



PARTNERSHIP PLUS PERSISTENCE:

A dual approach to Bridging Gaps Between Citizens and Officials

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Acknowledgments

In addition to the invaluable contributions from the wider Video Volunteers team, deepest thanks are extended to the Community Content Creators, whose insights and personal stories have enriched this report with authenticity and lived experience.

This report is not merely an exercise in data collection; it reflects a collaborative process—co-created alongside the communities themselves. The aim is to ensure that their voices are respectfully represented and central to the narrative. It is hoped that this report honours their experiences and meaningfully contributes to the broader dialogue on social justice and community-driven change.

Table of Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	<u>03</u>
<u>Results: what the data shows</u>	<u>06</u>
<u>Projects Secured by CCs</u>	<u>07</u>
<u>Survey reveals: officials keen on collaboration with citizens</u>	<u>09</u>
Case Studies: CCs' Strategies and Successes	
• <u>Shabnam Begum</u>	<u>12</u>
• <u>Shankarlal Raikwar</u>	<u>13</u>
• <u>Kashif Akhtar</u>	<u>14</u>
<u>Why this project matters</u>	<u>15</u>
<u>Balancing Act: collaborate when possible, confront when necessary.</u>	<u>17</u>
• <u>CCs' Strategies for Creating Collaborations with Government Officials</u>	<u>18</u>
• <u>The Pitfalls</u>	<u>19</u>

Introduction



Citizens use many different tactics to get things done by an overworked and understaffed bureaucracy that is flooded with requests. Every day, millions of citizens around the world are visiting local government offices and making requests. Some citizens are obsequious and use flattery and pandering to get their way. Some pay bribes or ‘pull strings’ and mention how connected they are. Others use a more confrontational approach, threatening exposure in the media.

Video Volunteers is an NGO that empowers and amplifies community voices by popularising the practice of community media. In India, a network of Community Content Creators (CCs) have produced over 18,000 videos, of which about 30% have resulted in the problem being solved when government officials saw the video and took action.

CCs trained by Video Volunteers regularly visit government offices, showing videos and having discussions about the issues that they produce content on. Over a period of just 12 months, more than 530 visits were made by CCs to government officials. Information on these visits has been gathered by VV and CCs, leading to the development of a rich archive of citizen-state interactions that is ripe for study.

The usual approach of CCs is often understood as somewhat confrontational and focused on the needs of the citizen, not the official. CCs would go into a government office with a video they had been working on, with the goal of informing the official of an urgent and overlooked individual case the

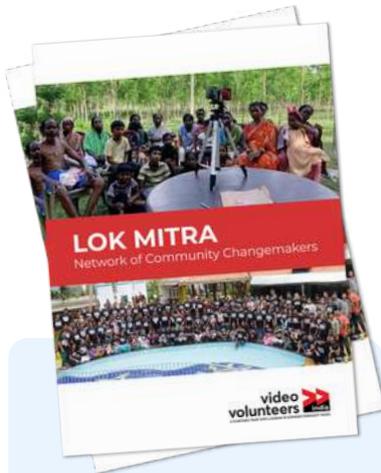
official needed to attend to. The officials they meet would usually see the video as a demand for accountability and would be concerned about being exposed. However, it is recognised that this is only half the story, and that many, many CCs are in fact very collaborative, and only use a more confrontational approach as a last resort.

Through a multi-year research collaboration with Professor Gabi Kruks-Wisner at UVA, VV has been studying the ways in which socially-minded village-level Community Content Creators like those it supports act as a bridge - or 'interlocutors' - between citizens and officials. As Kruks Wisner says, her "interviews with CCs found that CCs combine and switch tactics in a very savvy way, taking different approaches at different times, or layering them." It's not an "either/or" situation, but rather about using the approach of confrontation and the approach of collaboration to great effect, as the situation warrants.

So, in early 2023, VV decided to test with CCs what kind of approaches work best in influencing local officials to prioritise the needs of the citizens who are seeking their help. The focus was on understanding how collaboration would be not only possible, but in fact beneficial to the officials. Kruks-Wisner's research partner Dr. Tanu Kumar of Claremont Graduate College pointed out that while the confrontational approach might work, due to officials' concern about oversight, the logic for collaboration needed exploration. She thinks it might have to do with showing that their goals and citizens' goals are aligned.

More than 100 Community Content Creators (CCs) and Changemakers associated with Video Volunteers in taking a 'collaborative approach' with the government officials. They were taught to embrace their interactions with the officials as a potential space for co-creation, where citizen-state synergy - with community knowledge on one side and government authority on the other - would create a win-win for both. CCs immediately understood the logic of this. Says Shabnam, a CC from Varanasi District in UP: "I try to make them understand that if we don't work together, I could make 10 videos or they could raise awareness in 10 communities, but for a systemic impact, we must collaborate."

VV provided CCs two new tools to use in their meetings with officials, so that they would be able to make it extremely clear to the officials they met that their goal was collaboration not confrontation. The 'community app' is an individualised website which presents each CCs' data from their work in a simple dashboard to show to government officials. It's a sort of digital resume designed to show the



See the [Brochure](#) - CCs used to enrol officials.

CCs' depth of work and deep connections with the bureaucracy. Additionally, a brochure was provided, outlining specific ways in which collaboration could be achieved, and which could be left behind in the officials' offices.

One of the suggestions made to the CCs was that they should try and secure a 'collaborative project' from the officials they visit. This could be a small or simple communications product or community activity that the CC could undertake on behalf of the official or department with an aim to increase the uptake of a welfare program or decrease mismanagement of it. For example, a CC could offer to make an informational video on an important welfare program and distribute it widely on social media platforms, or could volunteer to organise a community meeting for the official or enlist volunteers to create a beneficiary list etc. By the end of December 2023, 67 such collaborative projects were secured by 45 CCs across the country. A key strategy was to start any meeting by asking an official what he was working on and prioritising at the moment.

The purpose of this report is to share the results of this experiment, as well as the insights of what CCs learned in the process, through a synthesis of VV's findings as well as case studies for those who wish to go deeper.

Results: what the data shows



'Collab Approach' helped each CC to resolve a higher number of cases. Out of the seven CCs profiled for these case studies, five achieved a dramatic increase in the number of impacts, while the other two maintained the same level of success. All of these CCs had a very high number of visits to officials, demonstrating the importance of persistence. This further provides evidence of the value of the Collab approach.

The gains of adopting this approach are now evident, as will be clear from the following data.

In the 12 months from Jan to Dec 2023, 729 matters in total were resolved, impacting a total of 8,346,351 individuals. The corresponding figures for the previous year [Jan to Dec 2022] are 429 matters resolved, impacting 3,775,405 individuals.

Therefore, the number of cases resolved increased by 59% and the number of lives impacted increased by 45%. CCs positively impacted an additional 4.5 million people, which is believed to be due to the 'Collab approach', the shorthand for this change in approach.

Though most of the factors such as the CC, region and issues were constant, there were some other factors as well that influenced the jump in numbers. For instance, this period coincided with CCs mastering the art of impactful storytelling through the guidance and support provided by their mentors. Additionally, with the organisational support provided by VV, CCs felt safe and systematic in their work.

Projects Secured by CCs



Community Content Creators (CCs) have worked on a diverse range of projects that address various critical themes. Their initiatives span agricultural support, caste equity, child welfare, gender equality, labour rights and law and order. They also covered issues concerning infrastructural development, such as education, public health, housing, road construction, sanitation and water pipelines installations.

Here are some examples of the **impactful projects secured by CCs**:

Land registration:

- Organising a community meeting for the Musahar community to get land registration documents.

Awareness Videos:

- Creating awareness videos on Mukhyamantri Samuhik Vivah Yojana (Mass Wedding Scheme).
- Creating a video on Kanya Vivah Sahayata Yojana (Girl Marriage Assistance Scheme).

Cultural Festival:

- Selecting 40 women for a cultural festival, with 8 awarded for their cultural contributions.
- Assisting 7 leprosy patients in getting certified for household scheme benefits, with potential accommodation.

Labour issues:

- Creating awareness among labourers about government board registration.
- Facilitating reconciliation among conflicting sarpanches.
- Assisting in organising a Shramik card camp for workers.

Awareness Campaign:

- Organizing a street play for raising awareness against child labour and child marriage in 150 villages.

Ration Card Updates:

- Assisting families in updating their names on ration cards

Trafficking Awareness:

- Creating women's groups in tea garden areas to educate about trafficking, organising meetings, and maintaining a list to check for trafficking incidents.

It was noted that the **largest number of projects were secured to boost health facilities, closely followed by initiatives addressing labour issues, agricultural support, and gender equality.** The strong emphasis on health highlights the urgent need in underserved areas, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. Labour issues took centre stage due to the vast informal sector and the pressing demand for better worker conditions. Agriculture, a cornerstone of India's economy, naturally drew attention, with projects aimed at strengthening this vital sector. What's truly inspiring is that every gender-related project was spearheaded by a woman Community Content Creator, driving the push for systemic change. These areas not only reflect the needs of the community but also resonate with government priorities, making them key in securing collaborative projects.

Survey reveals: officials keen on collaboration with citizens



A survey conducted by UVA, Claremont Graduate University, and Video Volunteers, involving 1,200 government officials in Jharkhand, provided substantive data on the value of this approach directly from the officials themselves. In one of its sections, that survey aimed to understand to what degree, and in which areas, are officials interested in collaborating with citizens. The collaboration options were as follows:

- Local surveys
- Community meetings
- Awareness campaigns on government programs & schemes
- Videos to showcase successful government projects
- Share information from local communities.

20% of officials expressed an interest to collaborate with citizens, a significantly high number given that friction was introduced to lower the chances of their positive response. Out of those, specifically:

- 84% said they would like to have citizens conduct awareness-raising workshops on government schemes. This was clearly the top choice, suggesting that officials feel there is a gap in information going from their offices to citizens.
- 64% said they would like to have citizens carry out local surveys for them

Survey reveals

- 64% said they would like to have citizens conduct community meetings for them
- 58% said would like citizens to share with them information from the community
- 56% said they would like videos made on government schemes.



Go Deeper: Read the full [report](#) of the experiments in which 1200 government servants were asked whether they wished to collaborate with citizens, and if so, how they would like to collaborate.

As the CCs met with officials, they were also providing data on their visits. Each of their visits was categorised using the same tags that VV uses in their own data reporting system. It is interesting to observe this data and see what is the common ground between citizens and officials.

TYPE OF COLLABORATIVE PROJECT	TOTAL PROJECTS SECURED BY CCS		PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
	No	%	
Aid Implementation of Govt Program	11	18.64%	33.90%
Community Survey	9	15.25%	
Awareness Campaign	8	13.56%	59.32%
Community Mobilising	1	1.69%	
Community Meeting/Camp	4	6.78%	
Informational Video/Material	22	37.29%	
Showcase Govt Success Story	5	8.47%	8.47%
Income Generating Project	1	1.69%	
Reports/Information from Community	1	1.69%	
Incomplete data	5		
Total number of Collab Projects	67		

59% of the projects were indeed awareness campaigns, which was the top choice during the survey of officials. But it is interesting to note that the second biggest category of projects that were actually implemented on the ground was ‘implementation of government schemes’, which was not even a category in the original survey, and which no one mentioned when given the opportunity to select ‘other.’ This

likely reflects a real need for more implementation support, which is known to exist because of bureaucratic overload, and also, a hesitance to explicitly state that officials need this kind of support from the citizenry.

The analysis of the data also showed that CCs made **a total of 530 visits to the officials**, including 194 visits to block officials, 117 to district offices and 165 to departments and sub-divisions. After examining 51 successful collaborations, it was found that block-level officials were more willing to collaborate, followed by district level officials. The reasons for more successful collaboration with block officials could be their closer proximity to the communities, making it easier for the CCs to meet them more frequently and build stronger relationships. Block officials also have a more direct connection to local issues, making them more informed and invested in collaboration. Additionally, there are fewer layers of bureaucracy in block administration, allowing for quicker decision-making and more flexibility.

Case Studies: CCs' Strategies and Successes



SHABNAM BEGUM

Shabnam's First Project: The Block Development Officer told Shabnam to identify women who could be recognized at a cultural festival, as she is popular among the women of the village. The government aimed to recognize the cultural qualities of women and award them to encourage further participation. Shabnam selected 40 women, and out of them, 8 were selected for awards.

Her Second Project: Shabnam also helped leprosy patients get certified to ensure they could benefit from the household scheme. Around 7 leprosy patients have been selected, and there is a possibility of getting accommodation soon.

She shared her secret to securing collaborations with officials, saying,



You need to have a strong connection at the community level. They must trust and support you wholeheartedly. Officials will listen to you only when you have the backing of the community. I also have a strategy for sharing issue videos. I shoot a video about an issue and then take it to the relevant authority, explaining the entire matter. Only then do I publish the video so that they are aware of the issue. If they find out about the issue directly from the video, they might get upset and refuse to collaborate.

Strategies used:

Highlight the community support that you have.

Give officials a chance to respond before publishing a story



SHANKARLAL RAIKWAR

Shankarlal's Project: Shankarlal secured a project from the CDPO to do a street play for raising awareness against child labour and child marriage in 150 villages.

He emphasised the importance of maintaining consistent contact with officers, whether one fails or succeeds. He explained, "You need to visit them 2-3 times a month whenever you are free. It should not just be about establishing a good relationship with one officer, getting a project, and considering the work finished. You need to make new connections every time there is a new officer. Keep meeting them and make sure they remember your face. They will automatically feel that this person keeps coming so often, what is he intending to do?"

He further added,

I separate myself when I talk to them. I tell them that I am not from any media outlet; I am a social worker and I am concerned about society. We can together solve issues. So, when they realised that about me, they started discussing issues in detail and included me in the project as well.

Strategies used:

make consistent and regular contact.

describe yourself as a social worker rather than a journalist.



KASHIF AKHTAR

Kashif's Project: Kashif secured a project to assist families in a village with updating their names on ration cards. Kashif met with multiple government officials a total of 34 times in a 9 month period.

Kashif, a journalist for ten years, highlighted the importance of explaining the difference between community media and mainstream media to officials.



He said,

I had to explain a lot to the officials because they know how crooked mainstream media can be. When faced with such a preconceived idea, it is important to assure the officials that the intent is not to put the blame on them and publicise them as bad officials, but that our intent is to work with them. The officials want to hide the inefficiencies of their departments, and they don't want that to be exposed in the media. So they like it if they can get the information from the ground and get to fix things without getting negative attention from the media.

Strategies used:

re-assure the official you aren't the kind of journalist who is out to get them. Highlight the aspects of your journalism that have value to them - namely, that you can provide information from the ground - while reassuring them about the negatives, which is their fear that their inefficiencies will be exposed.

Why this project matters



The communities benefited through the 67 Collaborative projects. They had both trustworthy support from a community representative as well as official sanction, a winning combination.

Officials themselves were grateful for the help, as CC Rasita Chik Barik, from West Bengal clearly explains. "I received a call from a railway officer, Mr. Montu Barman. He appreciated my efforts in the case of a missing person and said, 'You are doing good work, and if you continue, it will provide us with the support needed to solve such issues.' This clearly reflects that the CCs have been able to build stronger relationships with the officials.

But this project matters beyond this.

Power of collaboration

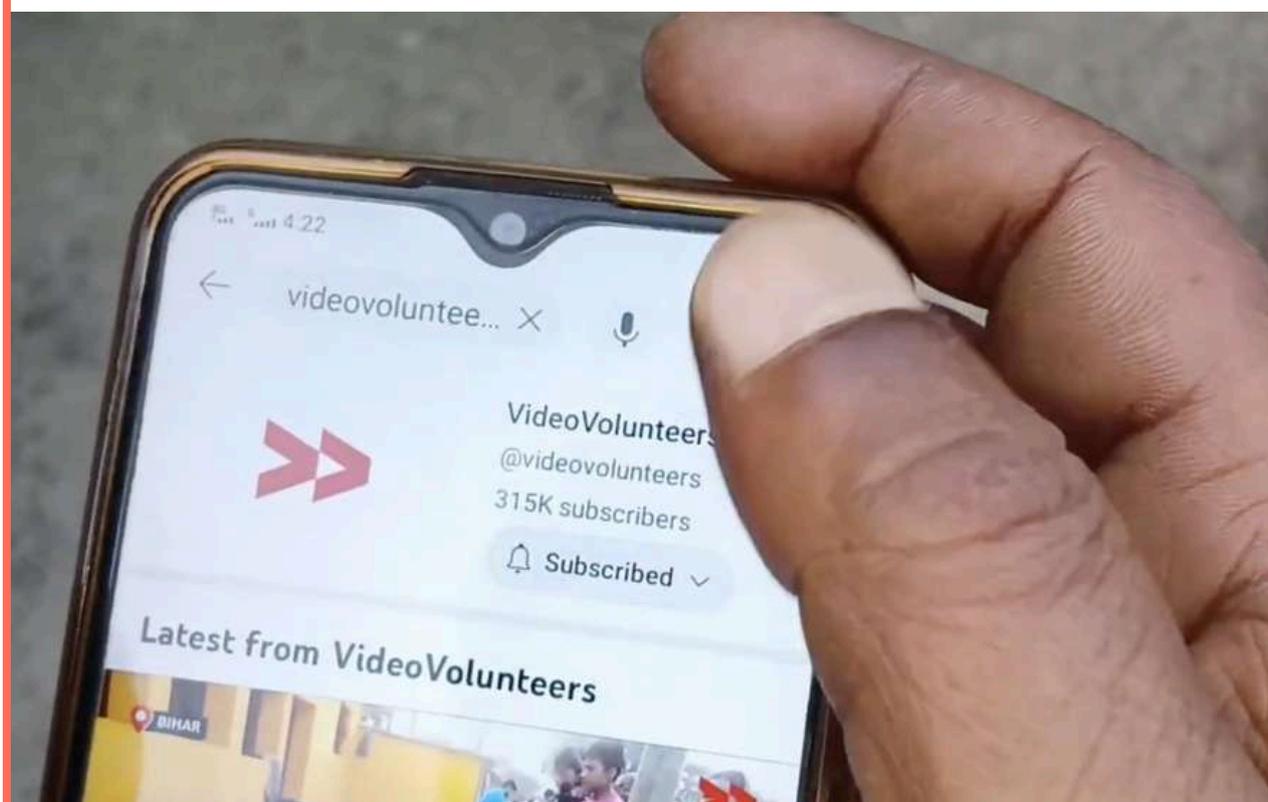
The project showed the power of collaboration and co-creation between citizens and officials at the most local level. So much of the work that the government does is top-down, necessarily so, and it is hard to break out of the confines of bureaucracy. But these 67 projects displayed a high level of diversity -- the kind of diversity that happens through co-creation. In a resource-starved environment where people argue that citizens should 'be the change they wish to see in the world,' it seems even more impactful if citizens and officials can TOGETHER be that change, and create spaces to take things forward with agency and self-direction.

An additional point regarding the impact of this project: in countries experiencing closing civil space, there is an all-pervasive narrative that government officials and those who seek accountability and transparency are at loggerheads. Video Volunteers has always maintained that this narrative isn't quite right - the 4000 impacts CCs have achieved are proof that active citizens --even ones armed with cameras! - make officials work easier, not harder, because they help them get through the long list of issues they must tackle more quickly.

From sticks to carrots

This project aimed to emphasise the 'working together' narrative as strongly as possible, and the data clearly indicates the greater impact was made by CCs when collaboration was prioritised. For many, it required only a slight shift in the framing, from one of confrontation, to collaboration. Though their work had always been collaborative, it made a difference when they started to communicate collaboration more clearly. Data from the survey of 1200 government officials in Jharkhand show this: that it's the fear of oversight/anger of more senior officials (due to the threat of sharing a complaint on social media) that in the end spurs action. This suggests that there is still an element of "pressure" required. However, it is proposed that it doesn't have to all be 'pressure or sticks', and there can be more 'carrot'.

Balancing Act: collaborate when possible, confront when necessary



VV analysed a large amount of data collected over the years and conducted in-depth interviews with 12 CCs. The study reveals the types of projects CCs secured and the willingness of officials to collaborate.

But how can citizens get involved? How can NGOs empower them?

Firstly, the NGOs should not be afraid of confrontation, when necessary, and should use collaboration together or separately, depending on the need of the hour. Such confrontation helps hold officials accountable for their actions and prevents abuses of power, thereby safeguarding democratic principles. Additionally, challenging the government can drive meaningful policy changes and reforms that address pressing public issues. By voicing diverse concerns and advocating for the marginalised communities, civil society can ensure that all perspectives are represented and considered in decision-making.



[Read the case studies of several CCs.](#)

Highlighted below are the strategies used by successful CCs to create collaborative projects, which they shared with VV through multiple interviews. NGOs, in their own training and grassroots work, can use these strategies to facilitate the on-ground collaboration of active citizens supported by NGOs and local government officials.

CCs' Strategies for Creating Collaborations with Government Officials

- **Prepare and Rehearse:** Be well-prepared and practise your pitch to ensure clarity and conciseness.
- **Build Trust:** Reassure officials that your journalism aims to provide valuable ground information and not to expose inefficiencies.
- **Maintain Regular Contact:** Consistently reach out and keep officials informed with updates, invitations, and progress without expecting immediate replies.
- **Leverage Community Support:** Highlight the support you have from the community and involve them in interactions with officials.
- **Be Positive and Respectful:** Understand the official's personality, use praise, show respect, and maintain a positive tone, even bringing small tokens of appreciation if appropriate.
- **Stay Informed:** Be knowledgeable about your local area and conduct thorough research to back up your stories.
- **Sell Yourself:** Provide your bio data, showcasing the good work you have done to build credibility.
- **Seek Mutual Understanding:** Work towards common goals and ensure mutual understanding with the officials.
- **Transparency in Reporting:** Give officials a chance to respond before publishing any story to ensure fairness and accuracy.
- **Escalate Appropriately:** Approach the same official where the problem originated and inform them if escalation is necessary.

The Pitfalls

That said, at the initial training, the CCs were quick to point out the clear risks that this approach could bring. It could cause self-censorship. It encouraged CCs to work on issues that the official they were visiting worked on. So what about issues such as gender, or caste discrimination or corruption or the myriad others where it isn't easy to find a local official with a clear mandate to work on it? If we spend our time focused on what the officials want, one CC asked, then the citizens won't see us as their allies.

These are real areas of concern. However, it is believed that local changemakers are well-equipped to decide their approach. Even the people who might be perceived as Journalists, like Bideshini from the mining area of Odisha, can learn to work collaboratively with officials and that is very hopeful. She shared her experience saying, "There is a tendency among reporters to instil fear in people and make officers wary of them. The idea is that if the work is not done, we will expose it in the media. I, too, used to operate with that mindset. I did not engage in extensive conversations with officials, and while I never explicitly warned or threatened them, my actions carried an implied message. Upon being introduced to the idea of collaboration, I was initially uncertain. I decided to give it a try and see how it works. I provided an introduction about it and myself to selected officers whom I believed would be interested. One such interaction was with the Sub-Collector, Suranjan Sahu. Previously, our meetings were solely for taking bytes. However, this time, I presented the idea of collaboration to him and assured him of my intent to cooperate and support him. Consequently, whenever I visit him now, he prioritises our meeting, inviting me directly to his cabin, where we spend 30-45 minutes discussing various matters."

In a nutshell, **collaborate when possible; confront when necessary.** There's a risk of 'selling out' and the best defence is that changemakers be part of a supportive network where people are constantly talking about and evaluating these risks.



Video Volunteers is a global organization dedicated to advancing the right to voice. VV amplifies marginalized voices to ensure social change and policymaking are grounded in community-led, participatory insights from the ground up.

