

'War Room': Bijnor District adopts a novel way to monitor sanitation

Context and Key Challenge

Ever since the Swachh Bharat Mission was launched in October 2014, frantic efforts are on in states and districts all across India to become Open Defecation Free (ODF). But monitoring the quality and design of toilets, sustained behavior change and toilet usage continues to be a challenge for the government at national, state and district levels.

Solution

Bijnor District in western Uttar Pradesh (UP), which has run a dynamic ODF campaign, has come up with one possible answer – a unique innovation and institutional mechanism called the **“War Room.”** Started in April 2016, it was the original brainchild of current Swachh Bharat Mission – Gramin (SBMG) Director of UP, formerly District Magistrate Bijnor. The current Bijnor administration relies on computer data entry operators, support staff and CLTS trainers across the district, who work round the clock in "mission mode," **to hold all their SBMG workers accountable, targeting genuinely needy beneficiaries, help catalyze and monitor community behavior change and even “monitor monitoring groups” themselves.**

“The Sanitation Mission requires a large army of foot soldiers in every village, both government and non-government functionaries and Nigrani (Monitoring) Committees to do behavior change. To monitor, train and have an incentive structure in place for this army, we needed a command center to wage this war against poor sanitation and hygiene. The trainers are using Gandhian tools and methods and we needed this 24/7 communication mechanism to enable interaction between district, block, village level committees and stakeholders to help them solve the sanitation challenge.”

- Vijay Kiran Anand, Mission Director, Swachh Bharat Mission Gramin (Rural), UP



With 11 Blocks in the District, some very far from District headquarters, an increasing work load of field level activities and data generation, Bijnor District Administration felt the need to open an ODF War Room to create a centralized tracking system. They wanted to understand what triggering activities were taking place in the field, challenges being faced in the ground, where improvements are required, where the teams are going, are they getting support or not, are the officers attached the teams doing their duties properly or not and other important related aspects of the ODF work on the ground.

Although the concept may be borrowed from and inspired by political campaigns, Bijnor District has been the first district to successfully adapt it to a government scheme for its SBMG effort and invested time, resources and money to ensure its meaningful use as a monitoring mechanism.

“The concept of the War Room was to connect it to computers, internet and Whatsapp groups. Our trainers would go in the field for a 5-day triggering programme in each Gram Panchayat (GP) and take photographic evidence of their work and sent it to the War Room every day. So, by just sitting in one place, we get the picture of the entire District. Slowly, it became very popular and now we are doing many things through the War Room and it has been very advantageous for us.”

Jagat Raj, District Magistrate, Bijnor

a | Functions of the War Room

The War Room is located in the District Administration office itself, where all the officials sit right from the District Magistrate (DM) and Chief Development Officer (CDO) to the building guards. The **benefit of this is proximity to decision makers, ease of addressing technical and other challenges and the ability to "watch over" the War Room itself, making the monitoring objective multi-layered and full proof**, to the extent possible.

The War Room **performs three main monitoring and data-entry related** functions to assist Bijnor's District Administration with its SBMG campaign.

First, it **helps to monitor behaviour change progress across the entire district from just one room and keep its own SBMG trainers and field level officers accountable** – The administration's CLTS trainers span out in each Gram Panchayat (small cluster of villages), join up with there with community level monitoring groups called “Nigrani Committees” - men, women and children of the village who volunteer or are nominated to check open defecation in the village. CLTS trainers both trigger behaviour change and monitor it with Nigrani Committees and have to send photographic proof of these activities to the War Room, every morning and evening through WhatsApp. These images are then fed into the computers in the War Room by the data entry operators for each Block. “Trackers” in the War Room take daily attendance of CLTS trainers at 4am every morning. In this way, the War Room “monitors monitoring groups.”

Second, the War Room **enables the District Administration to carry out its other innovative idea of “Compressed Demand” successfully.** Under the concept, **only the genuinely needy and very poor are chosen in their baseline of target beneficiaries who require government assistance to build toilets through the financial incentive.** For each GP, the ‘Compressed Demand’ baseline is arrived at by the CLTS trainers during their 5-day residential triggering schedule through a door-to-door survey. They compile the list and send it to the War Room every Friday. Another verification of the list does takes place at the GP level, changes are made if required and finally, the data entry operators feed the information directly into an App on the national SBMG website, as required.

"To do total tracking for the entire day and to do it in a time-bound manner, we took the concept of the War Room. And this concept we have seen being used in many democratic systems to communicate your message to the public. The concept even exists in the political campaigns.

So, to take your message to the community and to bring the community's messages to the administration, plus to include our champions in the work and to track their work, we took on this innovation."

- Indramani Tripathy, Chief Development Officer, Bijnor District

Third, the War Room **is utilized to address any other data related requirements and requests of sanitation work for the district administration** to ensure that information its district information remains updated and correct on the SBMG national website. For instance, shifting of beneficiary information within a Block or updating beneficiary progress information on the SBMG website App.

Based on the above three main functions, the War Room provides the district sanitation progress and data to the administrative leadership – District Magistrate, Chief Development Officer and District Panchayati Raj Officer. Among the monitoring indicators on which the War Room reports to the administration include daily progress report of toilets constructed per revenue village and weekly report of CLTS trainers performance/visits, summary report of MIS feeding and photo uploading, reporting of baseline update status and performance of Nigrani (Monitoring) Committees.

b | Structure – Three theatres of the War Room

The first theatre is **District level War Room** itself, where **four “trackers”** work in shifts from 4am until 8:30pm to take daily morning and evening attendance of the CLTS trainers in the field and receive and check photographic proof of their morning and evening triggering and monitoring activities via Whatsapp. At 10am, the **11 computer data entry operators** - one for each Block in Bijnor – enter information on computers of the attendance, photographic proof and spend the rest of the day until 6pm, entering household sanitation data of beneficiaries with completed toilets based on “compressed demand” directly into the national SBMG website - a requirement under the scheme.

The second theatre is smaller level **Block level “War Rooms,”** which were created in June 2016. They have **field level workers who are familiar with computers** reporting to the Block Development Officer (BDO) and **2 Block level motivators** each. Their purpose is to allow the administration to gauge in each Block where have toilets been built, where is triggering team facing challenges, where do they need support, providing information required for district level War Room, addressing delays in compressed demand list receipt and uploading photos of completed toilets. The Block level and District level War Rooms remain in daily contact and coordination.

The third theatre of the War Room is are the **Gram Panchayats where the CLTS trainers do triggering work**, monitor behavior change and conduct the door-to-door survey to make a baseline of "compressed demand" of eligible and needy beneficiaries. The trainers stay in the GPs and immerse themselves in the community for 5 days and **submit an activity report every week to the War Room and the “compressed demand” baseline list.**

c | Challenges in set up

Even a visionary and dynamic effort is not without its challenges and the War Room has its share. Perhaps the biggest challenge the administration faced was in getting staff to do work in addition to their normal official duties, put in long and late hours. To have a routine of waking up at 3am every morning is tough and tiring for anyone. The administration was fortunate to get highly passionate and dedicated people.

They also had to train everyone for everything from a start and to make them capable for achieving their purpose with 100% commitment.

Another big challenge has been with internet connectivity, which often slows down or is lost completely. This problem impacts the data entry operators the most, whose painstaking work can often be made more difficult when the national SBMG website is running slow due to an overload or showing repeated error messages upon submission of data.

d | Sustainability

One of the ways in which the Bijnor Administration has institutionalized and sustains the War Room is to **actually invest in the basic infrastructure and resources required** to run it successfully. For initial investment, the Bijnor Administration choose an appropriate unused room in their District Office and the efficiently used computers that are given to each GP by the State government, which were not being used.

The War Room was thus outfitted with 11 computers and work stations for 11 data entry operators - one dedicated person for each of the 11 Blocks in Bijnor, who are paid as per the SBMG guidelines.

“Ever since the War Room has opened up, I feel that we are achieving greater success each passing day because there is passion among the people. When I open the War Room at 4am every morning and take attendance of our field trainers, they tell us that they feel so good about what they are doing that it is benefitting their health and allowing them to do public service.”

- Rakesh, Tracker, War Room, Bijnor District

They were recruited from existing Block level resources. There are 4 support staff drawn from the government existing salaried staff. They rotate as “trackers” in shifts from 4am in the morning until 8:30pm in the evening every day. Another important investment is an internet broadband connection and since the War Room is located in the District Headquarters itself, it is easily linked to a printer, photocopier and scanner and a telephone line.

In order to create almost “**airtight**” **accountability in the whole system**, the DPRO of Bijnor took the initiative to install another layer of monitoring of the “War Room” itself from his office through a camera monitoring (CCTV) system linked to an intercom and his own mobile phone – from the mobile phone, he can monitor everything going on in the War Room whether he is in the office or not and from the intercom, he has a “hotline” to the War Room directly from his office to keep an eye on them or to cater to time-sensitive requests.

“Suppose someone leaves or gets transferred, all the information recorded in the War Room will be part of institutional memory and documented record of the District and its ODF work. Second, if someone wants to access it later, the War Room serves as an “online ODF library” for Bijnor for the future.”

- Manish Kumar, District Panchayati Raj Officer, Bijnor

To address the challenges of personnel, Bijnor Administration hired support staff as “trackers” in the War Room who were willing to go beyond the call of duty and put in extra hours. They introduced shifts or rotation between “trackers” to ensure nobody gets burned out. To keep motivation levels up, the Administration introduced a small monetary incentive each month for



the data entry operators and give out awards on key milestone achievements. Since Bijnor hired new staff in the War Room and had to train them from a start, they checked the eligibility, computer proficiency and capabilities of data entry operators, including Microsoft Word and Excel skills. To address the internet connectivity challenge, they have taken two internet lines. In the main office, there is a wireless internet connection and in the War Room, it is the lease line connection. So, sometimes, when it the internet breaks down in the War Room, they take back-up connection from the main office.

Results

This “out of the box” thinking, borrowing simple, creative concepts and applying them to Bijnor’s SBMG work and the dedication to execute well has paid some rich dividends for the district. As of March 2017, Bijnor has reached almost **80 % coverage of toilets** and usage in their district compared in less than a year. The **“Compressed Demand” concept that is facilitated through the War Room’s** tracking and data-entry efforts has not only reduced the number of toilets needed by 1 lakh, it has also saved the government almost INR 120 crores or USD 1.2 billion. On March 29, 2017, less than a year after the War Room was opened, they celebrated **crossing the 1 lakh mark for entering beneficiary data** in the national SBMG website with a cake-cutting ceremony and gave awards to the War Room data entry operators and staff.

A **systematic way and institutional mechanism to monitor and follow-up has been established** so that nothing falls through the cracks. At the field level, the triggering team that is going into the field are using the concept of the War Room to **deepen the CLTS engagement** on the ground and also **activating Nigrani (community level monitoring) committees**. On the administrative front, the thinking of the administrative officials can be quickly conveyed through such a set up to the field and the Challenges from the field come through the War Room as a conduit to the Administration through monitoring of activities. The entire line of communication has been strengthened through War Room from District to GP and GP to District. There have been important efficiency savings through the War Room and they have made a “centralized system to decentralize” the sanitation work.

“If I want to contact 100 people, then if I talk to everyone, then I need 100 minutes. But if I do it through the War Room, it will take me at most 10-15 minutes. Also, helps us to prioritize work. It shakes us up and reminds us that you have work to do.”

- Manish Kumar, District Panchayati Raj Officer, Bijnor

Other district government departments in Bijnor itself, such as health, education and women and child welfare have already started **replicating the War Room** for their own purposes and delivering results such as **better attendance of teachers and doctors/nurses/staff in schools and clinics**, respectively. The state government issued an order to all districts in UP to establish a War Room for their ODF work. Many **other districts in UP**, inspired by Bijnor's innovation, are **replicating the War Room** to varying degrees including Varanasi, Agra, Shamli, Pratapgarh, Mirzapur, Amroha and Ferozabad.

Lessons Learned

The administration identified a few main areas where they learned lessons as a result of the War Room innovation. First, through the field level **monitoring** and tracking, they were able to see where they were going wrong in some cases with **toilet design** and were able to make improvements. Second, they have learned lessons and gained insights on how to make ODF work more sustainable. For instance, the administration is already thinking on many fronts on how **to utilize the War Room for ODF plus or Solid Liquid Waste Management (SLWM) work**. Future steps may include video conferencing between District and Block level war rooms, utilizing the War Room for ODF verification and documentation and **also to monitor toilet usage through "Swacchta Sangrahis" – committed volunteers** at the Gram Panchayat level who will be appointed to check "slippage" i.e. people who slip back into open defecation.

Recommendations

In a concept note to scale up the War Room concept across UP, the current SBMG (UP) Mission Director had proposed multiple functions of the War Room in the future including **concurrent monitoring of CLTS activities** with respect to the ODF campaign, submission of demand received from Gram Panchayats and Blocks for **payouts to finance any outstanding dues** to beneficiaries after due diligence, monitoring of **district level verification procedure** of ODF status, **resolution of disputes** in the field by escalating to the right person, **identifying needs for training and capacity building** of stakeholders and **monitoring the IEC (communication) schedule** and events of districts and **associated costs**. Some of these functions are already taking place to varying degrees through Bijnor's War Room mechanism but if the War Room concept is implemented properly with requisite resources, these additional functions can be carried more effectively in the future in various districts across UP. A state level War Room has also been envisioned to monitor sanitation-related progress of all districts in UP and address training and capacity building needs.

"We first heard this concept of War Room from Bijnor only. The value is that earlier if someone used to come, people had to wander about everywhere to find out about SBMG work and data in our district - baseline survey information, which are the eligible GPs, who is the Gram Pradhan or Sachiv in a particular Gram Panchayat. If the common man or even SBMG worker wanted information, they got lost. Now they contact the Block level or District level war rooms for information directly. They've got to know what ODF really is because of this ODF War Room. Second, monitoring is now properly possible - of triggering activities, toilet construction and behavior change, Nigrani (Monitoring) Committees and training.

- Anamika Tripathy, District Project Consultant, Swachh Bharat Mission, Varanasi District

For now, the War Room is helping “Bemisaal (unmatched) Bijnor” to keep a fire burning among its trainers, staff and community alike for public service through external monitoring pressure and steady internal behavior change...