INTRODUCTION

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to evolve, nations and the scientific community struggle to control the disease and mitigate its impact on health, livelihoods, economy and socio-cultural aspects of life. India experienced a severe second wave with loss of human lives never seen in its recent history. As the country begins to experience a third wave driven by the Omicron variant, there is still little evidence to fully understand how severe this wave is going to be. A prospective plan to address public health concerns in current and future waves is still fraught with several unknowns. Coupled with inherent vulnerabilities of the country’s health system, especially in its rural areas, there is an immediate need to find a sustainable way of creating resilience to the pandemic through preparedness, prevention and containment actions with community as an important stakeholder.

COVID-FREE VILLAGE

Covid-free Village (CFV) is a community-led program that takes responsibility for protecting villages from the pandemic. The objective is to empower villages to take ownership and create a people’s movement for preparedness, prevention and containment of the pandemic during current and subsequent waves through collective action by creating need based Village Task Forces.

It is a scalable, flexible, demand-driven platform that strengthens the country’s pandemic-response by complementing and supplementing government’s efforts. 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 with flexibility for adoption in different local contexts. The program is informed by BJS’ 35 years of grassroots experience in health, disaster response, education, water conservation, and rural 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 (VTFs) that take responsibility for preparedness, prevention and containment measures. Community mobilization prepares villages for collective action led by the Sarpanch and village leaders like the Gramsevak, Talati and other influential persons. Village Task Forces leverage strong community support for preparedness, prevention and containment actions by:

- Mobilizing village communities to create an enabling environment for Covid-appropriate behaviours and risk reduction through awareness drives and BCC/IEC interventions
- Supporting district/taluka administrations to strengthen tracing, tracking, testing and treatment of Covid cases in the village
- Assisting the taluka administration to set-up and manage Quarantine Centres and Covid Care Centres
- Facilitating coordination with district/taluka administrations for increased uptake of government schemes
- Supporting vaccination program of the administration by addressing vaccine hesitancy, and by ensuring vaccine uptake by all eligible persons in villages
Increased awareness on Covid-19 and Covid-appropriate behaviours; enabling environment for risk and vulnerability reduction; preparedness, prevention and containment measures implemented by VTFs; and linkages established with district and taluka administrations are expected to empower communities to protect themselves from the pandemic.

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-1: Theory of Change

FLEXIBLE IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH

Interventions can be contextually tailored with disproportionate focus based on local needs. Several states are currently focusing on rapidly increasing uptake of Covid vaccination, for instance. Villages can appropriately activate respective Task Forces to respond to such needs. If and when there is a spike in new infections, the required level of response can be achieved by activating corresponding interventions. All VTFs will be fully trained on their respective interventions at program start-up itself.

Table-1: Flexible Implementation Approach
PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The program has been designed with clear frameworks, strategies and processes. Appropriate program resources have been developed to train and equip Sarpanchs and members of VTFs. Roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder has been articulated in detail to ensure clarity. The following resources are readily available:

- Conceptual, operational, monitoring and evaluation frameworks
- Implementation guidelines and standard operating procedures
- Roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders
- Self-learning audio-visual modules for village stakeholders on all interventions
- Implementation guidebooks for Sarpanchs and VTF members
- BCC/IEC creatives on preparedness, prevention and containment measures implemented by VTFs
- Tech-enabled Program Management Platform to support scale and replicability
- Process maps and guidelines for mobilizing university professors, NSS program officers and students to impart training and build capacity of village stakeholders
- Online Knowledge Management System (KMS) to facilitate universal access to program resources
- Online Program Management System (PMS) for data collection, analysis and dashboards

GOVERNMENT OWNERSHIP

The program has been designed for adoption by the government and implementation as a government scheme. In order to create demand and ensure large-scale participation by Gram Panchayats, the government may announce Covid-free Village competitions and declare prizes for winning Gram Panchayats, to be determined based on a set of performance indicators. Participation in the program by Gram Panchayats is voluntary and demand-driven, through an application submitted to the taluka administration. The government issues necessary directives to administrations at state, district and taluka levels and nominates nodal officials where feasible to facilitate coordination, implementation and review. The government also issues appropriate directives to mobilize university professors, NSS program officers and students to support training, capacity building, handholding, monitoring and reporting processes as per program guidelines.

STRATEGY FOR SCALED OPERATIONS

The program adopts following approaches to achieve scale:

- **Program Management Platform**: To successfully manage the program in thousands of villages, a tech-enabled Program Management Platform has been developed by BJS, which is offered to the nation as a public good. The Program Management Platform supports tech-enabled governance, and galvanization of the ecosystem to achieve scale without dilution in quality, besides integrating online Knowledge/Program Management systems to facilitate capacity building, mentoring, handholding, monitoring and reporting processes.

*Figure-2 Program Management Platform:*
- **Mobilization of University Professors as Master Trainers**: The program (with support from State Government) mobilizes university professors as master trainers to impart online training to Sarpanchs and VTF members. Training programs are scheduled every day at pre-determined hours and delivered using a virtual meeting link circulated to the target audience in advance. A cadre of Capacity Building Experts is established in each state to impart TOT to master trainers, and to monitor quality of their training. Master trainers utilize resources and training aids from the online Knowledge Management System (KMS) to impart training.

- **Mobilization of NSS Program Officers/Students**: The program (with support from State Government) mobilizes the NSS network to provide on-site handholding support to Sarpanchs and VTF members. NSS Program Officers in colleges are trained online by Capacity Building Experts in each state to enable them mobilize and train NSS students in their respective colleges. Trained students are then deployed in their own home/nearby villages to support Sarpanchs and VTF members.

- **Leveraging Health/Rural Development Institutional Mechanisms**: The program explores opportunities for leveraging existing institutional mechanisms of Health and Rural Development departments to integrate village level processes to the extent possible. Opportunities to mobilize ASHA workers in villages to support Sarpanchs and VTFs in data reporting will be explored, for instance. Similar opportunities in existing institutional systems of Rural Development department will also be explored where feasible.

- **Nodal Officials**: The State Government issues directives to district and taluka administrations to appoint nodal officials to support program implementation. In addition to oversight, nodal officials support coordination and program reviews, including for CFV competitions as announced by the government.

- **Mobilization of NGOs**: The program harnesses strengths of micro-specialist NGOs by leveraging their domain knowledge, reputation, and grassroots extension capabilities to provide support for village stakeholders. NGOs will be involved in program implementation through formal partnerships for supporting Sarpanchs and VTF members with supportive supervision, mentoring and handholding.

- **Mobilization of BJS Volunteers Network**: BJS’ nation-wide network of committed volunteer entrepreneurs will be activated in all program districts to support coordination with public representatives, government officials, media and other important stakeholders at district and taluka levels. BJS volunteers will also take a lead role in dissemination of program information to the general public by organizing various functions/events engaging VIPs and other noted personalities.

*Figure-3 Scaled Operations Matrix:*
CONCLUSION

The program places community at the very centre of pandemic-response, creating their ownership through a strong ground-up process. It galvanizes the ecosystem comprising communities, the government, impact sector partners and others to create a model that complements and supplements a health system that is under duress due to the pandemic. It uses technology to enable universal access to program-related resource material, builds capacity of village Sarpanchs and VTFs even during pandemic waves, establishes systems and processes for program monitoring and dashboards, and ensures efficient governance. It provides a timely, speedy, scaled approach with replicability built into it, mobilizing the strength of communities to make villages Covid-resilient.

BJS designed this program as a community-driven platform to take care of the current and subsequent pandemics, and other multi-sectoral challenges in rural development (like health, education, water etc.) with vital interventions that can be tried out across the country and beyond.