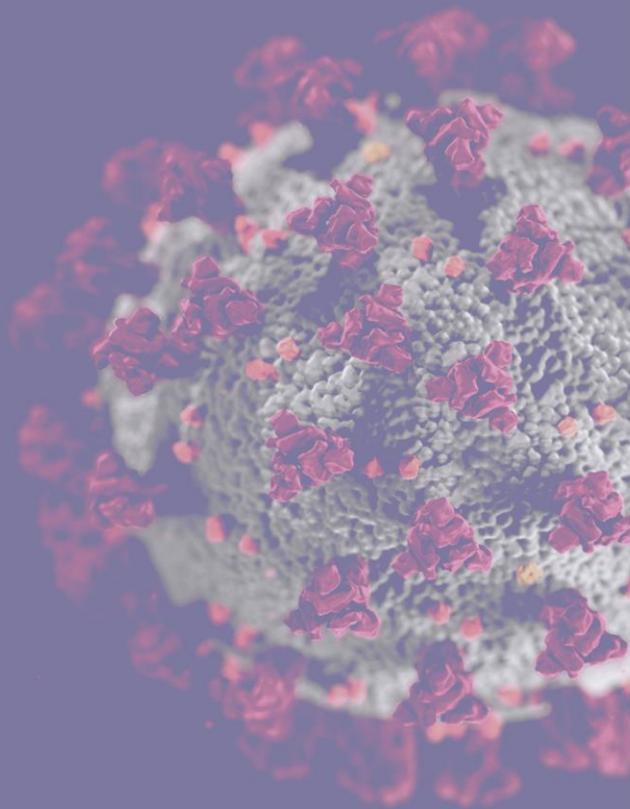
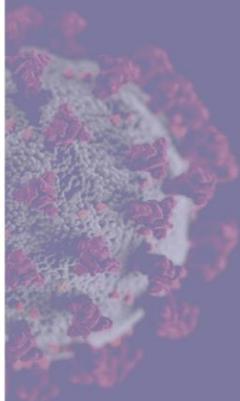


# REACHING OUT TO THE POOR AND MARGINALISED

IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

STRATEGY DOCUMENT FOR MADHYA PRADESH AND CHHATTISGARH



**SAMARTHAN**  
CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT



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Strategy Note

# Samarthan's Response to COVID-19 Crisis in MP and Chhattisgarh

## 1. Context

The country has faced an unprecedented disaster in form of COVID-19 (corona virus) threat for the society and economy of the country. The initial Janta curfew was imposed on the 22nd March, 2020 across the country and later on the 24th March mid-night, it was announced by the Prime Minister to completely lock down the country for 21 days. As a result, public transport viz. railways, buses, taxis etc. have come to a halt. The citizens are expected to come out of their houses only for essential requirements viz. purchase of glossary, vegetables, visits to hospitals or other emergencies. The lockdown has brought the country to a sudden halt, therefore various abnormal conditions have erupted in rural and urban areas.

The halt of the social and economic life at large has several implications for various sections of the society. The poor daily wage earners, small entrepreneurs, farmers are the most affected by the lockdown as their earnings have completely stopped. In order to buy bare essentials, they will require cash and access to goods, especially in remote areas. The old people are also finding it difficult to go out to buy goods and medicines. The daily migrant wage earners/seasonal workers in cities who largely come from rural areas have suddenly started moving to their hometowns creating frenzy and breaking the norms of social distancing<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, there are the most vulnerable without food and water.

The social behavior demands significant changes to promote habits of hand washing with soap, use of safe distances at public places/ utilities, efficient management of limited resources, including water apart from ensuring safe and easy access to essentials.

As any disaster brings in several social disorders leading to chaos, conflicts and inequitable use of the resources related to basic survival, COVID-19 situation is also simmering various kinds of conflicts as many of the returnee migrants are not being treated with compassion (they are considered as definitive carriers of the virus rather than suspects). As a result, they are denied access within the village or not welcomed by the village leaders. For many of these returnees, this

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<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the social distancing is primarily to reduce the rate of transfer of the viral infection as well as to identify the affected people so that they may be quarantined and treated, if required.

is also the time when they come home to provide extra hands in farming operations (harvest, post-harvest, sales etc.) so save family expenditure on agricultural labour and create some annual surplus. Similarly, many vulnerable families within the villages and urban slums would require food for survival or access to purchase essential items.

The local governments have a significant role to play to demonstrate their relevance and authority as an institution of Local Governance, so that public services remain accessible to one and all and each of the citizen feels cared and protected with the support of the community leaders and community.

In this context, Samarthan has developed a strategy in consultation with its existing teams in different locations viz. state, district, block, villages and slums as well as its large cadre of volunteers at the grassroots that reached out to people for understanding their existing challenges and needs. As the crisis appears to be long term, there is a need to work out a strategy for the short, medium and long term. The strategy detailed here also has inputs from the core staff of Samarthan as well as its Board of Trustees and other relevant stakeholders.

## 2. Our Approach and Guiding Principles

- Establishing Local Governments as peoples' Government in managing disasters
- Building collective leadership of local institutions to manage disaster
- Access to entitlement and rights of the people applying the principles of equity, inclusion and fairness
- Protecting and promoting sustainable livelihoods and rural-urban continuum
- Developing long term plan to address climate change and environmental concerns

### 2.1. Establishing Local Governments as peoples' Government in managing disasters

Samarthan has worked to promote participatory development and participatory governance over the last 25 years. It has strengthened local governments in rural and urban areas post 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments. Gram Panchayats and urban local bodies, especially in small town have been capacitated to develop models of participatory governance to deliver the function of 'economic development and social justice' in their respective local bodies. Our belief for supporting the local government has been based on the premise that local needs, local diversity, local solutions are only possible if local governments become stronger and function as independent democratic institutions.

In the current COVID- 19 crisis, the Gram Panchayats and urban local bodies will have to take control over the situation to provide relief, safety, and delivery of entitlement and access to various essential services to the citizens as they have constitutional mandate for the above. This has opened up a unique opportunity for the local governments to demonstrate their relevance, effectiveness and comparative advantage over the other forms of Government viz. Parliament and state Assemblies. This will establish the demand for greater acceptance of the principle of subsidiarity. Gram Panchayats will be encouraged and hand-held to use funds available under the Central and State Finance Commission and mobilize its own resources to provide immediate relief to the most poor and vulnerable within their panchayats.

## 2.2. Building collective leadership of local institutions to manage disaster

This crisis has also provided an opportunity to the local leadership to demonstrate collective strength to deal with the real issues of the people in a comprehensive and inclusive manner as each one is at an equal risk. Existing Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and youth volunteers have a critical role to in mitigation of the disaster impacts. Moreover, this is the time to innovate new ways of co-operation, mutual support and judicious use of public and private resources. The poorest of the poor, single women, disabled, destitute, orphan children, socially excluded groups and religious minorities are at the greater risk of survival, therefore they need to be protected as a collective responsibility of the community at large.

The leadership of women in the self-help groups, cultural entities like religious clubs, sport clubs, and various collectives of the farmers, adolescent boys and girls, youth promote under various programs or indigenously emerged organizations over the years will be nurtured to perform as Civil society and create social capital in the villages / urban slums to act as quick response teams to support Panchayats and promote voluntarism/ community philanthropy. This will include reviving some customary practices like collective resource pooling, setting up of community grain banks, helping panchayats in collecting community contributions for supporting the disadvantaged and vulnerable.

## 2.3. Access to entitlement and rights of the people applying the principles of equity, inclusion and fairness

It is time to ensure greater transparency and inclusion in the realization of additional packages being announced by the Government for the relief of poor and disadvantaged. The Gram Panchayats and Gram Sabha will need to play an important role to ensure that no one is excluded from these entitlements and rights. As there will be a short supply of subsidized ration, gas, fuel, essential household items, medicines and health services etc., the powerful and resourceful elite will try to capture it, leaving very little for the poor and marginalized.

Gram Panchayat and the local leadership can establish ground rules of equity and inclusion to meet the basic needs of everyone. The collective leadership will also demonstrate models of community contribution and compassion to every family and individual living in their village or locality. Opinion leaders and aware/ enlightened individuals will be encouraged to animate the Gram Sabha to monitor Gram Panchayat functioning and ensure access and delivery of entitlements to the eligible. This will include monitoring of basic services viz. drinking water, subsidized ration, mid-day meal, immunization, health checkups, apart from entitlements like social security pensions, NREGS wages and other measures under safety net announced by the government recently. Especially in the remote areas. Gram Sabha along with other CBOs, local

leaders will work with Panchayats and elected leaders to ensure voluntary disclosure of all information pertaining to delivery of entitlements, especially to the most vulnerable families in their village.

## 2.4. Protecting and promoting sustainable livelihoods and rural-urban continuum

Even after the immediate health related impact of COVID-19 dissipates, a large number of returnee migrants will not be in a position to go back to cities for work. They will need to be gainfully employed (in short and medium term) in rural areas and use the various expertise, skill sets and work culture that they bring in. This is coupled with the fact that due to economic slowdown, allocations under various development schemes are also likely to come down. Many of these returnee migrants will have to find work under various schemes like MGNREGS, PMAY, PMRY etc. as wage labourers/ semi-skilled workers in the construction and other sectors.

While some of them will be willing to work as agriculture workers and marginal farmers, a number of other people will need to be accommodated in the rural economy till the time manufacturing sector or the service sector registers growth and employment. There is a need to build continuum of the rural areas with the small towns where there is a potential for jobs and services. The disconnect of the small towns with their rural hinterlands need to be established back so that the local economy function in a synergistic manner to generate sustainable employment. For this local entrepreneurs/ collectives will be encouraged to incubate ideas and develop local production systems that can cater to specific needs of a region by harnessing local resources/ raw material that may either not find the right market price or as substitute for essential resources that may not be available in the medium term.

## 2.5. Developing long term plan to address climate change and environmental concerns

This is also an opportunity to sensitize the communities on the judicious use of the natural resources like water and trees etc. as well as to promote greater investment in natural resources development in private and public land. The global crisis and local impacts will help communities to learn new ways to be self-sustained and environmentally sensitive. This is the time for the communities to respect their bio-diversity, conserve natural resources, and promote organic agricultural production, agricultural diversification and strengthening economic base of their Gram Panchayats and small towns.

This will include promotion of livelihoods diversification strategy for rural communities, adoption of resilient agriculture, biodiversity conservation and promotion of behavior change around safe sanitation and social distancing, disaster preparedness and response.

### 3. Geographical presence in MP and Chhattisgarh

The current reach of Samarthan in the state of MP and Chhattisgarh is across several districts covering both rural and urban areas. Samarthan has a wide reach in rural areas and has a potential to cover several small towns and district headquarters. With its given reach in rural areas, Samarthan has decided to cover selective Gram Panchayats in rural areas for immediate and medium term response.

Samarthan will enhance its reach if the interventions are found relevant and a greater support is committed by donors to design more appropriate interventions emerging out of these experiences, based on changing scenarios and local learnings. Samarthan will reach out in one of the town in each of the intervened district where the office of Samarthan is located or where there are greater economic linkages of the rural communities.

The table given below provides the coverage that Samarthan envisages to intervene:

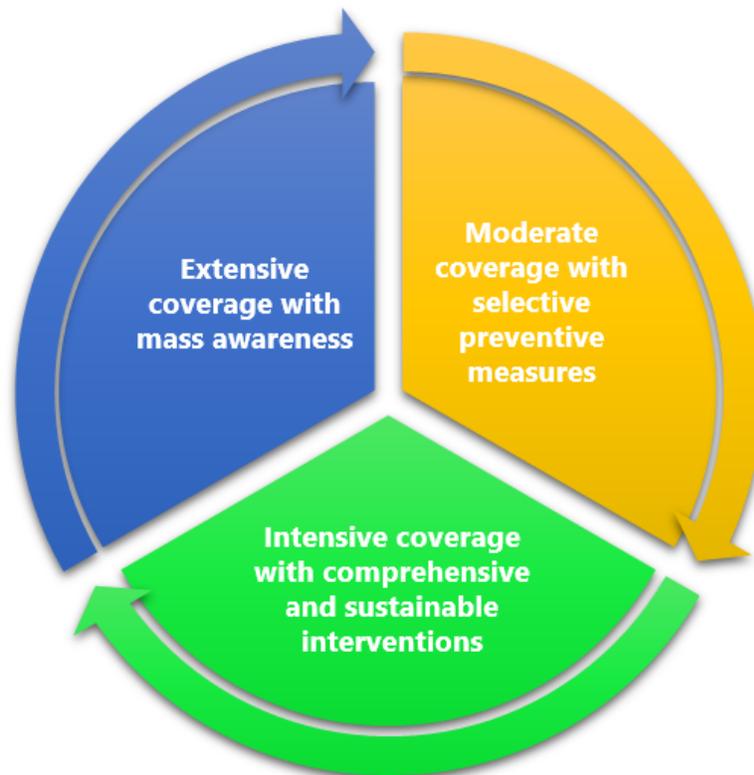
Samarthan's reach in Madhya Pradesh for COVID-19	District	Blocks	Villages	No. of Community Resource Persons
	Chhatarpur	8	40	80
	Sehore	4	150	180
	Khandwa	7	100	180
	Panna	1	45	90
	Badwani	1	97	113
	Jhabua	2	326	473
	Dindori	2	180	415
	Dhar	1	94	92
	Mandla	1	114	76
	Alirajpur	1	133	241
Indore	4	123	103	
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>1402</b>	<b>2043</b>	
Samarthan's reach in Chhattisgarh for COVID-19	District	Blocks	Villages	No of Community Resource Persons
	Rajnandgaon	1	43	72
	Kanker	5	45	62
	Raipur	4	71	100
	Korba	1	15	20
	Jashpur	4	34	60
	Sarguja	4	31	60
	Sukma	2	40	63
	<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>279</b>	<b>437</b>

## 4. Strategies and Action Areas

Currently, Samarthan is articulating the short term and medium term strategy to respond to the COVID -19 crisis. It will be unrealistic to unpack long term strategies in such an unpredictable and uncertain environment. The short term strategy is evolved for the period of next 3 months i.e. April – June, 2020 and medium term strategy is visualized for the additional 6 months i.e. July to December, 2020. The detailing of strategies has a mix of short term and medium term strategy.

### 4.1. Differentiating reach and activity in different clusters

The above mentioned geographical coverage of Samarthan has been divided into three clusters. It is proposed to have an extensive, moderate and intensive strategy in three clusters of geography respectively, where Samarthan has a presence.



#### a. Extensive coverage with mass awareness

First, Districts and Blocks where Samarthan has a long term presence and has established good rapport with the district administration as a partner agency in development through implementation of various project over the years. In these areas Samarthan can work on creating online/ technology based interventions to promote mass awareness around the crisis and protocols that need to be followed in the short term.

**b. Moderate coverage with selective preventive measures**

Owing to its previous interventions, Samarthan has active connection in select Gram Panchayats where one or two volunteers were trained and who can quickly be developed as community resource persons to implement strategies around local awareness generation and for working on issues of access to services/ entitlements and inclusion (as discussed above) in a non-intensive manner.

**c. Intensive coverage with comprehensive and sustainable interventions**

Samarthan has a very strong presence in select Gram Panchayats and poor urban settlements where Samarthan's paid grassroots workers live and work on full time basis. These are locations where Samarthan can undertake more intensive work and is willing to develop a deeper engagement with local communities as well as with local administration. These will include strengthening of CBOs/ Gram Sabha/ SHGs and working with local leaders and other institutions to work closely with Gram Panchayats, work intensively on inclusion, access to entitlement for the vulnerable/ disadvantaged, strengthening of local production systems, livelihood restoration/ diversification as well as help PRIs work as independent institutions in this hour of crisis.

## 5. Short term strategy and action areas

The **short term strategy and action areas** of Samarthan to address the impact of COVID 19 has been evolved in the following manner:

- Mass awareness among the citizens in rural areas for safe practices
- Encouraging Gram Panchayats to develop public buildings as quarantine centers for the returnee migrants
- Access of benefits to the entitlements to the poor and marginalized families
- Direct food and essential item support to the most vulnerable families
- Support in continuation of health services in the villages and linkages with the PHCs and CHCs for crisis

### 5.1. Mass awareness among the citizens in rural areas for safe practices

The community needs to be reached out with key preventive messages in the local dialect or Hindi using various social media platforms. Various Whats App Groups of the Elected representatives, field functionaries viz. ANMs, Anganwari workers, Agriculture extension workers etc. will be used to reach out to the communities. The data base of mobile numbers of the Panchayat level functionaries available with the Government will be used, besides the existing data base available with the workers of Samarthan and other CSOs. Various CSOs will be also invited to take these messages in different areas where these CSOs have presence and connections.

The key messages will be strictly designed using the content approved by the Ministry of Health or the Department of Health. If possible, the contents will be reviewed and approved by the concerned Government officials. The key messages will be around:

- Demonstration of meaning of 'social distancing' especially in and around public places/ service access points
- Importance of hand washing and method of hand washing
- Key symptoms of COVID-19 and required actions
- Helpline numbers to reach out to officials

- Meaning of self-quarantine and precautions during self-quarantine
- Awareness on relief packages and credit/loan moratoriums announced by the government for the vulnerable/ cultivators

The field level workers will be encouraged to undertake wall writing of some of the messages in public places, especially near the hand pumps, PDS shops Panchayat Bhawan, School buildings etc. The field workers will also attempt to ensure practices of the social distancing at public places, proper method of hand washing, hygiene antiquates so that the messages get really translated into behavioral change to reduce the risk of spread of COVID-19.

## 5.2. Encouraging Gram Panchayats to develop public buildings as quarantine centers for the returnee migrants

Samarthan will approach those Sarpanchs and Panchayat Secretaries where the number of returnee migrants is high and there is a strong demonstrated abilities of the leaders to undertake such measures. Samarthan team will provide them government instructions to set up quarantine centers and guide them in establishing it through helplines and IEC on the epidemic<sup>2</sup>.

If required, Samarthan will also share part of the cost of establishing these by entering into cost sharing arrangements with partners. In most cases, the funds of the 14<sup>th</sup> FC and community contribution will be used for setting up such crisis response facilities/ services. A detailed note has been prepared in Hindi on the protocol of setting up a quarantine center. Salient features of the instructions are the following:

- Counselling to the returnee migrants and their families on benefits of quarantine and isolation
- Creating separate rooms for those having some symptoms like fever or dry cough and those without symptoms
- Set up beds at a distance of at least 6 feet from each other
- Arrangement of safe water, toilets and system of hand washing with soap
- Provision of food either from the family or by running common kitchens for the needy and affected
- Arrangement of basic drugs with the support of ASHA/ANM/PHC
- Display of helpline numbers to call the ambulance or seek telephonic advice
- Regular monitoring of the returnee migrants and suspected cases in home quarantine

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<sup>2</sup> Most initial assessment are showing that in rural areas, understanding about self-isolation/ quarantine and social distancing and their recommended protocols is still unclear and is not being followed strictly, risking its penetration in the rural / poorer communities.

Separate room can be used for those members of the village who are also showing signs of COVID -19 so that they can be isolated from the family and community. Self-quarantine at the family level of such persons will be encouraged.

### 5.3. Access of benefits to the entitlements to the poor and marginalized families

The currently announced relief measure of the Government of India should reach out to the deserving families so that the poorest of the poor do not become the victims of starvation and deprivation resulting in greater risk of catching infection. The Gram Panchayats have a critical role either for the provision of the benefits or for monitoring the services so that each of the deserving family receives the benefits. Some of the critical entitlements are the following:

- Subsidized ration for the families, pregnant and lactating mothers and children
- Social security pensions to the old, widow and disabled
- Benefits on the MGNREGS or Shrmik card holders
- Any other benefit announced by the Government

The Gram Panchayats need to be encouraged to prepare a list of the most deserving families on the basis of their vulnerability so that the poorest of the poor and most marginalized families are not left out in case of scarcity of resources and short supply. Samarthan will facilitate community monitoring by Gram Sabha and like-minded CBOs to ensure access to services/ entitlements, disclosure of beneficiary wise information on benefits provided under different schemes, tracking receipt of benefits by the poorest quintile of the village/ Panchayat and creating mechanisms for advocating for release of additional assistance for those uncovered or those belonging to migrant families.

### 5.4. Direct food and essential item support to the most vulnerable families

Bottom 20% families in the poorest districts of MP and CG do not have disposable income to buy essential food items and meet medical emergency needs of the family in a lockdown situation of 21 days. Absence from the daily wage earnings in time to come will worsen their situation. There is a need to provide direct support to the most vulnerable families for their survival and dignified living. The essential food items include a) rice/wheat b) pulses c) edible oil d) salt e) vegetables f) spices etc. that are bare essential for the family to sustain and survive. Some of the other essential items that the family will require will be a) bathing soaps b) detergents c) snacks for the children etc. The village level disaster management committee that will be formed, will work to identify most vulnerable families and identify their requirements. The items will be purchased from the

local vendors or from the district/block level vendors. With the support of the district administration, the items will be transported and delivered in different villages.

The committee will be provided an emergency fund to meet the transportation needs, medical emergencies and other exigencies (funeral) that are not foreseen currently.

In the poor settlements in urban areas also, there is a severe distress situation due to the lockdown and inability to go for daily wage earning or regular employment in informal sector. There are highly vulnerable families having disabled family member, indisposed member or women headed families or old age families. Such families will also require similar direct food and essential items' support for their survival during the lockdown period and few weeks later till situation becomes normal.

### 5.5. Support in continuation of health services in the villages and linkages with the PHCs and CHCs for crisis

The Department of Health, Government of MP has already announced their instructions to the ANMs, ASHA and Anganwari workers to provide services to the target families and identify most vulnerable cases for COVID-19. There is a need to build support mechanism for the field functionaries through the Gram Panchayat and the youth groups so that the field functionaries may operate in their assigned villages. There is a need to monitor that the field functionaries perform their duties in these times of crisis rather than shy away out of fear and report falsely on the MIS system. It will dilute the efforts of the Government to reach out to the deserving families in time of crisis. Moreover, the promised supplies of the dry nutritious breakfast items will be in short supply due to several reasons, therefore these need to be augmented with the support of the CSOs mobilizing donor resources. Samarthan will try to organize donor funds to reach out to as many families in the rural areas as possible with the support of the essential supplementary nutritious food.

## 6. Medium term strategy and action areas

**Medium term strategy and action areas** of Samarthan will consider the following. Many more will be evolved based on the gravity of situation that the COVID-19 poses in time to come.

- Support to the farm economy and rural artisans & entrepreneurs
- Provide wage employment through convergence of Government schemes

### 6.1. Support to the farm economy and rural artisans & entrepreneurs

There is a need to protect the interest of the farmers and the small entrepreneurs so that the village economy is not significantly affected. The farmers are unable to sell their produce in the market due to lockdown and there is a need to hold the produce till better prices are realized either in the Government procurement system or in the market. There is a need for initial credit and capital for the small and marginal farmers to pay off their debts and invest for the new crop. The SHGs have been instrumental in providing small loan at the time of sowing through their SHG savings scheme. There is a need to pump in more revolving capital into the robust SHGs or their Village Organizations (VOs) so that genuine farmers can access credit to sustain their agriculture and allied activities viz. dairying etc.

The SHGs facilitated by Samarthan will be encouraged to extend medium term credit to local farmers for purchase of agricultural inputs and other productive purchases. In addition, SHGs will also be encouraged to use their social capital to turn into village level aggregators to negotiate warehousing facilities with local warehouses for pooling and holding their small surpluses and pledging their produce for seeking loans from commercial banks to meet their short- medium working capital/ Agri-input related needs.

### 6.2. Provide wage employment through convergence of Government schemes

Economic revival may take several months and the returnee migrants as well as the landless labor will look for employment within the village or nearby areas. If the service sector and manufacturing sectors remain slow on recovery, a large number of the migrants will not be able to return back to the towns and cities. Agriculture sector has its own limitation of absorbing labor. Therefore, there is a need to explore employment possibilities in the infrastructure development under the Government schemes. One of the most critical program will be the Mahatma Gandhi National

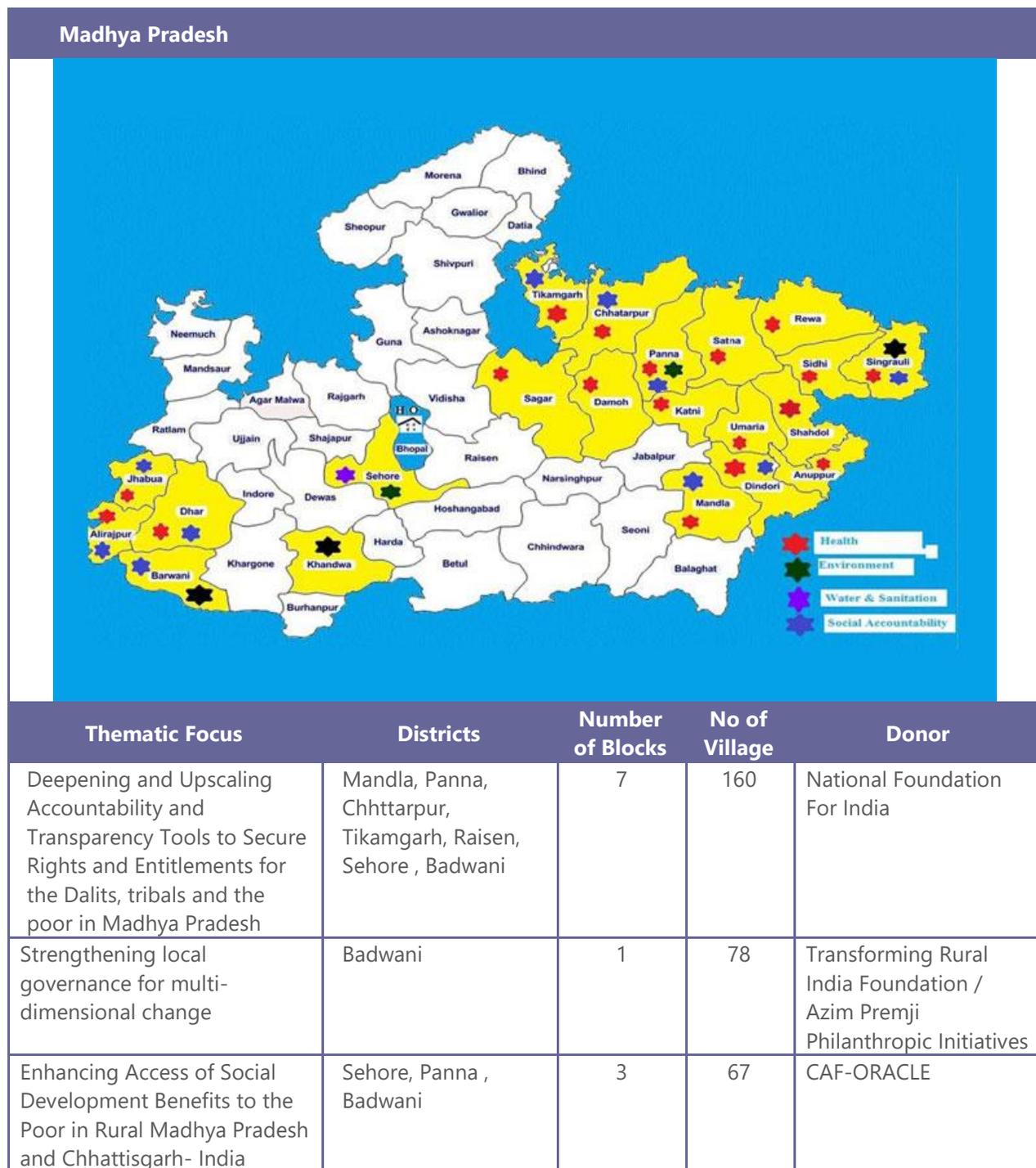
Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). There are several other programs like PM Awas Yojana, PM Rural Roads etc.

Samarthan will support the skilled and unskilled labour in the village to get employment by the following interventions:

- Support Gram Panchayats in developing labour budgets based on the demand for wage labor at the village level for the MGNREGS
- Approval of various individual and community works in the GP under the MGNREGS viz. farm ponds, farm bunds etc.
- Negotiation with the district administration to initiate civil works under the PM Awas, PM Roads and other constructions works of various departments based on the list of workers willing to work on daily wages

There is a need to help Gram Panchayats develop more comprehensive Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP) in the emerging scenario with a larger focus on labour oriented works. Samarthan's field teams will facilitate the process of preparing such plan and helping them access resources from the district administration on the revised plans.

## 7. Coverage of Samarthan by programmes in the state of MP and CG



Strengthening Gram Panchayats processes under the Mission Antodaya Program	Jhabua, Dhar, Alirajpur, Mandla and Dindori	7	617	Transforming Rural India Foundation / Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives
Demonstrating Convergence Approach for Improving Access to Information and Services for Young People	Chhattarpur	8	605	UNFPA
Reducing Chronic Malnutrition and Anaemia in 15 districts of MP	Satna, Rewa, Sidhi, Katni, Singrouli, Chhattarpur, Damoh, Panna, Tikamgarh, Sagar, Mandla, Umaria, Shahdol, Dindori, Annupu	96	15581	Clinton Health Access Initiative
Women and Water Alliance Project – Towards Ensuring Water Security and Quality	Sehore, Indore & Khandwa	16	800	Jal Seva Charitable Foundation/ WaterAid
Deepening and Upscaling Accountability and Transparency Tools to Secure Rights and Entitlements for the Dalits, tribals and the poor in Madhya Pradesh	Mandla, Panna, Chhattarpur, Tikamgarh, Raisen, Sehore, Badwani	7	160	National Foundation For India

## Chhattisgarh



Thematic Focus	Districts	Number of Blocks	No of Village	Donor
Natural resource management toward climate resilience	Bilaspur, Jashapur, Kabirdham, Korba, Koriya, Mungeli, Rajnandgon, Surjpur, Sarguja	33	240	IPE/DFID, GIZ
Water, Sanitation & Hygiene, Health	Kanker, Durg, Raipur	9	69	Jal Seva Charitable Foundation/ WaterAid, CGSACS, World Vision India
Local government, PESA, Livelihood & Natural Resource management, Social Accountability	Rajnandagaon, Kanker, Korba, Surguja, Jashpur	9	162	CARITAS India, GIZ, NEG Fire, Mobile Crèches, CAF-ORACLE, ILO
Watershed & Livelihood	Sukma	2	81	BRLF/CG Govt.





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