Management response to the evaluation of the *Shramik Vaani Initiative: Using Technology to Foster Collective Action among Workers (2020)*

Introduction - Context, background and findings (overarching narrative)

The Shramik Vaani initiative funded by the Laudes Foundation aimed to use voice-based communication technologies to foster collective action among women garment sector workers, in affiliation with trade union and social sector partner organizations, at four locations in India: Delhi NCR, Chennai, Dindigul, and Tirupur. Gram Vaani has a proven track record of empowering communities to demand their rights, and the Shramik Vaani initiative was an effort to extend a similar model to the space of labour rights. IVR (Interactive Voice Response) systems working through regular non-smartphones form the technological platform for these initiatives, along with carefully learned processes and practices to create a safe space for self-expression by the community members, and ground-up community mobilization strategies for capacity building of the community members to utilize the technology medium effectively. In the South India locations of Chennai, Dindigul, and Tirupur, the Shramik Vaani initiative aimed to embed this model within the operations of the partner organizations through suitable capacity building and participatory design methods. In the Delhi NCR arm of the initiative, where relevant partner organizations could not be identified during the initial stages, the project evolved a bottom-up volunteer-driven action methodology directly with participation of the workers.

We are thankful to the Laudes Foundation for their generous support for the initiative and the learning that emerged from the initiative.

We are also thankful to Strategy House DK for their thorough evaluation of the project outcomes. Given the complexity of working with multiple partners in widely different contexts, the evaluation successfully brought out fine nuances that led to successes and failures in meeting the original goals of the project.

We would like to humbly draw upon some factors that may have led to non/mis-consideration of certain facts about the Shramik Vaani initiative, during the evaluation. The evaluation was conducted remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which would have naturally impacted the contextual understanding gained by the team. The interface of technology and development is also a complex one, and although many factors were mentioned during calls with the evaluation team, some of them may not have been understood in all their detail, understandably so because of communication limitations as well the tight timelines for the evaluation. We outline our interpretation of the recommendations by highlighting how and why these recommendations were inferred, and to offer our view of re-interpretation which would have led to differently stated recommendations.

Recommendations and Action Plan			
Recommendation	Management Response: (Accepted, Partially Accepted, Not accepted)[1]: If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, state reasons:	Action Planned	Expected Completion Date
Conduct target group/user analysis to inform program design	Partially accepted. The evaluation seems to make this recommendation because it is attributing the lower outreach achieved by the project as set against the goals, to the digital gender divide, which could have presumably been addressed in advance by conducting a target group analysis. First, we would like to point out that a target group analysis was done for all the locations, including a baseline study of working conditions specific to the context of each location. Second, Gram Vaani has a deep understanding of the digital gender divide, with learnings drawn from multiple other projects as well, e.g. see (Moitra *et al*, 2016), (Chakraborty *et al*, 2019), (Seth, 2020a). However, in the	This is already a part of the organization's processes	NA

	context of the project, we want to clarify that the achieved outreach is more a function of the ground presence and community mobilization activities undertaken by the partner organizations, rather than the digital gender divide alone. If community mobilization is done well, then it can go a long way in addressing several factors that cause the digital gender divide – it cannot of course place phones in the hands of women who may not have phones, but among those women who do have phone access it can convince them to participate by explaining how it works, the safe space that it presents for raising issues, and the learning and solidarity that it fosters. The conceptualization of the Shramik Vaani initiative from the very start was based on leveraging the ground-presence of partner organizations who had already established a deep presence among women workers. The primary link that needed to be drawn therefore is between the achieved outreach of the project and the community mobilization efforts that went as an input to the project.		
Develop a content and communication strategy	Partially accepted Gram Vaani has over the years evolved several exciting content formats that bring together studio generated content with user generated content in engaging ways. Quizzes, pledges, campaigns, surveys, all provide a wide canvas to build engagement. Even users have extensively acknowledged the content and usefulness derived from the information. For example, see (Seth *et al*, 2020) for a	This is already a part of our projects, and we keep evolving new content formats	NA

	discussion of the pros and cons of different content formats in different contexts. The evaluation seems to attribute the low listenership to content quality, however as pointed out above, this is more of a function of the achieved outreach. Appealing content itself cannot bring new users to the platform, the strategy rather to increase listenership is outbound, to first inform more and more people about the platform, and once they do start interacting then to ensure that they are retained by providing a good content quality, demonstrating impact from their participation, and building trust. See (Moitra *et al*, 2019) for a detailed description of the impact pathways and the process inputs required to realize them. We therefore want to submit that user retention is perhaps a better proxy indicator to assess content quality than a measure based on the absolute listenership. User retention is of course driven by many other factors as well other than just content quality, but content quality does play an important role. Another viable indicator can be the percentage of users who contribute content. The performance of the Shramik Vaani platforms on both these indicators of user retention and percentage of contributing users has been at par with any other project.		
Develop a strategy for how partners can use the platform for 'social dialogue' at the local level	Partially accepted Engagement of multiple stakeholders on the platform directly, or indirectly by informing them of insights gained from the project, is a key impact pathway to bring change	The space of labour rights presents a new context for such "social	We are committed to supporting the ecosystem to learn, because of which we regularly write

	by using such public media platforms as a means of holding governments or employers accountable. See (Chakraborty *et al*, 2017) and (Gupta *et al*, 2020) for example. The evaluation should have tried to understand why this did not happen in the South India platforms, despite this being the key premise of the Shramik Vaani initiative itself, to bring collective action through communication platforms. The reason was that it was entirely a conscious choice made by the partners, by being sensitive to the local political context. One partner for example chose not to publish grievances on the platform, and rather to work behind the scenes to resolve them through a one-on-one interaction with the concerned stakeholders, because publishing them openly could have been perceived as an antagonistic move by the employers or the government. In line with our participatory design approach, we would have taken the same decision to defer to the partners' discretion, even if we were to revisit the choices. The evaluation unfortunately does not unveil the complexity of the local content and the contingent choices made. On the other hand, in the Delhi NCR iteration where we were working directly with the workers, there have been numerous instances where the platform was used to draw attention of employers to issues at their workplace, and led to quick impact. For example, see here and here and here for some recent examples.	dialogue", as against social protection for example where Gram Vaani has extensive experience. We have kept all the Shramik Vaani platforms active even without funding, and continue to experiment with new ways and new partners to create "social dialogue" in the labour space as well.	research papers ourselves, and we will continue to do so as we gain more experience of strategies to hold employers and governments accountable in the space of labour rights and working conditions.

Strengthen the action's monitoring system to measure factors that the platform influences directly and to enhance adaptive management	Not accepted Gram Vaani maintains an extensive set of indicators on a real-time dashboard for all its projects, and carefully reviews them both internally as well as with partners. In addition, we believe in maintaining close contact with both ours and the partner field teams which are crucial to create outreach and to bring attention to factors that might be impeding the project goals. This was done rigorously for all the Shramik Vaani projects. As the Foundation teams are aware, some partners were dropped during the course of the project and new partners were brought in, entirely as a result of this continuous monitoring. Gram Vaani took extensive steps of embedding our own team members into the partner organizations, to both assist with capacity building as well as to react quickly. We do not believe that any shortfall in the project can be attributed to a lack of monitoring on our part.	Extensive processes already exist for this.	NA
Consider the relevance of the IVR platform as opposed to an app in the medium-term	Accepted We already have an app that has seen more than 20K downloads, including from among users from the Shramik Vaani platforms. However, we also want to point out that a transition from feature phones to smartphones is a complex one. It largely depends upon affordability, capability, and need. Smartphone usage among low-income households is mostly restricted to young male people as of now, and further growth has saturated. Usage of smartphones among women remains low, the preferable	We have already built an app and are continuously improving it. We are also working on other innovations that can make it easier for	See (Khullar *et al,* 2021a) and (Khullar *et al,* 2021b) for some examples of improving ease of use through artificial intelligence / machine learning approaches with

	device for them being simple feature phones. While companies like Google and Reliance Jio do have plans to introduce lower cost smartphones, socio-cultural barriers will also continue to persist. See (Karusala *et al*, 2019) for such complexities that demand careful navigation of technology use by women.	users to interact on apps using voice.	speech technologies.
Establish 'listener clubs' to ease access to phones and stimulate learning among listeners	Not accepted We work with women Self Help Groups extensively in the state of Bihar, in partnership with the Government of Bihar. They indeed serve as listener clubs, as the evaluation suggests, to inform women about the communication platform and demonstrate its use, including its use in a group format. However, this setup is not feasible in the space of industrial sector workers. Faced with a busy and demanding work schedule, workers hardly have access to open physical spaces where they can associate on a routine basis. The field teams do use venues such as tea shops and restaurants, where men do often congregate, but access to women is hard. This is also a reason why even the partners have faced challenges in building their ground presence among women workers. A technology platform cannot bridge this gap, since the platform itself is reliant upon the ground presence to build its own traction. However, with appropriate seeding, the communication platform can indeed become a virtual community that serves as a safe space for women to convene and discuss issues, as several Gram Vaani platforms have managed to do, e.g. see (Seth, 2020b) for such examples.	This was explained to the evaluation team as an unviable strategy in the Shramik Vaani context	NA

Offer an extended training program, for partners who host the platform, on the use of the technology and how to identify content and shape messages	Partially accepted It goes without saying that capacity building of the partners to use the platforms was a key goal of the Shramik Vaani initiative. Different partners moved at different rates on this learning curve. Gram Vaani even embedded its own team members within the partner organizations to facilitate the process. Perhaps a standardized training programme could have been useful, although given the widely different capacities of the partners, it remains questionable how successful this could have been beyond the need-based evolutionary and responsive participatory methods adopted by us.	We have built extensive training modules as part of another project, which will also be applicable to the Shramik Vaani context	Based on funding availability, we hope to transfer this material suitably to the Shramik Vaani context.
Ensure that partners, who host the platform, have sufficiently qualified human resources available	Accepted This we feel is the key learning that has emerged from the Shramik Vaani initiative. Had we from the outset critically examined each partner's internal capability, communicated it to them, and in consultation evolved a strategy to address the gaps, the outcomes could have been stronger. What seems to have happened in practice, although with the best of intentions and a lot of hard work from everybody, was trying to make the best out of whatever was available. We definitely have become more objective in our approach now and have developed checklists for conducting such an objective assessment.	We will improve the checklists we are developing to make it easier for partners to assess their readiness to incorporate technology in their operations.	We will put a set of resources together in the next few months to conduct such assessments, and publicize them on our website and through our conversations with partners.