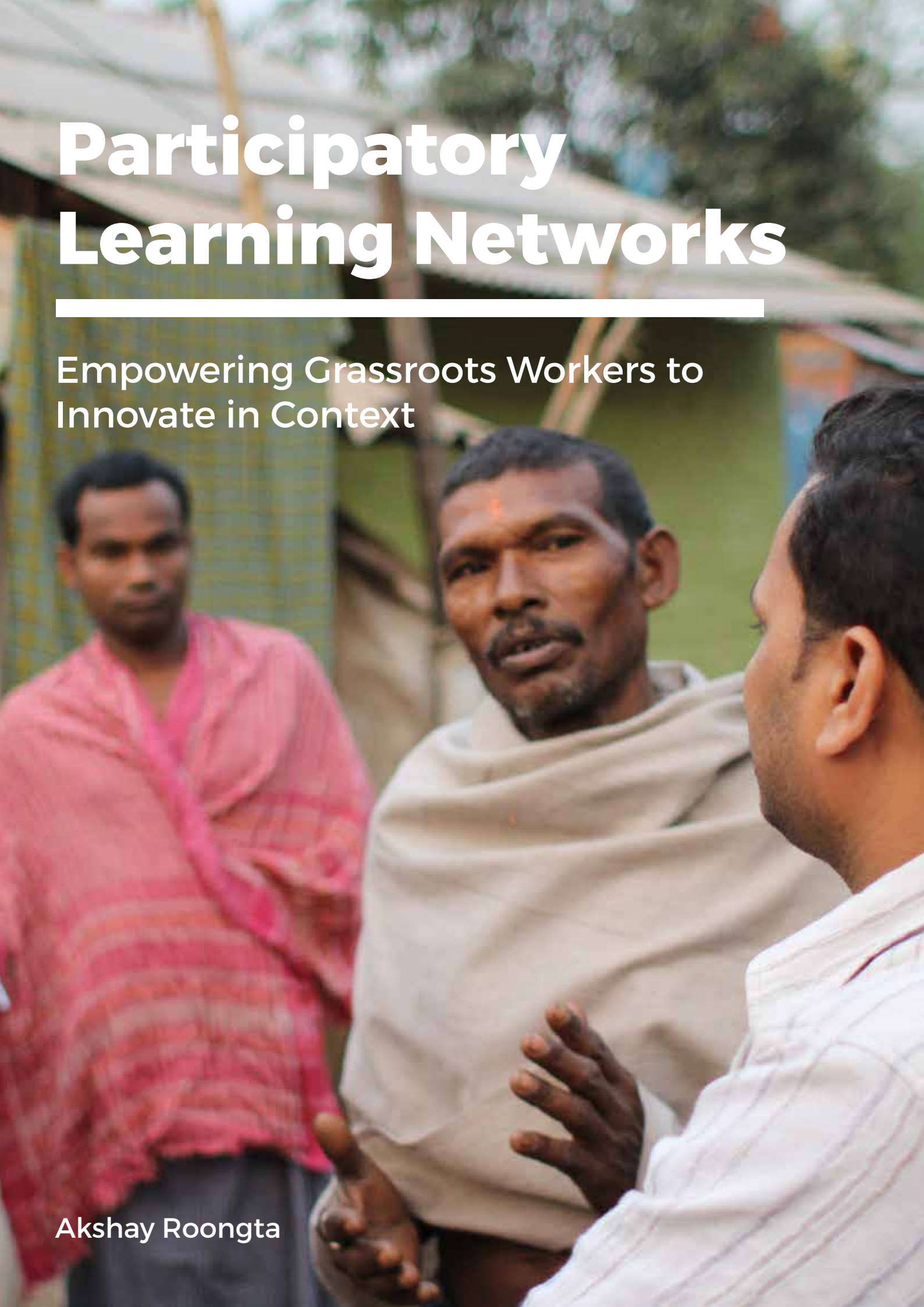


# Participatory Learning Networks

---

Empowering Grassroots Workers to Innovate in Context

Akshay Roongta





# **Participatory Learning Networks**

---

Empowering Grassroots Workers to  
Innovate in Context

**Akshay Roongta**

Master's Thesis, 2016

Department of Media

Aalto University School of Arts, Design & Architecture

Advisor: Lilly Irani

Supervisor: Rasmus Vuori



# Abstract

---

This thesis investigates the use of participatory media in large scale development projects to empower grassroots workers and middle managers to localise solutions by innovating in and for the context. It further supports the conceptualisation of ‘Participatory Learning Networks’, which act as a system of principles to enable ‘middle managers’ to accomplish innovation in context.

The thesis conceptually builds on three bodies of research from the areas of development planning, organisational theory and information communication for development (ICTD). In each of these the principles of participation and community are explored and synthesised to form the central ideas that are manifested as the organisational paradigm shifts necessary for the effective implementation of ‘Participatory Learning Networks’.

The central idea of the thesis is further strengthened by field research undertaken in the early phases. This research builds on expert interviews with organisations and individuals working in the participatory media space in India. Another part of the field research is the passive observation of activity on selected online communities on WhatsApp. This research informs the principles towards designing the ICT platform aspect of the ‘Participatory Learning Networks’.

The thesis tests the ideas presented through pilot testing done in India in collaboration with TATA Trust and Centre of Gravity (COG). The testing was carried out as part of the pilot of a larger water, sanitation and hygiene behavior change program, with the team in the western state of Gujarat and team members from COG. Primarily, the conclusions drawn from this testing, would be used to iterate the system in its application in a trial in the eastern state of Jharkhand, along with informing the plan while taking the idea to scale. Further, these conclusions inform the understanding of the complexities in implementing the principles and system of the ‘Participatory Learning Networks’.

**Keywords:** participatory media, middle manager, innovation, development, ICT

# Acknowledgements

---

Firstly, I would like to thank Aalto University, and the School of ARTS, for giving me the opportunity to carry out the research that I had been wanting to work on for some time prior to my beginning the MA. At the Media Lab, I would especially like to thank Joanna, Mariana and Rasmus for their guidance, advice and mentorship through the research and writing process at various stages. My classmates, with their inspiring work and words of encouragement, spurred me on as I chipped away at the project in India, and I would like to thank them for that.

Balaji and Nipa from Centre of Gravity were more than collaborators, as we became friends and confidants through the process, making what could have been a solitary endeavour, a deeply pleasurable one. The TATA Water mission deserve kudos for the courage to take on an untested idea and giving us the room to implement and iterate. I feel a lot of gratitude to the whole team of facilitators and trainers who worked on the Gujarat pilot, not just for helping to test the first iteration of the idea but for being beyond inspiring and reminding me why I started working on this idea in the first place.

Thanks to all the individuals and organisations who opened their doors to an unknown researcher, and gave me a lot of time, talking to me about the amazing work that they do in participatory media. Special thanks to Jessica from Video Volunteers, and the team in Goa, who let me into their work and lives for my most inspiring week of 2014, and her continued comments and enthusiasm long after.

A big thanks to Lilly, who kept pushing my thinking, analysis and writing forward all through the process. I couldn't have done this without her checking in, and the long calls where (I hope) we pushed each other's thinking forward. To Maya for stepping in at the n'th moment and helping to design this document. To Priyanka for turning the serendipitous 'chai', into the motivation that got me writing in the first place. To Mridu, for being there through the early days, and monitoring the WhatsApp groups and helping me make sense of what I was doing.

Thanks to 'the 6' — Hamsa, Rikta, Kaushik, Sid and Ritika, for many things, but especially for sticking through the insane journey the last couple of years have been. Hemant, for countless sessions of gaming every afternoon while I was writing ('GG'). Shiba, for being an emotional rock, and being there anytime I needed. To Min, Erik, Tasnim, Ruby, Zara, Joned and Suresh, for my last amazing sojourn in Auroville. To the good folks at Quicksand — Ayush, Kevin, Babitha, Rikta and Neha, for the guidance, mentoring, operation fun(s), UnBox and confidence in me. To Dahiya, Mohor, Sadam and Sid, for giving me a home away from home at 'C-2/4'. To my friends in Helsinki, for the food, the support and the laughs.

And, lastly, to my family. For believing in me when not many would have, supporting my journey, and helping make me who I am, for being my best friends.

# Contents

---

Abstract	1
Acknowledgements	2
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 Introduction	10
1.2 Context of this research	11
1.3 A Brief History and Personal Motivation	13
1.4 Research Questions and Process	16
1.4.1 Early Questions and Iteration	16
1.4.2 Research Questions	17
1.4.3 Process and Methods	18
1.5 Chapter Breakdown	20
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>22</b>
2.1 Participatory Learning Networks — an Introduction	24
2.1.1 Planners, Searchers and the role for technology	24
2.1.2 Participatory Learning Networks	27
2.2 Theoretical Framework	30
2.2.1 A history of development	30
2.2.2 Managerialism, Participation, and a cybernetic system to bind them all	42
2.2.3 Networks and Online Communities	56
2.3 Participatory Learning Networks	61
2.3.1 Meet the middle manager and the system they work in	61
2.3.2 Principles for a paradigm shift	65
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>70</b>
3.1 Studying Online communities	72
3.1.1 Using WhatsApp	72
3.1.2 Research on WhatsApp groups and	76

communities of practice	
3.1.3 Learnings towards Participatory Learning Networks	85
3.2 Participatory Media Landscape	86
3.2.1 Approaches to participatory media	89
3.2.2 Learnings towards Participatory Learning Networks	93
3.3. Framework for running and managing these communities	94
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>98</b>
4.1 Project Background	101
4.1.1 TATA Trust and Centre of Gravity	101
4.1.2 The Samajhdar Campaign	105
4.1.3 Participatory Learning Networks and the Samajhdar Campaign	105
4.2 The PLN Pilot	108
4.2.1 The Pre-intervention Picture	108
4.2.2 Creating a paradigm shift in culture	110
4.2.3 Setting up and Running the PLN	113
4.3 Learnings	115
4.3.1 Instances of use from the Gujarat Pilot	115
4.3.2 Observations and Insights from the Gujarat Pilot	119
4.3.3 Recommendations for the Jharkhand trials	123
4.4 Conclusions	125
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>126</b>
5.1 On the research questions	128
5.2 Way forward	131
5.3 Personal Reflection	135
<b>References &amp; Appendices</b>	<b>140</b>
<b>Appendix 1: The Problem of WaSH, and Behavior</b>	<b>148</b>

Change

**Appendix 2:** A detailed note on Design and Execution of training by Centre of Gravity

152





*Cleaner at community toilet in Ahmedabad, India (Quicksand, 2010)*

# Chapter 1

---

## INTRODUCTION

# 1.1 Introduction

According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2015), today over 800 million people live in extreme poverty, over 40% of the world's population lives without access to clean water or sanitation and 1 in 9 people in the world suffering from lack of access to food. These are not problems that have snuck up on us, but are systemic issues arising out of years of colonialism and failed solutions, that are now seen in sharp relief thanks in part to new media and globalisation (Kothari, 2005; Easterly, 2006; Moyo, 2009)

In this thesis, I aim to look at the response to these crises, that are loosely amalgamated into the sector of 'development planning' (see chapter 2.2), exploring some of the issues that plague the work with respect to scale, and offer an idea that uses participatory media and democratic, distributed planning processes to create a systemic solution to some of the operational issues identified.

These issues stem from the fact that societal problems 'are inherently wicked' (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 160) because of the interconnectedness of systems. For example, if one has to tackle sanitation in a village in rural India, it is impossible not to face up to and deal with issues of caste, livelihoods and access to water amongst others, which form a complex web of interdependence. In their landmark paper around 'planning problems', Rittel and Webber (1973) made the distinction between 'tame and wicked problems'. They stipulated that unlike engineering or physics problems, 'societal or policy planning' problems could never really be solved, at best they could be resolved in a single situation, and would need to be resolved repeatedly.

The thesis builds primarily on this idea, that much of 'development planning' which seeks to solve societal problems through planning, requires an iterative approach to resolution; One that is constantly responding to the context, and to do so puts the reins and agency to resolve these issues in the hands of those closest to (or residing in) the context. The thesis does so by exploring participation through the lens of theory in development, management (organisational theory) and information communication technology for development (ICTD), building a synthesized

understanding towards principles for action in a ‘development planning’ project. These principles comprise the foundation of the idea of Participatory Learning Networks. The articulated framework is then applied to the pilot of a project being carried out by Centre of Gravity, for TATA Trust (see chapter 4), across over a 1000 villages in 3 states in India.

## 1.2 Context of this research

In this section I discuss the context of this research. The section builds on the previous one, about the issues in development planning, and goes on to discuss the role that current organisational structures and use of technology have to play in the issue. I conclude this section by briefly introducing Centre of Gravity, TATA Trust and the project on which an early iteration of Participatory Learning Networks has been tested.

In his 2013 article in the New York Times, Peter Buffet, talks about the “Charitable Industrial Complex.” The growing group of NGOs, philanthropists and consultants who are ostensibly working on bringing an end to many of the issues the world faces today, but have brought with them many practices from the world of business and capitalism. This is most noticeable with the rise of the use of such phrases as ‘R.O.I.’, ‘financial literacy’, ‘microlending’ (Buffet, 2013) and the like. These practices have given rise to increasing ‘technicization’ and ‘managerialism’, heavy levels of hierarchy and the accumulation of knowledge in a centralised, top-heavy manner (Easterly, 2014 ; Shrinivas, 2009).

As discussed previously, an underlying trend in development planning has been that there is a tendency to treat problems with engineering inspired straightforward solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973). As discussed in great length by Easterly (2006) these solutions tend not to scale very well. While there might be

successes in small, controlled pilots, when taken to other contexts with their own vagaries these sorts of solutions tend to break down and ultimately fail.

This fact is not lost on the organisations that work on development planning projects, and over the last few years there has been a rise in evaluation activities being intrinsic elements of pilots and projects at scale (Schorr, 2016). While it is a welcome move, this has not necessarily led to a higher number of successes in solving the challenges they set out to solve (Tseng, 2015).

With the proliferation of low-cost smartphones and increasing access to the internet, evaluation has now turned to technology in a big way. Grassroots workers, equipped with custom applications that are at their most basic high-tech survey tools have to collect several pieces of data to prove the quality of their work on the intervention on the ground. The data analysed at a central location, helps ensure that the intervention is being carried out as designed across geographies. These sort of systems, amplify management practices that are based on doubt, rather than trust (see chapter 3.2).

This point was put forward (far more eloquently) by Bala Gopalan, the director at Centre of Gravity (COG). Along with the TATA Trust, COG was, in August 2015 when we first met, in the process of designing a behavior change campaign to affect change in people's habits around drinking water, safe sanitation and handWASHing with soap (WASH). The campaign was to touch the lives of residents in 1000 villages across the states of Gujarat, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand in India.

Bala's interest in my research came from his own frustrations of the difficulties of thinking through the implementation of campaigns. The dual difficulties of sustaining the energy on the ground over a period of time, and the iteration of the campaign through the inclusion of learnings from the field staff, were issues that he had been grappling with for some time.

This fit in well with my research, and we came up with the idea of ‘Participatory Learning Networks’ as a system of practices, culture and tools to tackle these issues. Starting with this basic idea, further research through the literature around development, organisational theory and ICT for development, brought us to a set of principles within a framework to test a first iteration during the pilot phase of the TATA Trust WASH Behavior change campaign (see chapter 4).

## 1.3 A Brief History and Personal Motivation

While studying ‘Product Design’ at the undergraduate level, I was reading a lot about the environment, sustainability and awakening to the many issues that the world faced. It became clearer as I read, that one of the major contributors to some of these issues, was rampant consumerism and material culture. Following through on that thought, it dawned on me that I was being trained to directly create desire for objects and in turn, push consumption. This led me in my final year of undergraduate studies to set myself a goal, that I would try and always work on projects that chipped away at the issues, environmental and social, facing the world, and not work with corporations pushing indiscriminate consumption.

While I haven’t been able to stick to this goal in the last seven years a hundred percent, my work has more or less led me squarely into an area that can be classified as ‘design for social change’. I’ve worked on applying principles of design thinking to projects that are driving strategic, systemic changes to areas as diverse as consumption, waste, sanitation, hand-hygiene and education, doing so in various capacities.

One of the common threads through many of my projects, and a principle I believe in, is that of the role of a project to be an enabler, and platform to help stakeholders define the solutions as they work for them, or at least shift the balance of power in the relationship from designer/organisation to the user/beneficiary. This manifests in various ways, from a very early college project where I designed a lamp for children, that was based on the principle of building blocks, such that they might develop various forms and use the lamp for both task and ambient lighting; To this thesis, whose starting point, is the belief that beneficiaries of development and aid must have more direct and continuous participation in the projects that affect their lives.

My journey on this thesis began prior to the MA, while I was working at the Quicksand Design Studio, Delhi from 2010 until 2013. My last major project there was Project Sammaan, a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded project, in which as part of a consortium we worked with the Bhubaneswar and Cuttack Municipal Corporations in eastern India, to reimagine community sanitation in the slums of the respective cities (Quicksand, 2015). The project was essentially a pilot-at-scale, in which we worked with the government to rethink redesigned facilities, management and business models, and deploy these through government channels of tendering to the most appropriate bidder (Shane, 2016).

Two experiences led me to start thinking about this project, and the need for participation in development. The first was the extensive online reading, and conversations I had with old time social workers and practitioners. This was the first time I was working on a pilot, and this raised many questions about the efficacy of pilots and following that the ability for development projects to scale. I started reading through development blogs, and watching videos about failures in development (Birrel, 2012; Damberger, 2011 amongst others), while also talking to a mentor, Tejas, who had been in the social impact space for a couple of decades. These along with conversations within the studio, made me feel that, Project Sammaan's basic structure was on a sound footing. That is, to build in conditions of scale, namely through government

contracts and funding, at the pilot stage meant that projects have a higher likelihood of success when scaled.

The other experience that drove me to look at participation in development, was the overarching monitoring and evaluation framework for Project Sammaan. We were working with the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), who would be evaluating the efficacy of the intervention, in reducing open defecation. The method of choice for J-PAL, are Randomised Controlled Trials, a process/system borrowed from the world of medicine and health. While there are merits to rigorous evaluation, the feeling that I came away with was that in order to not ‘contaminate the sample’ (Shotland & Ambroz, 2016), a distance was created between the beneficiary and those designing the intervention. This led to a lack of participation from the end beneficiary in the process, as they were simply receivers of the benefits, and not participants in their own progress. Heeks (2008), describes this as ‘pro-poor’, in which the solution is designed for a community by someone from the outside. This is in contrast with ‘para-poor’ and ‘per-poor’ processes that happen in participation with, and amplification of solutions by the communities being affected by the interventions respectively.

My own background is in ‘design thinking’ (Brown & Katz, 2009). Over time, my experiences, had bolstered the idea of empathy and the need to bring in participation as a form of agency for people to make decisions about their own lives and opportunities. I carried this sense of something being ‘broken’ with the system of development planning, in my head for some time, and exposure to two projects, Video Volunteers and CGNet Swara (see chapter 3.2), both participatory media and human rights projects, got me thinking about a new way of doing things. It signaled that perhaps there lay an opportunity at the intersection of participatory media and development planning. This led me to trying to understand the discursive spheres involved, and exploring possible solutions through this thesis.

The motivation for this thesis is twofold. It is a culmination of

the journey from design school through various development planning projects, as I use the thesis to take some time to better understand my major areas of interest; Which are development, organisational theory and information communication technology, specifically in the context of development. I am hoping that in the next stage of my career, I will be diving deeper to work with various organisations at the intersection of these three areas. This brings me to the second motivation, which is to explore the questions I have about my belief about the feasibility of beneficiary participation and the principles that might help design a system to allow that.

## 1.4 Research Questions and Process

### 1.4.1 Early Questions and Iteration

As outlined in an earlier section (see chapter 1.3), one of the big reasons, I ventured down this line of inquiry was after the experience with monitoring and evaluation practices. Early on my research questions were the following:

- Can the process of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) be made more inclusive through the use of community video tools and approaches
- Can new tools be developed and deployed based on mobile phones as video capture tools
- Can the threshold to entry be reduced for becoming part of community media teams — from consumer to contributor

Very quickly though, the questions evolved, primarily after some interviews with three experts from the M&E space. After these interviews it became clearer that I had had an uninformed sense of

monitoring and evaluation, in that I was treating the two activities as one. Evaluation, it was explained to me, by its very definition is an activity that takes place during and after a programme, to 'evaluate' whether and how effectively it met its objectives. I was directed instead to think harder about monitoring, which is an ongoing activity in a project.

The other common thread, as the reader might have noticed, is the focus on community video. My first interview with a participatory media practitioner, Roshan (at the time at AwaazDe) opened my eyes to the need for me to expand my definition of participatory media, to voice and text as well, and not just limit it to video.

The thinking thus evolved, to think about democratising monitoring of ongoing projects, and how the data thus gathered (through participatory media) could be used for more effective iteration to projects while they were being executed.

## 1.4.2 Research Questions

These are the research questions that directed my work for the thesis, after the first phase of expert interviews (see chapter 1.4.3):

- Can increased communication between grassroots workers & middle managers increase efficacy while implementing a development project?
- What is the effect of elevating the role of a middle manager on strategy implementation? And how can that be facilitated?
- Can participatory media be used to empower middle managers to make better decisions and encouraging contextualisation and iteration in ongoing projects?

At this juncture I'd like to point out how through this process of evolution it became clearer to me that this thesis would be the first step in a longer process of research, learning and experimentation. The research questions, reflect the need to build a foundational understanding of some of the core issues on top of which new systems can be envisioned and created.

### 1.4.3 Process and Methods

The journey of working on this thesis has been a long one, spanning about 3 years of work in short sprints and phases. The initial phase (which I haven't documented in this thesis), was where the idea first started germinating in my head in late 2012/early 2013 while I was working at Quicksand. This was the first time I gave voice to the idea, in my application to Aalto University's Media Lab, as an indication of an idea I'd like to research in my time there. The project went on the backburner until October 2013 which is where the official thesis journey kicked off.

#### Phase 1: Monitoring and Evaluation & Iteration

In this initial phase, I worked with my thesis advisor at Aalto University, to hone the initial research questions (see chapter 1.4.1). Additionally, I interviewed an expert each on the subject of M&E and participatory media, as initial explorations to figure out the feasibility of the research I was undertaking and the merit to the questions. These interviews along with those in the next phase helped me iterate and build up the questions and the line of inquiry in this thesis.

#### Phase 2: Deep dive into participatory media and development

In a sprint of about 5 weeks in June/July 2014, I traveled around India namely Goa, Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai to interview mostly with experts working in the area of participatory media (see chapter 3.2 Table 1 for names and brief descriptions), but also a couple in the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) space — namely J-PAL and IDinsight. These interviews helped me build an understanding of the various organisations and individuals who comprise the participatory media landscape in India. Along with that the interviews with a couple of organisations building technology solutions for development planning projects and organisations (Akvo and Vera Solutions), helped me gain a deeper understanding of how technology was being used by these organisations and other types of CSOs (Civil Society Organisations). As mentioned earlier the interviews with M&E experts from Digital Green, J-PAL and IDinsight, helped me gain a better understanding of the space, and focus more on monitoring, and its role in development planning.

### Phase 3: Theoretical Framework

After a tumultuous year long break, I got back to the thesis in August 2015, and worked on building a theoretical framework that would detail participation through the lens of development planning, organisational theory and ICTD to better inform the idea of how one might build Participatory Learning Networks. This was done primarily through literature review spanning all three discursive spheres, as well as two other sources of data.

The participatory media landscape (chapter 3.2) draws heavily from the expert interviews carried out in Phase 2, while a section on the use of WhatsApp by common interest groups and organisations draws upon observations from a five month long research exercise. The exercise (explained more in detail in chapter 3.1) had me being embedded on two sets of WhatsApp groups, the first a group of farmers in the western state of Maharashtra, and the second set, the WhatsApp groups used by the organisation Video Volunteers, for its employees spread across various geographies.

### Phase 4: Centre Of Gravity Case Study Project Work

While doing some unrelated consulting work in Mumbai in August 2015, I made the acquaintance of Bala, a director at Centre of Gravity (COG). COG, is a communication consultancy, working primarily in the area of behavior change campaigns to affect habit change at scale. The line of inquiry that I was proposing in this thesis, was intriguing for him, and we decided to pitch the idea to one of COG's clients, namely the TATA Trust. TATA Trust is the philanthropic arm of, the gargantuan Indian enterprise, the TATA Group who have interests in everything from salt, to heavy industry and consumer retail. The project they were working on was the rolling out of an experimental behavior change programme across over a 1000 villages in the three Indian states of Gujarat, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand (COG, 2015). The larger project took some time to commence because of the nature of the engagement and details therein, but finally kicked off operations in April 2016, with a pilot across all three states. The details of the project work are elaborated in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

# 1.5

## Chapter Breakdown

This thesis is broken down into four chapters following this introductory chapter.

Chapter 2 begins by defining the basic starting point of the thesis, and a broad definition of ‘Participation learning networks’ along with some broad organisational and design principles. The next section seeks to understand the history of development, participation and civil society globally as well as with a special lens on India. The chapter then goes on to define principles of participation through a reading of relevant literature from development geography, and participatory management. The chapter goes on to define and understand networks and online communities, culminating in a section that seeks to define the idea of ‘Participatory Learning networks’ in greater detail.

Chapter 3 documents the learnings from the field work undertaken in Phase 2 and Phase 3, namely the observation of the use of WhatsApp for online communities, and a landscape study of organisations working with participatory and community media, as well as data and technology in development. The section concludes with a more detailed set of design principles for the ‘participatory learning networks’ from the learnings from these two sets of research.

Chapter 4, documents the application of the ‘participatory learning networks’ in a project with the Centre of Gravity and TATA Trust. It goes into detail about how the design principles were adapted to the case in hand, and the principles around the execution of the project. It discusses the observations from the pilot at the time of publishing, with notes on the next steps within the project. They center around the reception of the project, and steps that will be undertaken when going to scale.

Chapter 5, concludes the thesis. It begins by looking at the research questions (see chapter 1.4.2) and discussing the outcome of the research in the thesis and the extent of answering them. It goes on to outline ideas for a possible roadmap to continue work on the lines of inquiry started off in this thesis. The chapter and the thesis

concludes with a personal reflection on learnings and growth from the process of researching and writing this thesis.



*Discussing perceptions around material preferences in spaces and architecture for Project Sammaan (Quicksand, 2012)*

# Chapter 2

---

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

# 2.1 Participatory Learning Networks –an Introduction

## 2.1.1 Planners, Searchers and the role for technology

As outlined in the introductory chapter, the context for this thesis is the development planning sector. While the thesis dives deeper into the history of the sector (see chapter 2.2.1), I would like to state that the sector can find its roots in colonial policies and institutions and accelerated in the era immediately after the conclusion of World War 2 and in the wave of decolonisation in the following decades across much of the global south. Starting with aid being disbursed by global institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, to governments directly giving aid to other countries, we have over the last few decades seen the rise of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and networks of civil society organisations (CSOs) who work in conjunction with each other to execute projects to solve or confront the major issues facing various populations of the world (Cornwall, 2005; Moyo, 2009; Tandon, 2000; elaborated in chapter 2.2.1).

In many an intervention there is a network of institutions functioning at different scales, from the philanthropic organisation funding the programme to the international NGO designing and channeling the funding finally to a grassroots organisation executing the programme across various geographies. While one might analyse the structural workings of these projects with policy frameworks, the science behind interventions and myriad other factors, one can (though one rarely does) trace these through the network of relationships of organisations and individuals through which these interventions and policies get implemented. Adopting the view that “the value that any organisation creates is ultimately no more or no less than the sum of the decisions that it makes and executes” (Blenko, 2010 as quoted in Meyer & Marais, 2014, p. 3), it follows then that the actors who are empowered to make decisions broadly constitute the actual institution that is executing a development project (Meyer & Marais, 2014). In this dense network of actors that take a problem, dissect it, design a solution, fund it and execute it on the ground, the motivations and empowerment of individuals define the effective running and impact (Bebbington,

2003; Hart, 2001; elaborated in chapter 2.2.2).

Who are these individuals? What motivates their actions? Easterly (2006) describes them as the personas of ‘Planners’ and ‘Searchers’, building on Rittel and Webber’s (1973) definition of professionals called to ‘solve’ society’s problems. Easterly (2006) puts the two together where he says that

*“a Planner thinks he already knows the answers; he thinks of poverty as a technical engineering problem that his answers will solve. A Searcher admits he doesn’t know the answers in advance; he believes that poverty is a complicated tangle of political, social, historical, institutional, and technological factors.”*

(p. 6).

As outlined by Peter Buffet (2013) in his comments on the progression of charitable organisations and their ilk, there has been a ‘professionalisation and technicalisation’ (Kothari, 2005) which has led to an exacerbation of the problems detected and presented by Rittel and Webber as far back as 1973. These are professionals from the fields of finance, technology, engineering, and the like, all of which are ‘based in modern science’ and take an engineering approach to problem definition and concurrently ‘solutions’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973). This obsession with looking at systems such as poverty, livelihood or agriculture (amongst others) as standalone, closed systems that need to be ‘solved’ (Easterly, 2006; Kilpi, 2015), leads to centralisation, which in practice is reductionist as these Planners need to solve them at scale, inevitably leading to a loss of ‘equity’, and discounting ‘the tacit knowledge of laity’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973) and their ability to improve systems and find realistic, sustainable solutions.

My (admittedly simplistic) analogy of this mindset is that of queen and worker bees. A programme is designed centrally, and then executed by actors on the ground; Following orders to the letter, all in the hope that these are done perfectly, what Cornwall (2005) calls ‘the blueprint approach to development’ (p. 75). As Easterly

amply demonstrates through various examples in his 2006 book, 'The White Man's Burden', this approach is flawed and is one of the principal reasons that has held back development impact all these years. He suggests, a paradigm shift in how the actors need to change their thinking, from 'Planners' to 'Searchers'.

In my interpretation of Easterly's system, the local actor is elevated and empowered, while the managerial actor is open to input from the local. Solution design is complex, in unfamiliar environments where unknown and unpredictable factors influence the success of the implementation of projects (Marais & Meyer, 2015, p. 6). Easterly calls upon the local manager or grassroots worker who might be from the context or have their 'ear to the ground' to be empowered to focus on adapting and delivering solutions on the ground. What one is then working towards is an environment where every organisation is a network of actors, leading to the leveraging of networks of individuals, institutions, and organisations working in tandem to deliver on the intentions of development.

In their research and analysis of ICT based collaboration systems in large development organisations, White, Cardone and de Moor (2014), highlight a key issue in how development activities are carried out, and the relationships in the network of actors plays out. They talk about the use of office intranet or even physical spaces as 'places' where formal and 'established business processes' play out. They contrast this with 'field work', as the space where all the

*structures of various projects translate into activities, experimentation, improvisation, adaptation and innovation. It is where the day-to-day work of projects happens, where communities of people work together and mark off the set of tasks they are assigned. This is also where collaboration is expected to yield the greatest results. It reflects the diversity of many different field contexts.*

*Typically a wide range of daily experimentation, improvisations, adaptations and innovations go unreported to headquarters,*

*and are often invisible in formal reporting structures. The improvisation may even be unconscious as staff go about their day, 'getting things done.' There is rarely time, space or structure for regular reflection, sharing of ongoing results and learning, and there is little opportunity for sharing across projects. It becomes challenging to contribute to the commons because all energy is focused on the immediate field work tasks. (White et al., 2014, p. 29)*

## 2.1.2 Participatory Learning Networks

The idea of participatory learning networks looks to build a system wherein through the use of a certain set of tools and techniques, these innovations and what White et al. (2014), call 'improvisations' are shared across the organisation to improve outcomes on the ground. As Anab Jain (2015) notes that, "technology becomes an amplifier and accelerator of the social, cultural and political values of the groups who use it, not those who made it." The idea to use ICT tools while great, isn't effective until the cultural context within organisations, networks and projects don't allow (even celebrate) the empowerment of 'Searchers' to innovate in their contexts. Thus there are two key aspects to the proposed system, a paradigm shift in the culture within organisations as well as a suite of tools to allow for more meaningful and targeted communication.

The cultural shift, at the outset of this thesis looked at two primary aspects:

1. Dynamic project design

As Ayush Chauhan of Quicksand put it in an informal meeting, "one of the key things that we try and explain to organisations, especially large ones, that want to create an environment for innovation, is that there is no finished product or system. One has to think in prototypes, where the learning is constantly applied, for a prototype that is more and more effective with every step." (personal communication, 2016).

In the current paradigm, solutions are conceived by 'Planners', to be executed at scale, thus creating the 'model solution' that must be replicated with few changes (also conceived at a central level). This gives way to a system where the campaign

or intervention is created at a point in time, evaluated some ways later (months — in many cases years — later) and then iterated into another grand project. The shift, as Chauhan, stipulates is for organisations to think of interventions as more dynamic, where with every instance of implementation, learnings (because surely there are always learnings as discussed by White et al., 2014) are rolled back in, and a ‘prototype’ of higher fidelity is pushed out, perpetuating a constantly learning, evolving system. The thesis explores this by looking at the ‘history of development’ and the legacy of how these projects are organised in chapters 2.2.1 and 2.2.2.

## 2. Participation and equity as a core organisational culture element

In Easterly’s (2006) system, ‘Searchers’ can be at any level of organisation, from grassroots workers, to policymakers, the key for him, is that solutions be created based on context, be ‘homegrown’, and dynamic. In this thesis, in the context of development interventions, I contend that to bring in innovation into the commons of the organisation (White et al., 2014), the grassroots workers and middle managers must be empowered to both innovate in context, and for those learnings to be actively shared and iterated upon.

To do this, we need to bring in a combination of principles of participatory development and management, through which we elevate the roles of these actors. A key principle is that across hierarchy it must be reCOGNised that workers in the field are not just ‘doers’ but also ‘thinkers’ and are not just capable of improving programmes, but that these improvements, and insights from the field are key learnings that can be rolled into a programme. This requires that systems of monitoring are based less on doubt but rather than on trust with an eye on organisation wide learning and iteration. The thesis, dives deeper into concepts of participation, network principles and borrows from the idea of ‘cybernetic systems of planning’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973) to explore this aspect in chapters 2.2.2 and 2.2.3.

The suite of tools envisioned as part of the participatory learning networks (PLNs), can be broken down into three fundamental building blocks. These are the starting conceptions, and are explored in greater detail through the study of online communities in literature, in the field and through the participatory media landscape in chapters 2.2.3 and 3.

1. The technology platform

The word 'platform' can mean different things depending on context, such as in the case of mobile phones, it often means the operating system (Android or iOS). In the case of PLNs, it means the suite of tools that make for effective communication and helps to realise the various principles that we have envisioned for the cultural shifts within organisations.

2. Connecting groups

The platform, helps to connect 'Searchers' to each other, helping them learn from each other, exchanging information and learnings through online communities. These groups, when curated carefully, keeping in mind organisational politics, hierarchy, agency and geography amongst other aspects, can be very effective hotbeds for exchange. White et al. (2014) refer to 'labs' and 'convenings' as interstitial spaces in organisations where learnings are built, and safe spaces to reflect and share.

3. Sharing meaningful content

'Build it and they will come' is a modification of the phrase that the character played by Kevin Costner in the 1989 Hollywood film 'Field of Dreams' hears. While the phrase and the movie centres around past regrets, baseball and the American midwest, it has a special meaning for online communities. In the case of the participatory learning networks, it would not be nearly enough to have the right kind of groups, on the right sort of platform unless the participants weren't also provided with training, cues and tools to help them share appropriate and meaningful content. The content must be engaging, and the thesis explores this to some degree by exploring the participatory media landscape in India in chapter 3.2 and the

observation of WhatsApp based communities in chapter 3.1.

In conclusion, having defined (somewhat loosely) what participatory learning networks mean, we embark on a journey that starts in the colonies of Britain in the 1920s, and concludes in a small village called Talodra, in Gujarat, India earlier this year. The thesis, over the next couple of chapters, will dive deeper into the concepts introduced above through a mix of literature review and field work to better define what we mean by participatory learning networks.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.2.1 A History of Development

There is an old English proverb, that states, ‘You don’t know where you’re going until you know where you’ve been’. Having been working in this space for a few years, and wanting to get deeper involved still, it seemed important for this thesis to be built on a solid foundation of looking back at the sector of ‘international aid and development.’ It seemed important to try and understand what had led it to become the behemoth it has become today, and what led to its many idiosyncrasies.

Cornwall (2006) puts it eloquently,

*Development agencies are often accused of lacking institutional memory. But there is more at work here than simply a failure to remember the past. The amnesia in this case appears almost cultured, rather than simply incidental; something akin to a tacit agreement not to invoke past failures or allow reflections on the past to act as a brake on the urgent business at hand. As one senior agency staff member put it [whom Cornwall interviewed and chose to keep anonymous], it is as if too much introspection might disillusion people, or, as another hinted, as if talk of the past might sap the energy of those who think they are onto a brave new thing and who desperately need all the passion and*

*conviction of its newness.* (p. 64)

The history of development here, is explored through the decades since the early twentieth century, looks at international trends in colonialism (mainly British), development economics, aid, civil society, and participatory approaches along with the lens of how those trends played out in India with our unique blend of politics, economics and civil society practice.

### **The 1930s: The Dual Mandate & Indirect Administration**

Without going into the intricacies of colonialism through the centuries it did exist, the analysis here starts from the 1929 ‘Colonial Development Act’ passed in the British parliament. It was heavily influenced by the idea of the ‘Dual Mandate’ forwarded by Lord Lugard, which spoke of the mandate of the colonial powers being of extraction along with the ‘civilisation’ of the natives (Cornwall, 2006, p. 66). Besides laying out the means of carrying forth the ‘dual mandate’ what the act did at some level was sow the seeds of what became ‘development’ through the ‘legitimation [sic] of colonial intervention’ (p. 65).

From my reading of modern Indian history, the first two decades of the 20th century were categorised by uprisings against the British, what the British MP Mr. H. Sneed explained as “the subject peoples of the British Empire are becoming increasingly aware of their position in the human family, and they are not satisfied with it” (as quoted in Cornwall, 2006, p. 65). He goes on to say that the voices raised are against exploitation, the protection of their rights, education and most importantly “for some participation in the shaping of their own destinies” (p. 65). These voices raising these concerns are (in our narrative) the ones constituting what has now become civil society.

The 1929 Act, thus enshrined the beginnings of participation in development, with ‘indirect administration.’

*Under this system the native authorities become not only part of the machinery of Government but also a living part of it, and the political energies and ability of the people are directed to*

*the preservation and development of their own institutions.*  
(Cameron quoted in Cornwall, 2006, p. 66)

The way this played out in India was the Indian National Congress, a body formed to fight for the rights of the ‘subject peoples’ participated in provincial elections that were held, and formed a sort of government, that led to a kind of self-governance. Thus indirect administration, while being purportedly about participation, became a potent tool to quell the uprisings, with a notion of power (Akpan, 1956 cited in Cornwall, 2006). This became clear in India, where the entire Indian provincial government resigned, when their ‘resolution’ to not participate on the side of the British in World War Two was superseded, and India was plunged into the war being fought by the United Kingdom.

### **The 1940s: World War Two, Bretton Woods and Rescuing Europe**

While the defining event of the decade (the century, in fact) was the World War, there are two critical occurrences that set the stage for development as we know it. The first was the 1940 ‘Colonial Development and Welfare Act’. It did two things, to begin with, the focus shifted to the colonies using their own resources and wherewithal to deal with their developmental needs, and the emphasis on social development and long term planning. The way this was done, where with pressures on the Empire’s resources (because of the war), was by the training of ‘mission educated’ locals who were trained in the ways of British administration (Cornwall, 2006). Thus, in their wake the British left a burgeoning bureaucracy trained in their ways.

In July 1944, ‘against the backdrop of the Second World War, over 700 delegates from some forty-four countries resolved to establish a framework for a global system of financial and monetary management’ (Moyo, 2009). At this historic meeting in Bretton Woods, the seeds for what we now know and experience as ‘aid-infused development’ (Moyo, 2009) were sowed.

While the main agenda for the meeting was to restructure

◀ *Note: Moyo is referenced in this document from an e-book, thus the lack of page numbers. All references in this section are from chapter 2: “A Brief History of Aid”*

international finance and trade to buttress the global economy to prevent a repeat of the depression of the 1930s, there were two major developments. Firstly, this meeting saw the setting up of two institutions. The World Bank, was designed to facilitate capital investment in the reconstruction efforts and the International Monetary Fund, to manage global finance systems in the aftermath of war. Secondly, the project that these bodies took on was the provision of aid to the European nations as they looked to rebuild infrastructure and industry, which are most certainly a key factor to the resurgence of those economies that were aided over the latter half of the 20th century (Moyo, 2009). A point worthy to note is that this saw the entry of the United States of America into the ‘business of development’ (Cornwall, 2006, p. 65).

### **The 1950s and 1960s: Decolonisation, Aid Led Diplomacy and the Nehruvian State**

In 1947, then Secretary of State, George Marshall, announced a proposal, in what is now called the ‘Marshall Plan’. The plan, in which the US, taking a departure from the decisions taken at the Bretton Woods conference, stipulated that over a five year period the nation would ‘transfer assistance’ worth US\$13 billion (Moyo, 2009) to select European states. The funding did a whole lot of good for the countries that received this aid, helping to put them on a sound economic footing. It was highly advantageous for the US as well, as it helped to buoy the American economy in a global economy that was otherwise in the doldrums, while seeing the rise of aid led diplomacy and multilateralism (Moyo, 2009).

With the US directly funding reconstruction in Europe, World Bank and IMF funds were freed for other use. Following the successes of the Marshall Plan, it seemed clear that investment capital was needed to spur economic growth. The idea that if aid of this sort worked to restore broken infrastructure, bring political stability and give a future to a defeated peoples and broken nations in Europe, why couldn’t it do the same in the third world? (Moyo, 2009)

The end of the Second World War, saw the rise of the erstwhile colonies as independent nations. Over this and the next decade,

several colonies fought for and gained their freedom from their colonial rulers. The key at this point is that the aid was used as a geopolitical tool, especially going into the next couple of decades in the pre-Cold War era, it was used by the US to gain political allies and for erstwhile colonial powers like Britain and France to indulge in a kind of neo-colonialism. With the rise of global aid led diplomacy, it became less about the needs of the country or the nature of their leadership but more about who they chose to ally with (Moyo, 2009).

In this context, we start seeing the setting up of systems ready for the influx of funds into the third world. The trend in civil society in this era was 'community development', which built on the practices of the previous two decades such that it built on the 'indigenous institutions' and 'responsive political [and bureaucratic] institutions' (Cornwall, 2006). It was predicated on participation by people, exercising agency, aided by the institutions set up to help them, basically the trained individuals and institutions that the colonial powers left behind. This was in conjunction with the larger trend where in the pre-Cold War era pushing participation as a way of pushing the ambit of democratic institutions to keep communist/socialist powers at bay.

India, won her freedom in 1947, and elected Jawaharlal Nehru, arguably one of the two lynchpins of the Indian independence struggle (the other was MK Gandhi), as its first prime minister. Nehru believed in democratic socialism and had been pushing non-alignment as a political stance, thus chose not to take sides in global pre-Cold war machinations. Largely his economic and political policy was one where "the language of democratic socialism continued to stand in tension with the pressures of a capitalist democracy" (Ray & Katzenstein, 2005, p. 7). It was in keeping with the larger trend of a lot of public funding for developing industry and while lip service was paid to socialist ideals, the backbone of the economy was capitalism, which flourished in those years.

Ray and Katzenstein in their 2005 book, 'Social Movements in India'

define three periods for civil society in India. The first period was 1947 to 1966 in the Nehruvian state, where social movements and the 'civil society' were dormant. Any and all points of view were effectively assimilated into the fold of what Rajni Kothari called the 'congress party system' where there was room for all voices, but where most movements took cues from the priorities of the parent party or the state which were one and the same at the time (Ray & Katzenstein, 2005).

### **The 1970s: Poverty Alleviation, Indira Gandhi and Popular Participation**

The 1973 embargo on oil by the Arab states, saw the price of oil rapidly quadruple sending the global economy into turmoil. Two phenomena played out. With the rise in oil prices, inflation rates shot up, seeing food prices skyrocket and economies going into recession. Added to this was the fact that oil exporting economies started depositing excess cash that was being generated with international banks, which saw lending going up even to uncreditworthy countries, and many newly independent nations using loans as a way to clear previous debt and keep economies afloat (Moyo, 2009).

*'By the early seventies, poverty had risen sharply, and development economists and international agencies came to question the idea that macroeconomic factors [rapid industrialisation and infrastructure building of the previous decades] would solve the problem of growing poverty, advocating instead "direct attack" (e.g. poverty alleviation programmes).'*' (Ray & Katzenstein, 2005, p. 8)

By the end of the "1970's, the proportion of aid allocated to social services had crept up to 50%, up from under 10% in the previous decade" (Moyo, 2009). While a lot of the aid in the previous decade had come from the US government, increasingly the World Bank came into prominence. The aid that was deployed, unless done through grants (which were few), were always deployed as loans to the countries in question.

Meanwhile in India, following Nehru's death in 1964, 1966 kicked off broadly 20 years of rule by Indira Gandhi (his daughter). By

many accounts Indira Gandhi turned the party into a personalistic vehicle, and her era saw the deinstitutionalizing of the Congress (Ray & Katzenstein, 2005; Guha 2013). In this phase poverty alleviation was a key concern for the social movements sector (amplified by the global trends towards this end), yet the vehicle — the Congress party — was no longer seen as being capable of carrying forward the collective ‘project’ (Ray & Katzenstein, 2005, p. 17). Arguably this saw the awakening of non-congress actors both in terms of non-political civil society as well as other political movements and parties (Ray & Katzenstein, 2005, p. 10) and the start of the second period of social movements and civil society in India.

Zooming back out for a second at the global setting of development, Title IX of the US Foreign Act of 1966, which stated that “emphasis shall be placed on assuring maximum participation in the task of economic development on the part of the people of the developing countries, through the **encouragement of democratic private and local governmental institutions** [emphasis is mine]” (as quoted in Cornwall, 2006, p. 70)

In addition to this (and perhaps prompted in large part by it), the UN General Assembly Resolution 2542, passed in 1969, Article 5 (b) states that “the adoption of measures for an increasing rate of popular participation in the economic, social, cultural and political life of countries through national governmental bodies, non-governmental organisations, cooperatives, rural associations, workers’ and employers’ organisations..” (as quoted in Cornwall, 2006, p. 70).

Thus owing in part to the fact that unlike infrastructure projects, poverty alleviation programmes were service oriented and required more ground support, and in a large part owing to the resolutions as mentioned above, the NGOs/CSOs that had been working in very local manners until then started gaining attention. This led to the ‘alternative development paradigm’ beginning to be noticed and studied (Tandon, 2000).

## **The 1980s: The WASHINGTON Consensus, Neoliberal Policies and People's Participation**

At the start of the 1980s many countries in the 'third world' were dealing with economic crises, which were partly the fallout of the wanton, unregulated international lending of the previous decades. The IMF stepped in to restructure debt, to save private lending institutions, by essentially buying the debt of countries about to default to mitigate a global economic shutdown. This led to a resurgence of the IMF and World Bank, while perpetuating a cycle of dependence (Moyo, 2009) and the rise of neoliberal policy reforms.

“Economically influential bits of WASHINGTON” (Williamson, 1993 as quoted in Hart, 2001, p. 651) agreed on certain policy reforms that were felt to be at the core of what was needed to build and bolster an economy. These centred around “fiscal austerity and control over inflation; trade and capital account liberalization; and privatization and deregulation of product and factor markets” (Hart, 2001, p. 651). This collection of policies were adopted by countries in Asia and Latin America especially, with the moniker 'structural adjustment'. Essentially this changed the dialogue in terms of development policy bringing in new ideologies of 'Development' (Hart, 2001; see chapter 2.2.2), or capitalist policies into the realm of aid and development planning.

At this time India was also dealing with massive fiscal deficit, wherein spending far outstripped collection through taxes and other sources and the country's international debt was also on the rise (Basu, 2015). When Indira came back to power in 1980 following a tumultuous half-decade in the 70s (with times of low and even negative growth) her socialist ideologies were more muted, and she was more ready to reCOGNise the role of markets in the economy (Basu, 2015, p. 25). This was as much a response to the failures of the socialism practiced in the decades past in India, as to the larger trends of the pushing of neoliberal policies in the international arena.

In this era, the idea of 'participation' was being reframed dramatically under the aegis of these new policies. “No longer the passive recipients of development assistance, 'beneficiaries'

were to be active participants in implementation, and in meeting the costs of development” (Cornwall, 2006, p. 71). This method of participation was appealing to donors and governments involved in the project of development, because while seeming to give the people a greater voice and stake in “managing the resources and services that their livelihoods depended on”, it exempted them (the donors and government) from many of the responsibilities that had hitherto been theirs (Cornwall, 2006, p. 71).

Cornwall (2006) talks about the consensus that formed at this time that “smaller-scale organisations with relative autonomy from the state were better placed to operationalize” (p. 74) these types of programmes. She calls it the ‘associational revolution’ (quoting Salamon, 1993) wherein we see the spawning of thousands of committees and organisations that “acted as institutional interfaces with ‘the community’” (p. 73).

Thus we see the rise and proliferation of NGOs and CSOs, and the relationship forming where programmes were carried out through a complex network of donors, government actors, and other civil society organisations and actors. Kudva (2005) sums this up well:

*“NGO-state relations are shaped by changes in state-society relations and by the position at the state as regulator, funder, and political force at several levels, providing in turn multiple points of contact and possibilities for conflict and collaboration with NGOs.” (p. 234)*

### **The 1990s: Demand-driven development, Access to markets and Millennium Development Goals**

In the 1990’s, the neo-liberal policies of the WASHINGTON Consensus came into question with regards to the soundness of the global interdependent economic systems that they relied on, amongst other factors. Along with these, there was a sense of the failure of aid led development which was seen as a failure of political leadership and weak institutions. (Moyo, 2009 & Hart, 2001).

What had started as ‘popular participation’ in the 80s was

'recast' within the ambit of neo-liberal policies and this new form cemented itself in the international development mainstream. Access to a free market economy thus becomes a sort of non-negotiable for this new popular participation (Cornwall, 2006, p. 75). Calling it a 'prescriptive' approach (as were so many of the previous trends), Cornwall (2006) states that the key to this new sort of participation was the extended role of the people, not just as 'citizens', but increasingly as 'consumers' (p. 77).

In India as well, in part as an effect of the global economic upheavals caused by the gulf war, the new government that came to power in June 1991, had about thirteen days of foreign exchange for normal imports. This led them to go the IMF for a loan, and the crises was used as an opportunity to open up the economy, to become a freer market (Basu, 2015).

Quoting Atal Bihari Vajpayee (Indian Prime Minister at the time) from a speech he made at a conclave in 2002, quoted in Kudva (2005):

*I would like to liken nation-building to a chariot driven by five horses. These are: the Central Government; the State Governments; Panchayati Raj Institutions; the private sector; and last, but not the least, voluntary organisations and community based groups. The chariot will run fast and in the right direction only when all five horses run in tandem (p. 233).*

We see Vajpayee succinctly synthesize the new idea of civil society within the new paradigm of people as consumers, in 'demand-driven development' and 'good governance' which were the themes that came to define development in this decade (Cornwall, 2006).

The associational economy that had its roots in the 80s is important here because it acts as a node in the conversation about scale and participation. While the British looked to recreate the institutions that helped them run their colonies (i.e. an empowered bureaucracy), the American philosophy of development looks at the empowered civil society organisation as one that stands outside the state (as a third sector) that represents the people and

can hold the state accountable. (Ray & Katzenstein, 2005; Kudva, 2005; Cornwall, 2006).

Thus at the turn of the century, fuelled by funding from donors and governments through the late '80s and '90s, NGOs 'took an increasingly instrumental role in service delivery'. This was mainly because they were seen by mainstream development agencies as "more participatory, less bureaucratic, more flexible, more cost-effective, with an ability to reach poor and disadvantaged people" (Robinson & White, 1997 as quoted in Cornwall, 2006, p. 74)

### **The 2000s: Debt-forgiveness, New Goals and an 'Uneasy Partnership'**

The late-90s and the new millennium, brought with it a slew of individuals (pop stars, movie stars, religious leaders and new philanthropists) who besides carving up niches and areas for themselves to work in also appealed to the world to write off the debt of the third world (Moyo, 2009), while upping the aid being deployed and looking to scale up and amplify work under various banners one of which were the UN's Millennium Development Goals.

Since 2000, there had been many attempts to meet the goals set in the MDGs, through various approaches. One of these kinds of approaches are (disparagingly called) silver bullets (Easterly, 2014). Silver bullets are best categorised as simple solutions that are one size fits all, and have massive backing and funding to scale rapidly, to take care of issues ranging from access to water to land reform. We are now in 2016, and while much money through aid and grants have been spent, the MDGs weren't as successful as was hoped (Easterly, 2006). I feel some hope with the newly revised 'Sustainable Development Goals' (UNDP, 2015) which encode somewhat better more of the principles of the alternative development paradigm, are more inclusive and give greater credence to the complexity and interconnectedness of problems and environments.

While on the whole the trends from the previous decade seem to

have held fast,

*“economic liberalisation has been accompanied by the NGO-ification of civil society arguably crowding out some of the more protest-oriented forms of organising within the social movement sector. In the eyes of some, as the state has moved to relinquish its responsibilities towards the poor, NGOs increasingly function as no more than “global soup kitchens” of the New World Order”* (Ray & Katzenstein, 2005, p. 9).

One trend that perhaps defines the last decade of international aid and development is the rise of large private foundations and donors, and the professionalisation and managerialism that it has brought with it (see chapter 2.2.2).

Lastly, in India today, the role of NGOs has changed, wherein now in the third phase (as defined by Ray & Katzenstein, 2005) they are in an “uneasy partnership” as they accept money from both selected state and global sources even as they continue to oppose other parts of the state (p. 21).

## **Conclusion**

While this historical view starts with a wide canvas, most relevant to this thesis is the idea that while large development and aid projects/campaigns are designed for scale, they do so through a complex network of actors, across the private sector, the state and NGOs. In this milieu, Tandon (2000) raises the very relevant question, that while the language of the alternative development paradigm has been co-opted, has it created any change on the ground for the large global development machinery?

Cornwall (2005) offers some hope:

*Each new wave of enthusiasm for participation has been marketed slightly differently, harnessing progressive-sounding buzzwords from the development discourse of the time. The current recasting of participation within the frameworks of ‘empowerment’, ‘democratic governance’, ‘rights-based approaches’, and ‘social accountability’ reveals, on closer inspection, little more attention to the underlying causes and power effects of poverty and inequity than in previous incarnations. (p. 78)*

Thus this section set us up well to further analyse the current relationships between the actors in these global networks. The next section (2.2.2) looks into this issues along with an analysis of managerialism in development, which seemingly is a rising trend in the sector today, and what are some principles for bringing in participation within these networks.

## **2.2.2 Managerialism, Participation, and a cybernetic system to bind them all**

### **‘Big D’ vs ‘Little d’ development, and the Dichotomies of Global and Local**

To begin with, I needed a framework to understand the various activities we deem as ‘development’ and thus I started reading through the work of geographers, Gillian Hart and Anthony Bebbington. Bebbington (2003) argues for a larger, more public role that geographers need to play in the analysis and understanding of development planning. He suggests that many details can be better teased out when the ‘place based dynamics’ of these projects and actors are analysed (Bebbington, 2003).

So while Cowan & Shenton (1996, 1998 as cited in Bebbington, 2003) made a case for understanding international development activities through the lens of intentional and unintentional interventions, Hart extended the idea using her classification of ‘big D’ Development and ‘little d’ development (Hart, 2001). By her classification ‘Development’ encompasses all intentional development and aid activities in the decades after the Second World War, as shown on the timeline in the previous section. Whereas ‘little d’ development’ is the “development of capitalism as a geographically uneven, profoundly contradictory set of social processes” (Hart 2001, p. 650).

Bebbington (2003) makes a valid case for this being a limiting classification as it does not take into account the fact that intentionality works across both types of development.

Additionally, it bases the whole classification purely in a post-war timeframe by states, ignoring aid efforts by philanthropists, religious institutions, local governments and the outsized effect of later periods of colonialism as discussed earlier in this thesis. He makes the point that most development planning needs to be understood through four core concepts: place, livelihood, scale and network. I propose continued use of Hart's system of 'big and little d' developments, amalgamating the two ideas. What we have then:

**Development** activities as organised interventions with explicit and implicit goals, that progressively expand social and institutional networks and relationships structuring flows of ideas, resources and activities not necessarily governed by the logics of capitalist expansion.

**development** activities as the expansion and extension of (generally capitalist) systems of production, exchange and regulation through economic networks structuring commodity, capital and related flows.

(Hart, 2001; Bebbington, 2003, p. 299)

Over the last two decades there has been a rise of concepts such as microfinance, social entrepreneurship and livelihoods training and a move away from direct charitable giving, as a means to solve many of the issues we are now facing (Buffet, 2013). What becomes clearer in our current scenario then is that the classification is murkier than ever.

Having said that, the above classification uses networks and intention as its core basis, while the inter-related ideas of scale and place play out in both. The idea of 'global' and 'local' and the interplay of networks and actors across the two while inherent in both, are often correlated to one or the other. But as Hart (2001) puts it, the 'global/local' dichotomy, play out with very interesting underlying perceptions:

*Global: masculine, dynamic, techno-economic forces, restlessly roving the globe*

*Local: feminine, passive, socio-cultural forces, only function to appear as alluring as possible (p. 655)*

As Bebbington (2003) puts it, “even if analysis is place based it must still work across different scales” (p. 302). In many a Development intervention there is a network of institutions functioning at different scales, from the philanthropic organisation funding the programme to the international NGO designing and channeling the funding finally to a grassroots organisation executing the programme across various geographies. Within these institutional relationships are “structural flows of money, authority, ideas etc.” (Bebbington, 2003) which play out according to the manifestation of our perceptions of the ‘global/local’ dynamic as expounded by Hart (2001). This leads more often than not to a top-down, lopsided power structure in these sorts of relationships.

While one might analyse the structural workings of these projects with policy frameworks, the science behind interventions and myriad other factors, one can (though one rarely does) trace these through the network of relationships of organisations and individuals through which these interventions and policies get implemented. In this long and dense network of actors that take a problem, dissect it, design a solution, fund it and execute it on the ground, the motivations and empowerment of individuals define the effective running and impact.

## **Managerialism in Development and the Rise of the Development Expert**

While this has been alluded to in several instances in the last couple of sections, I would like to dive a bit deeper into the rise of the Development ‘expert’ (Kothari, 2005) and the concurrent ‘managerialism’ and ‘technicization’ (Shrinivas, 2009) of Development organisations.

◀ *Note: capitalisation to reflect the difference between ‘big D’ and ‘little d’ development*

The seed for the ubiquity of the Development expert was sowed in the post Bretton Woods era of the 1950s (see chapter 2.2.1), with the use of ‘technical assistance experts’ as central to ‘most [D]evelopment interventions’ (Crewe and Harrison as quoted in Kothari, 2005, p. 247). Over the decades, this led to the expert taking prominence for a variety of reasons, slowly phasing out the ‘colonial officer’ whose focus on local expertise and tacit

knowledge was seen as outmoded and old-fashioned (Kothari, 2005). While Shrinivas (2009) critically analyses the rise of 'managerialism' in particular in NGOs, I contend that the concepts and lens are very applicable in Development today, given the co-option of the NGO approach (Tandon, 2000). Shrinivas (2009) introduces the "analytical triad, an interplay of three concepts — knowledge, ethics, and power" (p. 616) to build this understanding. In our analysis, we will focus particularly on the concepts of knowledge and power, as I feel that ethics is far more subjective and contextual.

The Development 'expert' has risen to prominence through the "privileging (of) certain groups of individuals and particular forms of knowledge" (Kothari, 2005, p. 427). This has been an insidious rise though. What started as the bringing of certain types of knowledge and processes to the world of Development, turned into the perception that 'locals' did not possess the knowledge or 'expertise' required to carry out Development work further building on Hart's (2001) analysis of the dichotomies of 'global' and 'local'. This status gets maintained and indeed, exacerbated, when Development trends and fashions change rapidly, thus making it impossible for the local Development practitioner to learn and thus be an equal stakeholder (Crewe and Harrison as quoted in Kothari, 2005, p. 428). This is also a result of the knowledge of context, locality and region not being given due credit or importance by the 'global expert' (Kothari, 2005).

Thus, the wielder of the 'latest' knowledge — the expert — occupies a higher standing in the pecking order, and the separation between the 'global' and 'local' is maintained (Kothari, 2005). While they bill themselves as 'interpreters' (Bauman as quoted in Kothari, 2005, p. 249), they are 'not just transmitters of ideas, language and techniques' but also become involved in what and how Development activities are carried out, and thus perpetuate these power relations through the work (Kothari, 2005).

Shrinivas (2009) directs us to look at these developments through two lens: critical management studies (CMS) and critical development studies (CDS). CMS, leads to the concept of

‘managerialism’, while CDS, with a subtle difference views it as ‘technicization’ (Shrinivas, 2009).

‘Managerialism’ is different from ‘management’ in that, the latter is a set of practices that co-ordinates and controls organisational activities and outcomes, whereas the former, is a “set of assumptions that only personnel with certified training are capable of accomplishing organisational goals” (Shrinivas, 2009, p. 619). This type of thinking brings with it a sharp separation between ‘trained specialists’ (Shrinivas, 2009), often expatriates (Kothari, 2005), who are brought in to “accomplish [D]evelopment-related outcomes, for the benefit of, or on behalf of, a community” (Shrinivas, 2009 p620; capitalisation mine). In an effort to standardize Development activities and the processes that govern them, with the spread of ‘silver bullets’ (Easterly, 2014), trends around measurement and accountability, or distrust in the local ‘partner’ (Brabant, 2016), the power structures of the ‘global’ and ‘local’ (Hart, 2001) get reinforced.

“Technicization’ on the other hand, delves deeper into the ‘increasingly technocratic and tool-kit approach to [D]evelopment” (Kothari, 2005, p. 425) owing to its origins in critical development studies. The use of specialised tools and techniques, that most often require very specific training and/or keeping up with trends, “contribute to the dominance of experts, enhancing their power over aid recipients” (Shrinivas, 2009, p. 620). Due to the separation between the ‘global’ expert and the ‘local’ practitioner, a structure emerges in which the expert uses tools that enforce top-down approaches to the processes of Development interventions (Shrinivas, 2009). While co-opting the ‘alternative development approach’ (Tandon, 2000), what has now played out is the downplaying and disempowerment of local and grassroots workers (Shrinivas, 2009).

Within this system of Development organisations and interventions, like Shrinivas (2009), I want to make a call for an emphasis on ‘amateurism’. The implication of which is that while the staff that is hired does not necessarily have the adequate

professional qualifications and might require training to use the specialised tools or techniques that are used, they are well-versed and familiar in local conditions and customs, besides having skills that help them adapt and execute the programme in context (Shrinivas, 2009). These are what White et al (2014) called ‘learnings and insights’ from the ‘field’ that must be cycled back into projects (see chapter 2.1).

Taking that argument, a bit further, I contend that in Development interventions, this role is already occupied by the middle managers and grassroots workers, and indeed, the beneficiaries themselves. They are already well versed in the local conditions, but top-down, ‘foolproof’ processes, do not allow them to apply this knowledge fully. Given this, we now look at, in the following section, on principles for participation in development and through the additional lens of management/organizational theory.

### **An Expanded Role for Middle Managers**

In the history of organization, the middle manager’s role seems to have come into focus during the post-war industrial boom. Their earliest role was that of a supervisor, in an industrial set up, where they would have to ensure that each worker did their designated micro-task as instructed (Parera & Vallejo, 2013). This supervisory role as envisaged by Taylor (1967 in Parera & Vallejo, 2013), was primarily with the view of boosting production rates. This led to a reduction of their mandate to one of control, in which not much scope remained of making any contribution as they were executors of plans only (Parera & Vallejo, 2013).

In Development projects that span global networks (Bebbington, 2003; Hart, 2001), the roles played by one level of hierarchy above the grassroots worker, is often planned in a somewhat similar manner as Taylor’s (1967) theory for industrial set ups. The strategy is envisioned elsewhere, and it is upto the ‘regional’ manager and grassroots worker to execute that programme as envisaged on the ground. In this thesis, going forwards, principles for participatory management referring to middle managers, are in reference to particularly these two strata of employees in Development

projects: grassroots workers and their managers or team leaders. While in the classic sense they are not ‘middle managers’, I contend that they have a crucial role in translating strategy into action, and act as the bridge between large Development programmes and beneficiaries.

### Strategic Alignment

“Failure to execute successfully is essentially reflective of an inability to align the mental construction (plan) with the reality — the strategy gap.” (Research participant as quoted in Salih & Doll, 2013, p. 35). Borne out by my research with individuals and organisations in the Development and participatory media spheres, there was an emphasis on the need to align “strategic intentions and employee actions and activities” (Salih & Doll, 2013, p. 35).

The middle manager has the potential to hold a very key position in any organisation, because of the unique mix of knowledge, both of the “external environment and internal operations” (Salih & Doll, 2013, p. 33). Leveraging this unique ability, would mean that upper management can then rely on them to advise on potential issues that might be faced when attempting to execute a plan. They (upper management) could also potentially give them (middle managers) leeway to make changes on the fly, while responding to local conditions.

### Participatory Management Style

Participatory management is categorised by high employee engagement and seen as crucial for successful strategy implementation (Salih & Doll, 2013). This builds on the idea of the role that can be played by middle managers in creating strategic alignment, and puts the onus on the organisational culture to allow for this kind of style, which necessitates greater inclusion and loosening of control.

Employee engagement is a desirable trait in an organisation as “high levels of engagement are associated with high levels of performance, citizenship behaviors, and individual well-being” (Truss, Shantz, Soane, Alfes & Delbridge, 2013, p. 2658). While the

research on what creates high levels of engagement is inconclusive, there is emerging evidence that ‘high involvement’ and being ‘committed to the organisation’s goals and values’ are a couple of a larger set of factors (Truss et al., 2013).

Thus keeping in mind the history of participation, global networks that come into play for the executing of Development interventions, and the role that the ‘middle managers’ can play, in the next section we try and unpack what principles for participation by these actors within a project or team can be brought into play while thinking through Participatory Learning Networks.

## **Principles for participation**

As discussed earlier, participation has become one of the ‘shibboleths’ (Hickey & Mohan, 2005) of Development over the past thirty years. As Hickey & Mohan (2005) demonstrate through their selective history of participation in Development (Hickey & Mohan, 2005: Table 1), most organisations and projects now incorporate some form of participation by beneficiaries, as it is seen by organisations as “necessary for development to be relevant, sustainable and empowering” (p. 237). This participation involves various ‘stakeholders’, the range covers anyone from governmental institutions and individuals, beneficiaries, NGOs, to the private sector (Cornwall, 2006). Cornwall (2006) sums the sheer expanse of what participation means when she states that

*Amendments to focus on ‘primary stakeholders’ notwithstanding (Tandon & Cordeiro, 1998), this is clearly an expansive constellation of actors. Rietbergen-McCracken and Narayan define ‘participation’ as ‘ranging from information-sharing and consultation methods, to mechanisms for collaboration and empowerment that give stakeholders more influence and control’ (Rietbergen-McCracken & Narayan, 1998: 4). **This gives the term an elasticity that expands its meaning to cover just about any development activity involving just about any development actor** [emphasis mine] (p. 77).*

For the purposes of this thesis, we will focus our attention to greater participation from the ‘middle managers’ with a possibility of extending some of the principles to encourage participation from beneficiaries in future work (see chapter 5). The following principles extend our understanding of the aspect of ‘Participation and equity as a core organisational culture element’ as stated in chapter 2.1. Blending perspectives on participation as envisaged by Hickey and Mohan (2005) along with the principles that comprise the ‘participatory management’ style as stated by Parera and Vallejo (2013), we have a set of basic set of principles for participation in learning networks as envisaged in this thesis.

#### Participation as Citizenship

The biggest factor for success in the view of Hickey and Mohan (2005) is that participation needs to be viewed and built into programmatic design, as citizenship. Extending that idea, the middle managers thus become citizens. While this might seem merely to be a semantic shift, within the purview of a Development intervention this would ensure a certain amount of equity, accountability and agency. While there are many ways to understand and unpack the idea of citizenship, I’d like to focus on two aspects that are critical to our using the idea to understand the role of middle managers and their participation in Development projects. Parera and Vallejo (2013), direct us to refer to Fayol’s principles of management that focus on authority and initiative, as important aspects of management in a formal organisation.

Fayol’s principle of authority is particularly important in the way that we are defining ‘the middle manager’ as it posits that while authority can be derived from an ‘official’ position, there is another kind of authority which is ‘personal’. This gains strength from the ‘know-how’ possessed by the individual, the actor, consisting of their ‘personal intelligence, experience, moral courage, and managerial ability’ (Parera & Vallejo, 2013), ideas which have variously been called ‘the tacit knowledge of laity’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973) or as actions: “experimentation, improvisation, adaptation and innovation” (White et al., 2014, p. 29).

The 'initiative principle' echoes Marais and Meyer (2014) and their conception of value created by organisations as directly tied to the decisions made, thus generating a "framework of freedom that grants the worker, regardless of the level they occupy in the chain, a decision making margin" (Fayol as quoted by Parera & Vallejo, 2013, p. 363).

Thus these complementary principles, suggest that participation in formal organisations must be based on the ability of middle managers to take initiative based on the authority that they already possess. Thus, For there to be sustained participation, there needs to be sustained real change in 'visible' ways in which the wider context is affected in line with the input from the middle managers – 'the local'.

#### Agency in Hierarchy through Communication and Trust

The ability to have the kind of relationship required for the principles of authority and initiative to be accorded to all employees in some measure of equality, requires a great amount of trust between various levels of hierarchy (Parera & Vallejo, 2013), and one way of building that trust is high levels and quality of communication that is two way.

For Barnard (1973 as cited in Parera & Vallejo, 2013), the 'organisation is a kind of human co-operation', thus making communication between the many human actors who comprise this organisation as critical. An important 'innovation' in management thinking, is that one must focus on various types of communication, both formal and informal (Parera & Vallejo, 2013). Parera & Vallejo (2013) posit that descending communication is formal, while ascending communication (and often overlooked) is informal. Barnard (1973 as cited in Parera & Vallejo, 2013) makes the point that the types of communication lead to kinds of 'organisations', and while management theory focuses on the formal organisations, there needs to be some focus on informal organisations, as in his mind they are critical in strategy implementation, and are inseparable with formal organisations (Parera & Vallejo, 2013).

The role of the middle manager as a channel for communication between various levels of hierarchy can't be stressed enough (Parrera & Vallejo, 2013). These middle managers, the 'agents of developments' (Hickey & Mohan, 2005) need to go through a perceptual transformation; From being 'directive experts' to 'facilitators of local knowledge and capabilities'. In the case of team leaders and regional managers, they need to facilitate the participation through ideas and experiences of the grassroots workers; And in turn these workers need to make room for the beneficiaries to participate.

Additionally, I'd like to contend though, to add a another form of informal communication, which is lateral. In organisations that are spread across vast geographies, as is the case with Development projects at scale, middle managers have few opportunities to interface with others carrying out similar work in the same programme in other regions. Facilitation of better lateral informal communications could in effect lead to higher employee engagement, and exchange of knowledge.

#### Workgroups and Personal satisfaction

While this is more an operational observation than a principle, I'd like to build on Mayo's (1977) theory around workgroups. Mayo observed in research conducted in the Hawthorne studies (Parera & Vallejo, 2013), the tendency that people had to "form or belong to workgroups", and the satisfaction that they derived from that experience. Mayo (1977) observed that "for the individual, groups are an integrating factor, a means to reduce the monotony of work, a communication channel, an opportunity to earn prestige" (Parera and Vallejo, 2013, p. 363).

Mayo (1977) observed that these groups tend to be small ones, united by a series of common tasks or goals. I contend that while the groups that Mayo observed were informal and spontaneous in how they emerged, there is a role for the artificial seeding of small informal groups amongst middle managers and grassroots workers, who might not otherwise have the opportunity to form

such groups that would lead to higher ‘workplace engagement’. The thesis uses this point, and explores it further through the exploration of networks and online communities in chapter 2.2.3.

### **Envisioning a cybernetic system for dynamic project design**

Building on the principles for participation in the previous section, we come to the other aspect we had initially defined as essential in creating a cultural shift within Development organisations, which was ‘dynamic project design’ (see chapter 2.1). At the core of this is the idea that organisations must design interventions to be more dynamic, as autocratic and centralised processes in problem (and concurrently solution) definition (Rittel & Webber, 1973) lead to sub-par outcomes. We don’t have to go too far though, while looking for a framework that creates this sort of dynamism, Rittel & Webber (1973) supply us with the notion of an “idealized planning system” (p. 159), which is:

*being seen as an ongoing process of cybernetic process of governance, incorporating systematic procedures for continuously searching out goals; identifying problems; forecasting uncontrollable contextual changes; inventing alternative strategies, tactics, and time-sequenced actions; stimulating alternative and plausible action sets and their consequences; evaluating alternatively forecasted outcomes; statistically monitoring those conditions of the publics and of systems that are judged to be germane; feeding back information to the simulation and decision channels so that errors can be corrected — all in a simultaneously functioning governing process. (p. 159)*

What broadly is being described is a movement away from an ‘autopoietic’ system (Maturana & Varela, 1980 as cited in Kilpi, 2015), in which a system is thought to be closed and insulated from external or changing forces, and thus a single solution can fit the problem at hand. We must move towards a cybernetic system, which is driven by twin goals that run hand-in-hand, it is a living system that strives towards certain goals while constantly evaluating, and adapting to feedback from within the system (Kilpi,

2015). Kilpi (2015) is driving towards the point that management practices need to become more responsive and agile, in a fractal manner (thus at every level). It goes from seeing 'human work as contextual interaction between interdependent people' all the way to seeing firms as nodes in a constantly shifting, morphing network of entities responding creatively to the changing landscape.

Kilpi (2015), feels that it is time for us to think and act more algorithmically, simply because unlike any other time in history, we have at our disposal both the ability to collect large amounts of data (in the trinity of volume, velocity and variance) and the ability to compute this data with some speed, and accuracy.

To add to this line of thinking I'd like to add two thoughts. Firstly, Kilpi (2015) is probably referring to firms that work in the realm of mainly technological innovations and systems, that rely on quantitative data from sensors and the like. I contend that if one were to bring his line of thinking to bear on the participatory principles within a framework of the organisation as a network of actors, it would mean that the middle managers would become suppliers, consumers and analysts of qualitative data — in the form of pictures, videos, stories and ideas. This leads me to my second point; which is that while the cybernetic system is iterative and responsive, it still seems technocratic. This is mainly due to the fact, that all it does is put the onus on middle managers, and others in the hierarchy to report more and better. The addition of participatory principles into this system of governance along with the empowering of actors in the lower levels of hierarchy to make and enact decisions, significantly transforms this system.

The system builds with the basic principle, that we treat those who comprise the organisation, as individual actors, and work to bring in participation that creates better employee engagement and a sense of equity, agency and accountability. Operationally speaking, this translates into a set of principles through which we can realise this cybernetic system or network of actors.

1. Ownership over values and goals  
In Development projects, the middle manager should be viewed not only as the executors of designed programmes, but be well trained and made co-owners of the overall impact being sought. This could lead to better adaptation on the ground and inputs that lead to higher strategic alignment.
2. Small groups & lateral communication  
As discussed earlier, in Development projects spread across vast geographies, grassroots workers and middle management, have few opportunities to connect and learn from each other. Given Mayo's (1977 as cited in Parrera & Vallejo, 2013) view about the need for workgroups, it would be highly advantageous to connect these employees to each other in safe, informal spaces (physical or virtual) where discussions around problems, solutions, frustrations etc can be shared openly without judgment, in real time rather than at long intervals.
3. Channels for ascending communication  
If the middle manager is seen as a co-owner in the impact being sought, then channels need to be opened up where honest and detailed feedback and failures can be shared with upper management without retribution.
4. Ability to enact change in strategy and programme  
Taking forward the principle around participation as espoused by Harper (2001 as cited in Hickey & Mohan, 2005), if channels of participation are created in a programme, for there to be sustained change, there needs to be visible action that enacts the feedback being got.

## 2.2.3 Networks and Online Communities

While in the previous section we synthesised some principles for participation and organisational paradigms relating to decision making and dynamic project design, in this section we build a foundation for an understanding of what we mean by the ‘networks’ aspect of ‘participatory learning networks’.

The humble, bottom-up “approach requires a fundamental rethinking of prevailing managerial approaches, (where) hierarchy and top down controls are the norm”, Wei-Skillern and Silver (2013) write in their paper ‘Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success’ (p. 125). While their paper focuses on networks of organisations and funders who help ‘build constellations’ of these institutions for higher impact, I have previously contended that one could indeed treat organisations as networks within themselves, elevating and supporting each actor irrespective of hierarchy. One could then apply some of the principles as espoused by them for creating an environment where managers collaborate with grassroots workers, who in turn collaborate with beneficiaries for more successful outcomes.

### Ownership of Impact

Organisations often, due to the realities of funding and accountability, are focused on organisational scale and growth, often losing sight of mission focus. (Wei-Skillern & Silver, 2013). This leads to a trickle down of these pressures into programmatic design and organisational pressures on workers and employees within Development institutions. The principle here is to become mission focussed, at the level of every actor within the organisation, such that there is a sense of place in terms of the impact that the individual has through their actions. A network built on this principle, would lead to each actor having an ownership on the overall impact being sought, and thus view their actions through that lens, working towards overall growth and success, rather than short-term or near-sighted goals.

### Trust, not Control

While Development institutions led by well meaning and introspective funders and philanthropists have now made

monitoring and evaluation key aspects of Development programmes and projects, the underlying principle is one based on doubt and control. It has been observed that “trust-based relationships among network partners allow more holistic, coordinated, timely, and realistic solutions to rise to the surface” (Wei-Skillern & Silver, 2013, p. 125). Wei-Skillern and Silver’s (2013) successes (amongst others) with creating trust based systems, rely on “mutual accountability among peers [which] is often found to be [a] more powerful lever for ensuring high performance [rather] than top-down approaches” (p. 125). This leads us to try and create systems, where peers at the same level of hierarchy can periodically, even constantly, engage with each other, not just for support but also to hold each other accountable for their actions and how these contribute to the overall impact.

Thinking of Development organisations in this manner, as networks of actors, I believe is a powerful tool. It allows us to not look at a programme as being executed by a variety of monolithic institutions, but a network of individuals, of people, with very human tendencies, needs and failures. Given the ICT focus, we look at the leveraging of online communities as a way of manifesting these principles and networks.

## **On Online communities**

Today, user communities are being built across various services, be that common interest groups on services such as WebMD, Reddit or Google Groups, or communities for specific functions such as review and reputation web services such as Yelp and Amazon amongst others. This has led to an interest to better understand the guidelines and principles that describe the ‘organisation, initiation, stimulation and management of these communities’ (Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2002, p. 71).

Online communities can be defined

*through their features as associations of participants who share a common language, world, values, and interests, obey a commonly defined organizational structure and communicate and cooperate ubiquitously connected by electronic media and possibly represented by avatars. (Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2002, p. 72)*

As she further elaborates, the social association of the participants of a community and the technological platform that enables participation are of equal importance, and must work together to create and maintain a high-functioning online community.

### Kinds of participation

Thinking through the kind of participation that we envision, we turn to Land (2009) for two types of participation:

- An online community that enables ‘broad mobilisation’ ensures that a larger number of people are more engaged with the issue at hand, but this tends to decrease the quality and amount of participation, as the size of the group increases.
- On the other hand ‘deep participation’ allows, as the name suggests, for a much more engaged user, engaging with others in a more meaningful manner. This type of participation however is quite limited by the size of the community, wherein smaller communities are more effective.

For the system that we are looking to develop, we would ideally like for there to be small groups of middle managers, speaking horizontally to peers in accordance with the organisational principle of ‘small groups and lateral communication’. But for these to then feed into larger groups where the whole organisation can interact with each other, where participation might be a lot less, but the connection is created between work and communication on the ground and the larger strategy, in keeping with ‘channels for ascending communication’ (see chapter 2.2.2).

Borrowing from the idea of ‘Networked Activism’ (Land, 2009) we can create a network of highly interlinked smaller groups, that encourage and facilitate deep participation, that come together to form larger groups that fulfil the advantages and functions for ‘broad mobilisation’.

### Typology of the community

As per Stanoevska-Slabeva’s (2002) typologies of online communities we are looking at a hybrid community that combines certain principles of three types of communities:

- Communities of practice: defined as “a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavor and engage in a process of collective learning that creates bonds between them” (Wenger, 2001 quoted in Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2002, p. 79). These are defined as an online discussion community, which are categorized by their focus on high levels of communication and content generation.
- Design communities: are defined under the broader heading of task and goal oriented communities. Their basic aim according to Stanoevska-Slabeva (2002) is the “common design and development of a product or a service” (p. 85). Within our system, the ‘product or service’ would be the programme or project being executed.
- Online Learning communities: are “dedicated to collaborative online learning. Their basic aim is the establishment of a learning space for a certain subject, where participants can receive both defined degrees or knowledge and support for continuous lifelong learning” (Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2002, p. 87) and are also a ‘task or goal oriented community’. Massively Online Open Courses (MOOCs) like Coursera are a prime example of this sort of community.

Thus synthesising broadly, participatory learning networks are proposed as a system. This system empowers the individual actor - the middle manager. They would be empowered to be part of a larger online network of communities of practice. This network would run parallel to the organisational system it is situated in, through smaller groups that encourage deep participation. The objective of this participation would be towards continuous learning and development of the programme that they are collectively working towards.

A system like this would also effectively be participatory in nature within an organisational paradigm adhering to the principles discussed earlier, and through the channeling of information and the larger network, respond to Kilpi’s (2015) call for management that is cybernetic in nature.

## Principles for platform design

Stanoevska-Slabeva (2002) offers us a structure by which to define the parameters or principles of a platform that we are looking to use for a given typology of design communities.

### Organisational Structure

- Roles & Hierarchy: Based on the point of smaller groups and deep participation, we are looking at small groups who are at more or less the same level (in the larger organisational hierarchy). Within each group thus, we would have the individuals forming the core of the group, sharing relevant content. Other than being participants, perhaps one or two individuals might be required to play the dual role of moderators and sharers of content into the larger groups as suggested earlier.
- Rules for communication: Broadly, there might not be any strict rules for participation that can be designed at the outset, but would be established through practice by the members of the community itself. This is where the moderator might play a role, in ensuring that rules set by the community are enforced.

### Basic Communication and coordination services

- Platform: The platform required would allow for easy creation of groups of participants, with good functionality for both small and very large groups. Additionally, the platform should be easily available across operating systems on mobile phones, because of fragmentation in terms of the personal/official devices that might be used by the participants in these communities, whose primary access to the internet is through mobiles. Furthermore, the platform should function well on lower speed data services as have been observed in the field in everything but urban situations in India.
- Knowledge services: The communities need to be able to share content through a variety of media — text, speech, video, images as well as documents in various 'office' formats. Additionally, it would be desirable if bundled with the online service/platform are tools that allow for the creation of higher quality media, such as video or image editing, document creation. Other tools could include search features, of

previously shared content, the ability to better tag and manage the shared content or the discussions that ensue.

Thus we see a clearer picture emerges of the kind of tools we would need to manifest the vision of Participatory learning Networks. This strengthens the foundation of our understanding of the building blocks of the suite tools originally proposed (Technology platform, connecting groups and sharing meaningful content; see chapter 2.1) and situates them in the new organisational paradigm as well.

## 2.3 Participatory Learning Networks

### 2.3.1 Meet the middle manager and the system they work in

To conclude this chapter, I would like to paint a picture of the middle managers that we are talking about and the system that they work in. These are personas based on experiences from my work at Quicksand and subsequently, as well as the organisations that I met and interviewed for the participatory media landscape study and the case with Centre of Gravity. In this section I define three personas at various levels whom I have included within the ambit of the ‘middle manager’: two grassroots workers, one senior and one junior, and their team leader. The scenario that these personas find themselves in is where a large international foundation is executing a rural sanitation programme at scale through a network of local NGOs. In Gujarat, one of five states in India where the programme is being executed, one of the NGO partners is ‘Prayatna’ (meaning ‘attempt’ in Hindi). Near the merchant city of Rajkot, Suresh is in charge of a team of ten facilitators of whom Salman and Geeta are two members working on this programme amongst a couple of others.

**Salman** is a senior facilitator with Prayatna, an NGO working across many of the districts in Gujarat, India. While his background is

technical, trained as a surveyor, his work over the last 30 years with this NGO on several different projects ranging from watershed management, to building sanitation facilities and rainwater harvesting systems, to educating around women's health and polio have made him adept at navigating social mores in the villages in his constituency, and carry out social communication and behavior change campaigns. His experience has given him the tools to quickly become familiar even with villages where he hasn't worked before, and his easygoing and likable nature make it easy for the 'beneficiaries' of the programmes he executes to trust him and thus help him execute his projects much better than many of his peers. He often spends the first few days or weeks of a programme, understanding the underlying power and social dynamics of any community he has to work in. What frustrates him often though, is that programmes that he gets trained to execute are so stringently tracked and monitored that it doesn't leave too much room for him to adapt the programme to the realities of what he sees. Sometimes, if a programme is somewhat loosely monitored he makes changes to the programme so that he gets better results, but doesn't report those changes so that he isn't pulled up by his team leader Suresh, for not adhering to the programme. He laments the fact that he can't share his ideas with others, as especially the younger crop of facilitators often struggles to understand why their work isn't as successful, even though they've been following the script.

**Geeta** is a fresh graduate, having completed her 'Masters in Social Work' from the local university in nearby Rajkot in Gujarat, India. She is 21 years old, and while there is pressure on her from her family to get married soon, she is quite passionate to try and get a career going with the local NGO Prayatna. She has made a deal with her family that they will let her work for at least two years, before they try and find her a husband, who will support her continued work with the NGO. Thanks to recommendations from her professors, she has got a job with the NGO. She received some initial training for a new national level rural sanitation project, being executed by Prayatna across several districts in Gujarat. She has now been out in the field for a few weeks trying to execute

the project, doing as she has been told by her team lead Suresh, to follow the script to the finest detail. She is quite frustrated, as it's time for her to document the outcomes thus far and submit them to Suresh for collation and reporting to the Good Intention Foundation which has contracted them for this project. She has several ideas of small tweaks she could make to create better impact, but is shot down often by Suresh, who is under strict orders to not go off script. She sees some of her other colleagues who are doing marginally better than she is, but are equally frustrated at the stringent monitoring and the lack of room for improvisation. During informal chats with them, she brings up these concerns, but many of them, having been doing this work for a while in this and other organisations, tell her that it's pretty much the same everywhere, and that's just how things are.

**Suresh** is the team leader managing social impact projects for the well admired NGO, Prayatna, across two small districts in Gujarat. He has a team of about 10 facilitators working with him and depending on the project they have anything between 40 to 50 villages in their ambit. He's been working in the social work space for about ten years now, but his superior English and leadership skills have helped him jump into a managerial position after having spent only five years as a facilitator with another NGO in the state's capital Ahmedabad. For his latest project he has been tasked with helping the NGO successfully carry out a programme around rural sanitation, that has been designed by the Good Intention Foundation which is a highly regarded international philanthropic organisation based primarily out of WASHINGTON DC with offices in Delhi and Bihar. This project is one of three that his team is carrying out. All of them are in the realm of sanitation and hygiene, though the other two are designed by the state rural development programme and the other by a large national women's rights NGO respectively. The new programme has been running for a couple of months now, and tensions in the regional office are running high, as the programme that was piloted in Bihar, is not having the same level of success, but pleas from his team and him to the foundation's visiting monitoring team, fall on deaf ears. The monitoring team instead found several small details wherein

Suresh's team was not adhering to the designed programme, as causes for the failures. Besides this of course, he is under constant pressure from the local bureaucrat, the block development officer, to carry out surveys for the district offices, as part of the large national push around sanitation and hygiene. It's become quite difficult for him to run a tight ship with such few resources, all of whom are quite unhappy with the heavy hand he is forced to exercise as their team leader.

**The Good Intention Foundation's** rural sanitation project is one amongst several different programmes that they run across various sectors ranging from public health, education and urban development. They are a foundation that has been running since the late 90s, formed when their founders got involved in international development through the UN discussions around the Millennium Development Goals. Since then they have spread in their work to over 30 countries across Africa, Asia and South America. The rural sanitation programme is a promising new idea that was floated by a celebrated behavioral economics researcher at Yale University. The foundation gave her a small grant to pilot her hypothesis in a few villages in Bihar in Central-Western India. The closely monitored programme had shown promise and very exciting results, and so the researcher put together a proposal as part of a consortium including various public and private agencies and NGOs to scale the programme across five states in India, along with pilots in Kenya and Uganda. The proposal for India was funded with some tweaks by the foundation, as being managed out of their offices in Delhi and Bihar. In keeping with the foundation's beliefs around evidence-based action, the project is monitored very minutely with all partner organisations having to report their activities, preferably not deviating from the design as envisioned and executed in the pilot. The programme has now been running for about three months, but as with so many promising pilots in the past, the results have just not been in the same range. These and other lukewarm successes and often time failures are forcing the senior officers and founders of the foundation to think about how they can improve their programmes. The only saving grace is that this isn't a unique problem they are facing, but seems to be a

widespread issue with programmes at scale in general, with many heated discussions at many a conference.

These are but a few of the many actors involved in this process, there are several more personas that could be described, from the team of researchers who worked on the pilot and are in charge of the massive project based on their initial work, to the regional managers at Prayatna's state office, to the various characters that Salman has to contend with in his work in one of the remote villages he works in, along with the bureaucrat facing immense pressures to make her district open-defecation free in an impossible time frame. But here we focus on just these, to illustrate how an instance of the participatory learning networks could be applied here.

### **2.3.2 Principles for a paradigm shift**

At this juncture, I would like to pause to start with more succinct definitions of the constituent parts of the phrase 'Participatory Learning Networks'. The following build on the work in the previous sections of this chapter. Participation, meant especially of the middle manager — describing all three, Salman, Geeta and Suresh — wherein programmes are designed such that they have the leeway and trust in their network to make iterations and improvisations based on the realities on the ground, sharing these learnings with their peers especially and with their seniors. Learning, meaning those observations, ideas and improvisations that seek to create greater impact in their work, and the documentation and sharing off this learning with peers, who can apply and build on these in their own contexts, and a synthesis of these to affect overall project design and details. Lastly, networks as safe spaces and platforms for these communications and support for the middle managers working on the frontline of these programmes, and the decisions they make.

Building on the key aspects that were mentioned in the introduction of participatory learning networks in chapter 2.1, namely 'dynamic project design' and 'participation and equity as a core organisational culture element', Bala (from Centre of Gravity)

and I defined five principles that a team, organisation or network can adopt to create an environment for successful application of participatory learning networks. These principles were envisioned, as part of the work of pitching the idea to the TATA Trust (see chapter 4), but are applicable in a more general sense to this thesis.

1. One time to Dynamic

Campaigns or project interventions are conceived with the assumption that you create perfect prototypes straightaway and they just need to get replicated. However, in reality they need to be adapted to local context and get refined with time based on learning as they are in pilots. Thus an organisation, needs to make it part of its cultural DNA, to be all right with this sort of a dynamic process, while planning projects, such that the intervention might look very different on day hundred from what it did on day one.

In the scenario illustrated in the previous section, that would mean that the programme design based on the pilot would need to be designed in a slightly broader manner, with reCOGnition that there would be certain elements that could be improved upon by field workers based on their understanding of their local contexts and experiences on the ground. This would involve programme design wherein the intervention is designed as a set of tools and practices as part of a larger framework.

2. Top down to Many directions

As we saw in the section 2.2.2, It is often assumed that all knowledge rests with the top and it needs to be just transferred to those below, for effective implementation or learning. The key though as we discussed in that section, was that a vast store of knowledge lies with those at every level, and thus while thinking about channels for learning and communication, we must acknowledge and make room for learning that is lateral, and bottom up as well.

In the scenario this would happen in a two fold manner. Firstly,

Suresh and his team would be given the room to iterate. This would enable the second point, that is being highlighted here, wherein Salman, Geeta and their colleagues could open share their learnings and improvisations not just with each other, but with Suresh, to be reported to the teams from the state and foundation teams.

### 3. Technical vs. Technical and emotional

Organisational processes and project design, need to take into account that training and capacity building programmes focus beyond just the ‘whats’ and ‘hows’ in the programme. There needs to be a move towards more emotional support and ongoing training and technical support. The project design needs to build systems of feedback that seek to empathize with the middle managers and grassroots workers. This is because the effort put in by them, depends on how inspired they are and how connected (as against lonely) they feel.

While the scenario above didn’t touch upon this detail, there are a few key actions that the project design team could undertake in the design of the programme. Firstly, during the training, an effort needs to be made such that those in the field executing the programme understand the theoretical and practical basis for the work they’re expected to do. This is in keeping with the key role that Suresh, Salman and Geeta can play as ‘middle managers’ in ensuring strategy implementation. Additionally, they need to be emotionally supported through the process, so that when a facilitator like Geeta is feeling lost as she is not seeing results, or Suresh feels put down upon because of his pressures, they both can have formal spaces in which to get support.

### 4. Doers vs. Doers and Thinkers

One of the key points being made in the initial introduction to ‘participatory learning networks’, is that the perception of the role of the grassroots worker, needs to shift dramatically. They need to be viewed less as simply doers or executors of a programme, but their skills and abilities to discern information

and make decisions as thinkers and thus innovators needs to be made room for in the design of projects.

This elaborates on the first point, such that to be able to have dynamic project design, one must have a shift in the way that Salman and Geeta are viewed by the project monitoring and design teams. Given that they are in the field, working with a particular set of beneficiaries in a specific context, means that they are best equipped to get things done. They need to be given the agency to think through their situation, and make decisions for better outcomes. This can only happen if there is a dramatic shift in how they are viewed by those higher up in the hierarchy.

#### 5. Doubt vs. Trust

Monitoring is often about playing the ‘watchdog’ – monitoring systems are therefore built on doubt rather than trust. This follows from the previous point; The grassroots workers must be trusted to make appropriate innovations towards the shared impact and goal, and thus we can have monitoring systems that look at data collection as means for understanding and improving aspects of the campaign, rather than simply reprimanding those who stray from the objectives.

In the scenario, the monitoring team is more critical of the team implementing the project and nitpicks with their work, rather than asking critical questions about what they might learn towards project design and implementation. With this point, the design of monitoring should be focussed on learning from the iterations that Salman or Geeta might make, as a marker for ways to improve the overall project design. Feeding these ideas back to the larger group, such that facilitators in other teams and geographical contexts can learn from them and create better impact in their own contexts.

Illustrated above are but a few examples of how each of these five principles could be translated to the scenario. In the project (elaborated in chapter 4), we translated these principles through

a reframed framework for the entire project, into a varied set of actions in training as well as in the manner in which the ICT element of the ‘participatory learning networks’ was implemented. The next section, presents a set of principles for the design of the ICT tools, building on field research.



*A Video Volunteerscommunity correspondent in training (Video Volunteers, 2016)*

# Chapter 3

---

**LEARNINGS FROM  
INITIAL FIELD  
RESEARCH**

This chapter works to build on the understanding from literature, and a conception of what one means by Participatory Learning Networks. Here as briefly mentioned in the introductory chapter (see 1.4.3), field research was undertaken across two broad themes, the first (chronologically) in phase two, wherein early on in the process, I met with several different organisations working in participatory media and technology in development. The landscape study is documented in section 3.2 along with some conclusions and learnings towards the long-term goal of building out the Participatory Learning Networks, along with a few lessons applied to the case study. Along with the researching and building of the theoretical framework in phase three, I also did a short study on the use of WhatsApp for online communities, that fit our description of target communities. This is documented in section 3.1, along with learnings that were directly applied to the case study.

Together this field work was instrumental in better defining the principles for building, and running the participatory learning networks. These principles are defined in section 3.3.

## 3.1 Studying Online Communities

### 3.1.1 Using WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a proprietary mobile based messaging platform. It is one of the only messaging apps that is truly cross-platform working across devices running many different operating systems. Additionally, along with messaging the application can be used for sharing media in various formats, documents and making voice calls (WhatsApp, n.d.).

The messaging platform has a reported 1 billion plus users across the world (Metz, 2016). A service that started as merely a way to broadcast a user's status and availability to peers, has turned — especially in Brazil and India — as the go to service for messaging,

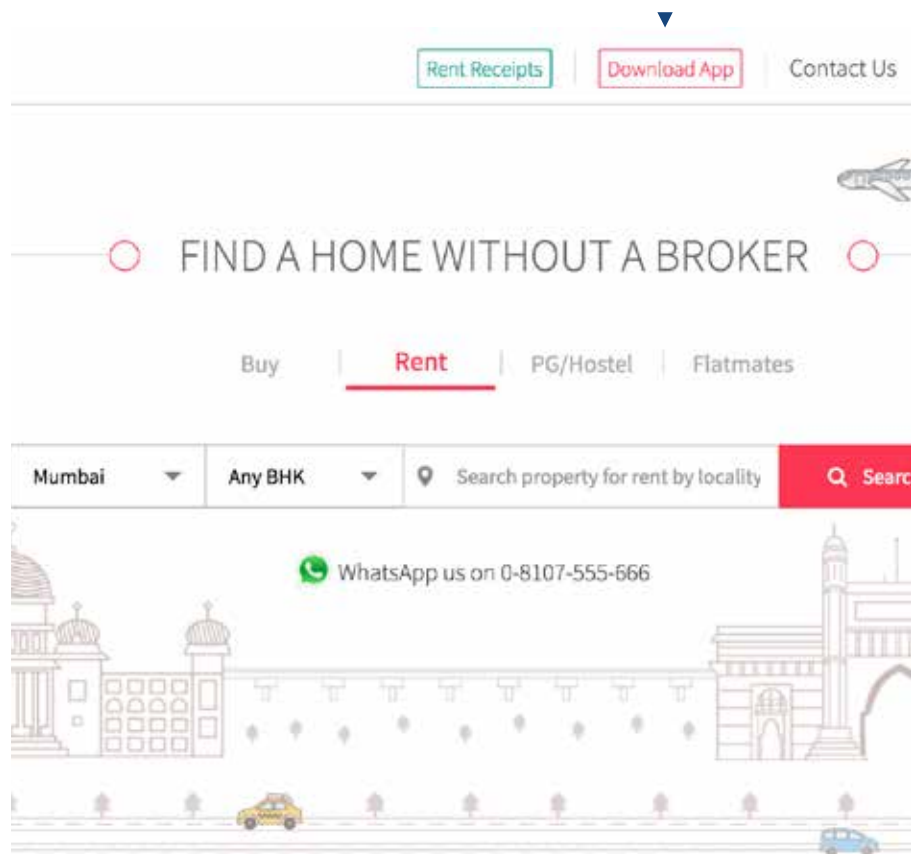
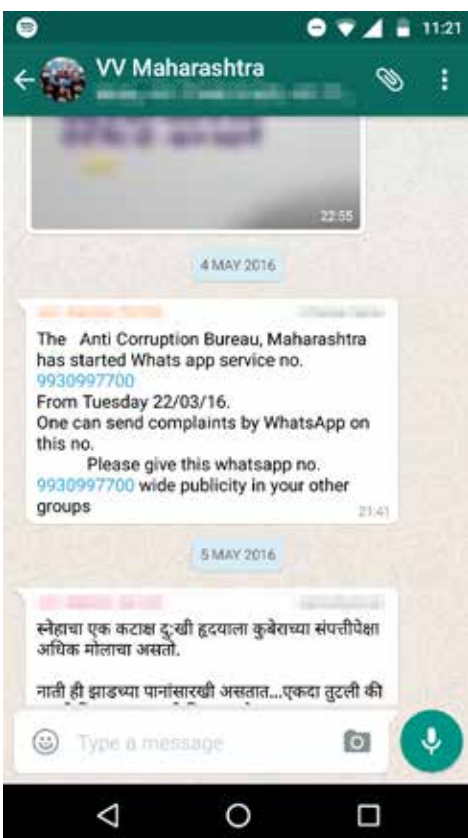
with local telecom carriers creating offers that undermine their own SMS plans, but that have gotten a large section of the public on the wider web (Metz, 2016).

In my own experience, traveling the length and breadth of the country and in my own family, I've seen older, mostly technophobic members take to smartphones and the internet because of WhatsApp. It is now the go-to service for connecting with people and creating groups for various functions. We explore some of these in the following section, but I want to briefly look at how the platform is being used by various groups in formal and informal ways for very different ends.

#### Used by institutions to connect

There are now multiple instances where WhatsApp is used by institutions instead of or along with a helpline number. The platform acts as an always-on, easily accessible chat helpline. Below are a couple of such instances:

(l to r) Figure 1: Screenshot from the Video Volunteers Maharashtra WhatsApp group about the Anti-Corruption Bureau of Maharashtra; Figure 2: Screenshot from the website of Indian real estate website 'NoBroker.in' which uses a WhatsApp number for customer service.



In a group of community correspondents and activists (discussed later in this chapter), this message (refer figure 1) was shared highlighting the WhatsApp 'service' being offered by the 'Anti Corruption Bureau' in Maharashtra (a state in western India). Citizens can message the number directly to report instances of bribes being solicited.

NoBroker.in an online property and realty platform that connects buyers & sellers and renters & landlords for potential deals, offers a WhatsApp number to be contacted for support (refer figure 2).

#### Informal networks for information sharing

There are multiple instances where individuals or organisations act as nodes of information, connecting large groups of people who would hitherto have no way of connecting with each other.

Vora (2015) reports that a Gujarati trader, Dinesh Tilva, who uses a network of WhatsApp groups and personal messages to create a high-functioning informal system of classifieds.

Another instance of similar usage is the story of bus conductor, Shiju, working on the Public Bus system in Kerala, who uses a group with regular customers updated about the bus route so that they're never late or miss the bus (Garcia, 2016).

These are but a few instances and types of use, the function of presenting these is to simply show that people are using a basic peer to peer messaging service in very creative ways to achieve various functions of online communities as elaborated by Stanoevska-Slabeva (2002).

### **Platform for the Thesis**

Primarily we are looking for a communication platform for the purpose of this thesis, and the case study discussed in chapter 4. Functionally speaking, the platform as discussed in chapter 2.2.3, would point to the team collaboration service Slack. The software has taken internal team communications by storm, and is touted

by many to be a great way to get teams to better communicate with each other.

Slack, is essentially instant messaging for teams. It allows teams to create channels (both public and private) and direct messaging between various team members. Initially built on the internet relay chat (IRC) platform, the software has evolved dramatically over time, adding functionality for higher productivity to work with such services as Dropbox, Google Drive, Asana amongst others (Slack, 2016).

While many of these features are desirable, I tested the service in late 2014 while consulting with an education foundation that has moved all their internal communications onto slack. There are two major reasons that this is inappropriate for our usage:

- The service hasn't been built mobile first, and works better for teams that work a higher percentage of the time using full function computers (desktops or laptops). Performance on mobile as we stipulated earlier was a key factor for our platform.
- The other failure would be that the mobile platform, is not built for geographies where people are using slower, intermittent data services as is the case in many developing country contexts.

Additionally, for the following reasons, WhatsApp is the right platform:

- Existing usage: There is little or no training required, as the use of WhatsApp is widespread especially amongst the target users in the organisations with which Centre of Gravity is working (see chapter 4).
- Informal usage: One of the functions that the platform must serve is for the online communities formed on them to feel like safe spaces where grassroots workers and middle managers can easily communicate without intervention or repercussions from the hierarchy. An application/platform that is custom designed or that feels official will then be used mostly for formal communication and deviate from the principles of

informal communication that we elaborated on in chapter 2.2.2 and 2.2.3.

- Continued usage: As observed with the users in the research conducted to better understand the use of WhatsApp groups and communities of practice, one of the issues that users face with lower end smartphones, is lack of memory on their devices. Thus the ability to keep a large number of applications on board is limited. Owing to this, it further makes sense to ensure that we utilize a platform that has continued personal and informal usage rather than just for these functions.

### **3.1.2 Research on WhatsApp groups and communities of practice**

To better understand how WhatsApp groups that fall in a similar category of hybrid communities that we are targeting, I got in touch with and joined three WhatsApp groups.

I was a silent and passive observer, of the communities over a period of over eight months, broadly between October 2015 and May 2016.

The three groups were:

Baliraja: is a WhatsApp group which connects farmers from the state of Maharashtra (specifically in the drought hit parts) with each other as a means of exchanging information and offering support. I found out about them through an article on an Indian online magazine called The Better India (Katoch, 2015). Through the contact details given, I got in touch, explaining the larger project, and was allowed to observe the group's interactions.

Video Volunteers: are an NGO based out of India, that use the power of community video to create change around hyper-local issues in a different (mostly) rural contexts around a variety of different issues, from service delivery, accountability, social justice to citizen mobilisation. In a nutshell the model is that a team based out of Goa, trains correspondents (usually one per district) after a rigorous selection process to create videos on these local issues and mobilise action around them. I had initially gotten in touch

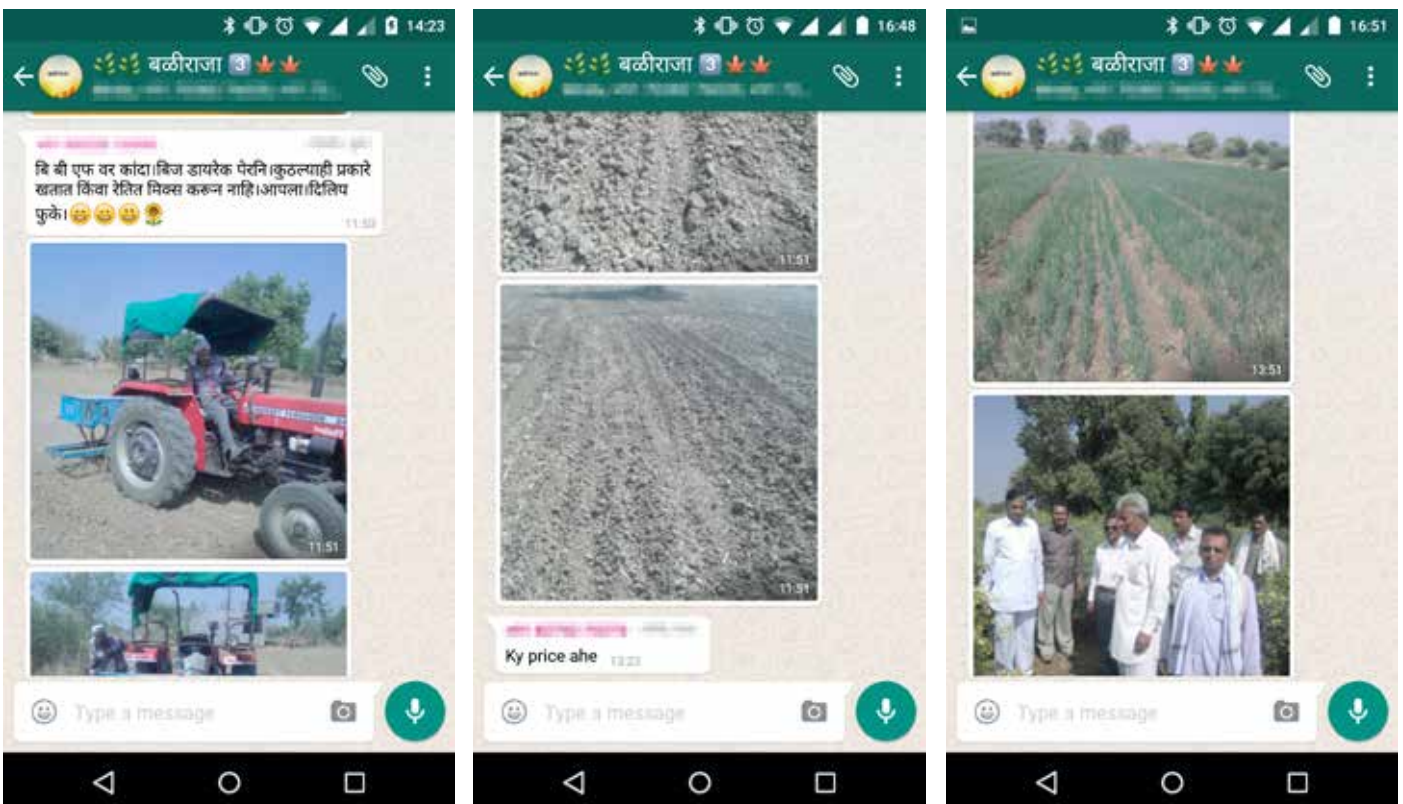
with them primarily from the perspective on understanding their model and experiences with community video (elaborated in 3.2) but in subsequent meetings in November 2015, realised that they were using two kinds of WhatsApp groups, both of which I joined. The first, was an all India group, which comprised the entire team working across geographies, verticals and functions. The other, were state specific teams, and at the time the only active one was the one for Maharashtra (my home state), the language on which, Marathi, I would most easily understand.

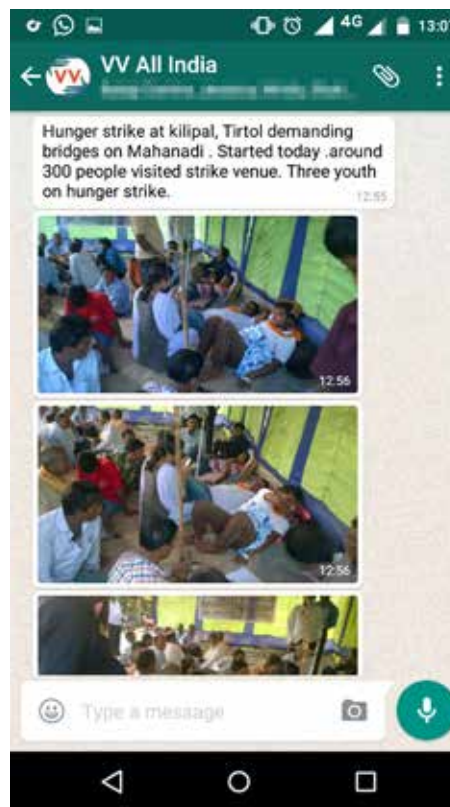
There were a number of interesting instances and types of use, and I present these below with a few anecdotes each, in order of their prevalence:

#### Sharing success stories and updates

Across all three groups, this was the most common type of usage, wherein participants shared either success stories with some activity they had undertaken or updates about the work that they were doing. Refer figures 3 - 11.

*Figures 3, 4 & 5: In this case, one of the farmers, Manoj (name changed), shares his experience of using a special attachment for sowing onions, and the success therein.*





▲  
 Figures 6,7 & 8: Shreya one of the community correspondents who works with Video Volunteers shares her documentation of a protest and strike in her district, appealing to the government for bridges through non-violent demonstrations and hunger strikes. This is a very common type of update in the Video Volunteers, all India group, wherein members share events taking place around them that they may turn into news stories.

▼  
 Figures 9, 10 & 11: Pooja, a community correspondent from Maharashtra shares a success story of the impact that one of her videos made. She reported locally on issues related to granting access to women to the local temple. Her video got the local community energized and they approached the local collector to intervene, and she shared documentation from their meeting with the larger group. The group usually chimes in with congratulatory messages and kudos when these sort of success stories are shared.



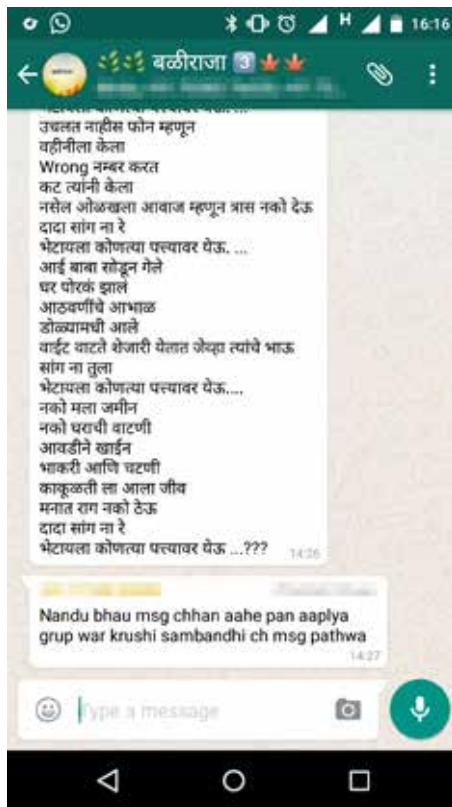


▲ Figures 12 & 13: One of the user's, shares the market price as he experienced for cotton, and other users quickly chimed in about their most recent experiences with selling their stocks. This sort of information is extremely valuable to farmers, who can then insist on fairer prices, and are not negotiating in a vacuum with middle men that they might be dealing with.

▲ Figure 14: Ganesh shares the contact information for all community correspondents in Jharkhand (a state in Central-Eastern India), arranged by district, with the intention that for others working on issues that might have interaction with those individuals, direct contact can be made quickly.

### Public sharing of relevant information

The other manner in which these groups are being used is by sharing en masse, information that might be deemed useful by the group. Refer figures 12 - 14.



▲ Figures 15 & 16: Here are two different instances where, in the first case, the content is completely irrelevant and one of the administrators (as designated by WhatsApp), reprimands the poster, Mr. Patil to not post such content. In the second instance, Mr. Nandu, posts content related to the Dalit leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and so the administrator mentions, that while the content is quite nice, the group is meant for farmer or farming related content only, and requests him to keep that in mind in the future.

▲ Figures 17: After a spate of non-relevant content, one of the administrators on the Video Volunteers All India group, had to step in and re-establish the guidelines for posting on the group and the central aim of creating it. Paraphrasing, she mentions, that she wants to reiterate that the group is for posting issues that are relevant to or about the work being done at Video Volunteers. Any content such as news, jokes or forwards should not be posted on the group. She makes a plea to the members of the group to keep that in mind, for the health and progress of their work.

### Moderation of non-relevant content

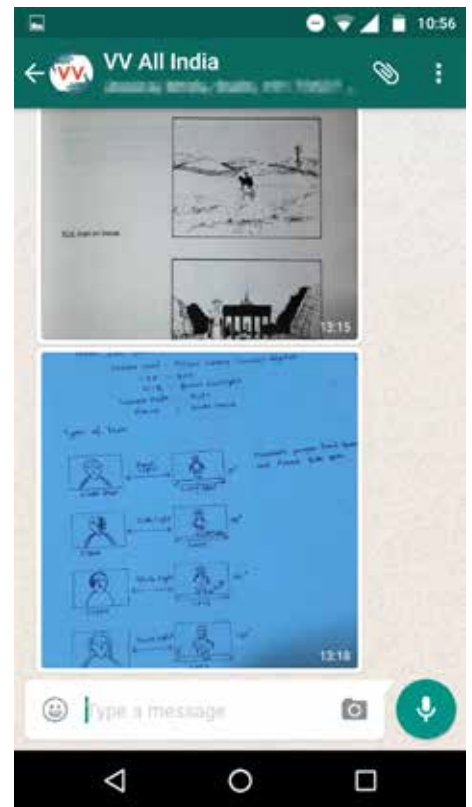
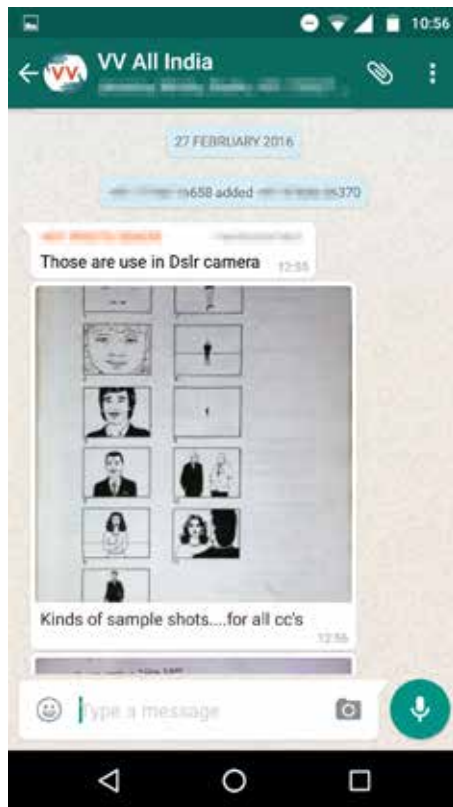
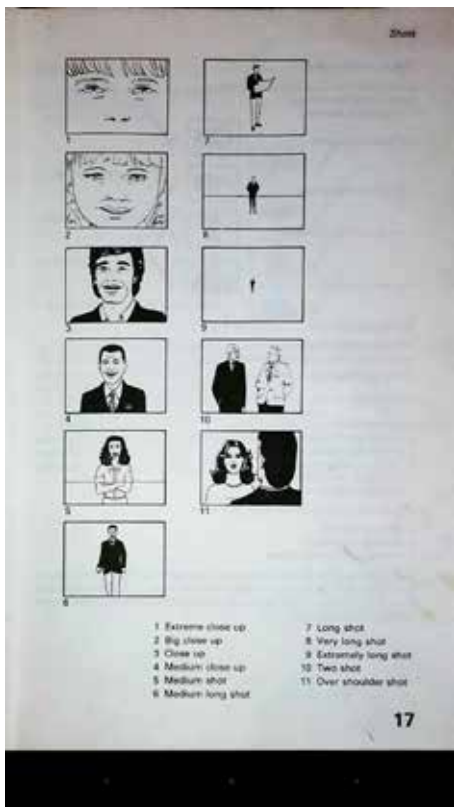
One of the issues that the groups face, as with traditional social media, is the posting of non-relevant content. Since these are targeted 'communities of practice' (Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2002), it is imperative to separate the signal from the noise, and thus across all three groups moderators stepped in from time to time to admonish transgressors of those rules. Refer figures 15 - 17.

### Teaching and Learning

Given the relationship between the members in the Video Volunteers all India group, which comprises of the community correspondents, trainers, and management, there are a few occasions on which interactions turn into teaching moments. Refer figures 18 - 22.

### Quick actions and feedback

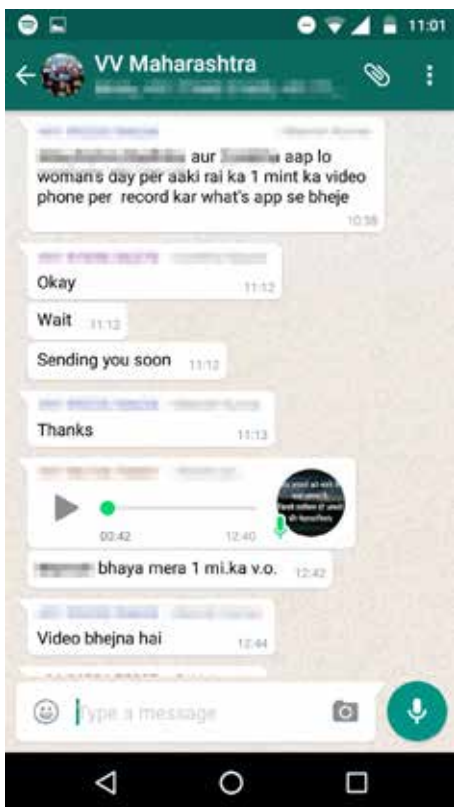
The platform is often used to get quick turnaround or feedback when going through official channels of email might mean long delays or inaction. Refer figures 23 -27.



▲  
 Figures 18 - 20: One of the trainers shared pictures of some sketches and worksheets, to help the community correspondents out with cheat sheets of sorts for revision before they went out into the field to shoot their videos.

▼  
 Figures 21 & 22: Roshni, a community correspondent, shared a story about how she had helped to prevent, a child marriage from happening. While many of the other members lauded her efforts, there was also curiosity about how she had been able to achieve that. She shared the story of how she found out from neighbours, and the steps she took to get the police to take action.

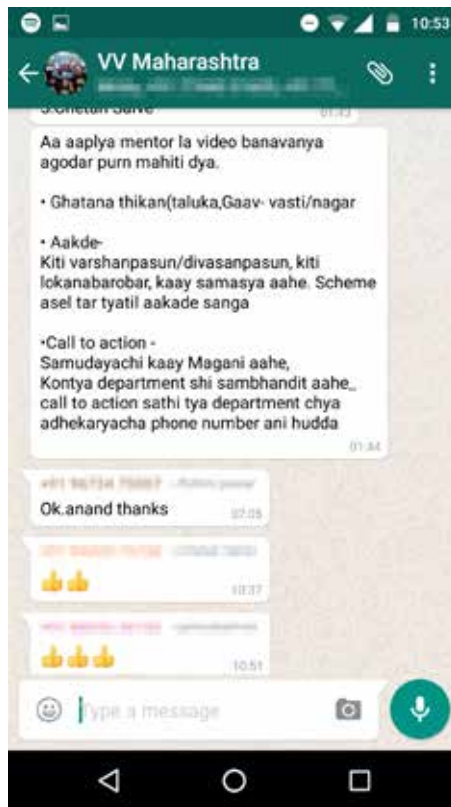
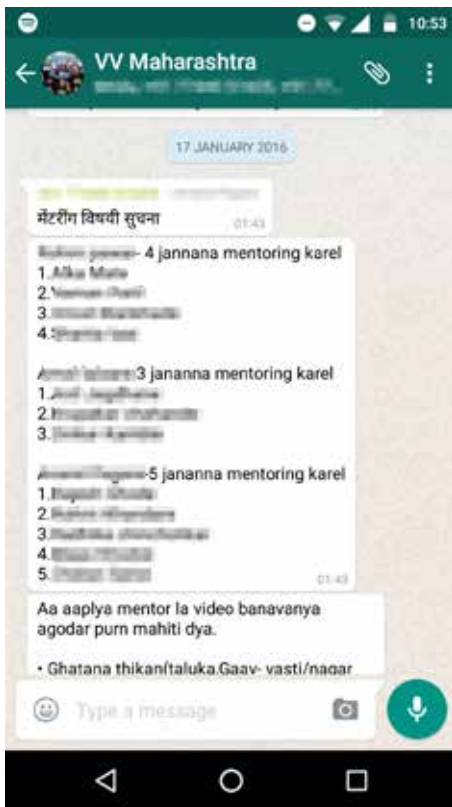




▲  
 Figures 23 & 24: Shreyas (the state co-ordinator) urges the women correspondents on the Video Volunteers Maharashtra group to share short video messages that can then be shared online on the occasion of 'Women's Day'. Normally these would have taken a long time, but by stressing on the urgency and allowing for them to be sent over WhatsApp meant that it happened in a matter of hours.

▼  
 Figures 25 -27: The central team was testing out a new application for data collection called KoBo Collect. They started out with a test survey, to see if their correspondents in the field could interact with it easily. They were able to develop and deploy this tool through simple step by step instructions, along with troubleshooting over the Video Volunteers Maharashtra group with relative ease. Towards the end, Shreyas, asks Saima to teach what she has learned to Roshni, who will in turn teach it to someone else. He calls this out as 'participatory learning'





▲ Figures 28 & 29: A co-ordinator for the Maharashtra team, Ajay, shares a list of the senior correspondents who will be mentoring the newer recruits. He goes on in the next message to elaborate the three key things that a mentor is to help with, which are location, details/ highlights and the call to action.

▲ Figure 30: One of the members of the central team, informs the community correspondent that they are creating a plan for his videos and will be getting in touch with him soon, once they have been through the steps, which she elucidates.

### Planning and Logistics

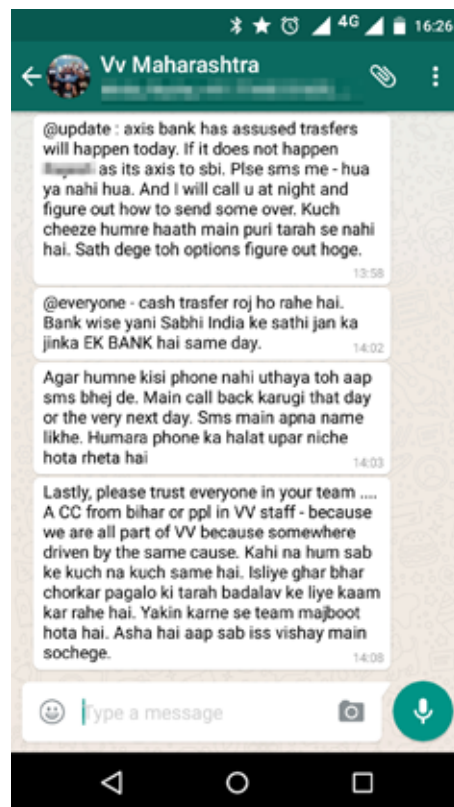
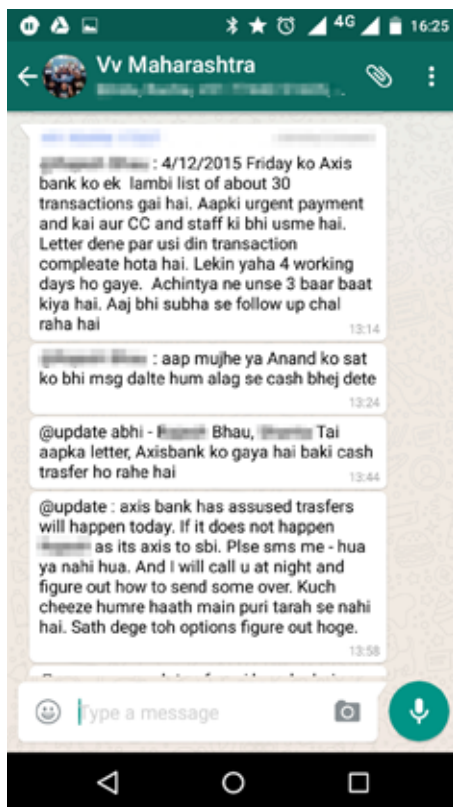
The Video Volunteer WhatsApp groups are often used to quickly resolve issues around planning, and deal with logistics that might otherwise have been cumbersome. Refer figures 28 - 30.

### Reporting and resolution of issues

One of the things that a WhatsApp group for an organisation that connects with their grassroots workers, is that it becomes a simple and quick way for them to air their grievances. Refer figures 31 - 33.

### Support

One of the key roles that a small group where members know each other can play, is one of mental and emotional support. Refer figures 34 & 35.



▲ Figures 31 - 33: The correspondents are remunerated based on the number of finished videos that they produce. One of the members of the Maharashtra group raised an issue about not having been paid for the last few months. At this other members chimed in as well, which led to prompt action and resolution of the issue. At the same time, the administrator Amrita, made an appeal to the team members to remember that they were all on the same team, and had a shared cause they were fighting for.

▼ Figures 34 & 35: Roshni who is asked to deliver something urgently reports in passing that it would take her time as she was in the hospital. Immediately, the urgent request is put on hold, and many of the members enquire after her health, and offer support and advice for her to get better.



### 3.1.3 Learnings towards Participatory Learning Networks

Observation of the activity on the groups, lead me to a few insights that could be applied to while better defining the principles for building the networks:

- The role of the moderator is of great importance. There are a variety of functions that a moderator can play. Besides helping the group set norms about the kind of content that would be shared, they can help to enforce those norms through reminders, or direct messages. Apart from that as observed in the context of the Video Volunteers' groups, the moderators can play the role of using prompts through sharing of content, or inciting discussion as a method of energising the community.
- The informality of WhatsApp means that people are able to share more openly what they feel about the work, or their experiences, as evidenced by the airing of grievances and reporting about ill health and support on the Video Volunteers' regional group.
- The Video Volunteers' groups, inadvertently stumbled upon the model of networked groups through their smaller regional groups feeding into the larger organisation wide national group. Broadly speaking they are using the larger group with all members in the organisation using it as a bulletin board, whereas the smaller groups are used for support, planning and reporting & resolution of issues. With some tweaks with respect to media sharing and learning (as elaborated in the principles in chapter 3.3), this is an effective model for the Participatory Learning Networks.
- Many of the participants on both groups, were using them to share successes that they had had in their work, be that in new agricultural practices or with their advocacy. This points to how the kudos received after by the other members could be an effective method of rewarding members to both continue participation, and to do better and more work.
- Lastly, comparing between Baliraja and Video Volunteers, it feels that the fact that people have met each other and have a sense of shared purpose leads to much better interaction, and discussion. Additionally, this fits in partially with the concept of convenings or labs as espoused by White et al. (2014), which talk about the need for teams to have informal spaces in which

they can reflect on learnings and build on new ideas. While the smaller groups are not exactly being used for that, I contend that with some tweaking these could be used very effectively for learning.

## 3.2 Participatory Media Landscape

Having explored briefly WhatsApp as a platform, going back to the framework we created for our hybrid online community, we now come to the idea of dealing with content creation and sharing. This relates closely with one of the key building blocks for the participatory learning networks (see chapter 2.1.2), about ‘sharing meaningful content’.

This section is broadly a landscape study of some of the major approaches to participatory and/or community media as well as technology use in development prevalent in India. The study was undertaken in Phase 2 (see chapter 1.4.3) wherein I traveled across India, meeting with members of organisations working in the sector, interviewing them about the broad areas they were working in, as well as diving into a few of the details of their methods and technologies. At the outset, I had put in a few limits:

- I only interviewed organisations based in India, as even right at the beginning, I had a sense of trying to work on the thesis in a cultural and social context that I was familiar with, that is in my home country of India.
- The organisations would have been running for over three or so years, and have reached some level of maturity and scale. This limit was set primarily so that while creating a synthesis I had approaches that had weeded out teething issues.

The key for me was to understand how these organisations worked with media in particular, but tangentially with data. What various kinds of media they used? What tools and related training

were undertaken? The design of custom tools, as well as the use of standard tools. And how their practices fit in with the larger framework of the sectors they were embedded in, from activism to agriculture to consulting INGOs.

As I found out through my travels, the community is quite close-knit, in that while meeting one organisation they would offer to connect with others that were already on my list, and so the list of organisations had the proverbial 'usual suspects'. And yet, needless to say, the organisations profiled in Table 1 comprise a list that is hardly exhaustive. Please note, that the location mentioned is where the main team in India is based, as most of these organisations work across a geography that cuts across the country.

Organisation	Location	Description
Video Volunteers	Goa	Is a non-profit, that trains individuals living in various parts of India, to be community correspondents using film-making and journalism tools and processes to galvanise communities and create change on hyperlocal issues. (Video Volunteers, 2016)
Maraa	Bangalore	Is a media arts collective, and while they work in a number of formats, in our discussions we focussed on the work that they do with community radio, on the policy and capacity building fronts, with community radio stations across the country. (Maraa, 2016)
CGNet Swara	Bangalore	Is a voice based portal for the people of 'Central Gondwana' (a region spanning Central and Eastern India) to share and listen to stories of local relevance. This is of great importance since the region is media dark, due to several developmental and political issues. It is a specific instance of the use of a broader technology that allows for a highly interactive voice response system. (CGNet, 2016)
Janaagraha	Bangalore	Is a non-profit that works on improving quality of life in urban India, through a variety of different activities and programmes, that focus on greater civic engagement by citizens. From amongst their many programmes, we focussed on the platform, IPaidABribe.com which is a platform for citizens to report cases where they might have been forced to pay a bribe. ("I Paid A Bribe", n.d.)
Akvo	New Delhi	Is a non-profit with teams across the world that work with social impact organisations to help with effective monitoring and reporting through a suite of mobile and web based tools and sensors. (Akvo, n.d.)

Organisation	Location	Description
Digital Green	New Delhi	Is an international non-profit that uses relevant locally produced video content, to improve the lives of rural communities in South Asia and Africa. (Digital Green, n.d.)
Gramvaani	New Delhi	Is a non-profit working primarily with voice based community media concepts. Thus they focus on community media created using mobile and IVR as well as community radio as a form of dissemination working in mostly rural contexts which are underserved and underrepresented in and by mainstream media. The organisation has gone through some structural changes since the interview was conducted.
Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF)	New Delhi	Works through a large variety of programmes to use ICT tools to empower rural and underserved communities. In our conversation we focussed on their work with various types of participatory media and community radio. (DEF India, 2016)
Vera Solutions	Mumbai	Is a consulting company that works with social impact organisation to create technology-based solutions that bring in real-time data to the people that need it most. (Vera, 2016)

▲  
(Table 1) A list of organisations interviewed for the landscape study in phase two

### 3.2.1 Approaches to participatory media

In this section six different approaches are outlined that have been distilled from the expert interviews. Each of the approaches will be analysed using the following criteria:

- Medium and technology used
- Overall aims that are/can be served
- Creators and consumers of media and data
- The amount, methods and functions of mediation and editing

#### 1. Community Radio

At its most basic, community radio stations, are those radio stations that serve a very local context, and thus are

meant to easily serve the media needs of an audience, with communication in the local language and a focus on issues of local interest. The medium is primarily voice, consumed through radio sets, or inbuilt FM functions on mobile phones.

In India, the ability to start and run a community radio is regulated by the government. The rights to run a radio station, are tendered by the government through an application process in which interested and eligible civil society organisations (CSOs) must explain the function of the radio station, in terms of the kind of content that they would be programming. Furthermore, there is an embargo on reporting general news, which according to policy makers has been done to curb the inciting or inflaming of local conflicts. What this has led to, according to some that I interviewed, is a defanging of the medium, taking away its ability to be truly participatory, and instead becoming more of a development communication channel for airing health and agriculture messaging created by large NGOs or the government.

While the radio is the method of dissemination, the organisations that I interviewed are involved in doing a great amount of capacity building with those working on content in the radio stations. This capacity building is around figuring out what consumers want to be hearing, methods of curation and reporting of stories. Additionally, in some cases, interactive voice response (IVR) systems have been used to allow listeners to call in and contribute messages and stories, that are later curated, edited and put on the air.

## 2. IVR based Community Audio

The manner in which it is structured is that users call in and interact with the system using interactive voice response (IVR) for both contributing and listening to contributions of stories from others. Essentially, what this creates is a call-in audio based social media network.

While there is no censoring of the type of content that goes on

the CGNet Swara system, such that contributors can talk about anything they want to, whether that is giving each other news, or singing songs, or reporting on local issues. But the content that is posted, is somewhat mediated by a volunteer team of primarily journalists, or vetted locals who understand the dialect. The mediation is to root out erroneous or misleading reports.

### 3. Community Video

This is based primarily on the work by Digital Green (DG). The key aspect of the model is to screen videos of local relevance to a community using a projector. In the case of DG, they work on issues of agriculture primarily, along with those around livelihoods, health and nutrition. A key aspect of their work though, is that the content has a local flavor, which means that they document local best practices or success stories, to create better resonance with their audience. An interesting aspect of the DG model is that the videos are used to incite change by grassroots workers who guide the members of the groups that form the audience into changing practices.

The videos in question are produced for specific programmes that DG might be running, in concert with the organisations that they are collaborating with for those specific programmes in each region.

### 4. Participatory Video

Based primarily on the work of Video Volunteers (VV), their main aim with the work is to bring attention and affect change with regards to issues of social inequality, injustice, and poverty. Their model relies on an intensive recruiting and training programme by which in every district where they work, they train and hire local activists, to become video journalists or community correspondents (CC). They enable them to select and tell stories on locally relevant issues and through the investigation and telling of stories create change by galvanising affected local communities and taking the issue up with higher authorities.

At the time of the interview the way the organisation was structured was that once the CCs have been trained, either a senior CC or someone from the State team mentors and guides each CC on any story they wish to tell, helping them research the issue and capture the media. The captured media, would make its way back to either a state or central editing team on a DVD who would rush the finished film back to the CC, to be used to create change by showing it to concerned locals and officials.

While at the time they were using hardware like handycams, Flip cameras and laptops, the proliferation of higher-quality low-cost smartphones, has seen the organisation start to explore these tools.

#### 5. Data Services for Social Organisations

The growing use of 'Big Data' by multinationals and commercial organisations is now widely acknowledged and accepted as a practice. In this environment, Vera solutions, provides tools to social impact organisations to gather, analyse and act on collected data.

An example that came up in our interview was a system being implemented by an agriculture services company in Africa, who based on the season, and individual demographic and historical data of a user can send curated audio based messages to a user related to best practices. In another example, using coupons redeemable on mobile phones, Vera helped an organisation distributing condoms, do AB testing on their marketing campaign and packaging.

The systems that Vera builds are not tied into any specific software or hardware in terms of how data is collected, so that could be using survey forms with 'Open Development Kit', or SMS linked with SMS servers, or warehousing technology. What they do seem to use is Salesforce, as a backbone for most of the heavy work of storing, analysing and acting on the data collected through dashboards.

While Vera's focus is on using data for enabling automation and decision making within social organisations, Akvo has created a suite of tools that allow social organisations to monitor activity on the ground using mobile based survey and sensor based tools. On top of these tools they have dashboards that central teams can analyse data, and also enable the telling of stories based on that data to funders and the public.

### **3.2.2 Learnings towards Participatory Learning Networks**

Two things stand out in sharp relief when analysing the work and models of these various organisations:

- First and foremost, the role that the mobile phone has and can play in enabling participation is absolutely paramount in the coming years. Whereas there was a large focus on audio and SMS based systems, this has steadily evolved with the growing proliferation of internet enabled 'smart' mobile phones.
- All of them seek to enable higher development impact, and are as such agnostic to technology. In keeping with Andersson & Hatakka's (2013) call for a focus on development in ICTD, these organisations are striving for the same, using technology as the means rather than the end, with a view to be adaptable to new developments and shifts. This is perhaps best evidenced by Vera, who choose from a variety of available tools to fit the solution at hand.
- I posit that for the system that we are proposing the platform, could perhaps be not just a single tool, but a communication platform that enables input and integration with a number of various content and media creation, curation and editing tools. The openness and simplicity of these tools, as shown by the culture in these organisations, is what would lead to greater innovation and uptake.

The learnings above are integrated into the framework of principles for managing the communities and network in the next section. While doing these interviews though and from the observation of the WhatsApp groups, concepts for a few tools came to mind that

are documented in chapter 5.2, wherein I outline the way forward from this thesis.

## 3.3 Framework for running and managing the communities

While we have discussed in some detail the various aspects and practices around digital communities and the platforms that can enable communication, I would like to distil that into a framework that focuses on the following five principles, such that by thinking through these one might have a robust system, and meaningful community interactions.

### 1. Content

For high quality interaction, it is important that those participating be able to express what they are experiencing and feeling to others with clarity and engage with others' queries and experiences in a positive and meaningful way. Based on the conversations with the community media organisations (see 3.2) and observations from the instances of use of WhatsApp groups (see 3.1), this can be distilled into three skills that one might build through training and capacity building over a period of time.

- Storytelling attitude: the training would focus on helping participants to be able to relate incidents, or observations through a narrative that is easy and interesting for their peers to follow and engage with.
- Asking good questions: when looking at their peers for input or help, they should be able to frame their problem well, to encourage solutions and ideas.
- Deeper engagement: to ensure that it doesn't become a bulletin board, the moderators should be confident to

engage in and carry on a discussion, some training should be carried out on translating experiences of discussions in the real world onto the virtual.

## 2. Groups

Taking off directly from the section 'Kinds of participation' in 'Online communities' (see 2.3.2), we need two types of groups that are interlinked. Thus we can create a network of highly interlinked smaller groups, that encourage and facilitate deep participation, that come together to form larger groups that fulfil the advantages and functions for 'broad mobilisation' (Land, 2009).

## 3. Platform

While in this thesis we have used WhatsApp, (see 3.1) and that is the application used in the case as well (see chapter 4), we believe that while selecting the digital platform there are some key characteristics to keep in mind.

- Enable realtime updates: For effective support and constant learning, participants need support or should be sharing their experiences in realtime, rather than at periodic meetings
- Personal/Informal: while the learning network might be designed as part of the program, it is critical that it feel (and be) informal and personal, to ensure candour
- Low threshold of entry: to ensure continued engagement in the learning network, the platform needs to be simple to use, and preferably be an extension of a currently used platform or something the participants are comfortable with
- Access to technology: the platform that is selected should work within the limitations of the technology accessible to the participants. For example, something that requires high speed internet connectivity or desktop computers like Slack will probably not work as well as something that works with low-speed intermittent connectivity on mobile phones.

#### 4. Moderators and norms

The role of moderators has been observed (see chapter 3.1.3) to be of utmost importance, and can be extended further in our case.

- Adhering to norms: Moderators can play a key role in ensuring that norms that are set for a group, especially around sharing non-relevant information, are followed. They help to keep errant participants in check, till norms become accepted and followed regularly.
- Content discovery: Since we're looking at small groups being part of a larger network, linking up for larger groups, the moderator can play the role of a bridge entity (Witter & Mikulski, 2015), helping in the discovery of meaningful engagements, new ideas to take to scale, or bring attention to systemic issues amongst others.
- Energisers and prompts: One of the key roles we outlined in the principles for learning networks (see chapter 2.2.2), was the emotional support that are key for ensuring that grassroots workers' energy doesn't flag. The moderators can play an important role in groups, to prompt discussions and sharing such that participants are energised about their work.

#### 5. Rewards

As we have seen through an analysis of participation both in development and management styles, it is important for there to be some reCOGnition and effect of the sought participation. These can act as strong rewards for the participation in learning networks.

- ReCOGnition: by creating a set of groups interlinked by moderators, content that is created in smaller groups, would be shared in the larger groups where the whole team across hierarchy is present to bring attention to the work done by individuals acting as a reward for continued and engaged participation.
- Participation and enacting change: As seen in principles for participation (see chapter 2.2.2), visible outcomes are critical for continued participation. By giving individuals

a chance to innovate in context, and rewarding these experiments by trying them at scale and/or creating change in the larger programme, there is a greater sense of participation in the process and a corollary is that they then have a sense of ownership on the process and impact sought.



*Photo documentation by a facilitator in Gujarat showing schoolchildren WASHing hands after a session at the school. (Centre of Gravity, 2016)*

# Chapter 4

---

**TESTING WITH  
THE 'SAMAJHDAR'  
CAMPAIGN**

This chapter documents the project where an iteration of the ‘participatory learning networks’ was implemented during the pilot stages. The project is to carry out a behavior change campaign (to change water, sanitation and hand hygiene habits) across over a thousand villages in three states in India. The project is being carried out by a number of NGOs, being funded by the TATA Trust, and designed by a consulting organisation, Centre of Gravity (COG). Within the context of this larger project, concerned about strategies of implementation, the director at COG, Bala found resonance with the idea I was proposing, and brought me on board to implement ‘participatory learning networks’ in this project as a first step to a longer, deeper engagement with iterative project design and participation from the grassroots.

Briefly introduced in the first chapter and above, the first section delves into greater detail, elaborating on the organisations involved, and the overall aims and context of the project. This is followed by a deep dive into understanding the organisational setup, and the various details that comprised the intervention with participatory learning networks. The penultimate section focusses on the observations from the pilot carried out in Gujarat, and the learnings from that pilot that were synthesized into a set of learnings for the next stage of the pilots in Jharkhand. The documentation in this thesis is limited to the first iteration, that is the one in Gujarat, as the iterations in Jharkhand and Uttarakhand, and the larger project going to scale were delayed beyond the scope of the research for this thesis. The final section, concludes with overall learnings from having carried out this intervention, as well as, the way forward for ‘participatory learning networks’ within this project, and for COG in general.

# 4.1 Project Background

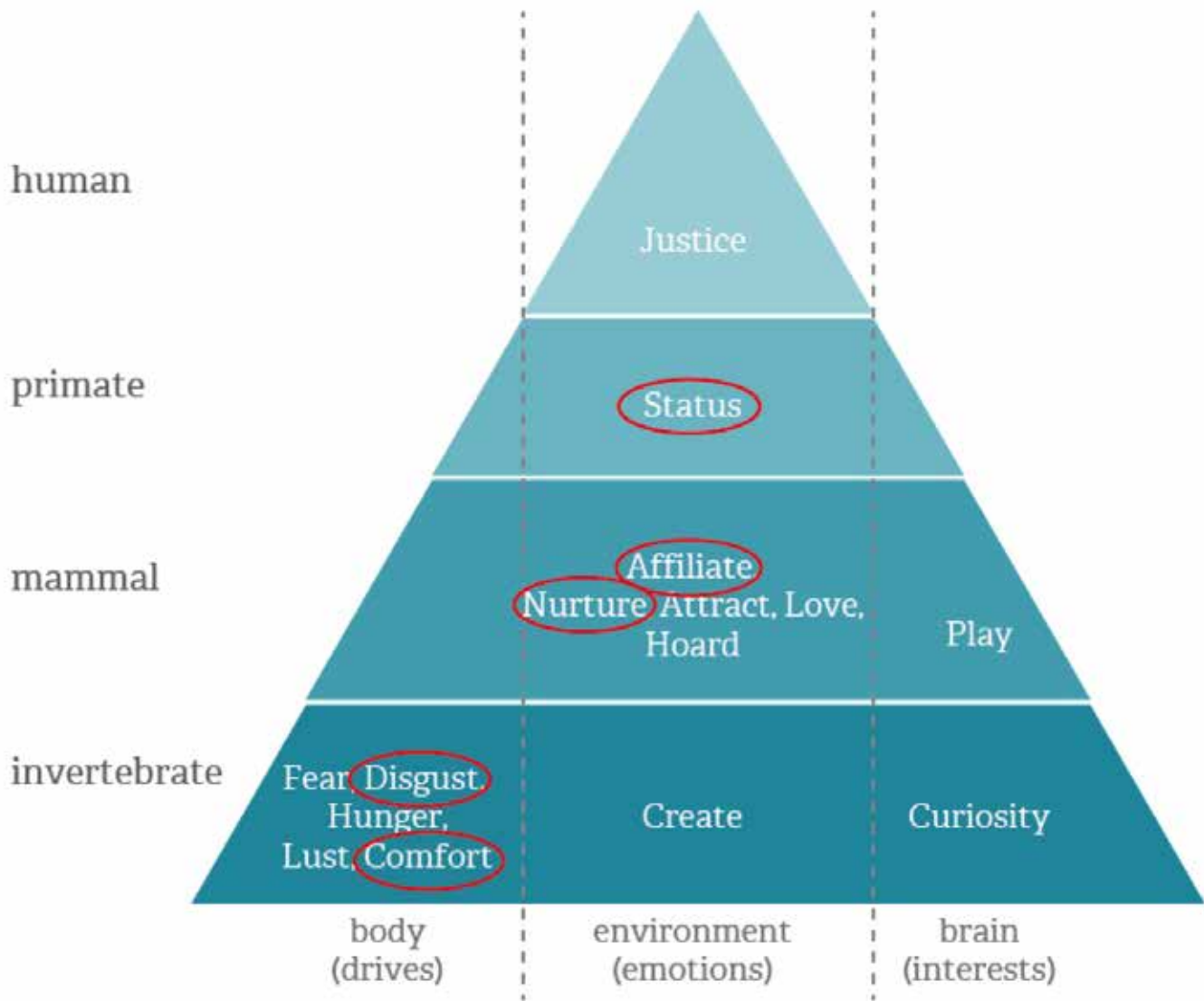
## 4.1.1 TATA Trust and Centre of Gravity

TATA Water Mission (TWM), is “a programme initiated by the Tata Trust to tackle the water crisis with a multi-pronged approach. Under the programme, the Trust supports innovative initiatives that seek solutions to water-related issues” (TATA Trust, 2016).

The TWM undertakes various types of projects across eight Indian states at the moment, through a network of implementation partners and organisations. Their projects use a variety of models, engaging in sustained manners with communities where they are attempting to affect change (TATA Trust, 2016).

Centre of Gravity (COG) is a communication consultancy that has been in operation for about ten years. Over the last half-decade though, they have shifted their focus to communication campaigns in the social impact space, with a special focus to ground all communication concepts and strategy in theories derived from research in behavior change. They have created quite a niche in this space for themselves in India working with a variety of clients ranging from the not-for-profit Arghyam to the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM).

Their work has come to focus in the last couple of years, after early successes with hand hygiene (discussed below), on creating impact in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) space, especially in rural India. More than half of the 1.2 billion people living in India lack access to toilets, and this issue is deeply tied to behavior, perception and habits around water and hygiene, thus collectively being tackled as WASH. While several attempts have been made over the past decades with great efforts in the last decade by subsequent governments, there hasn't been a major breakthrough in the numbers of people defecating in the open (COG, 2015). Some of the most successful approaches to solving this ‘wicked problem’ have come from a nascent, yet growing, area of research from the field of behavioural economics, sometimes called ‘behavior change’ communication or campaigns (elaborated in Appendix 1).



▲ Figure 36: 'The Motivation Pyramid' depicts the base motivations that drive actions of various 'levels' of animals. The diagram is originally by Aunger & Curtis (2013), but edited here to highlight (in red) the key motivators that COG would use for their campaigns. (COG, 2015)

Centre of Gravity working with Val Curtis and Bob Aunger (LSHTM) use a pyramid of human motives (Curtis & Aunger, 2013) while creating behavior change campaigns. Two of their campaigns 'Superamma' — tackling handWASHing with soap, and 'Javabdar' — tackling the building and sustained use of toilets in rural Tamil Nadu and Karnataka respectively are two projects I would like to mention here as examples of the use of positive triggers.

'Superamma' that literally translates to 'Super Mother', was the underlying theme and moniker used to encourage mothers to include handWASHing with soap, amongst the myriad behaviors that they already undertake to ensure the health and upbringing of their children.

'Javabdar' that translates to 'Responsible', targeted fathers, who are traditionally the decision makers in households, with the message that as a responsible father they already take great pains to take care of their families. Given that, they are responsible, they should certainly build and maintain toilets for their family members to use.



▲ *Figure 37: Various stills from the animation movie that was used during the Javabdar campaign. These stills depict a father who cares deeply for his daughter and is concerned about her well-being and happiness. (COG, 2015)*

Centre of Gravity, use a sustained campaign over a period of four to six weeks, with a variety of community and individual interventions to create a sustained change in the community where the campaign is executed. They break the campaign down to community triggering and making a public ‘oath’ to change behavior at evening events featuring street plays, films and group interactions. This is followed by household visits and smaller group meetings to help families overcome obstacles to changing their behavior. Towards the end of the campaign, households that have successfully adapted to the target behavior are rewarded in different ways, depending on the strategy of the campaign, but they usually focus on elevating the individual or family in their standing in the community.



▲ Figure 38: This is the key illustration of the child and mother characters used throughout the 'Superamma' campaign. (COG, 2015)

Figure 39: A still from a training video from the Superamm campaign, accessed from [superamma.org](http://superamma.org) (LSHTM & COG, 2013)



## 4.1.2 The Samajhdar Campaign

TWM have contracted COG to design and oversee the implementation of a behavioral change communication (BCC) campaign across over a thousand villages in three states in India (Gujarat, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand) over a period of three years to create sustained change in toilet usage, water handling and handWASHing with soap (COG, 2015). The project kicked off in early 2015, and the pilot started in April, 2016.

In this campaign, COG is using the message of ‘Samajhdar’ which translates from Hindi to ‘smart’ or ‘intelligent’ depending on context of use. The idea is that since they’re targeting all three behaviors in WASH, the message needs to resonate with various sub-groups of users, from young mothers, to children to the patriarchs of families, and their research has shown that the message of ‘Samajhdar’ works to create that sense of motivation. They will use ‘disgust’ as a trigger to begin the behavior change process and then build on that in various ways through a six week process to help people change and stick to their target behaviors.

Broadly, the implementation of the project will be done through the partner NGOs in each state, who will hire facilitators (or use those already on their payrolls) to execute the project on the ground. The idea is that each behavior will be targeted sequentially, such that a facilitator would trigger one behavior at a time for 6 weeks in each village in their purview.

## 4.1.3 Participatory Learning Networks and the Samajhdar Campaign

In August 2015, I was helping to facilitate a global workshop for the CSR activities of an FMCG multinational, around behavior change at scale for handWASHing with soap. Bala, a director at COG, was participating as they were, at the time in talks to be part of this work with the aforementioned multinational.

We got talking informally about my thesis, and found that there was resonance. As Bala told it, while working on the ‘Superamma’ and ‘Javabdar’ campaigns he had realised that if they wanted to

translate successes with their pilots, to scale, there would have to be some new processes put into place, that helped grassroots workers implement their learnings and to be able to, through some institutional mode, scale iterations as the campaign went along. He also had a chagrin for top-down, technocratic management styles, and wanted to explore a more empowering, bottom-up process and methodology.

We built the idea over a number of phases. Below I trace major milestones and phases.

### Phase 1: Translating principles for the TATA Trust project

October 2015 to March 2016

Through the six months, over short sprints we worked to create a set of principles and evolve the idea for ‘participatory learning networks’ in the context of this project. It would be fair to say, that the evolution of the framework and principles and the idea of ‘participatory learning networks’, were co-developed with Bala. The two major milestones were a presentation in December 2015 (Appendix 4), with the TWM team along with the leadership from the anchor NGOs from the three states. This phase took quite some time, due to institutional issues within the larger project, largely to do with approvals, budgets, and partnerships.

### Phase 2: Pilot

April 2016 to July 2016

In this phase, I worked with the COG implementation team to help with the use and implementation of learning networks, as the pilot for the ‘Samajhdar’ campaign was rolled out in about thirty-six villages across the three states albeit in a staggered manner. Due to logistical and approval issues with the project though, I will be presenting the results only from the work in the state of Gujarat, where about eleven facilitators carried out the pilot across twelve villages. The results will be followed by conclusions based on our (COG and mine) observations along with the feedback from a couple of select facilitators who agreed to an interview along with proposed iterations for the pilot in the state of Jharkhand.

### Phase 3: Scale

August 2016 - 2018

The scope of the thesis is limited, due to constraints of time, only to the results as stated above, but I will be informally advising and helping the COG team as they try to execute the learning networks along with the larger campaign at scale.

The work across Phase 1 and Phase 2, can be broadly broken down to two sets of activities. These map directly to the two aspects of the ‘participatory learning networks’ as introduced in chapter 2.1 and elaborated in chapters 2 and 3.

1. Creating a paradigm shift in culture and project design  
This was largely carried out by Centre of Gravity through a variety of activities, right from the manner in which the project was conceived, in negotiations with TWM, and most importantly in the training process where they engaged directly with the facilitators.
2. Using ICT tools to run ‘participatory learning networks’  
I was involved in the training design, with my role being limited to sessions or aspects that touched upon the implementation of the learning networks. These were sessions to do with setting up the groups on WhatsApp, training on improving skills for capturing and sharing media, and overall, in trying to get the facilitators used to the idea of openly sharing meaningful feedback. After the training, I was mostly a passive observer to the running of the networks, oftentimes making suggestions to the main moderator on the groups, Nipa (a master trainer, working with COG).

Both these aspects are elaborated on in the section that follows.

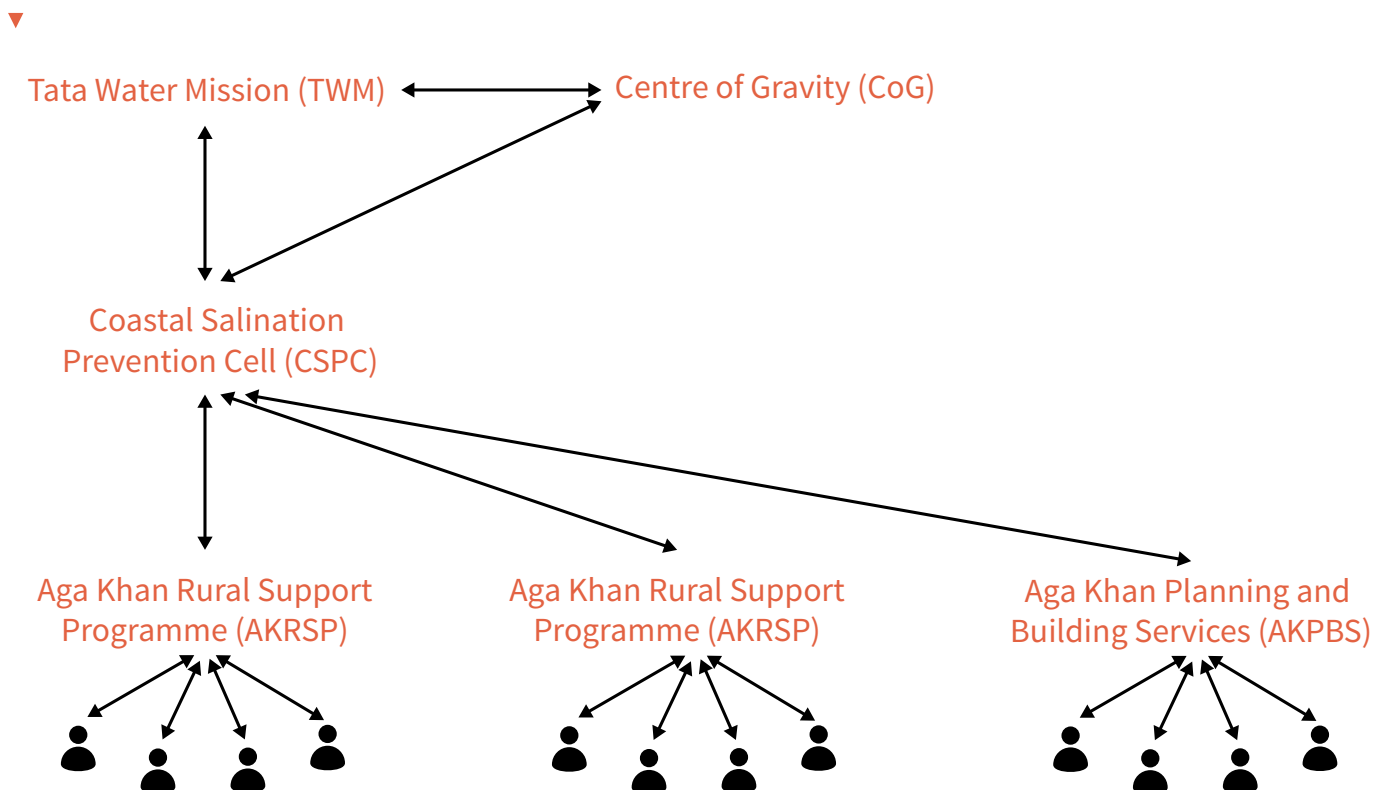
## 4.2 The Participatory Learning Networks Pilot

### 4.2.1 The Pre-Intervention Picture

In this section, I outline the scenario of the engagement as it stood before the participatory learning networks were introduced, and a scenario of how the project would have been implemented focussing on the points wherein the application of the PLN made a significant change.

The key thing to understand going in was the structure of the

Figure 40: is a simplified diagram of official chains of communication prior to the implementation of the Participatory Learning Networks



engagement, in figure 40, we see the various entities involved, just in the engagement in Gujarat. Each of these entities has a contract with each other, through which various projects are executed one of these being the ‘Samajhdar Campaign’.

The TATA Water Mission (TWM) is a part of the TATA Trust, and make grants to various ostensibly independent NGOs at state and district levels. They have longer term contracts with these NGOs to work on various WASH projects, going beyond the goals and time frame of the ‘Samajhdar’ campaign. These vary from cleanliness and hygiene drives to watershed management and desalination to piped water access. In Gujarat for the ‘Samajhdar’ campaign, the Coastal Salination Prevention Cell (CSPC) is the anchor NGO, thus second in hierarchy from the TATA Water Mission, and contracted to broadly manage and provide oversight to the project in the state. In the pilot, there were two implementation NGOs, Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and Aga Khan Planning and Building Services (AKPBS) both contracted through their parent organisation the Aga Khan foundation, but being administered directly through the local leadership, by managers from CSPC. AKRSP had two teams on the ground from two different regional offices, with about four villages each conducting in the pilot the programmes around water handling and hand hygiene. AKPBS was in one location managing four villages for the behavior around access to and sustained usage of toilets.

In the scenario wherein PLNs were not part of the programme, there are a few things that would have panned out quite differently than they did. Below I list a few of the most notable differences, the points are based on observation from interactions prior to the kick-off of the pilots, at the training programme, and discussions with Bala, from his varied experience on this and previous projects:

- In this hierarchy of implementation, Centre of Gravity was interfacing directly mostly with the team at TWM and CSPC, while they would get some feedback from AKRSP and AKPBS, only when team-members from the COG team went out into the field and interacted directly with facilitators on the ground.
- Project design and iteration would be slow due to the several

levels in the chain of communication, and the lack of agency given to the facilitators and their team leaders to iterate and share. Additionally, if problems were found with the programme, they would be reported in formal reports at the end of particular stages of the programme, or at the end of each set of behavior interventions.

- Given the length of the programme, that is over three years, and a certain sense of the programme being repetitive, facilitators would be working in isolation without a sense of the impact their day-to-day activities were having in a cumulative fashion, and how they fit in with the larger campaign/project.
- There would be a sense amongst the facilitators of having to follow the training provided in all its minutiae, without reporting any deviances in actions to get better outcomes fearing backlash from those in the higher levels.

## 4.2.2 Creating a paradigm shift in culture

As described earlier (see chapter 2.1), simply applying the suite of ICT tools that comprise the ‘participatory learning networks’ would not nearly be enough, to affect the envisioned change. The cultural and organisational paradigm shifts, synthesised into the five principles elaborated in chapter 2.3, are quite critical as well. For this project, Bala and I translated those principles into action by reframing the varied elements of the project through the lens of being ‘bottom centred’. From a relatively more complex constellation of activities and systems (refer figure 41), we synthesized three major threads for designing the project, namely: Training, Review and Planning, and Support.

### Training

Hitherto thought of and worked out as a transfer of knowledge, the focus was to look at training from the lens of ‘strategic alignment’ and creating ownership over the goals of the programme, while also transferring knowledge of the communication material, and activities involved. While elaborated in Appendix 2, below are some of the critical aspects of the training programme and process.



- Internalising the theories underlying the campaign  
Much of the work done by facilitators in the past, with regards to changing behavior, often came down to trying to create that change through awareness of the issues, rather than as in behavior change, using emotional triggers as an opening to create those changes. Additionally, far too often facilitators weren't empathetic to how difficult it actually was to change behavior leading not only to them getting frustrated with beneficiaries who couldn't 'see the point' (quoting a facilitator from the workshop, kept anonymous here) or getting frustrated themselves. This was a key aspect of the training, and was handled in an interesting process wherein prior to the workshop, facilitators attempted to change one of their own behaviors and documented those publicly within a WhatsApp group of attendees of the training workshop. Coming to the workshop, through a slow, deliberate process over the first two days, the trainers guided the facilitators from firstly analysing their personal behavior change experiences to coming up with the framework that informed the design of the entire campaign.
  
- Personal skill building  
While the facilitators have all been trained and are experienced in how to engage in the villages that they work in, there were a few skills and ideas that were critical for successful interaction on the 'participatory learning networks'. One of the ideas that we worked to understand as a group, was the power of sharing solutions and ideas with each other, to make each other smarter, and the group more successful as a whole. This was achieved through a collaborative ideas exercise (elaborated in Appendix 2). In relation to that, we helped hone their skills of giving and receiving feedback, by pointing out instances of good and poor practice throughout the duration of the workshop. As was elaborated in chapter 3.3, we extended the idea of meaningful content through two sessions conducted by me. In the first one, the focus was on capturing higher quality video and photographs, and came down to simple principles

around framing, composition and technique. The second session, was a first attempt at bringing in storytelling through the suggestion of templates for sharing anecdotes from the field, and were demonstrated using simulated screenshots, for formats with various combinations of image, text and video.

## **Review and Planning**

While a large part of the review process happens offline, between the implementation team and the managers, in this project the attempt would be to use conference call systems to bring in the voices of the field staff (facilitators). Additionally, a large aspect of the review process, is evaluation, and at the time of the writing of the thesis, Centre of Gravity and TWM, are looking at various methodologies and technologies for enabling evaluation that are based on observation and qualitative data, rather than through quantitative data based surveys alone.

## **Support**

A key reason for taking on the concept of ‘participatory learning networks’, we focused on using the principles of ‘small groups and lateral communication’, ‘channels for ascending communication’ and most importantly ‘the ability to enact change’. The principles resulted in us planning the use of ‘WhatsApp’ to create small digital groups based on regional classifications in the pilot to enable constant, realtime support for the facilitators on the ground.

### **4.2.3 Setting up and running the Participatory Learning Networks**

The testing was done with a group consisting of seventeen individuals including me. These were eleven facilitators of varying seniority and experience, two master trainers, three of us from the Centre of Gravity team and the manager of the partner NGO, where the facilitators were all hired.

The ‘learning networks’ were rolled out in the following major steps/phases:

1. Setting up WhatsApp group: Once the dates for the training workshop were set, all facilitators were emailed about three weeks prior to the first day, to share their contact details, as



well as to prepare for the pre-work, that is to select a personal behavior that they would like to change (see Appendix 2). Following that, two weeks before training, a WhatsApp group was formed, where the facilitators were sharing details of their experiences with personal behavior change.

▲ *Figure 42: The team involved in the Gujarat pilot comprising of facilitators, trainers and management from CSPC.*

2. During the workshop: Through the duration of the week long training workshop, the team was sharing snippets of inspirational information, pictures taken during the workshop or breaks, or using it as a bulletin board for announcements, such as the group yoga session timings in the mornings.
3. Campaign: During the campaign (pilot), the team has been using the groups for communicating with each other. Some instances of use and observations of this usage are elaborated in the following sections.

For this project, we are using WhatsApp, as the platform on which to build small groups, in keeping with the principle of ‘workgroups and personal satisfaction’. Additionally, the groups that the facilitators will be a part of will play many roles to support them through the long, often lonely days that entail the execution of a campaign like this. In the pilot we have organised the groups such that each group is for the pilot in each state, with facilitators working on different behaviors all together. At scale, depending on the arrangement in training, we would organise the facilitators differently either based on region or behavior, but the key would be that close ties in the group are forged in the workshop.



▲  
(from l to r) Figures 43 & 44: Screenshots of Nipa talking about trainers remembering their 'bad habits' and reminding them to use a specific form for the 'Samajhdar Group Meeting.'

Some of the key roles these groups will play in terms of sharing for support and improvement have already been hinted at in the section on storytelling (see Appendix 2).

Additionally, the moderator of each group who would be the trainer who trained those facilitators would share occasional tips and reminders at strategic moments in the campaign, to ensure that the more subtle points of the campaign aren't forgotten, or to reinforce certain principles like sticking to positive messaging, and staying on message. For the pilot, Nipa (COG), who was the head trainer, shot a few videos that we shared across the duration of the pilot in Gujarat. These were short thirty to sixty second videos that focussed on details of various stages in the campaign process.

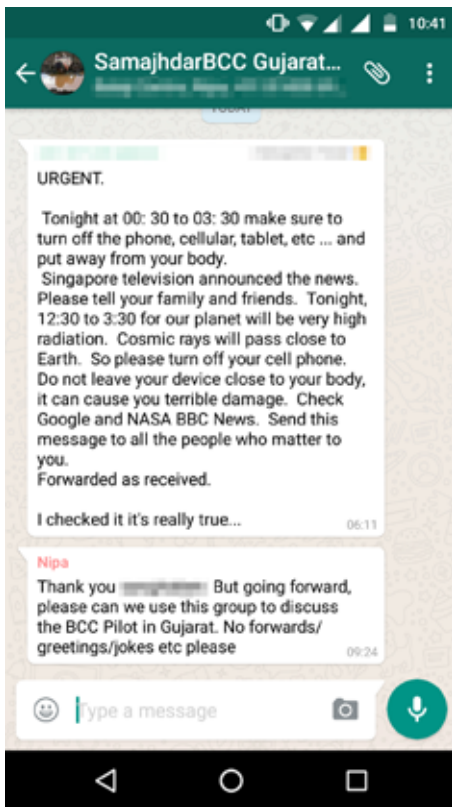
## 4.3 Learnings from the Pilot

### 4.3.1 Instances of use from the Gujarat Pilot

Some key instances of use recorded from the Gujarat pilot are presented in this section.

1. Moderating posting of memes and forwards  
WhatsApp is now a very popular social media platform in India, being used widely by a large populace who use groups much in the way that other internet users, might post on Twitter and Facebook (see chapter 3.1.2). This is one of the major issues that was observed in other groups (see chapter 3.1.2), and we had made a conscious decision, that while we wouldn't moderate the posting of memes in the pre-campaign stage, during the campaign a concerted effort was made to stop the posting of non-project material. Refer figure 45.

◀ *Note: Names of all facilitators from the AKRSP and AKPBS have been changed on request.*



▲ Figure 45: A member on the group forwarded an unrelated message from one of her other groups into the 'Samajhdar Campaign Group' and was reminded by the lead trainer, Nipa, about the rules of the group.



▲ (from l to r) Figures 46 & 47: When the 'Water BCC team' was asked for an update, Mayurbhai reported certain impediments in strategy due to which they had been unable to get the project going on the ground after training (Figure 46). Jayesh from the 'Sanitation BCC' team took a 'selfie video' to put in a quick report on their progress and further he reported some issues they had in progressing to the next steps (Figure 47).



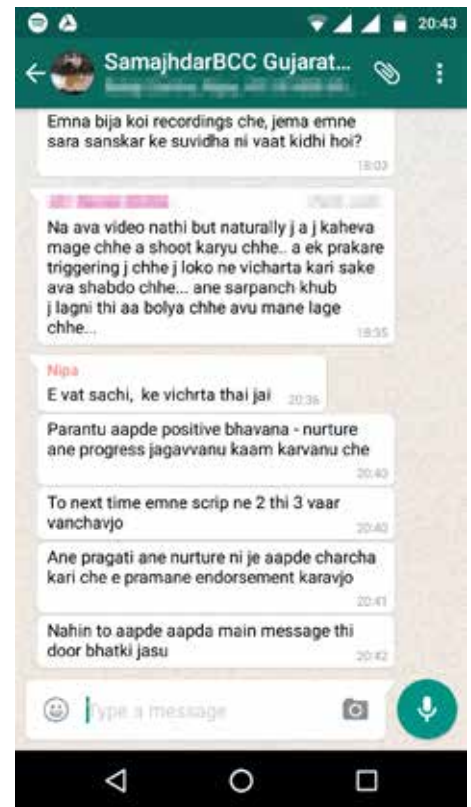
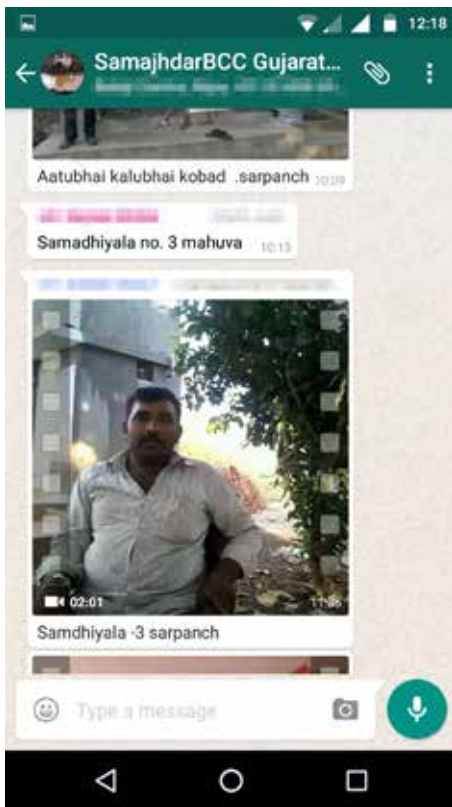
## 2. Reporting progress and impediments

The WhatsApp group, has become a convenient place for the facilitators to quickly update the group on what stage of the campaign they're in. In addition, and as an extension of that function they also have been reporting impediments both institutional (such as the availability of resources or approvals) as well as in field impediments. This sort of reporting, has allowed for quick escalation and attempts at resolution. Refer figures 46 and 47.

## 3. Course Correction

Behavior change is a nuanced process (in detail in Appendix 1), and given that the content and the approach is new for the facilitators, the media and posts were especially scoured to help course correct, to ensure that the facilitators weren't straying from the essence of the campaign.

As we have established, one of the key features of the



▲ (from l to r) Figures 48 & 49: The team working on sanitation posted a video of the head of the village panchayat (sarpanch) endorsing the campaign (Figure 48). In his video as pointed out by Nipa the sarpanch is referring to people who open defecate being attacked by animals. She points out that as per the campaign principles, the key would be positive messaging and so the team should try and get him to both understand that and get a new endorsement video using the principle of nurture as its underlying message (Figure 49).

▲ Figure 50: The trainer Payal points out that the sarpanch spoke as it came naturally, hence the negative messaging. This became a way for Nipa to point out that the change had to start from this first person, else the team would end up very far from the intended messaging.

‘Samajhdar campaign’ is that it is based on positive messaging rooted in the values of nurturing and progress, and distances itself from values such as shame.

One of the first endorsement videos shared by the ‘Sanitation BCC’ team, was of a sarpanch, who spoke about the issue through a negative lens. Immediately, the trainers jumped in to point out and offer tips on steering the person towards our intended values. Refer figures 48 - 50.

#### 4. Tips on improvement

One of the key functions of the learning networks, was to help facilitators improve their work in the field, especially through small details. And once these tips were figured out to share those with the larger group, so that these could help affect change in the larger campaign, leading to better outcomes.

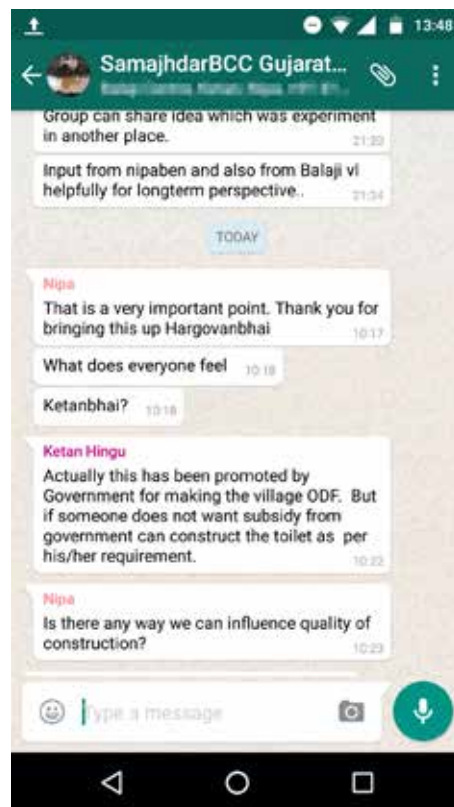
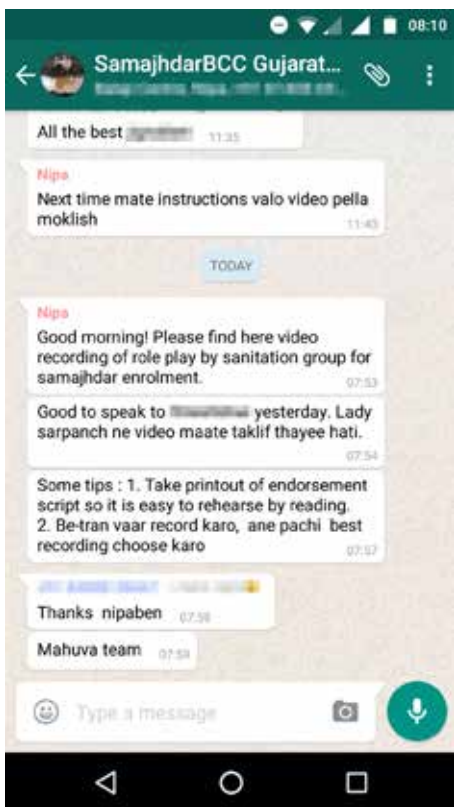
Based on a telephonic conversation with Alok bhai, the trainer



▲ (from l to r) Figures 52 - 54: Payal shares a photo they've taken of one of the families in front of their house. But the framing is off, and in the feedback I sketched, explained and reminded them on how better they could frame the picture. Since, they had shared the updated from the field, they were able to quickly retake and share the new photo. As observed by Mauli, another facilitator, this was useful feedback for others as well.

Figure 51: Nipa updates the rest of the team about feedback and tips she gave to Alokabhai, regarding taking better endorsement videos

(from l to r) Figure 55 & 56: Ramprasad shares his observations with the team about quality of toilets in figure 55, and gets some feedback from the manager of the project, Ketanbhai, shown here in the next screenshot.



Nipa, offered some tips on making the endorsement video process smoother. While these tips were offered on the phone, it is likely that similar problems are being faced by others in the group, and hence the tips were shared there as well. Refer figure 51.

While the team was in the field, they shared a photo they took of a family in front of their house, improvements were suggested by me, in my role as one of the trainers, and the feedback was immediately implemented as seen in the screenshots. Refer figures 52 - 54.

#### 5. Asking for suggestions

Another key use of the WhatsApp groups, was for the facilitators to reach out to the group for suggestions on dealing with issues that they were facing in the field.

Ramprasad one of the trainers, shared an observation about the quality of construction of toilets, and the systemic issue that leads to the poor quality which in turn have led to low adoption rates. He reached out to the group for suggestions, and got a few from the trainers, and the manager, Ketanbhai. Refer figures 55 and 56.

### 4.3.2 Observations and Insights from the Gujarat Pilot

Presented below are some insights, from this first round of testing. These insights have been gleaned from observing the activity on the groups as well as from informal interviews conducted with a couple of senior facilitators about four to five weeks after the training had finished, and the campaign was in its penultimate phase. Additionally, these insights were worked on along with Bala, from Centre of Gravity.

#### 1. Reporting vs. Learning

A key shortcoming of the activity on the groups in this first trial, was that a lot of the posts were more like updates about

what has been happening, and thus reporting, rather than the intended use of informal sharing towards learning. In a chat with Mayurbhai (one of the senior facilitators interviewed), he mentioned that it was difficult to share problems or impediments, as they were in a habit of quietly overcoming these with help from colleagues or local staff itself. Whereas it was much easier to share what was being done, and success stories.

In our analysis, this can be attributed to two factors:

- At a broad level, because of years of programmes that have been designed and implemented in a top-down manner, there is a sense of being very involved purely from the point of view of implementation and day-to-day tasks. This has led to a culture of ‘getting things done’ and doesn’t encourage the grassroots workers to pause, reflect and learn (White et al., 2014).
- Additionally, since there wasn’t an easy way to share updates from the ground, that is a clear format or space for reporting, the group became one of the main ways to put in regular reports.

## 2. Greater involvement required of the moderator

Nagmaben, mentioned that early-on when she had shared an update about having to change her schedule for household visits based on the local sowing season, she didn’t receive any response. To this, her colleague, also on the group, told her that she should probably just share positive stories, as those tended to get responses aplenty in the form of thumbs up, clapping and smiling emojis.

The lessons we’re taking away from this are:

- More than success stories, we need to ensure that small updates or issues being faced need to get prompt response and support. This is a role that the moderator might have to play, to bring attention to a post like that, and get the rest of the members in the group to contribute.
- Additionally, it is critical that until the group gets going, the

moderator must play a role in seeding conversation and encouraging discussion and sharing.

3. Lack of interaction between facilitators

One of the issues that was observed was that there was little or no interaction between facilitators. The way this played out was that when asking for suggestions, or seeking feedback, the responses came mostly from the trainers, rather than peers.

There are some possible reasons and concurrently solutions to this issue:

- Power dynamic is still in place after training. While there is a sense of bonhomie, the facilitators are still not comfortable enough to give each other feedback, as they believe that the WhatsApp group is ‘more-of-the-same’, where they do and get feedback in a top-down manner.
- Moderation of social media style memes or forwards, might have changed the tone of the group from one of banter, casual sharing leading to more on-point discussion, to that of a more formal, mediated conference room.
- Lack of specific exercises in the training, around this might not have made the message hit home. Perhaps an experiential learning exercise in which, the facilitators help a teammate navigate an issue through digital messages, might help them better internalise that kind of interaction.
- Unlike what had been envisioned while designing the ‘learning networks’ for this project, there aren’t individual facilitators working on the ground, but small teams of between three and five members. Thus some of the support roles that the learning network needs to play are being fulfilled by the teammates working in close proximity, thus removing the need for a virtual network of peers.

4. Presence of hierarchy hinders openness

Keeping managers out, was quite a challenge, and ultimately we had to bow to the demands from the organisation. This was primarily because without other formal, digital tools for reporting, most of the realtime project updates from the field were coming to the WhatsApp group. As mentioned

earlier, the sheer presence of the manager, along with trainers and people who had designed the programme, made it feel more like a 'formal' platform for reporting rather than in the intended manner. As mentioned in one of the examples in 4.3.1 (Reporting impediments), the facilitator who shared that they were having some strategic issues, promptly got a call from the manager, inquiring after the issue, and suggested calling him in the future. While the intention of the manager, Ketan, was to offer quick and easy support, it tainted the activity on the group somewhat as not a place where negative feedback could be easily shared.

#### 5. Realities of life on the ground

I spent a week across two of the three regional offices where the pilot in Gujarat was going on observing the early days of the third phase, where facilitators were following up the triggering exercise with household visits to help residents of their target villages overcome issues to build behaviors around using toilets and handling water in a hygienic manner. While out, it became clear that even though the campaign had been designed keeping in mind the attitudes and realities of the target audience, the implementation met obstacles in terms of the realities of multiple programmes being executed by a single facilitator, multiple ways of achieving similar goals. For example, with regards to sanitation, given the massive push from the central government for rural India to be 'open defecation free' by 2019 (see Appendix 1), this has trickled down to the team in Mahuva, Gujarat, working on meeting targets through three (somewhat) conflicting programmes. One of them is a government subsidy programme, another is funded by a local charitable organisation and the third being our campaign which focuses on behavior change. All these have vastly different targets, schedules, methods and formats of reporting.

This led to one of the facilitators interviewed, who has been working with his NGO for over twenty five years, to remark



▲  
(Fig 57) Mayurbhai explaining the daily log to be carried out by children, to Megha.

how “in NGOs I feel like we do more paperwork than we do actual field work. Take for example, the procurement process, if we want anything, we have to do a ton of paperwork and it goes through a long process” (subject kept anonymous on request). In saying this, he was trying to illustrate that given the pressures that they face, it becomes difficult to interact with others for learning and the like, as it is deemed non-essential.

### 4.3.3 Recommendations for the Jharkhand trials

While the intention in the beginning was that the pilots in the three states would run in parallel, as it turned out, they happened in a staggered manner, thus as Gujarat entered the end of the third phase, things were kicked off in Jharkhand.

In Jharkhand, due to organisational issues, the first phase training was a bit haphazard, and unlike Gujarat, the groups weren't formed prior to the training, but at the kick-off of the third stage within the pilot. This was deemed a happy accident for us, as we got a chance to iterate based on the learnings from Gujarat, and suggest some subtle changes to the trainers and managers in Jharkhand.

1. Create two types of groups
  - Reporting group: This group will comprise of everyone working on the campaign in Jharkhand, which means team leaders, facilitators, trainers and even interested members of the TATA Water Mission team. This group will become the primary space for reporting activity, with content in

the vein of ‘we did this today’, or ‘have completed so many households, here are some pictures from the process.’

- Learning Groups: Each group will consist only of facilitators and moderators. But the idea is that each group contains facilitators from different behaviors, thus in any one group, there shouldn't be two people working out of the same region or regional office.

This was done in keeping with the idea that creating a distinct space for formal reporting, would highlight the role that the learning groups play for sharing difficulties, innovation and small successes. Additionally, by keeping hierarchy out of those groups, we expected that more activity would take place that was informal and keeping in with ‘learning network’ principles. Lastly, splitting people across geographies is important, because why would a team that works out of the same office, use WhatsApp to share feedback, when they can do it in person.

2. Training around the difference between reporting and learning  
While introducing the groups in the training, the trainers will do some sort of simple activity like call and response, for what sort of content goes in either group. So a few examples will be given, and ask them to figure which group they should post in. Additionally, the groups would be formed physically also, where the three or four facilitators who will be on the group should sit with each other for the activity. The feeling to convey would be one of a quiz.
3. Applying different rules for moderating social posts  
One of the things that will be tested will be to have differential rules for the two types of groups. Thus the reporting group will have a strict policy of no forwards or social media type posts, whereas the learning groups will be more lax, to better strengthen the idea of their informality.
4. A schedule of triggers for the moderators  
A simple schedule and guide was co-created for the moderators, to ensure that there was a set of triggers,

shareable content for different parts of the last two phases of the campaign in which this new system would be tested. This was done mainly to ensure that the moderators were triggering activity in both groups, but more so in the learning ones.

## 4.4 Conclusions

In conclusion, from feedback from Nipa and Bala (COG) especially, there is a lot of enthusiasm, to carry the idea forward (elaborated in chapter 5.2), within this project but also to adapt it for use in other projects they're now pitching for.

The sense is that, while this first instance of testing the 'learning networks' wasn't a resounding success, in keeping with the culture of iteration we are trying to inculcate, there is huge room to constantly innovate and improve based on our observations.

This is mostly strengthened by the general sense of acceptance and excitement that the idea has evoked in the 'Samajhdar Campaign' team. This sort of a tool or system, clearly can't be simply introduced all in full, but needs to be introduced in increments of complexity, responding to the organic growth within an organisation or project (elaborated in chapter 5.2).



# Chapter 5

---

## REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Coming into the thesis process, as I elaborated in my personal motivation, I came with a certain energy and zeal to create an idea or system that had the ability to shake things up in the world of Development. Having spent the last two years, working through the literature of the constituent areas of inquiry, and spending time in the field, while my 'revolutionary' zeal has been tempered somewhat, the magnitude of the task ahead and a possible roadmap has become clearer.

This chapter contains the concluding thoughts into three sections. Starting with a brief look back at the research questions, and my sense of how far I got in making sense of them. I follow this up with an idea for how I will carry this train of thought and this initial work forward. And conclude with a short note reflecting on my personal growth and learnings.

## 5.1 Discussion on the research questions

As has been discussed in the introductory chapters, the research questions went through a fairly large shift soon after my initial research. It went from a monitoring and evaluation focus to project implementation focus, along with a parallel shift from a participatory video focus to a participatory media and ICTD focus. Below I briefly discuss each research question and the extent of exploration and areas to further explore.

[Can increased communication between grassroots workers & middle managers increase efficacy while implementing development project?](#)

This question is largely dealt with in the chapter 'Managerialism, Participation and a cybernetic system' (2.2.2). The method of researching this was to understand the role of participation

in Development primarily through literature, building on my experience and knowledge prior to the thesis. The research showed that participation could have a large role to play in the coming era of Development, and pointed out that this is was truer because of our reCOGNition of the wickedness of the problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973) we are looking to resolve. It pointed us ultimately to thinking through the design of organisations and systems within projects, to a ‘cybernetic system of governance’ based on empowering participation by beneficiaries, grassroots workers and middle managers.

Beyond the literature, the field work and the case, both offer some insight into this question. The use of the smaller regional groups by the Video Volunteers, certainly helps the state teams stay in constant touch, getting updates, with more candid responses. Besides these, the groups facilitate quick turn-arounds for feedback and work. In the pilots in Gujarat, the facilitators were able to improve their understanding and the execution of the projects, iterating their approaches far more frequently, than if teams were convening every few weeks with the trainers and managers as was the case otherwise.

#### [What is the effect of elevating the role of a middle manager on strategy implementation? And how can that be facilitated?](#)

While at the outset, the research question looked at the ‘middle manager’, as the subsequent research with various organisations (see chapter 2.2.3) and Centre of Gravity (see chapter 4) showed that this role can (and should) be interpreted in a broader manner to include various levels of hierarchy within an organisation that are closer to the workings on the ground.

Having realised that the organisational philosophy of a project and the manner in which the stakeholders are engaged is a key issue in the success of projects, in chapter 2.2.2 we looked to unpack the issue of participatory management to better understand the advantages and principles that could enable better participation in development.

We applied these principles overall to the paradigm shift that need to happen in organisations defining some of these changes in terms of project design, and how the middle management and grassroots workers need to be viewed. Indeed, while it was clear going into the case, that these are critical, and while Centre of Gravity (COG) did their best to use interesting techniques to bring in some of these shifts, the old paradigm is rather entrenched. My conclusion for this would be that, from the informal interactions in the field in the course of the pilot in Gujarat, I believe that the hypothesis holds, but it would take far greater, deeper and longer engagement with a team or an organisation to be able to fully test and understand whether this change can happen, and if it indeed as effective as one hopes and posits.

#### Can participatory media be used to empower grassroots workers and beneficiaries to make better decisions and encouraging contextualisation and iteration in ongoing projects?

Through the process of speaking to various participatory media organisations, I would say that the practices, tools and approaches employed are certainly powerful. There is great potential in leveraging these to allow grassroots workers and beneficiaries to better express themselves and make their voices heard in Development projects. This became clearer somewhat through the course of the pilot in Gujarat. The need to better express themselves felt by the trainers (the grassroots workers in that project), was perhaps most apparent through the enthusiasm for learning and honing their media capture skills, whether it came to taking better photos, videos or sending reports to the team using 'video-logs' or as we christened them 'selfie-videos'.

On the subject of the latter question, that is, the ability for middle management to use this system to make better decisions, the collaboration with Centre of Gravity (COG) offers some answers. While in the broadest sense, the idea saw resonance with the organisations and individuals involved, the actual project outcomes at the time of writing this thesis, offered much less by way of answers. While the COG team is keen on taking the idea forward in other projects as well, adapting the idea to different

contexts such as a project on hygiene habits with schools in a southern state in a government sponsored project, the TATA Water Mission project on which this idea was tested, didn't see a massive shift. Some of the reasons, such as the need for a deeper organisational culture shift are discussed in previous questions, and further iterations as suggested for the Jharkhand trials might offer some more insight.

## 5.2 Way Forward

Taking off from the discussion on the project work elaborated in the previous section, the idea is gaining some momentum, not just with Centre of Gravity, but also through informal conversations with other collaborators.

The plan at the moment is to collaborate with more organisations and projects to take the kernel of the 'participatory learning networks' idea forward and develop it by manifesting and iterating over the next few years. The way to do it would be to mimic somewhat the relationship that I had with Centre of Gravity, thus becoming a node for this knowledge, learnings and practices and work in the dual capacity of researcher and consultant with collaborators to implement and document the execution of more such learning networks and their effectiveness. The relationships would have to be tweaked somewhat though, such that they are longer term, and seek to create slow fundamental shifts in culture while applying the networks idea iteratively through projects.

There are two lines of inquiry at the moment, in terms of further developments. The first is to do with bringing in learnings and a point of view from theoretical research, and the other is the development of certain digital/hybrid tools to aid grassroots workers and middle managers in their engagement on 'learning networks'.

While reflecting on the conclusions from the project with Centre of Gravity (chapter 4), it became clearer that there were two areas

of study, principles from which had to be better included into the practice of ‘participatory learning networks’.

- Learning: In later conversations, we felt that one of the reasons that the organisation and facilitators involved in our trials in Gujarat, had trouble was that as a group they were not geared towards learning. Since it wasn’t part of the research going in, it became difficult to evaluate this aspect, and so for further work on the theories around learning, especially around improving and encouraging peer to peer and lifelong learning need to be looked into.
- Knowledge Management: Another area of research, principles and learnings from which need to be better included are around the area of knowledge management. Since we are talking about the use of digital/online communities for sharing learnings through stories and qualitative data on various topics, along with offering support to the participants of a programme; It will be critical to understand how this knowledge is recorded, made sense of, and inculcated into a growing institutional and sectoral memory.

Sensing the impending need for these areas, some work in parallel was started with Quicksand, through research, reflection and writing online, with a focus on toolkits and their use in Development planning in practice.

Alongwith explorations in these areas, ideas for tools and methods that extend the idea or help the users of the system can also be explored in the following areas.

1. Media Handling & Creation
  - Video has emerged as a powerful tool for sharing and consuming stories online. Insight from the several conversations I had with the team members at Video Volunteers, revealed that there is room for an application that could lower the threshold for entry into production of simple video stories. In my own experience, in the filmmaking process, it is relatively easy to teach an individual to capture better video, but the part that is much more difficult is the process of editing. Coming into phase 1 of this thesis where video was a

◀ *This project can be accessed at the following URL: <https://medium.com/reflecting-on-toolkits/>*

big part of the research, I had an idea for a mobile application, that would have pre-designed templates which helped people with creating simple stories without any editing required. The idea being that they would capture discrete shots, based on guidance from a template, and an edited, finished video would be generated. I later found out that an open source app had been created with this idea, for investigative journalism, called storymaker. The application has a number of features, such as training, videography aids, downloading project specific templates and language options that mean that it does what I had envisioned and much more. The issue I faced, while doing some preliminary testing though, was that the application is highly unstable to the verge of being non-functional. Having said that, the project is open-source, and I believe that using some of the ideas, and source code, a simpler, lighter app can be created.

- Open Development Kit (ODK) is an application for creating simple surveys tools for android based mobiles. ODK is used extensively by organisations such as Akvo and Vera, for enabling organisations to create surveys that are conducted by team-members in the field, the data is uploaded to the cloud and using various other online tools, analysis is done. While ODK is currently used primarily as a survey tool, it could also be reworked, to help grassroots workers and middle managers generate reports or blog posts as formats for capturing and sharing stories.
- A key feature for any media creation or handling application on mobile phones though would be their ability to export video, images or documents into smaller file sizes. This is especially critical as while phone cameras are now capturing ever larger images and video, data speeds and costs haven't kept up, and file sizes might become deterrents for sharing.

## 2. Supplementary tools

In the course of the work there were a couple of ideas that came up that could be used quite effectively by organisations in the course of their implementation work. But additionally, would make learning networks far more effective.

◀ *This has been launched as an open source project, and at the time of writing this thesis can be accessed at the following URL: [https://github.com/clownbigmole/storytelling\\_with\\_video\\_templates](https://github.com/clownbigmole/storytelling_with_video_templates)*

- There is room for a very simple status check or reporting tool, that allows a person in the field to check-in with whatever stage of the project they might be in. This idea is based on an insight from the ‘Samajhdar Campaign’ with TATA Trust (see chapter 4) that while we didn’t need reporting on the minutiae of the project, we were a bit lost because different facilitators were at different stages across the board. If we a simple tool was created where facilitators could ‘check-in’, it would enable smoother planning and the ability to key that information for follow up work.
- One of the techniques that the monitoring, evaluation and quality team at Digital Green champions is the ‘poll-booth’ method. In my understanding of their usage, they do simple polls with the beneficiaries of their project in any given location, to get a sense of what is and what isn’t working in the particular location. This enables them to help their local team, innovate and improve. At the time of the interview (see chapter 3.2), they had recently begun using it and relied on teams from the head office, being out in the field conducting this survey. This method could be very effective for the grassroots workers and middle managers to understand how to improve the implementation in the locations in their jurisdictions. The way it might play out, is to enable the grassroots workers and middle managers, to ask pertinent questions through IVR and SMS, so that beneficiaries can give feedback anonymously. The data could then be used to make changes, and as an added benefit to be used to justify changes made in the programme.

### 3. Aids for moderators

The focus in the trials with Centre of Gravity (COG) was primarily on the participants of the learning network. One of the stakeholders that was largely overlooked were the moderators. As we saw through our trials, the moderator has a very large part to play especially initially to get activity on the group going. With that in mind, we believe that there are certain components in the learning networks process that could be included in future iterations.

- Training with regards to moderating and managing online communities could be imparted to these individuals. The role

of community managers has grown with the rise of various online communities, and it would be extremely useful to build the capacity of these individuals with these lessons.

- A tool could be built for moderators, that can take in the data from the sort of tools described in the previous section around reporting and poll booth surveys. With that data, the moderators can easily create data based triggers for activity in their respective groups, besides having a dynamic schedule for triggers and messages to the group.

Overall, there are some very interesting lines of inquiry and ideas to follow through on over the course of future iterations. This could be the beginning of a very exciting phase of work.

## 5.3 Personal Reflection

This thesis, in many ways is the bridge between my previous work and the work I intend to do in the future. With an eye to that future, it felt important to reflect on some of the major takeaways for me in terms of process and personal growth.

### [Standing on the shoulders of giants](#)

Unlike my personal process in previous roles and work, parsing large amounts of academic literature and including that information in my analysis of a situation or sector was not an intrinsic part of the process. What seemed like a cumbersome process at the outset of the MA in general and the thesis in particular turned into quite the joyride. Reading papers, following the trail of references and falling into the proverbial ‘rabbit hole’ was quite an enriching experience. I’d like to think that I took to it quite well, bringing insights from my process of reading into physical space, was especially useful in helping me connect otherwise unconnected fields of study.

### Sense making through writing

While I had read many a blog post about the power of writing as a means to make sense of the things in your head. The advice came from everything from productivity blogs, to zen practice, I never quite internalised the power of this until a friend forced me to get writing on the thesis, rather than just sitting on all the information as I'd been doing for over a year. In the course of writing this thesis, I got into the habit of writing other pieces, most notably the writing/publishing project making sense of institutional learning and toolkits in international development mentioned in the previous section.

### Confidence to pitch my ideas

For the longest time, while I sat and let this idea stew, I was talking to people about it and letting the idea evolve with every conversation. But the chance encounter with Bala from COG, and the subsequent collaboration, was a huge boost in confidence and allowed me to build up the skills to pitch the idea, and create a space for testing a hitherto unknown idea in a large project of that kind. It's given me a huge amount of confidence for the coming phase, where I hope to get out there and pitch to bring on collaborators to test and improve the idea of the 'participatory learning networks'.

### My work

Right from my undergraduate studies until I started my thesis, I've always had the mindset of a consultant. Which loosely translates, for me to the idea that I have a 'specific set of skills' that I apply to various problems, from running a social enterprise to strategy for an education foundation or figuring out how to sell dishWASHing detergent to people who can't afford it. But in the course of working on the thesis, and other related projects, I've really found my voice. That voice at its simplest looks at democratic and truly participatory processes in social impact work, using technology and human centred design.

While there was a section for acknowledgement at the beginning, I am immensely grateful for the learning and growth that this thesis enabled.





# **REFERENCES AND APPENDICES**

# References

## Papers and Books

Andersson, A., & Hatakka, M. (2013, 05). What are we doing? - Theories used in ICT4D research, In 12th International Conference on Social Implications of Computers in Developing Countries / [ed] Niall Hayes, Renata Lèbre La Rovere, 2013, 282-300 p.

Ariely, D. (2009). Predictably irrational, revised and expanded edition: The hidden forces that shape our decisions. New York: HarperCollins e-books.

Aunger, R., & Curtis, V. (2013). The anatomy of motivation: An evolutionary-ecological approach. *Biological Theory*, 8(1), 49–63. doi:10.1007/s13752-013-0101-7

Bebbington, A. (2003). Global networks and local developments: Agendas for development geography. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 94(3), 297–309. doi:10.1111/1467-9663.00258

Brown, T., & Katz, B. (2009). Change by design how design thinking can transform organizations and inspire innovation. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Cornwall, A. (2006). Historical perspectives on participation in development. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 44(1), 62–83. doi:10.1080/14662040600624460

Curtis, V. (2013). Don't look, don't touch, don't eat: The science behind revulsion. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Easterly, W. (2006). The white man's burden: Why the west's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good. New York: Oxford University Press.

Easterly, W. (2014). The tyranny of experts: Economists, dictators, and the forgotten rights of the poor. Washington: BASIC BOOKS.

George, R. (2009). The big necessity: The unmentionable world of human waste and why it matters. New York: Metropolitan Books,

Henry Holt and Co.

Guha, R. (2013). *Patriots and partisans*. India: Penguin Books India Pvt.

Hart, G. (2001). Progress reports development critiques in the 1990s: Culs de sac and promising paths. *Progress in Human Geography*, 25(4), 649–658. doi:10.1191/030913201682689002

Heeks, R. (2008). ICT4D 2.0: The next phase of applying ICT for international development. *Computer*, 41(6), 26–33. doi:10.1109/mc.2008.192

Hickey, S., & Mohan, G. (2005). Relocating participation within a radical politics of development. *Development and Change*, 36(2), 237–262. doi:10.1111/j.0012-155x.2005.00410.x

Kothari, U. (2005). Authority and expertise: The Professionalisation of international development and the ordering of dissent. *Antipode*, 37(3), 425–446. doi:10.1111/j.0066-4812.2005.00505.x

Kudva, N. (2005). Strong States, Strong NGOs, In *Social movements in India: Poverty, power, and politics: Poverty, power, and politics*. (pp. 233 - 265). United States: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.

Land, Molly K., *Networked Activism*. Harvard Human Rights Journal, Vol. 22, 2009; NYLS Legal Studies Research Paper No. 09/10 #13. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1475423>

Meyer, I., & Marais, M. (2015). Design for Sustainability: Countering the Drivers of Unsustainability in Development Projects. *The Journal Of Community Informatics*, 11(3). Retrieved from <http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/1169>

Moyo, D. F. (2009). *Dead aid: Why aid is not working and how there is a better way for Africa*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Ray, R., & Katzenstein, M. F., Ray (2005). Introduction: In the Beginning, There was the Nehruvian State, In *Social movements in India: Poverty, power, and politics: Poverty, power, and politics.* (pp. 3 - 31). United States: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.

Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*,4(2), 155–169. doi:10.1007/bf01405730

Salih, A., & Doll, Y. (2013). A middle management perspective on strategy implementation. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 8(22) . doi:10.5539/ijbm.v8n22p32

Srinivas, N. (2009). Against NGOs? A critical perspective on Nongovernmental action. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 38(4), 614–626. doi:10.1177/0899764009334308

Stanoevska-Slabeva, K. (2002). Toward a community-oriented design of Internet platforms. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 6(3), 71–95.

Tandon, R. (2000). Riding high or nosediving: Development NGOs in the new millennium. *Development in Practice*, 10(3-4), 319–329.

Truss, C., Shantz, A., Soane, E., Alfes, K., & Delbridge, R. (2013). Employee engagement, organisational performance and individual well-being: Exploring the evidence, developing the theory. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 24(14), 2657–2669.

Parera, L. B., & Fernández-Vallejo, A. M. (2013). Changes in the role of middle manager: A historical point of view. *International Journal of Information and Education Technology*

Wei-Skillern, J., & Silver, N. (2013). Four network principles for collaboration success. *The Foundation Review*, 5(1), 121–129.

White, N., R. Cardone and A. de Moor. (2014). Learning 3.0: collaborating for impact in large development organizations. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* 10(3): 21-37

## **Webpages**

Akvo. About us. Retrieved September 30, 2016, from <http://akvo.org/about-us/>

Ambroz, A., & Shotland, M. Randomized controlled trial (RCT). Retrieved October 1, 2016, from Better Evaluation, <http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/rct>

Birrell, I. (2012, January 27). Haiti and the shaming of the aid zealots: How donated billions have INCREASED poverty and corruption. *Daily Mail*. Retrieved September 30, 2016, from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2092425/Haiti-earthquake-How-donated-billions-INCREASED-poverty-corruption.html>

Brabant, K. V.(2016, September 7). Five ways to make aid locally sourced. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from September 30, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/mar/01/the-aid-localisation-debate-five-issues-for-the-world-humanitarian-summit>

Buffett, P. (2013, July 26). The charitable-industrial complex. *Opinion*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/opinion/the-charitable-industrial-complex.html>

Bullen, P. (2014). Community-led total sanitation (CLTS) – does it really work? Retrieved September 30, 2016, from <http://www.tools4dev.org/resources/reviews/community-led-total-sanitation/>

CGNet Swara. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <http://cgnetswara.org/about.html>

The CLTS knowledge hub: Strengthening and broadening CLTS at scale. (2014, November 14). Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <http://www.communityledtotalsanitation.org/page/clts-knowledge-hub->

strengthening-and-broadening-clts-scale

Damberger, D. (2011, December 11). What happens when an NGO admits failure Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_damberger\\_what\\_happens\\_when\\_an\\_ngo\\_admits\\_failure](http://www.ted.com/talks/david_damberger_what_happens_when_an_ngo_admits_failure)

Digital empowerment foundation. (2002). Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <http://defindia.org/our-belief/>

Digital green. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <https://www.digitalgreen.org/about/>

Garcia, M. (2016, February 5). Meet the bus conductor who uses Whats App to ensure the passengers are on time. News. Retrieved from <http://www.thebetterindia.com/45120/bus-driver-thiruvananthapuram-whatsapp-group-kerala/>

The Hindu (2015, January 1). Unused rural toilets to face public scrutiny. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from National, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/swachh-bharat-goes-hitech-govt-to-track-toilet-use-in-realtime/article6742186.ece>

I Paid A Bribe. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <http://ipaidabribe.com/>

Jain, A. (2015, October 20). How will we live. Retrieved September 30, 2016, from <https://medium.com/@anabjain/how-will-we-live-d9baf00acac9#.xoz2esi5o>

Katoch, M. (2015, June 30). In One of India's most suicide-prone areas, Whatsapp is bringing hope & support #DigitalIndia. Agriculture. Retrieved from <http://www.thebetterindia.com/21703/farmers-rural-maharashtra-bringing-about-the-next-green-revolution-whatsapp/?ref=fb>

Khanna, P. (2015, December 9). Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan failed to achieve its desired targets: CAG. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from Politics, <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/>

ghYnnKN03hSgre4cwSrwqN/Nirmal-Bharat-Abhiyan-failed-to-achieve-its-desired-targets.html

Kilpi, E. (2015, October 25). Why management has to be algorithmic – what’s the future of work? Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <https://medium.com/the-wtf-economy/why-management-has-to-be-algorithmic-c2e4075fc717#.njw9nllsw>

LSHTM, & COG. (2013). SuperAmma campaign for changing hand washing behaviour. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <http://superamma.org/>

Maraa (2016) Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <http://maraa.in/>

Metz, C. (2016, April 5). Forget Apple vs. The FBI: WhatsApp Just Switched on Encryption for a Billion People. Retrieved September 30, 2016, from Business, <https://www.wired.com/2016/04/forget-apple-vs-fbi-whatsapp-just-switched-encryption-billion-people/>

NoBroker.in (2016). Retrieved June 11, 2016, from <http://nobroker.in/>

Pande, A. (2013, May 1). Toilets in India: The statistics stink. India. Retrieved from <http://www.firstpost.com/india/toilets-in-india-the-statistics-stink-744025.html>

Quicksand (2015). Project Sammaan: Tackling the urban sanitation crisis. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <http://quicksand.co.in/work/project-sammaan>

Schorr, L. (2016, January 08). Reconsidering evidence: What it means and how we use it (SSIR). Retrieved October 1, 2016, from Stanford Social Innovation Review, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/reconsidering\\_evidence\\_what\\_it\\_means\\_and\\_how\\_we\\_use\\_it](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/reconsidering_evidence_what_it_means_and_how_we_use_it)

Shane, K. (2016, January 15). The project Sammaan Toolkit – reflecting on Toolkits. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <https://medium.com/reflecting-on-toolkits/the-project-sammaan-toolkit->

2c881665df06#.4g7hmah9v

Slack: Be less busy. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <https://slack.com/is>

TATA Trusts. (2016). Tata water mission – livelihood – Tata trusts. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <http://tatatrusters.org/section/inside/Tata-Water-Mission>

Tseng, V. (2015, October 27). Evidence at the crossroads Pt. 1: What works, tiered evidence, and the future of evidence-based policy | william T. Grant Foundation. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from Insight & Analysis, <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/evidence-at-the-crossroads-pt-1-what-works-tiered-evidence-and-the-future-of-evidence-based-policy>

Vera (2016, September 30). Retrieved October 1, 2016, from Vera Solutions, <http://www.verasolutions.org/what-we-do/>

Video Volunteers (2016) Retrieved October 1, 2016, from Video Volunteers, <http://www.videovolunteers.org/about/>

Vora, R. (2015, April 29). WhatsApp turns a trading platform for Gujarat farmers. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/agri-business/whatsapp-turns-a-trading-platform-for-gujarat-farmers/article7154940.ece>

WhatsApp. About WhatsApp. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from <https://www.whatsapp.com/about/>

Witter, L., & Mikulski, J. (2015, December 22). Breaking free from the tribe: Why philanthropy needs to invest in bridge builders (SSIR). Retrieved October 1, 2016, from Stanford Social Innovation Review, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/breaking\\_free\\_from\\_the\\_tribe\\_why\\_philanthropy\\_needs\\_to\\_invest\\_in\\_bridge\\_bui](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/breaking_free_from_the_tribe_why_philanthropy_needs_to_invest_in_bridge_bui)

World Bank. (2015, December 15). World bank approves US\$1.5

Billion to support India's universal sanitation initiatives. Retrieved October 1, 2016, from The World Bank, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/12/15/world-bank-approves-usd-1point5-billion-support-india-universal-sanitation-initiatives>

### **Presentations and Internal Documentation**

Centre of Gravity, 2015, "Behavior Change in WASH, and the Samajhdar Campaign".

Quicksand Studio, 2010, "Potty Project".

Quicksand Studio, 2012, "Project Sammaan".

# Appendix 1: The Problem of WASH, and Behavior Change

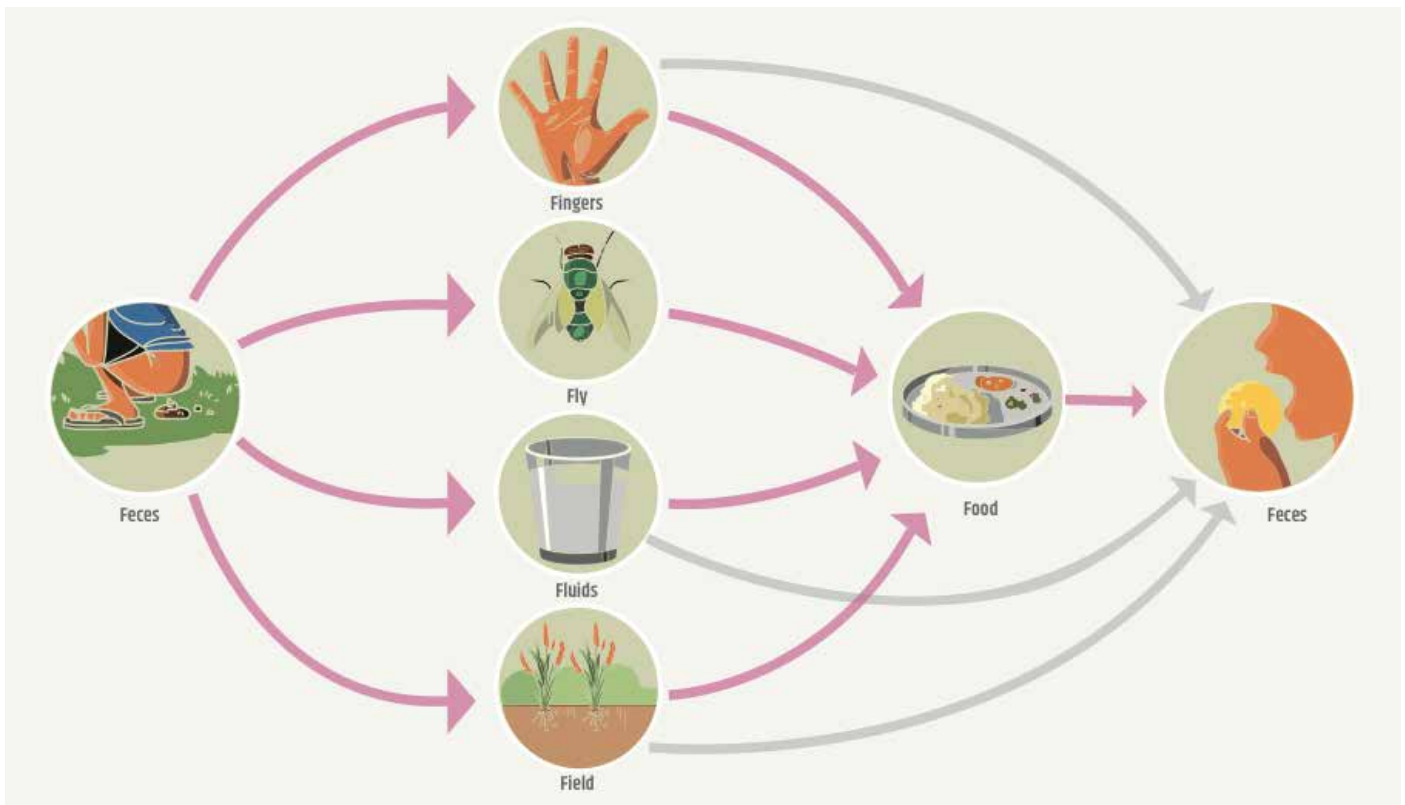
## The Problem of WASH

More than half of the 1.2 billion people in India lack access to toilets. As of 2013 (Pande, 2013) the Indian government had spent over INR 1.25 Billion over the previous two decades on sanitation and drinking water, to no avail. The new government brought to power with an overwhelming majority in the general elections of 2014 in India, the National Democratic Alliance, announced as one of their flagship projects the ‘Swacch Bharat Abhiyan’ (Clean India Mission) which tackled issues of solid waste management and littering, but with most focus on sanitation access. The campaign is a restructuring of the ‘Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan’ or Total Sanitation campaign that had been initiated by the previous government in power (Khanna, 2015). The biggest critique of the campaign and its predecessors was that it had focussed solely on the building of toilets, and not enough on sustained usage and behavior change. The new goal of the campaign is to “ensure (that) all citizens in rural areas have access to improved sanitation – such as a toilet or latrine with a focus on changing behaviors – in ending the practice of open defecation by 2019” (World Bank, 2015).

The focus on behavior change and monitoring of usage through technology (The Hindu, 2015) comes at the back of previous failures to create actually open defecation villages. The observation has been that while toilets get built through top-down pressures, this does not necessarily translate into families and communities utilizing these facilities (COG, 2015). The need is to bring in behavior change strategy to help people build good and stick to good habits.

There are two things that I would like to elaborate on about the work of behavior change, and sanitation, as sectors.

While broadly behavior change refers to any change in human behavior, in the Development sector it often refers specifically to public health campaigns and interventions that seek to create shifts that prevent illness. The theories that form the basis for interventions are many, but most trace their origins to landmark



▲ *Figure 58: This diagram called the 'F-diagram' by the COG team, depicts the various 'vectors of disease' that act as direct or indirect ways for germs and bacterial matter to travel from feces to food and eventually into our systems.*

work by behavioral economist Daniel Kahnemann (Ariely, 2008). The basis is the questioning of classical economic theory, which treats humans as beings who make all their choices rationally. As we have now come to see through various examples, and experiments, this is not true. People don't necessarily behave in their best self-interest, for a number of reasons (Ariely, 2008). The discussion of human behavior in this larger field though isn't in the scope of this thesis, I bring up features of this practice where relevant below.

The introduction to this section delved primarily on sanitation, but it is critical to understand that when applying a human-centred lens to sanitation, we realise that as it is a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973), we must take into account the larger set of behaviours that interact with it. The reason for the focus on sanitation, is the effect that lack of sanitation has on health. When people defecate in the open, the feces is left in the open. Flies that come into contact with this, carry the germs and deposit it on food and water sources thus leading to the spread of various gastrointestinal diseases such as diarrhoea (George, 2008). But if we make that the focus, that is the prevention of the spread of germs, then the F-diagram helps us make better sense of things (COG, 2015).

As we can see from figure 58, it becomes clear that the building of toilets and managing of sanitation waste is not nearly enough, there is a requirement to think about and change behavior with regards to access and handling of drinking water, as well

as handWASHing with soap. Thus to create long term, real behavior change any campaign needs to tackle holistically, the trio of sanitation, water and hand hygiene, which are commonly abbreviated to WASH (COG, 2015).

## **Behavior Change and WASH**

At this juncture I'd like to describe one type of campaign that tackles the issue of WASH

*Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) is an innovative methodology for mobilising communities to completely eliminate open defecation (OD). Communities are facilitated to conduct their own appraisal and analysis of open defecation (OD) and take their own action to become ODF (open defecation free) (CLTS Knowledge Hub, 2016).*

In my own observation of one kind of manifestation of this, a 'mobiliser' or 'facilitator' goes out to a village and triggers the community to create change. The process follows a few common steps:

- It might begin with a village meeting, where along with villagers the facilitator creates a map of the village, marking primarily where people live, the water sources (and storage) and where they defecate. On a large 'map' drawn on the ground, they might signify the drinking water with a glass of water in a clear tumbler, and the place where they defecate with a small pile of brown or red pigment.
- They then go for a walk, tracing the spaces marked on the map, observing the conditions at each of the spaces. They might nonchalantly observe flies around an open well or tank, and then later on observe similarly flies sitting on the feces in the open defecation fields.
- Later they get back to the map, and using a stick with a toy fly at the end, they will show how the fly might pick up germs (the pigment) from feces and then pollute (color) the water that people then consume. This creates a sense of disgust, a very strong motivator for behavior change (Curtis, 2013)
- Observing this often creates an environment where the

community realises that open defecation is a health hazard, and decides to do something about. At this point the facilitator might suggest a number of things, such as creation of shaming squads or patrols that stop people from open defecation, suggesting access to subsidies to build toilets amongst others.

One of the major critiques of CLTS, has traditionally been that while it is a great way of triggering a need for change in the minds of people the triggers that end up being used are based on shame and fear (Bullen, 2016; COG 2015). There is a growing sense that while disgust is a great way to create a sense of the need for behavior change, for action and sustained change, campaigns need to use more positive motivations as triggers.

Chapter 4.1, explains a few of the campaigns that Centre of Gravity have conducted towards similar goals, and an important point to note is that they try to differ especially on the point of the kinds of triggers that are used to instigate action and create behavior change.

# Appendix 2: A detailed note on Design and Execution of training by Centre of Gravity

The training was carried out in the pilot by team-members of the Centre of Gravity (COG) team, and a couple of sessions were done by me. We were assisted by master trainers who were using the sessions being conducted by COG as training for themselves, as at scale they would be tasked with training the larger number of facilitators required to reach the target of over a thousand villages.

There were some very interesting principles that were executed quite well in the process of training. I was given the chance to participate in a training workshop happening for a group of facilitators in Gujarat. These facilitators were divided up into three teams, each focussing on a single behavior (either water handling, sanitation or handWASHing with soap) across four villages (for each behavior) in the pilot.

## 1. Creating a shift in mindset

The facilitators who will be working on this campaign are all quite experienced and have been working on various other campaigns related to WASH. Some of them have been CLTS facilitators, while others have worked on issues around groundwater, and access to drinking water. One of the major challenges identified upfront in their (COG's) research was that far too often, while a campaign might have a different tone or approach, it doesn't come through to facilitators and they regress to old 'habits' and messaging. This was translated to action by continuously stressing on the fact that this was a very different campaign, in three ways:

- Positive vs. Negative:: As mentioned in Appendix 1, Centre of Gravity tends to focus on using positive motivators such as aspiration and responsibility rather than shame and guilt. While subtle, it is a key distinction that the trainers stressed on, using various examples during the five days of the workshop to make their point. They used different unrelated moments in the discussions, where someone might say or mention something

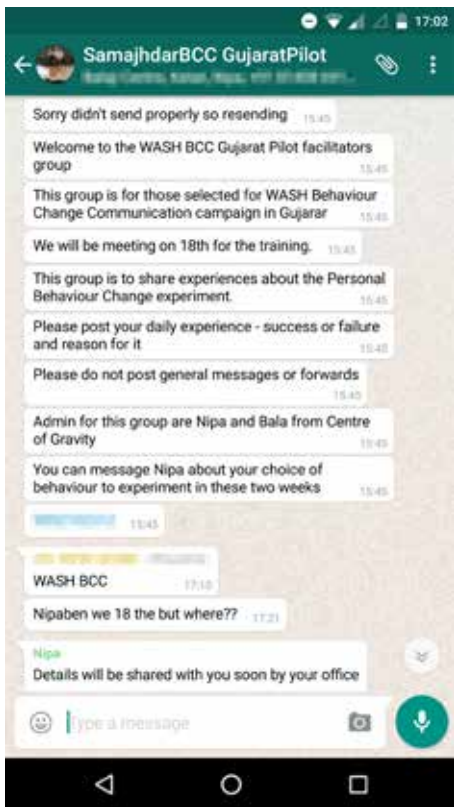
negative, bringing in the focus on positive.

- Information, Education and Communication (IEC) vs. Behavior Change Communication (BCC): Based on many of their various previous experiences, the facilitators were used to coming to training workshops and being made familiar with IEC materials. These would usually be verbal messaging, posters, pamphlets and other such collateral that would assist the facilitators in executing the campaign on the ground. The distinction that the trainers wanted to communicate here is that the difference between IEC and BCC was akin to the difference between knowledge and emotion. They used examples from their own lives about how simply knowing something doesn't automatically lead to change in behavior. For example, a doctor friend, who knowing the harmful impacts of smoking cigarettes, still continues to do so. What hit home for the group though, was an instance where Bala (one of the trainers) was speaking to the group of facilitators and Nipa (another trainer), took him by surprise and shouted, "Catch!" while flinging a couple of markers his way. Not prepared to receive them, he dropped the markers. This was used as a parable to IEC, where without emotional priming people cannot hold on to messaging that you might bombard them with. BCC on the other hand is akin to using emotional triggers to get someone's attention so that they are primed and ready to receive the knowledge you intend to share with them.

## 2. Fully understand/internalise the basis of the campaign

One of the issues the COG have faced with behavior change communication campaigns in the past, is that for the facilitators on the ground, the activities carried out are thought of as discrete elements of the campaign. The facilitators do not fully internalise that behavior change is a difficult process that requires effort and the coming together of elements such as willpower, motivation and the external environments in which people live.

In this project they are testing a kind of training for behavior change facilitators that was deemed a success in the training workshop that I was part of.



▲ (from l to r) Figures 59 - 60: Nipa set up the initial group, welcoming the members (left) Soon after all the facilitators and the trainers selected personal behaviors they would change (middle), and began reporting every day about their adherence (right)

They break the training down into specific steps:

Step 1: Pre-workshop for 2 weeks

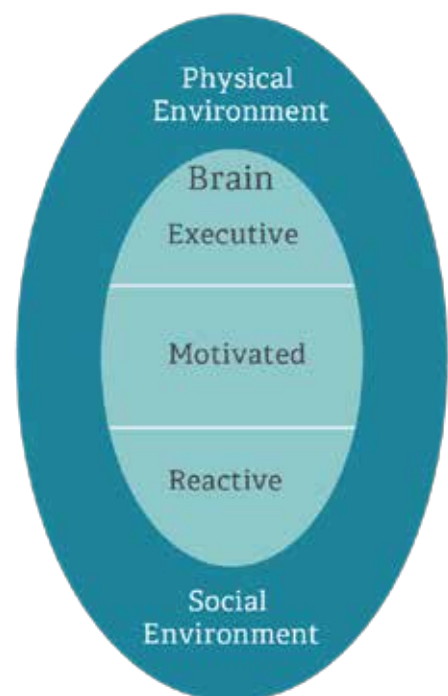
In the two weeks prior to the workshop, the facilitators all joined a WhatsApp group along with the trainers. Right at the start, everyone was tasked with pledging to change a small behavior. Some of the ones selected were around waking up earlier in the morning, abstaining from using their mobile phones or exercising more. Everybody would check-in every day with their successes or failures with their chosen behaviors. Refer figures 59 and 60.

Step 2: Analysing personal behavior change

The first day of the workshop, was spent with each facilitator going through their selected behaviors and discussing in detail, what worked and what didn't, and trying to analyse the reasons why. Using this information, the trainers led the group to a simple version of the behavior change framework they had applied to design the campaign.

The next morning, the facilitators used the internalised framework to create a

Figure 61: The diagram below shows the basic framework that was introduced to the facilitators as a synthesis of their analysis of their personal behavior change experiences and was further used for generating the underlying philosophies for each of the behaviors





▲  
 Figure 62 & 63:  
 Facilitators roleplaying  
 various aspects of the  
 campaign to better  
 understand how they  
 would execute.

strategy of how they would set themselves up to better succeed at their chosen behaviors, using their now nuanced understanding of behavior change.

#### Step 3: Applying the framework to WASH

Following this, the group was asked to look at each of the three behaviors, sanitation, water handling and handWASHing with soap, applying the behavior change framework that they had familiarised themselves to. In a group effort, which involved much debate and discussion, the group created a number of ideas on how behavior change could be brought about across all three aspects of WASH.

#### Step 4: Becoming familiar with the campaign

Following this, the latter half of the workshop, focussed on using various methods chief among these role playing exercises to walk the group through each phase and activity of the campaign. Refer figures 62 and 63.

The first three steps, were critical to the campaign, because

- The facilitators really understood that this particular project was aiming to do things in a different manner, with sustained activity in each village on a single behavior
- By going through a process of personal behavior change and connecting that with the BCC for WASH, the facilitators kept talking about how they couldn't simply tell people to change behavior. It was a difficult process, and they felt greater empathy with anyone trying to change behavior.
- By understanding the underlying model/framework for the

design of the campaign, the facilitators now became part custodians to the strategy. This principle is key for creating 'strategic alignment' and in keeping with the effort of being bottom centred as elaborated in chapter 4.2.

### 3. Personal skill building

Another element that was infused throughout the training workshop was a sense of skill enrichment for the facilitators involved. The skills that we worked on were through a mix of discrete activities and constant reminders and examples through the course of the interactions in the workshop.

#### Stronger and smarter together

One of the key ideas of the learning networks is that facilitators in the long run should be able to help each other with ideas, and solutions to issues they might be having through the ICT platform. An activity was carried out to evoke this idea, as through their previous research with facilitators, COG had realised that the facilitators are unlikely to both share issues they might be having openly with peers, and are not quick to offer ideas or solutions. Their conclusion was that this was partly because there weren't forums or encouragement to do so. The activity that the master trainer Sangeeta carried out was to give each of the participants some leaves of a Neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*) and ask them to come up with a massive list of uses for the leaves as a group. We went around in several rounds, to come up with a list of over twenty uses for the leaves. The point that Sangeeta made at the end was that while any one of us would've come up with four or five, as a group putting their heads together, we could do so much more. This activity was called out several times over the next few days of the workshop, to remind the facilitators that sharing their ideas and doubts only made the group stronger.

#### Giving and receiving feedback

Similar to the previous skill of smarter together, through subtle feedback through the course of the workshop, we worked with the facilitators to share feedback in more constructive and positive ways with each other. This was mostly done by setting an example

in the way that we gave feedback as well as helping them rephrase more unconstructive/negative comments that they might have made.

#### Being 'human-centred'

The approach taken by COG in their research, was to do ethnographic research in a sample of villages across the three states, as well as with facilitators. The approach of designing the campaign followed the design thinking approach, and it was an important skill that we wanted to impart to the facilitators. This is in line with the previous principle of understanding the difference between IEC and BCC and that the audience they're working with aren't simple numbers or subjects, but are human like them and need to be worked with slowly to create change. This was aided by an activity in the pre-workshop phase, where the facilitators were asked to spend a whole day and night, embedded in the homes and lives of a family in their target geography. The idea was to begin to cultivate a more human approach to communicating the material that they would have during the campaign. Additionally, at various stages in the training, especially while role-playing interactions with residents in the villages where they would campaign, feedback called back to the activity and the lessons that had been discussed in a short session on the third day.

#### Story-telling

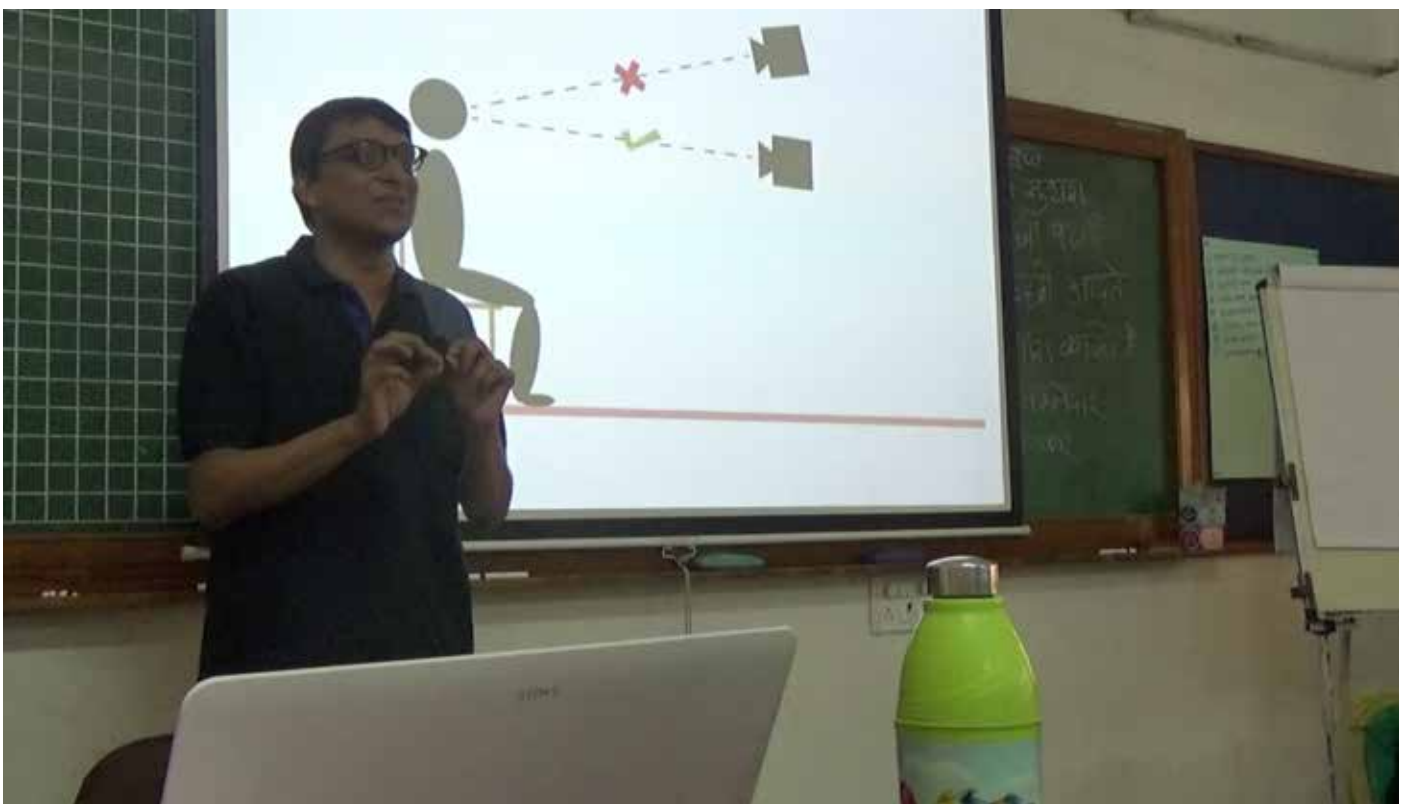
As discussed in chapter 3.3, a key aspect of setting up a platform for sharing on ICT-enabled learning networks, is the content that goes on it. In the workshop, we presented to the facilitators different types of stories that they might share, these were:

- Getting over local blocks or issues eg. a facilitator is facing a real problem breaking into a village, getting the first few early adopters. She puts up the challenge in the group and gets many ideas, having tried one that seems most powerful, shares her experience back.
- Sharing inspirational beneficiary stories eg.
  - Mohan, a resident of Amreli, took on additional labor work for 6 months to save money to build the toilet, because his family needed it.

- Bhavesh, a facilitator in Amreli, recorded an interview of Mohan and his family, took videos of home and toilet, and uploaded these with a short note to his group.
  - Girish, the group moderator, spots the story's power and shares it across other groups.
  - Rekha, a facilitator in Uttarakhand, downloads the story on her mobile and shares it with villagers who think money is a huge barrier. This breaks the ice with them and some of them decide to save money to build a toilet.
- Sharing tested ways of improving processes eg. a social mobiliser improves on how a game is played and shares it with the rest of the group. This is picked up by moderators, and makes its way into the next session of offline training.

While this was done simply by way of presentation and examples, we are hoping to work with professional storytelling trainers to create training modules, to help make the facilitators stronger

*Figure 64: In this still from video documentation done by the COG team, I am teaching the facilitators how to take better interviews on video*



story-tellers in Phase 3 of the project (see chapter 4.1).

#### Media Capture

A key element in the way that people consume information today, and especially as observed on WhatsApp (2.4.3), shows that higher quality media gains much better interaction. In keeping with this idea, we conducted a short session with demonstrations, on how to take better photos and video with simple principles around framing, camera stability while taking video, and techniques for quieter and better interviews.

This session was very well received by the group, as we realised that while we were thinking of this as a critical skill for the 'learning networks' aspect of the project, taking better pictures and video was a highly coveted skill for the media-savvy facilitators in their personal lives. The roleplay session immediately after this presentation required the team members to role play taking photos and videos of influential residents of the village, to use these as endorsements to get the general populace of the village excited and involved in the campaign. The team took the media capture aspect of the roleplay very seriously, and the trainers were walking around the breakout groups offering suggestions for improvement. Additionally, all the photos and videos captured were viewed together as a group, and further detailed feedback was offered.





*Cover Image: Interviewing residents at a  
slum in Bhubaneswar for Project Sammaan.  
(Quicksand, 2012)*

This document is a Master of Arts thesis  
from the Department of Media as part of  
the New Media, Design and Production  
programme at Aalto University School of  
Arts, Design and Architecture,  
Helsinki, Finland



**Aalto University**  
School of Arts, Design  
and Architecture