



VANI
Celebrating 30 Years
VOICE OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

COVID-19 Related Success Stories from the Voluntary Sector of India





Utthan

Utthan's journey began in 1981, when four women chose to work in the desolate Bhal region of Gujarat, helping marginalized communities to self-organise around critical livelihood issues and develop local leadership. Utthan, which means 'upliftment' in Hindi initiated a people's movement comprising a large number of women and youth, to address their rights to regular, safe drinking water, protecting and accessing common land for their livelihood security, challenging patriarchy, feudal exploitation and caste discrimination at local levels. In the process, Utthan facilitated the formation of a community-based organisation known as Mahiti (knowledge), which has been a local force since 1994.

Utthan's mission is to initiate sustainable gender sensitive, grass root processes of empowerment amongst the most vulnerable communities; through a process of inclusion, building conscientiousness, and organising around their major issues.

Geographically, it caters to the following areas:

Outreach Description	In Gujarat (Bhavnagar, Bharuch, Amreli Dahod, Panchmahals)
Total District	6
Total Block	19
Total Village	269
Total Population	13,75,962
Total HH	1,94,409

Utthan's working model addresses the issues of the most marginalized through a decentralized structure consciously engaging local, committed women and men who lead operations and partake in decision making. It has forty years of rich experience at the grassroots in Gujarat. Participatory situation analysis of challenges in intersectional contexts provides the appropriate base for building community agency, strengthening leaders & institutions in collective prioritization & planning. Employing people's knowledge and new innovations helps demonstrate best and brave practices contributing to building a body of Utthan learnings for sharing and exchange. Strengthening of its own team, networking and partnerships with Government & non-Government stakeholders contributes to growth and influence.

COVID-19 magnified the impact on vulnerable communities on whom Utthan's work was focused. With consequent waves of the pandemic, those who had barely started tying some threads, were once again faced with a situation, more complex than before. Utthan's priority groups were thus, in a more precarious situation. It became important to address these issues so that the negative impacts could be minimized.

Utthan was able to swing into a multiple support response due to the very dedicated community leadership at village, block and district levels. Its local base, network and strong field team, put it in extreme hard work to successfully implement a large scale of relief work activities, throughout the lockdown and restrictions. Having created basic awareness for COVID-19 prevention, provided emergency as well as intermediary relief support to the most

vulnerable families in 100 villages. This provided Utthan, the scope to influence people's beliefs around the need for complete vaccination and influence behaviours to prepare for a possible next wave, in the proposed 80 villages. Multiple relief kits were provided to over 60,500 families.

Thirty-one team members of Utthan & community fellows were trained online, to better understand the COVID-19 disease, prevention, care and response for a safe roll out. Awareness on COVID appropriate behaviour was provided through community influencers and a 1000 COVID response volunteers from 106 villages were further trained. 106 villages were provided with basic safety and diagnostic equipment like oximeters and thermal guns & were trained to use them. Gram Panchayats were supported to understand the importance of activating COVID Community Care Centres. However, building their confidence to efficiently use these centres remained a challenge. Utthan provided relief support in multiple forms to emerging needs in 235 villages, keeping in mind the principle of Social Solidarity Enterprise model.

Utthan leveraged diversity, equity and inclusion in building local resilience to the crisis. It followed the principle of 'employing and deploying' locally available resources, knowledge and networks, to boost social solidarity between households and energize the local economy.

They used the following approaches while distributing kits and providing support:

- **Rural community-centered, gender responsive approach in procurement and distribution**
- **Prioritizing the most vulnerable when directing relief and livelihood support**
- **Building alliances with different stakeholder groups for effective interventions**

Rural community-centred, gender responsive approach in relief procurement and distribution: PEOPLE TO PEOPLE SOCIAL SOLIDARITY MODEL

Immediate support, local procurement, money circulation: Food grain and masks distribution



Food grains for relief purchased from local women farmers.

INR 15,09,000 worth of food grains were bought from 170 women farmers for the ration kits. Money was thus infused back into the local economy, into women's accounts. Comparatively, women got a 16% benefit by selling at their doorstep at a fair price & minimal drudgery.



Relief including food grains, soaps, masks and menstrual hygiene products were distributed to 12,292 rural households

Face masks worth of **INR 5,00,000** bought from 68 women tailors.

Social capital building and boosting social solidarity



Village community leader were mobilized. Youth and women from 55 villages were engaged as volunteers to support the process, also trained and equipped for COVID-19 prevention and care work.



Kitchen-garden kit including seeds & bio inputs to grow vegetables. Support to 9, 879 households led to nutrition for nearly 30, 000 households

Scaleup and share the experience in Networks

- Utthan shared experiences in the Working Group for Women & Land ownership, Inter Agency Group & Rapid Rural Community Response to COVID-19 (RCRC), the latter was featured as one of the top 50 last-mile responders in India (2021), in the World Economic Forum's [COVID Response Alliance for Social Entrepreneurs](#)

Local procurement and share while building social capital within the community

Rural community-centred, gender responsive approach in relief procurement and distribution: PEOPLE TO PEOPLE SOCIAL SOLIDARITY MODEL



Kharif & Rabi sowing & Organic input support

Seed support of local varieties to 6, 249 households. 2, 200 households were provided with organic input.

70% of seed support relief, gave double the returns. Decentralised Seed Banks were set up to store these seeds for next season and were further provided to more women farmers.

Tool kit support

DISTRIBUTED TOOL KITS



3600 FAMILIES

Emergency Safety & Diagnostic Equipment & Awareness Support to Village COVID response groups, in 100 villages and 4 CHCs

Safety kits for Team & Volunteers	136
Vaccine awareness Banner	424
Vaccine awareness Leaflets	21200
Thermal Guns	312
Medicine kit	3180
Hand gloves	20600
Face shield	1060
N 95 Masks	15300
Surgical masks	10000
Sanitizers	2120
Oximeters	993
PPE Kits	750
Oxygen Concentrators	4

Safety essentials

SOAPS
20,100



MASKS
79,100



SANITARY PADS
27600



Prioritizing the most vulnerable when directing relief and livelihood support



Vulnerable families were identified with the support of village leaders, Women Federation members and local government representatives. Vulnerability assessment was based on house type, control over private or public resources, impact on livelihood, families with disabled and non-earning members, and women headed households.



Livelihood support to marginal fishermen, small & marginal farmers, migrant families and livestock keepers.

Women members of coastal village groups also brainstormed on improving income-generation within existing work scope, as well as alternative income-generating opportunities.

- 78 artisanal fisher women and 32 women fish traders were provided with fishing nets and weighing scales.
- 1400+ women farmers, dependent on rain fed agriculture were supported with local seed and bio inputs for the monsoon crop and 230 farmers were supported for the winter crop.
- 17 migrant families were helped to set up rope-making units and 15 poor families were helped to sustain their livestock businesses.



Participatory and community led model of identifying "vulnerable" people along with building economic resilience through livelihood enhancement.

Building alliances with different stakeholder groups for effective interventions



Establishing a strong dialogue and feedback mechanism with the government



- A culture of establishing a strong dialogue and feedback mechanism with the Government was encouraged at all stages of the relief intervention.
- Support the government through participatory exercises & public disclosure of vulnerable households selected for relief distribution.



Linkages with government health cadre in the second wave, when there was a spike in the infection spread in rural areas and deaths from COVID-19, provided timely support in its prevention and treatment.



Data on gaps in accessing relief material like food ration, under government relief distribution schemes, provided by Utthan and village leaders to relevant government officials, helped several vulnerable households receive their entitled benefits.

Information on mandated relief and opportunities like the rural employment guarantee programme helped communities gain some income security.



An alarming rise in gender-based violence during the pandemic, the three Women's Federations provided counsel and support to 350 women and girls from April 2020 to July 2021.

Building alliance with the system to ensure full access to Government resources and facilities.

The leaders of Utthan, through evidence collection and raising critical issues with panchayats and the local government, supported Women's Federations in facilitating over 18000 applications towards the announced Government relief drives, multiple Government entitlements & schemes. The team also conducted a Collaborative Research as part of Rural Community Response to COVID-19 (RCRC). The highlights of the study were as follows:

COLLABORATE TO UNDERSTAND, BRING OUT EXPERIENCES & EVIDENCES OF THE INTERSECTIONAL IMPACT OF CRISES

58-70% women shared that their household work burden had increased including care work. 56% women said that they work at farms had also increased. 60% of the Gujarat respondents were women.

Gujarat data, RCRC Study, N=11000, 11 states, Jan 2021

Highlights of findings from Collaborative Research as part of Rural Community Response to Covid 19 (RCRC)

What was previously 49% households earning less than INR 5000/ month pre-COVID, had increased to 79% in Gujarat, with similar results in different states. 60% of the Gujarat respondents were women.

Gujarat Data, RCRC Study, N=11000, 11 states, Jan 2021

Fear

70% women respondents expressed apprehension that lack of electricity made them feel unsafe & they were not aware when it would be restored.

Sexual & Reproductive Health

Women reported that they were using sanitary napkins pre-disaster. Sanitary napkins are not available in shelters and access to market is cut off. No supply of sanitary napkins from ASHA/AWW.

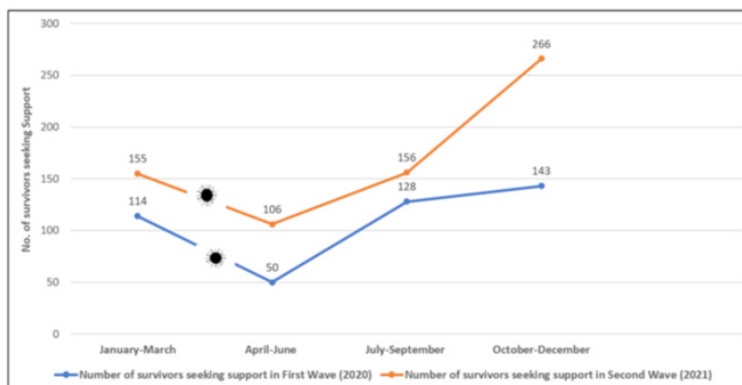
Women & girls using cotton cloth are suffering due to indufficient water to wash and space to dry the cloth which may pose health threats.

Source: CYCLONE TAUKEE JOINT RAPID NEEDS ASSESSMENT/URNJ REPORT, MAY 2021
Inter Agency Gujarat, UNICEF & Sphere India



The members of the Women's Federation, were at the frontline all through the pandemic, in order to provide relief and create awareness. In this way, they were able to gain real time access to the situations in the community, as they were unable to hold group meetings in person. In the first wave, they were available telephonically with village leadership, Panchayats and some police officials. During the second wave, as the restrictions were a little relaxed, the officials could now physically meet aggrieved women. However, due to the fear of being infected, a major portion of consultations were still done over phone calls. With the data given by the Justice Committee of the Women's Federation and the Utthan team members, personal interviews were conducted with 16 women and girls, in collaboration with RCRC members.

Ensure continuity of services & support by Federations' Quarter-wise Comparative Analysis of survivors of VAW/G seeking support of Five Justice committees



Note: Jan-Mar 20 (unrelated to Covid)

Sharpest rise observed in the category of "Physical and Mental Harassment/Violence"

The number of survivors seeking support increased significantly in the second-wave.



Women's Justice Committee, Alternative redressal mechanism

The members of the women's federation, tapped every opportunity they had to provide the best support. They used the pre-existing rapport with the men in the village to connect with & convince the Panchayats for their support during the relief work. They also used their connect with the village people to initiate a dialogue with the ration shop owners and health department officials. This helped them in increasing their outreach and expanding their ambit of providing relief of all kinds.

However, working in such tough situations, with permissions for limited movement, was definitely difficult. The fear of getting infected, amongst the community and the staff members, and the resulting impact on their families, was a huge challenge to overcome and continue services. Ensuring compliances & timely accounting – procurement, cheque transactions, short closures of offices due to infections etc., was extremely tedious, given the lockdown and its related restrictions. Even though a dialogue was initiated with the local ration suppliers, within the community, sourcing of the required amount of ration was a difficult task. In addition, due to shortage of the required number of personnel to cater to the magnanimous demand for services, created a problem many times.

The organization, however, did not face any immediate impact on its sustainability, as the donors were quite supportive. The ongoing activities were rethought and repurposed, to align with the current needs. With their donor's support, Utthan was able to carry out a lot of relief work. Efficient community leaders and donor retention mechanisms, in which the organization had invested over the past years, made it possible to ensure emergent, relief and rehab support to a large population. However, diverting the available funds did lead to cash flow issues initially, but eventually, everything fell in place.

The pandemic had certain negative and positive effects on the employees of Utthan as well:

Negative-

- Impact on Health: Several employees had to go in and out of isolation due to recurrent infection. The team also lost two of their employees to the virus.
- Impact on well being: Immense pressure to ensure relief material delivery, adhering to compliances in such trying times & constantly reworking strategies was quite stressful.



Positive-

- The team was introduced to many digital tools and softwares, which will enhance their work efficiency in the future as well.
- Each employee got a health insurance from the organization's side.