #1: Villagers End Corrupt Practice in Distribution of TPDS Rations

Shikrawa Village in the Puhana Block

Prior to this incident, the license holder in the village was not distributing required TPDS ration every month. Contrary to his purpose, he was distributing the ration i.e wheat every three months and pulses and sugar every eight months. Further the village Sarpanch was acting in collusion with the license holder. Additionally, the license holder was holding on to the villagers' ration cards in direct violation of the law when it should have been held by the villagers. The villagers had complained regarding the same to the Assistant Food Services Officer (AFSO) but were left clueless about whom to approach when the AFSO didn't take the desirable action.

The GGN team members along with the volunteers catering to the TPDS stall in the legal literacy camp had distributed information relating to various aspects such as how to receive new ration cards, how to get back on the BPL list, and other related matters. The stall was attended to by more than 50 villagers. The villagers after learning the grievance redressal system now had the confidence that they were using the proper channel to make their complaints.

After having found new confidence and right knowledge, the villagers now complained about not getting their ration cards and the delays in the distribution of rations at the PDS stand. Through the initiatives of the camp, the villagers had now learned that they could make complaints to the DLSA. The villagers gave their complaint in writing and sent it to the Secretary of the DLSA. The license holder and sarpanch after being aware of the fact that complaints were being made and responded to, distributed three months worth of rations to Priority Household (PH) in two days and shortly thereafter to all Below Poverty Line(BPL) households. The license holder further returned all the ration cards to the villagers.

Story of Change #2: Cleanliness of Drain in the village:

Sanitation still remains one of the major development challenges in India and we had a firsthand experience of it in the field. A drain had been constructed around the Shikrawa village of Punhana Block in 2001. It was the main outlet of drainage for the entire village. Right from the time of its construction it had been cleaned only once in 2007. Inadequate maintenance along with no provision for periodical cleaning and sheer state of neglect by the concerned authorities had brought the condition of sanitation in village to an abysmal low. The entire drain was filled with filth and dirt and the system was completely choked. The state of hygiene around the entire area had become deplorable. The villagers on numerous occasions had requested the Sarpanch and other government officials to ensure that drain was cleaned and heaps of garbage dumped around it was removed, but a deaf ear was turned to their repeated requests. During one of our camps, we had facilitated a direct one to one interaction between the villagers and Secretary DLSA, as a result of which many villagers came to the front to complain regarding the same. He immediately took cognizance of their complaint and asked them to file a written complaint to his office. Within a span of few days, the Sarpanch of the village took all the required steps to remove the filth and dirt from the drain and make it functioning.

Through various camps we envisage the idea to make rural citizens aware, informed, empowered and active participant in the process of governance. We intend to make this whole process sustainable so that citizens can themselves identify any gaps or lacunae in the implementation of above programs. Sangita, GGN field team member, who used to be a PLV with the DLSA, observes that these

camps are of much more help to people because of the basic aid being provided in such camps such as help to write down the desired application in the required format and submitting it to the necessary department, unlike the DLSA camps where the paralegals advise people to go to the DLSA office and seek solutions for their problems themselves. Further it is due to these camps, that Secretary DLSA came to know about the dysfunctional status of Legal Care and Support Centers from the villagers themselves, only after which he took due steps to make them functional.

These camps have helped the people empower themselves and this has been used to get better civic facilities, cut down the delay in decision making, punishing the corrupt, getting their legal lawful entitlements under various government programs. We have helped people address number of grievances arising from delayed delivery of public services which often lie at the root of corruption and inefficiency. We have helped people plug the gap in functioning of various government programs like insufficient accountability, irregularity in their functioning of AWC, TPDS shops and weak concurrent monitoring. We have felt that exclusion of large number of people from service delivery mechanism often results in unresponsive government and give rise to exploitative system

The various government programs cater to each and every aspect of life .i.e TPDS for hunger, ICDS for young infants and maternity care, RTE for education, Mid Day Meal to reduce the dropout rate, Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan for sanitation and personal hygiene and various Pension programs to help them look after their lives. Further democratic decentralization entailing power to gram panchayats and people at lowest level regarding the above programs can help the citizens lead a much more productive, fruitful and meaningful life in every sphere whether social or economical. They can help to bring out the best among each people.

A constant and critical dialogue between the administration and society involving the people is essential to generate hope and bring an element of good governance. We act as a catalyst to help people engage constructively with the government help to get them their basic minimum entitlements necessary for their survival and well being and thus bring a sense of ownership to community. In long run it would create opportunities for people, bring leadership to society and bring good governance to the door steps of people

The thing that can be concluded from this is that awareness and hand holding support given to the villagers gives them confidence, and the power to solve their own problems through knowing their rights, and using them properly to get them without the fear of the authorities. The amount of change that is brought in them is absolutely magnificent. The way in which the people have changed gives confidence that the system will buckle and will become better under the pressure of the people who are striving towards making it a better one. If the DLSAs and NGOs, able to work in conjunction and maintain records of the work done, NGOs could benefit by using the information collected for advocacy purposes. If the DLSAs and credible NGOs in the above field can work together in synergy and harmony with each other, complementing each other and leveraging each other strengths for the benefit of community as a whole, it can be a model worth emulating in other parts of the country transforming the lives of rural people.