

COVID-FREE VILLAGE

A people's movement for Covid containment in rural India

Concept Note

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has largely been an urban phenomenon until recently. However, the country is now witnessing an increase in new infections in peri-urban, rural and tribal areas. This is a challenge as public health infrastructure and services would require major bolstering in rural areas to adequately respond to the pandemic. Recent guidelines¹ by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India call upon Gram Panchayats and other village stakeholders to help strengthen the primary healthcare system to effectively address this emerging challenge.

COVID-FREE VILLAGE

The Covid-free Village (CFV) is a community-led program that takes responsibility for protecting villages from the impact of the pandemic. The objective is to empower villagers to take ownership and create a people's movement for containing the pandemic through collective action by creating Village Task Forces.

The model demonstrates success in "one village" that can be taken to scale across the country. Its frameworks, processes, stakeholder roles and responsibilities, and support material such as training modules, BCC/IEC creatives, technology interventions etc. have all been developed to support implementation at scale. The program is informed by BJS' 35 years of grassroots experience in health, disaster response, education, water, and social development.

EMPOWERING VILLAGES THROUGH COLLECTIVE ACTION

BJS strongly believes in the inherent capacity of communities to find solutions to their own problems. Every village has self-motivated people ready to contribute their time and efforts for the well-being of their communities. However, what they often lack are a platform, guidance, training, and the tools to facilitate leadership for collective community action. The CFV program empowers the village through a people's movement to protect them from the impact of the pandemic.

The program focuses on creation of Village Task Forces that take responsibility for specific Covid-containment measures. Social mobilization facilitates preparation of the village for collective action led by the Sarpanch and village leaders like Gram Sevak, Talati and village seniors. The Village Task Force provides a strong community platform for Covid containment by:

- Mobilizing village communities to create an enabling environment for Covid-appropriate behaviours and risk reduction through awareness drives and BCC/IEC interventions
- Supporting the district/taluka administrations to strengthen tracing, tracking, testing and treatment of Covid cases in the village
- Assisting with setting-up of quarantine centres and Covid care centres, including for children if needed
- Facilitating coordination with district/taluka administrations for utilization of government schemes
- Supporting the vaccination program of the administration to ensure 100% vaccine coverage of eligible people in the village

¹ GoI, MoH&FW, SOPs on COVID-19 Containment and Management in Peri-urban, Rural and Tribal Areas, 16 May 2021.

The increased awareness on Covid-appropriate behaviour, enabling environment for risk-reduction, Covid containment measures implemented by the Village Task Forces, and linkages established with the district/taluka administrations are expected to empower the village to protect themselves from the pandemic.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

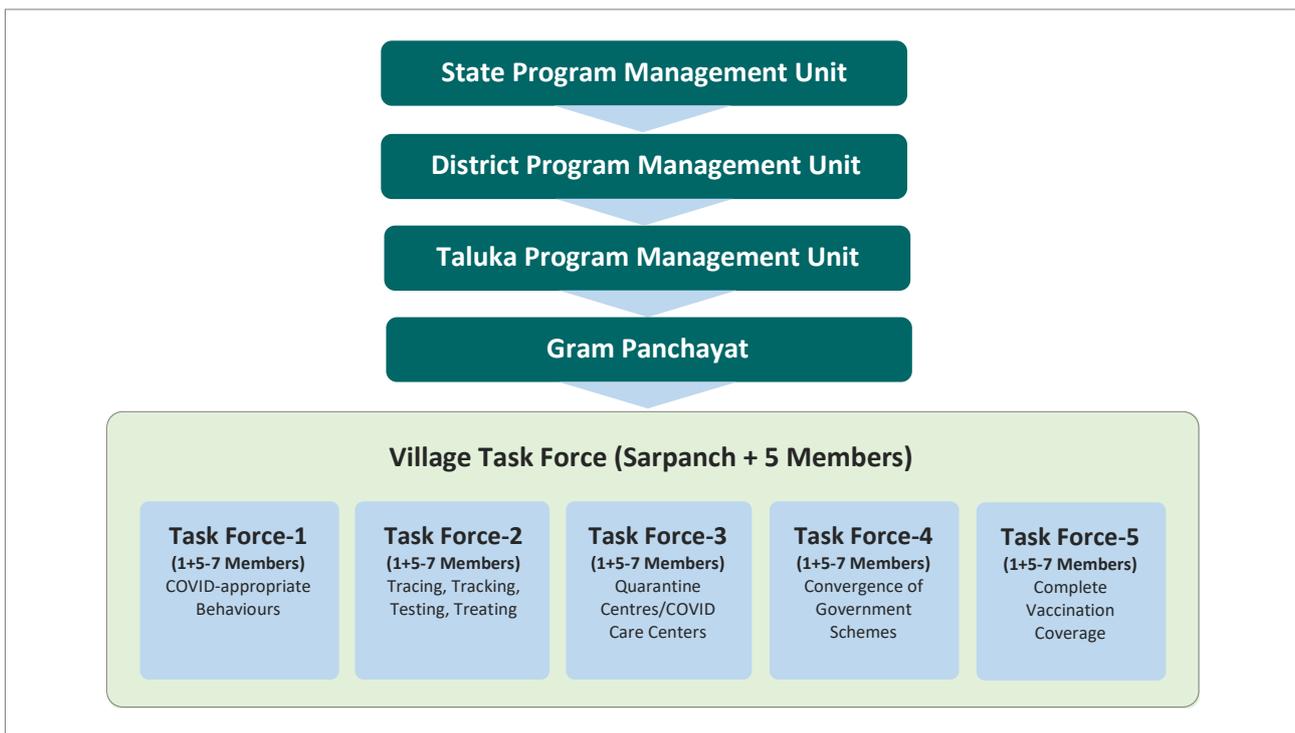
BJS has designed and developed the CFV program with clear frameworks, strategies and processes. Resources have also been developed for training and handholding of Village Task Force members and other stakeholders. The interplay of roles and responsibilities of stakeholders have been articulated in the program design to ensure clarity at all levels. The following preparations have been completed by BJS to have the program ready for scaled implementation:

- Development of conceptual, operational, monitoring and evaluation frameworks
- Defining the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders and their interplay in key processes
- Implementation guidelines and standard operating procedures
- BCC/IEC creatives on all aspects of Covid containment implemented by Village Task Forces
- Implementation guidebooks for all stakeholders, including Sarpanch and VTF members
- Self-learning audio-visual training modules to facilitate online training and capacity building
- Universal access to program resources by stakeholders to assist with program monitoring, data collection and dashboard processes
- Development of a program management platform with technology connect to support scale and replication
- Guidelines and process maps for mobilizing local student interns to impart training and build capacity of Village Task Forces
- Framework for Covid-free Village competitions, including indicators to motivate villages

OWNERSHIP BY THE STATE GOVERNMENT

The CFV program is implemented in the state as a government initiative. The State Government issues suitable orders and declares Covid-free Village competitions with prizes in different categories awarded to winning Gram Panchayats. Participation in the program is demand-driven; and Gram Panchayats desirous of joining the program and competition submit applications to Taluka Administration. The State Government supports implementation by establishing Program Management Units at State, District and Taluka levels, nominating Nodal Officers for coordination with stakeholders.

Figure-1: Support Structure of the CFV Program



ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES

Although the CFV program has been designed with flexibility to support state-specific contexts, the following challenges are anticipated in its scaled implementation:

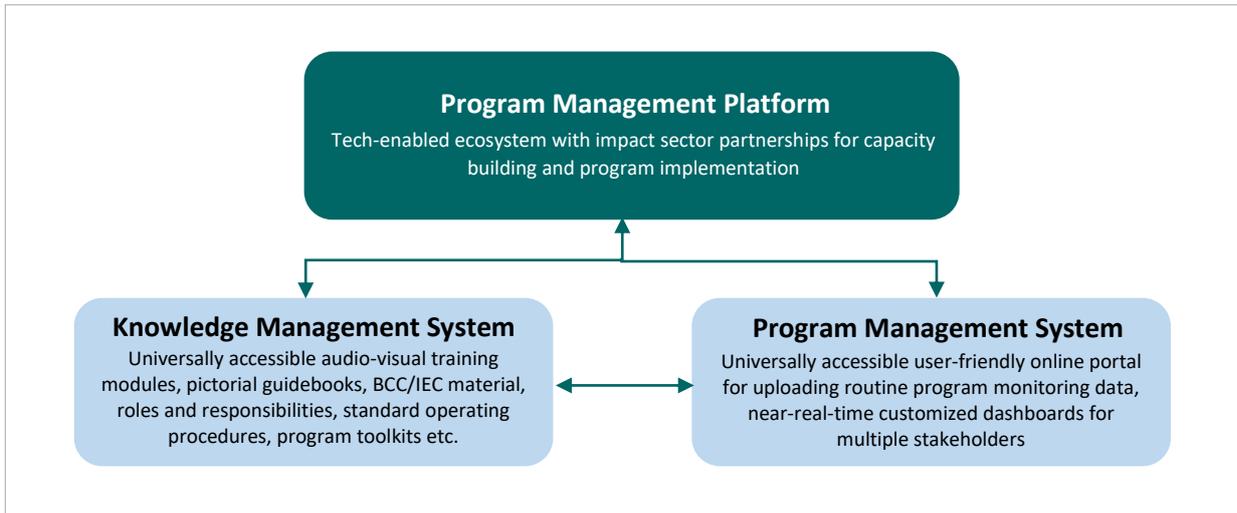
- Social mobilization in thousands of villages. Village communities across the state need to be mobilized to ignite their passion and prepare them for a strong collective response to the pandemic
- Building grassroots extension capacities for training and handholding of Village Task Forces by engaging local student interns in a structured manner
- Ownership of the program management platform by a premier management institution as envisaged in the program
- Use of tech-enabled processes in low-literacy village settings

STRATEGY FOR SCALE

To program adopts following approaches to address the above implementation challenges:

- **Decentralised Program Management Platform:** Managing the program in thousands of villages can be a complex task. To successfully accomplish this at scale, BJS has developed a decentralized program management platform, which is offered as a public good to the state government as part of BJS’ strategic partnership. The state government is supported by a galvanized impact sector by harnessing their strengths through strategic, capacity building and implementing NGO partnerships with technology enabling scale and quality in program management.

Figure-2 Decentralized Program Management Platform:

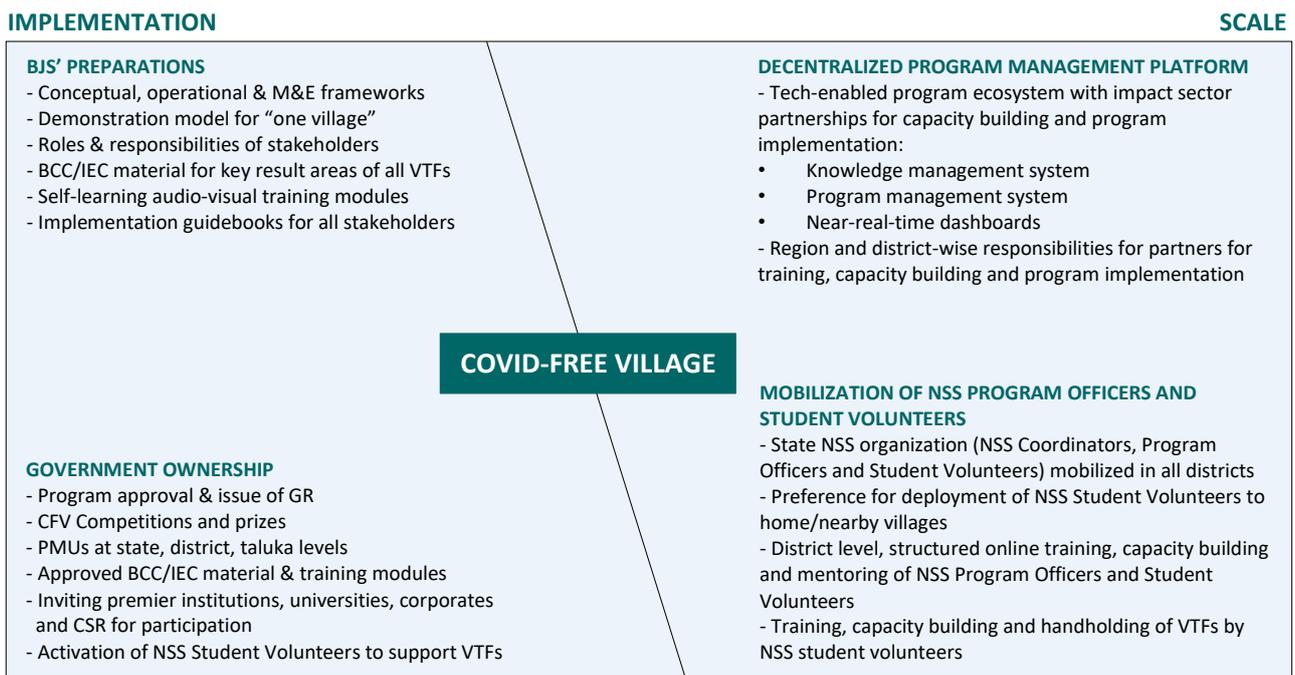


- **Involvement of NSS Program Officers and Student Volunteers:** The State Government mobilizes the state NSS organization, including NSS Coordinators in Universities, Program Officers and Student Volunteers in Colleges to support on-site grassroots capacity building and handholding of Sarpanchs and Village Task Forces. The State Government also supports participating NSS Student Volunteers by providing them academic credits as per UGC norms. Online training of NSS Program Officers and Student Volunteers will enable them to in turn train and handhold Sarpanchs and members of Village Task Forces. NSS Student Volunteers will be deployed in their home/nearby preferred villages to support Village Task Forces. Mobilization of the NSS organization in the state ensures a win-win situation for all – Student Volunteers in terms of the learning opportunities and academic credits, villages for the assistance they receive for Covid containment, and government in terms of effective Covid risk-reduction in thousands of villages. Apart from award of academic credits for their contributions, NSS Student Volunteers will be given certificates co-signed by the State Government, University/College and BJS.

In addition, the State Government may declare special awards to NSS teams that supported winning Gram Panchayats in CFV competitions.

- **Program Management Units:** To channelize government’s support for the program, Program Management Units (PMU) will be established by the government at state, district and taluka levels. The State Government will nominate Nodal Officers at PMUs for effective coordination with all program stakeholders.
- **Technology Platform:** The program uses tech-enabled solutions for universal access and utilization of resources by stakeholders at all levels. A user-friendly technology platform has been developed to facilitate monitoring, data collection, reporting and dashboard processes, especially keeping in mind the low-literacy village setting. The platform has been designed with flexibility to allow contextual changes and the requirements of scale.
- **CFV Competitions:** To incentivise participation of Gram Panchayats in the program, the State Government will declare CFV competitions with prizes for winning Gram Panchayats in different categories. Prizes will be aligned with demonstrated success in key result areas of the CFV program. The categories of prizes to be awarded, the prize money, and guidelines for utilization of the prize money will be announced by the State Government while declaring the competitions. The State Government will also finalize the assessment process for selection of winners.

Figure-3: Strategy for Scaled Implementation



PARTNERSHIPS

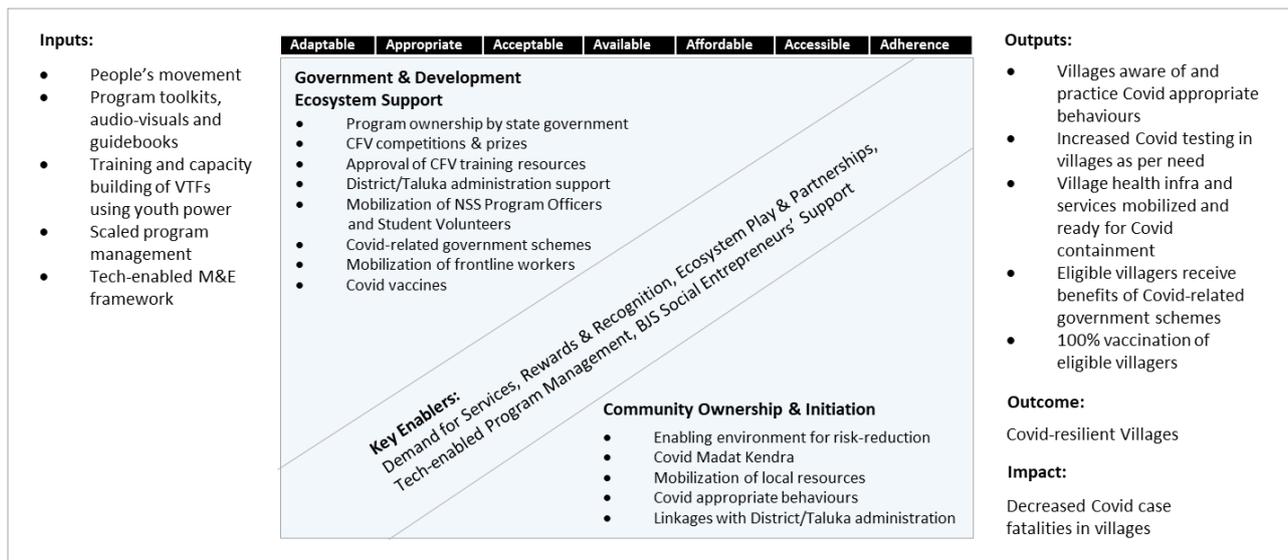
BJS will harness the power of partnerships to implement the Covid-free Village program. In Karnataka, BJS has entered into a strategic partnership with the Government of Karnataka. The following actions have been initiated in Karnataka by BJS and the State Government to develop additional partnerships for implementation, knowledge, funding etc.

- Sattva Consulting on-boarded as a lead partner
- State NSS organization mobilized to provide NSS Program Officers and Student Volunteers for training of VTFs
- Partnerships with two reputed universities/educational institutions for capacity building support
- Partnership with a group of 22 NGOs experienced in rural development for program implementation
- Partnership with United Way Bangalore and different donors to channelize resources

THEORY OF CHANGE

The program seeks to empower villages for Covid containment through a people’s movement. It envisages villages taking responsibility for community-led collective action to protect them from impact of the pandemic. The State Government, BJS, implementing NGO partners, universities and colleges play critical roles in program implementation and capacity building.

Figure-4: Theory of Change



FLEXIBLE, CONTEXT-SPECIFIC, MULTI-LEVEL IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH

Responding to the dynamic pandemic situation calls for a flexible, context-specific program implementation approach. At present, achieving Covid vaccination targets is on high priority of several State Governments, along with awareness on Covid-appropriate behaviours and increased utilization of Covid-specific government schemes. The CFV program is flexible enough to tailor its implementation priorities based on such context-specific needs. Given the focus on Covid vaccinations and Covid-appropriate behaviours, those levels of interventions will be implemented by Village Task Forces on priority. If and when there is a spike in new Covid infections in a particular geography, Village Task Forces there will immediately respond to the situation by activating the required level of interventions such as tracing, tracking, testing and treatment of Covid cases, as well as supporting quarantine centres and Covid care centres. Thus, ongoing needs assessment at the village level becomes integral to this flexible approach. Training of all Village Task Forces will however be undertaken right from the start of the program to ensure readiness of villages to face all emerging scenarios.

Table-1: Flexible, Context-specific Implementation Approach

Level	Focus Area	Objective	Interventions
Level-1	Prevention	Enabling villages achieve vaccination targets, including for children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vaccination camps in villages • Addressing vaccine hesitancy; myths and misconceptions about vaccination • Support for elderly, children, differently-abled, comorbid and other special categories
Level-2	Preparedness	Improved Covid-19 awareness & Covid appropriate behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covid Madat Kendra in every village • Community-led Covid awareness initiatives • Door to door awareness campaigns • Local resource mobilization for Covid awareness • BCC/IEC interventions on Covid appropriate behaviours
Level-3	Support Services	Increased utilization of Covid-19 related govt. schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness on Covid-related government schemes • Identification and counseling of eligible beneficiaries • Support for eligible beneficiaries to avail schemes • Linkages with local administrations • Follow-up to ensure utilization of schemes
Level-4	Containment Measures	Early tracing, tracking, testing, treatment & support for QC/CCCs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active community participation in early tracing, tracking, testing and treatment of cases • Linkages with frontline health workers for system strengthening • Support for enhanced patient care services in QC/CCCs

PILOT IMPLEMENTATION IN PUNE DISTRICT

The CFV program was piloted in 144 villages identified by the District Administration across 11 Talukas of Pune district. During initial visits to villages, field teams established contacts with Gram Panchayats and key village stakeholders in all pilot villages. A team of Taluka Coordinators were trained and deployed in the first week of August 2021 to implement the pilot. Village profiles of all villages were developed and Sarpanchs in all villages were trained. Program resources like BCC/IEC material, guidebooks, audio-visual training modules etc. were used in the pilot to test their effectiveness and user-acceptance. A structured training program was implemented for village level stakeholders through Taluka Coordinators and student interns. A preliminary assessment was conducted to learn from the pilot experience to inform implementation and scale.