

AGENTS OF CHANGE

## A grassroots Reuters

Mansi Choksi | January 8, 2011



JESSICA MAYBERRY Giving India screen time

A women's self-help group in Chhattisgarh tries to put the brakes on migration by making ready-to-eat powder for the mid-day meal programme, an Uttarkhand girl makes a desperate plea to save Garhwal from extinction and Dalit women from Limdee in rural Gujarat organise a rally and get the district collector's office to supply safe drinking water to their village. Such grassroots stories of community empowerment are documented every day at Video Volunteers, a media organisation that strives to equip disadvantaged communities with critical skills.

Jessica Mayberry, the 33-year-old founder and executive director of Video Volunteers who started the organisation in September 2003, spent a year training rural Indian women in film-making as a Fellow of the American India Foundation. "When technology becomes cost-effective, interesting avenues to give voices to disadvantaged communities are created," says Mayberry, who works out of Goa. "There was a lot of interest in what the communities wanted to say from NGOs and others."

Mayberry, who worked as a journalist in New York before setting up the organisation, says that the programme closest to her heart is the Community Video Unit where local production companies put forth solution-oriented videos and screen them in villages. "When people see themselves and people they know in the videos, it works well. It's the same instinct that sparks up when we see ourselves and our friends' photos on Facebook," she says.

It could mean having more community members engaged in discussions and creating concrete cause-action solutions. "For instance, the traditional solution to the problem of water is to build wells. But Video Volunteers is about creating awareness and mobilising the community to demand better governance and services," says Mayberry.

Another instance is the Video Volunteer guide to the Right to Information Act. "When we screen a film on RTI, we don't just say that they must use it. We show them which bus, train, cart to take from their village, what the government office looks like and how it must be filed. Reinforcement is important and the idea is to overcome the fear of governance and apathy," she says.

Mayberry says that the focus of the organisation is to create livelihoods. The India Unheard program, for instance, is like Video Volunteer's community news service. "We have 30 community correspondents, two in some states, from whom we purchase two stories every month and stream," she says. "It's like a grassroots Reuters. "