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INDIA DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

The best reads on development

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Co-founder and Director, IDR

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Co-founder and CEO, IDR

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We have created two parallel sectors, and their distinct approaches towards development are resulting in band-aid solutions to serious social problems.

Amitabh Behar is the CEO of Oxfam India. He is a civil society leader and the former executive director of National Foundation for India. He is recognised for his work on governance, accountability, social and economic equality, and citizen participation. He also chairs the boards of Amnesty International India, Navsarjan, and Yuva.

In this conversation he talks about how civil society in India has changed, what the implications of those changes are, and what the future looks like.

You have spoken about how there seem to be principle differences between the older civil society and the one we see today; could you tell us more about what this looks like, and what its implications are?

This is a moment of dramatic and quick changes. One change that has serious implications on the entire development community is the creation of two parallel sectors: one represented by older nonprofits (including social movements and mass organisations) and the other, by newer ones, located more in the market (in terms of the principles underlying their world view) and in technology spaces. And the difference between them is one based on principles, in the way in which they approach development—a systemic, integrated social science approach versus a techno-managerial approach.

The older nonprofits look at society through a lens of the systems at play, the complexity of it, the interdependency of the various factors involved. Whereas with the new age nonprofits, we are seeing an attempt to have technical and management solutions to very complex social questions. This really is the primary and most critical fault line. And it's this shift that is playing out in multiple ways.

"One change that has serious implications on the entire development community is the creation of two parallel sectors: one represented by older nonprofits, and the other, by newer ones."

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When you look at the world through a techno-managerial lens, the real world, which exists in all its complexity, gets left behind. You end up creating a bubble where technical solutions to complex problems seem possible. And the conversation—be it about solutions or about innovation—remains limited within that bubble. Those bubbles get celebrated and more investments follow into the bubble making it bigger, till it bursts, and in the meanwhile, move on to creating other new bubbles.

So, you look at a set of problems that are 'solve-able' and within your domain—and you spend all your money, attention, and resources there. It is an almost artificial separation of the problem from its surroundings, systems, and location where it is embedded. And you are not engaging with the larger problems of the system/society.

"When you look at the world through a techno-managerial lens, the real world, which exists in all its complexity, gets left behind."

For example, you may be innovating on sanitary napkins, and reducing their unit cost from four rupees to two. But while doing so, you may not be addressing something like how caste or social norms may impact usage. It's not that innovating on sanitary napkins is not important, but focusing on that alone not only leaves out the larger problems, it also makes us completely unable to deal with the impact of politics and economics on social issues; which leads to bursts of apparent success, but soon it becomes business as usual without any serious change. This approach essentially creates band-aid solutions; resolving at best, the manifestations of poverty, the manifestations of issues of inequality, but not the causes.

At the end of the day, I think what we need to ask ourselves is, 'What is the human project?' If the human project is about food and shelter then the techno-managerial approach might reach there. But I believe it is about dignity and justice, and that requires a wider and more integrated world view. History has taught us that food and shelter have never ended misery, slavery, exploitation, un-freedoms and indignity.

Why do you think we are seeing this very distinct shift towards a techno-managerial approach?

Today's decision makers—be they funders, nonprofit leaders, or government officials—look markedly different from those of the 1950s and 60s. Consider the profile of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) cadre—the most important people in our country in terms of policy. Forty years ago, most of them had a liberal education, where the appreciation of art and cinema, and social responsibility were viewed as necessary dimensions in the pursuit of knowledge.

This is in contrast to the officers in the last 20 odd years. A very large number of these civil servants now comes from the IITs and other engineering courses, and have been schooled in technology or management. The current public narrative even privileges this education, and builds an arrogance of markets and technology as answers for all issues, including unfortunately, our quest for knowledge.

"Even the social sector and in particular, philanthropies are now increasingly being run by management and technology-driven professionals."

These officers with very limited understanding of history, sociology, caste or gender, do not even use these frames to understand the problems, and often think they know how to solve development problems as seen through a technical lens. This shift is visible in all sectors, surprisingly even the social sector and in particular, philanthropies are now increasingly being run by management and technology driven professionals. There is therefore a large shift in the activities that are getting funded, driven entirely by the interests of the newer decision makers. New donors and policy makers are excited about the new nonprofits—the ones that develop techno-managerial solutions because they understand it and believe in it. And they often do not have the patience or even the ability to understand the old systemic way of approaching problems.

As a result of this fundamental shift, the earlier generation of nonprofits are struggling because they lack resources and are unable to communicate to a new set of decision makers who don't understand their language of social justice and systems change.

"Had we continued to invest in the old civil society in a bigger way, the right wing upsurge that the country is seeing today could have been challenged."

Many of our colleagues from the 1970s and 80s were driven by ideas of change and of human dignity. The two fundamental things that old civil society did was to challenge power and create new ideas for transformational change. Both these primary roles are now neglected, and today when something like vandalism and vigilantism happens against Padmavati (and all other kinds of rights violations including lynching of Muslims in the name of cows), who will stand up and say this is unacceptable? The older guard would probably have, but we as a sector have weakened them.

I believe that had we continued to invest in the old civil society in a bigger way, the right wing upsurge that the country is seeing today could have been challenged. There is a principal political contradiction between civil society and the ethos of any right wing force. And we have contributed to this shift where our ability to protect and nurture the biggest wins of the last two centuries—namely, freedoms, rights, and human dignity—is far weaker, while we think in a bubble of 'solving and fixing social problems'. People's ability to think critically and ask these fundamental questions is shrinking.

What does the future look like, for our sector and country?

It's not all gloomy; there is reason to be optimistic. The optimist in me says that we are on the verge of people recognising that this thinking cannot last. If history is any guide, in the last two hundred years whenever the madness or exploitation has reached these levels, there has been serious change. I am fairly confident that alternatives will emerge and they will gain traction. As Martin Luther King famously said "The arc of history is long but bends towards justice". ∎

Research, for whom?

Photo Credit - Rachita Vora

"Go to the people, live among them, love them, learn from them, begin with what they know, build upon what they have." Imagine the power of problem solving in India, if this were our ethos for research.

Dr Abhay Bang
Founding Director, SEARCH

Looking back at some 30 years of working in the social sector, I believe that the most important milestone in my journey was the point when I started recognising the importance of research in development.

As a freshly minted doctor in the late 1970s, I was so socially oriented that I did not take research seriously. When Rani [Dr Rani Bang] and I started working in the villages of Wardha district, in 1977, we had a lot of beautiful, innocent ideas: we thought we would help people in the villages, that people would change, and villages would change, too.

But we soon realised—after sincere attempts at bringing about change through medical care as well as through farmer and labour movements—that we could only achieve limited results through these

approaches. For example, although our work with landless agricultural labourers was aimed at organising them to demand a fair deal from the Employment Guarantee Scheme, we were unable to negotiate a substantial increase in their wages. That's when I decided to investigate further into why this was so.

The importance of research

When I inquired with the relevant government department, I found that the Minimum Wage Act had fixed the daily minimum wage for agricultural labourers at INR 4, a figure usually determined by the money required to meet a person's daily calorific needs. I was curious to know how the committee deciding the minimum wage had arrived at this figure.

Further investigation revealed that the

committee had worked out this figure by assuming the average adult's calorie requirement at 1,800 calories. When I asked the committee chairman, VS Page, how he had calculated the 1,800 calorie requirement, he replied that his diabetologist had advised him to restrict his diet to 1,800 calories. In other words, the committee had committed a gross scientific blunder by applying a diabetic's calorie requirement to that of a landless labourer who does hard physical labour for eight hours daily!

So, I looked at the Indian Council of Medical Research calorie recommendation, which was 3,900 and 3,000 calories, respectively, for men and women who do hard labour. I collected all this data, identified around 20 errors—some on the economics side, others on the social side—in the committee's report, and then calculated the minimum wage required. It worked out to INR 12.

"The power of research is greater than that of *seva* and *sangharsh*. The results are always several times more than the effort."

Within a year of the research getting published, and publicised by media and labour unions, the Maharashtra government raised the minimum wage to INR 12. This benefited 6 million labourers in the state—many, many times more than what we could have hoped to achieve if we had not adopted a research-based approach to the problem.

That's when I realised that the power of research is greater than the power of *seva* and *sangharsh*. The results are always several times more than the effort. Knowledge-based, evidence-based arguments have greater impact. That is why I would encourage more and more people in the social sector to adopt 'thinking action' rather than just action.

Research, for whom?

In 1986, soon after we moved to Gadchiroli, Rani and I learnt another important aspect of using research and data to address social problems. Back then we used to give some time to the district hospital, where we once came across a 10-year-old girl whose symptoms led the medical officer to believe that she had heart disease. I suspected that she had sickle-cell disease, a disease that had not been reported from that district until then. Tests established that she did indeed suffer from sickle cell disease.

We at SEARCH then organised a district sample survey—people came forward to give us a drop of blood for the survey—which revealed that there were nearly 6,000

sickle-cell patients in the district, and nearly 100,000 had the sickle-cell gene. We presented this finding to the health minister, who praised our work, and announced that the government would set up a tribal medical research centre in Gadchiroli. Eventually, though, the centre was set up in Pune (where there are no tribals) because researchers and doctors did not want to come to Gadchiroli.

Disappointed, we approached the tribal leaders in the villages and requested them to put some pressure on the government to bring the centre to Gadchiroli. Their response took us unawares: "Doctor, this is your disease, not ours," they said. "Did we ever tell you that we need help for this?" they gave us a drop of blood for the survey out of respect for us, but they would do no more; they were neither worried about the sickle-cell disease nor did they want to do anything about it.

"We had done so much work, earned recognition, but solved nobody's problem."

We were faced with a crisis following that experience: we had done so much work, earned recognition, but solved nobody's problem. It made me ask myself: if people did not need the research, why did I do it? And I realised that I was actually gratifying my own intellectual curiosity. In hindsight, I have the courage to say that we practically used people as guinea pigs.

That's when I realised that, unfortunately, researchers often do research not for the community, but for their own peers. If you are an educated person working in places like this, even as you work with the people, your target audience—knowingly or unknowingly—is still your peers. Subconsciously, you are thinking, "What will I publish? What will I present at the conference? What would other nonprofits or doctors like to hear?"

Therefore, your stay here and your interactions with people merely become means to collect data as you try to write something or do something that your peers will appreciate. This attitude often misleads us.

"Subconsciously, you are thinking: What will I publish? What will I present at the conference?"

Following the sickle-cell disease experience, Rani and I took a formal decision in 1988 that we would not do any research that did not address the needs of the people. Ever since, this approach has become almost a religion at SEARCH—it is a fundamental value choice for us that what we are doing here must address the people's need and not our need.

"Most of the research at SEARCH is for the people and with the people. My dream is to get to a point where we see research by the people."

Photo Credit - Rachita Vora

Putting people at the heart of research

Just as the formal medical process is to ask a patient, "What is troubling you?" to understand their history, at SEARCH our process of trying to form a diagnosis on a community starts by asking the community, "What are your health problems and needs?" Partly because of our medical training and research background, we have unknowingly, but successfully, applied this approach in the social sector also.

Every time we set out to do something new, we always ask ourselves: "Do the people of Gadchiroli need this?"

Then we organise formal processes to get to know what people need. For example, we hold an annual tribal health assembly for representatives from various tribal villages in Gadchiroli to hear from them what their health problems and needs are. This has helped us understand health priorities from the communities themselves rather than depend on distant external sources. The next step is to verify what people said by way of hard research data.

The importance of doing research 'with' the people

There are essentially three ways in which to conduct research:

1. Research *on* the people:

What we did with the sickle-cell disease study is an example of this. Yes, you take informed consent from the people, but these are just precautionary measures; there is no power in the hands of the patients. You get data on the people, but the intellectual property as well as the power to interpret and publish is with you, for you.

2. Research *for* the people:

This is better than the first approach. The research seeks to understand a genuine problem faced by the people, and to solve it, but neither do they really understand what you are doing nor do they have a say or role in it.

3. Research *with* the people:

This approach shares power with the people. When people provide you with questions, or questions emerge through your observations and dialogue with the people, you involve people in collecting the data, report your finding to them, and then develop a solution that involves people. It enables them, it serves them.

Our home-based newborn care (HBNC) solution to address the issue of high newborn and infant mortality in Gadchiroli is an example of this approach. Knowledge was simplified and given in the hands of the village worker. And they proved that we can reduce newborn and infant mortality without having a trained pediatrician in the community.

"Ultimately you should ensure that the solution is transferred to the hands of the people."

Twenty years since we completed the HBNC trial in 1998, the programme still continues because the people had a need, and we empowered them to address that need. I would like to call it research with the people, in which people are our partners in the process. While our contribution is more intellectual in nature, their

contribution is different, but no less important—they are offering their lives, their newborns, and they are learning to provide the care. Their interest is that they want their newborns, to receive care. They don't care how much the infant mortality rate has decreased. When we put up a board in the village saying there have been no newborn deaths in a year, they know that their contribution to the partnership has paid off.

Most of the research at SEARCH is for the people and with the people. This culture of research for problem-solving can be powerful, but only if you follow certain ethics and ask the people. Ultimately you should ensure that the solution is transferred to the hands of the people.

My dream is to get to a point where we see research by the people. When people are able to think like researchers, they will ask questions and inquire more. People already ask why and how to solve it, but they don't use advanced scientific methods to solve these problems. But I foresee a time when ordinary people will also think in terms of research—and that will lead to research by the people. And when research by people happens, imagine the power of problem-solving in India.∎
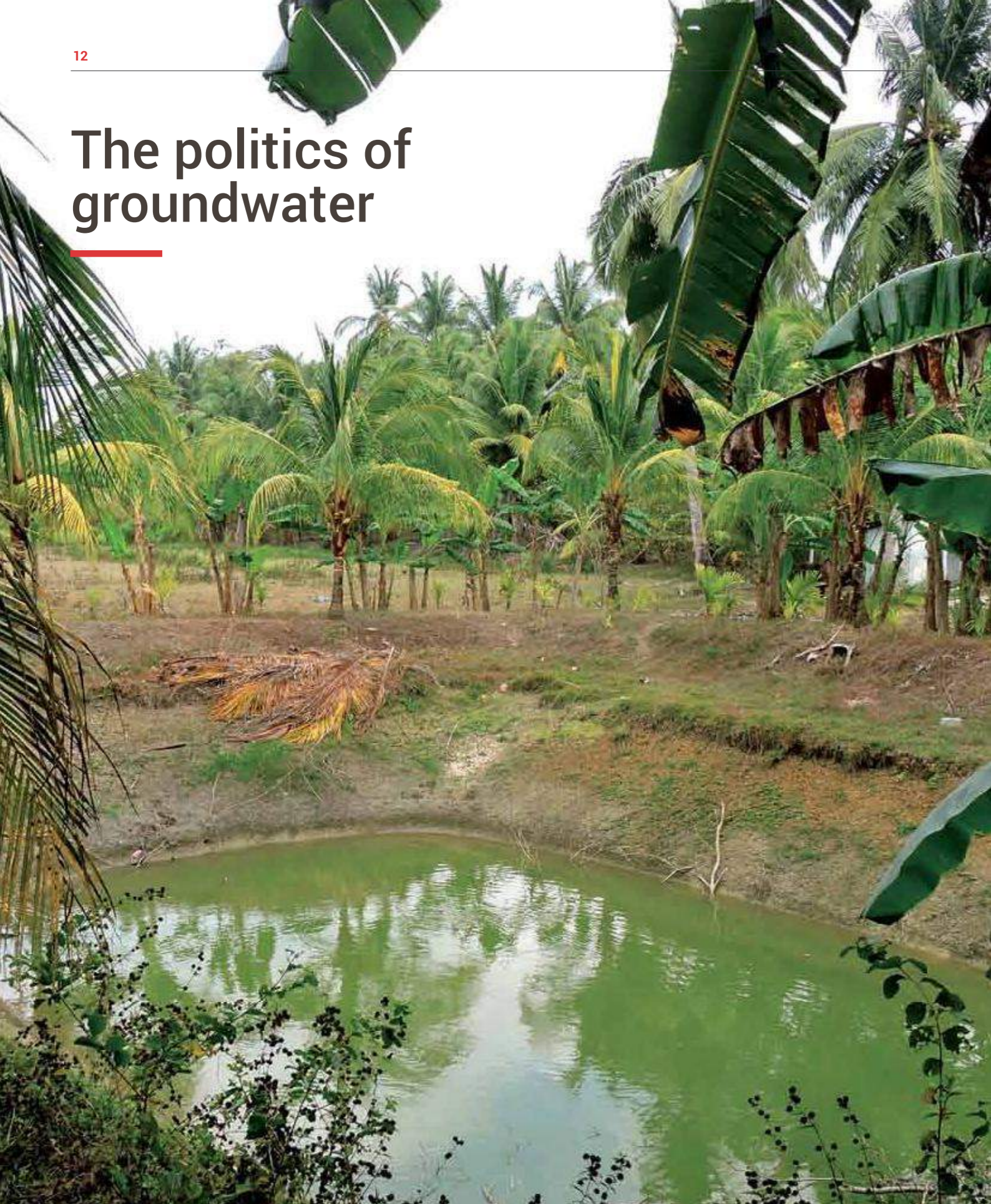
The politics of groundwater

Photo Credit - Wikimedia Commons

Dr Himanshu Kulkarni
Executive Director and Secretary, ACWADAM

Uma Aslekar
Senior Scientist, ACWADAM

In order to make access to water adequate and equitable, we must shift our focus from water sources to water resources. Both science, and community participation and cooperation, are key to addressing our water woes.

A growing demand for water implies the need for an improved understanding of our resources, and the ability to manage that demand in an equitable and sustainable way.

Wells, not dams, have been the temples of modern India

India is a groundwater economy. At 260 cubic km per year, our country is the highest user of groundwater in the world—we use 25 percent of all groundwater extracted globally, ahead of USA and China.

When we think of water however, our brains have been programmed to think of large dams and rivers, and not wells. This, despite the fact that India has at least four crore irrigation wells and millions of farmers who use well water in agriculture.

India was not the highest extractor of groundwater in the 1960s and 70s; the Green Revolution changed that. At independence the share of groundwater in agriculture was 35 percent; today it is a startling 70 percent.

Looking at water as a common pool resource

People tend to think of groundwater only through an agriculture or urban water supply lens. This however, is just a supply-side perspective that lacks an understanding of what the resource is, and what we need to do to ensure better use of it.

"We need to think of groundwater as a common pool resource; the challenge however, is that this common pool resource is almost invisible."

We need to think of groundwater as a common pool resource; the challenge however, is that this common pool resource is almost invisible.

In villages, the perception often is, "This is my land and hence the water below it is my water." But the question we've been asking communities to think about is, "How can you own the water below your land, when the water in your well has come from underneath someone else's land, and the water from under your land is naturally going to flow underneath your other neighbours' lands?" Once this has been explicitly stated and explained, people are quick to understand it, especially if you use science derived from data that has been collected by communities themselves.

But while the science is about hydrogeology and the mapping of water sources, the more important aspect is the application of this science—which is effective only if it involves bringing the resource (aquifers), communities, and villages together in the processes and solutions— what we call Participatory Ground Water Management (PGWM).

Thinking about water as a resource and not just a source

The conventional thinking is that check dams—which are essentially percolation tanks—will collect water that will percolate and recharge the groundwater. A common misconception among both the communities as well as organisations working in watershed management is that it is the wells that are being recharged.

"Wells are not the resource; aquifers are the resource."

But wells are only the sources of water and a mechanism to access water and distribute it according to needs and often, demand. Wells are not the resource; aquifers are the resource. (Aquifers are underground layers of porous and permeable rock capable of storing groundwater and transmitting it to wells and springs.)

If you can identify your aquifer, then you know precisely where to put your recharge structure (or, check dam). So now, instead of four checkdams that you would place in areas where 'water collects', you could make do with two accurately positioned check dams where the aquifers are, thereby reducing costs by half, while also ensuring optimal recharge.

Usually, once the watershed programme is implemented, no one cares about what happens to the water in the aquifer. Farmers tend to dig deeper, and make larger wells with the presumption that unlimited water is now available for the taking. Such actions are not necessarily sustainable.

It is therefore important to move the focus from wells

> **"The science of groundwater is not only about hydrology; it's sociology, psychology, politics, economics and ecology as well."**

(sources) to aquifers (resources). By changing this lens, the focus then shifts from merely looking at what is going in and coming out to a variety of aspects: how do you balance livelihoods and ecosystem needs, or what happens to economic returns from groundwater, and how does the drinking water security get affected when an aquifer depletes.

Communities need to have this knowledge

Having understood the theory and implications behind aquifers and ground water, communities and villages have been keen on getting trained in these areas. Imparting these key hydrogeological skills to nonprofits and rural practitioners is therefore key to improving decentralised water management in India.

Over the last 20 years, we at ACWADAM have trained para workers within communities. These individuals are now able to intelligently design the watersheds, talk to their communities, monitor progress, and ensure better decision-making and management of groundwater.

As a result, communities are more aware of the uses of check dams—why they are built in specific locations, what their purpose is, and what that will mean for the village.

Panchayats are also now asking for knowledge and help. They are even willing to pay for the costs incurred, which for us signals just how important this is to the village as a whole.

The decisions on water should rest with the people

90 percent of rural India's drinking water comes from groundwater and 75 percent of agriculture is groundwater-based. In urban India, 50 percent of the water supply is groundwater-based.

Given this high dependence on groundwater, it is extremely important that we bring democratic processes to groundwater management. When we share our hydrogeology results with communities, we at ACWADAM don't influence the decisions, we don't tell them what to do.

We share the results—this is saline and is a larger aquifer; this other one has fresh water and gets used faster. And we give them 'protocols'—a menu of possible options to decide upon. We tell the villagers that these are the limitations, and these are the possibilities.

This information serves as a starting point for a dialogue. The community then decides what they should do, and what they should avoid.

When communities collect data and you derive knowledge from that data, they will trust the data. And they are more likely to change their behaviour and practices.

> **"When you move the decision-making and power to the people themselves, change is not as difficult as we make it out to be."**

It also then becomes change that is based on scientifically-informed decisions; there is seldom total failure from such decisions.

Since it's about water, there are always power dynamics at play

The science of groundwater is not only about hydrology; it's sociology, psychology, politics, economics, and

ecology as well. The power dynamics around sharing are about people as well as the stakes involved—who has how much stake in what. The landless have more stake in ecology, the large farmers have a stake in economics, the small marginal farmers in sociology.

The first step towards getting people to even think about sharing is to have them cooperate in some formal-informal capacity. Unless people and communities cooperate, you can't protect the resource, you can't make it sustainable.

It therefore needs good governance

Surface water is typically characterised by conflict—who's getting what water, how much, where is it coming from, do we want to bring it from further and further away. Being above ground and visible, people are quick to fight over it!

With groundwater there is limited conflict; instead, people compete with each other because one can compete endlessly over invisible resources; you can go deeper, and you can have as many water sources as you want on your land.

Our social narratives, infact, are built around groundwater. The woman of the house who manages drinking water and her husband who handles agriculture are often managing water from two different sources for two different activities. Often, these sources tap the same aquifer. Hence, the couple are in tacit competition without being aware that they are; both their needs are met by the same underlying aquifer. So, if you use up too much water for agriculture, then drinking water is a problem, and scarcity results. How do you tackle this? All of this therefore needs good governance and good management. And governance itself is based on science, participation management, and institutions in the village.

The panchayat, which usually makes these decisions, is therefore critical to the success of this approach. We don't go and work in an area unless we have formal permission from the panchayat.

This approach needs more supporters

Participatory groundwater management needs more support. Corporates often say that it is high-hanging fruit —since it is dependent on the annual rain-cycle, it takes a year for the research/hydro-geological study, and only then can any of the actual work start on building check dams or changing usage patterns. The results take time to 'show'.

Moreover, results are usually in the form of aggregated small changes—drinking water security, improved crop yields and so on—and given the invisible nature of the resource itself, these visible changes are often difficult to perceive. However, such changes are longer-lasting, making the effort sustainable and efficient.

It is much easier to invest in the digging of bore wells and building of tanks. But if we as a nation want to ensure that the access to water is adequate, equitable, and sustainable, we must look at both science and community participation for answers, rather than building more and more infrastructure in pursuit of visibility. This shift in perception will go a long way in changing the way we look at groundwater in India. ∎
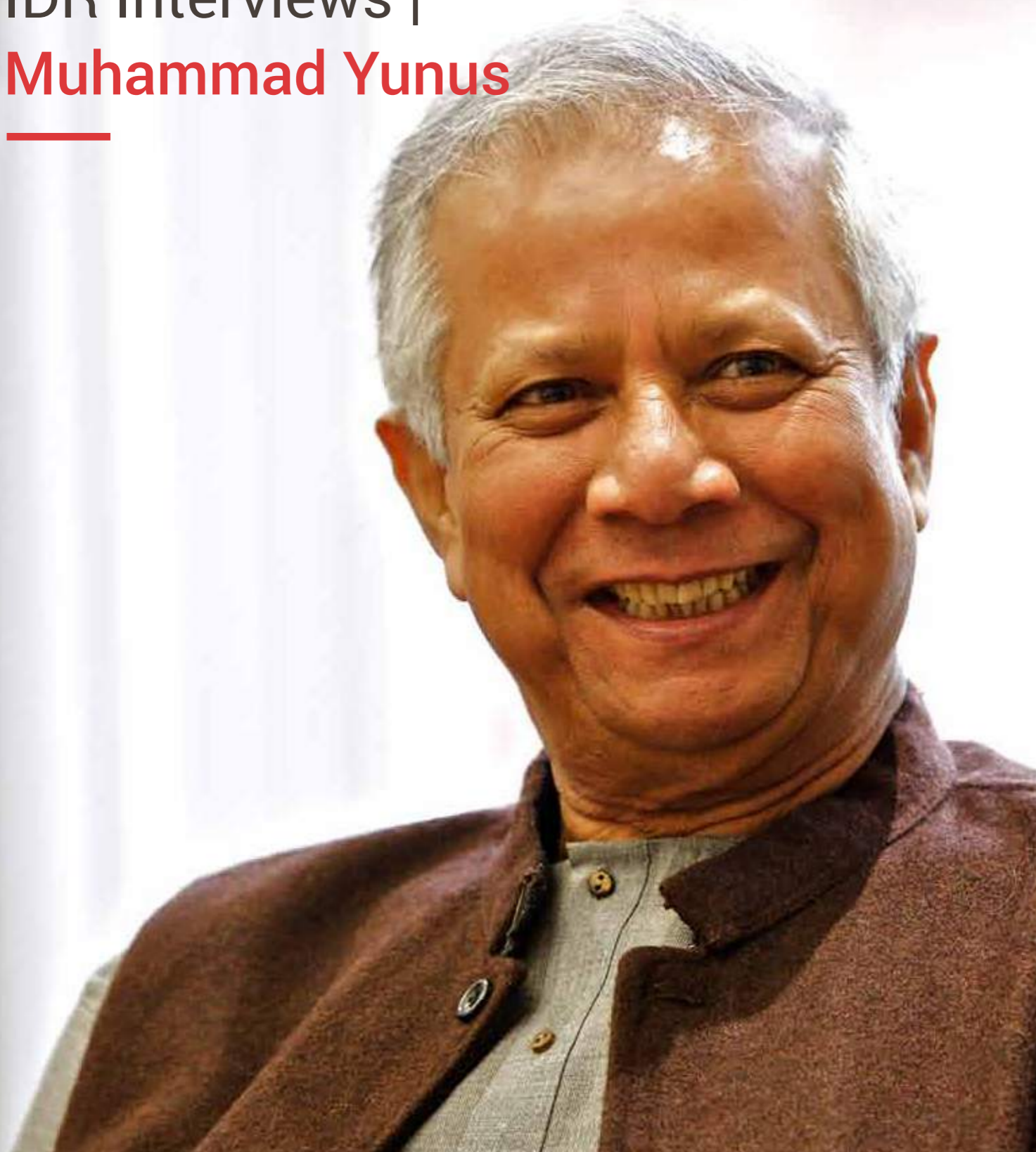
IDR Interviews |
Muhammad Yunus

Photo Credit - Wikimedia Commons

Devanshi Vaid
Co-founder and Director, IDR

Smarinita Shetty
Co-founder and CEO, IDR

Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus talks about what it will take to create a just and more equal world, and the power of individuals to bring about this change.

Banker, economist, and humanitarian, Muhammad Yunus established the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, fueled by the belief that credit is a fundamental human right. Having pioneered the concept of microfinance in 1983, he then went on to set up Yunus Social Business in 2011 to foster entrepreneurship, especially among the young.

In this interview with IDR, Professor Yunus discusses the very definition of success, the power of technology, the role of governments, and most importantly, imagining the impossible.

You believe that we must move towards a world of three zeroes—zero poverty, zero unemployment, and zero net carbon emissions. What will it take to make these three zeroes happen?

In my opinion, a world of three zeroes starts with young people. In order for them to be successful, we have to challenge the fundamentals on which the economic system as we know it is built, and then redesign it.

For example, how do we interpret 'human being' in our economic system? Because that assumption is what we build the whole structure on. Right now, we have created an image of an economic human. This economic human is defined as someone who is driven by self-interest. And accordingly, we have built the system based on this. We are trained in school, at home, in the workplace, to make money. So, we keep making money, and that's how we define success. This is how we have pushed good human beings into limited people who only run after money.

I believe that this fundamental image of an economic human is wrong. There is a gap between 'real human' and 'economic human'. And who is this 'real human'? There is one basic difference—you say they are selfish, I say they are both selfish and selfless. And when you redefine the image like that, then suddenly the whole

structure becomes different.

This is why young people are so important

I have a lot of faith in the young for a simple reason: 'young' means that their minds are still fresh; so their mind space is not occupied—it is still up for lining up with fresh ideas, and we don't know what they will be. What we are trying to do, is give them different options to choose from.

That's why we focus on the universities. When universities teach courses on social business, the youth become aware that this kind of a business can exist. They begin to understand that selflessness can go hand in hand with business, and that if you want to change the world, this is the way to do it.

And just like that they have been given an option, which is something the present system does not allow for. They now get to decide. They will grow up with this new idea of a human being, and the possibility of a new economic system, and make it happen.

Understand the power of technology and use it well

Technology is moving in such a way, that most impossible things have become possible. Today I tell the young people—look, you have Aladdin's lamp in your hand. Literally, you can take your phone, touch it, and a digital genie comes out and asks what they can do for you. And you just have to say it—you want a song, you want to find a restaurant—any of these big or small things can be done in an instant. I tell them, ask your genie for big things, giant things, and to not limit yourself to daily little needs.

So, I tell them to be aware of the power that they are holding, of the power in their gadgets. Once they become aware of the power they have, then they can start to think about how they want to use it. And it's important that they use the power of technology to the fullest.

To use it to the fullest, they have to imagine what they want. If you don't imagine, you don't know what to ask for—you will say okay, I want my breakfast, and then that's what you get—you could have brought the wealth

"You need to imagine the impossible. Imagination is what changes things. It is the starting point. If we imagine, only then it will happen. If we don't imagine it, there is no way it will happen."

of the whole world to you, but you didn't ask for it, you just said, give me breakfast.

You need to imagine the impossible

Imagination is what changes things. It is the starting point. If we imagine, only then it will happen. If we don't imagine it, there is no way it will happen.

That is why science fiction is so important. Science fiction is all imagination. All kinds of silly, funny things— we laugh at them. They seem so impossible that we don't pay attention to them. But science fiction drives technology. What we see today was in movie scripts many years ago. And today, it's our reality.

That's why I ask—why don't we have social fiction? We are so good at writing science fiction, why don't we try social fiction—bold ideas about human beings living together in a completely different way. Let us imagine the things we think are impossible. The fact that we imagine it, write it down, that will make it happen. Someone will watch it and say, yes we can do that, it is possible.

"We pretend as if society is fixed. We keep saying that this is the way things are."

But we don't write social fiction. We pretend as if society is fixed. We keep saying that this is the way things are. But it doesn't have to be. It's the way things are because that's what it's been traditionally. What if we changed it? What if we said, this is not the way we live, we have no markets, we don't have currency, we have something else altogether. And suddenly things become interesting. Because fiction created something and now it became reality.

So, that's the power—of imagination, of youth, of technology. And I say, in the transformation of the world, social business is that power. Once you introduce the idea of human beings being selfless and selfish, there is so much power, and that power brings with it the capacity to make change happen. If you insist on looking at money alone, no matter how you try, you will not get there.

And we need to change things. If we don't, and we continue to go down this path, things will get worse until we have destroyed the planet. So, before we get to that point, let's be aware, let's look at ourselves and see what we can do.

And as I always say, you cannot go to a new destination with old roads. You have to build new roads to get to the new destination. So, don't cling to the old roads, don't try to tinker with them, to fix them, they cannot and will not take us to the new destination.

You're a big proponent of companies driving some of this change. What's the role you see them playing, especially in a country like India?

When I look at companies, I see them not as entities, but as people. After all, companies are made up of people— people who run them, people who own them. If we could somehow talk to these people, and show them that they have this combination of selfishness and selflessness in themselves, then they too would question their work. They would wonder why they are only fulfilling the dollar (selfish) part of themselves and not the global (selfless) part. And once they start thinking like that, they begin thinking about how their businesses can be both, dollar and world oriented.

"You cannot go to a new destination with old roads."

These people within companies, I see them as allies. And when they begin acting on the selfless parts of themselves, other companies too will look at them and want to replicate what they are doing.

And governments?

Governments are very important because they can level the playing ground. They can remove hurdles, inspire people, and make space for the real power and capacity that is within each person for change. Human beings have unlimited creative opportunity, and it's the government's job to unleash that.

It doesn't take everybody to change the world, one person is enough. It takes one person to see things differently, open the door, and show people that there is another way. Microfinance is an example of seeing things differently, as is technology. Technology is not something we have to hold a big rally for, with a million people getting together. One person does it their way, it works, and just like that everybody else has it a little easier.

And that's the government's job—to make it possible for that one person who sees things differently to open the door for others. We elect the government and we give them power to facilitate our ideas, and to do the things that we cannot do individually. We want to reach a destination, and we ask that they build the roads to get us there.

"It doesn't take everybody to change the world, one person is enough."

What would you like India to do?

When it comes to India, the financial system is designed in the wrong manner, as it is in other countries. If you design it right, everybody will have access to financial

services, and they can be empowered.

How do you know if you are doing the financial system right? It's very simple. Do you have loan sharks? Do you have pawn shops? Do you have people borrowing money from friends? This shows a lack of access to the system. If the system exists, these alternatives wouldn't. The system would make it much easier for people to do business on their own terms, without being dependent on anybody.

The other thing that the government can do is to create a separate banking setup that takes care of the unbanked people, but do it as a social business. Do it with a lens of being selfless, not because you can make yourself rich, but because you want to solve problems.

"If you design it right, everybody will have access to financial services."

Imagine this: Any license the government gives, is a social business license. A license is a very powerful thing—it means you can make billions of dollars from it. I'm saying, that the moment the government issues any license, any privilege, they should make a condition—you have to build a social business of certain size in order to qualify for this license. Essentially, any license, that any government gives should be a social business license. If businesses want to compete with that, let them. Because essentially, we did not elect governments to make other people rich. We gave them power so they could help us. And what they have done is, they've used our power to make somebody else a super power. If they insist that any license or privilege that they give be used for a social business, we will see change. We'll be on our way to building a new society, a new world. ■

Humour | Jargon-ing your way through life

jargon¹
/'dʒɑːg(ə)n/

noun

special words or expressions used by a profession that are difficult to understand, sound unbelievably pretentious, and will most definitely be met with eye rolls.

synonyms: technical language, specialised language, lingo, parlance, babble, mumbo jumbo.

"Deepak kept using jargon in his presentation to compensate for being underprepared."
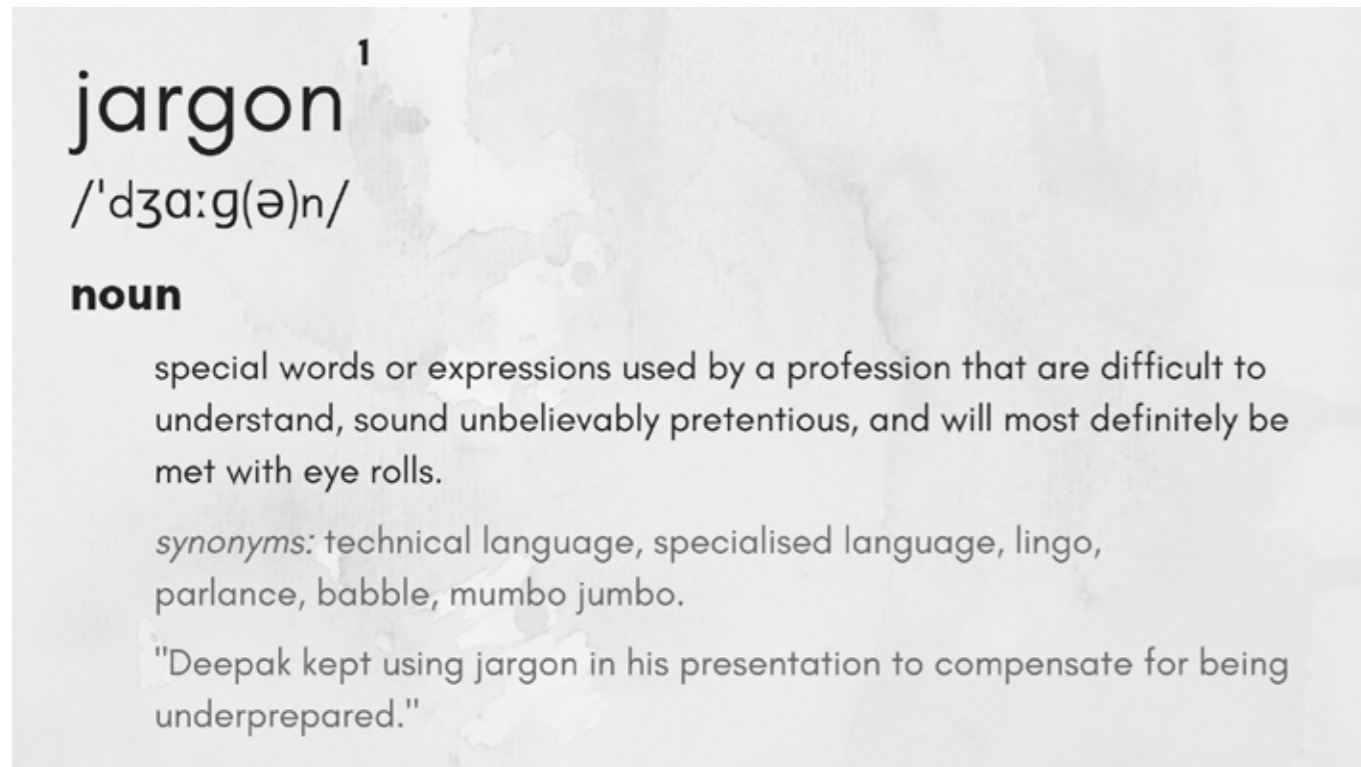
Photo Credit - IDR

Jargon often gets a bad reputation. However, using the right jargon (or meaningless catch phrase) can help you navigate the minefield of conversations and situations that make up the development sector.

Akhil Paliath
Programme Manager,
Central Square Foundation

1. Situation:

Bunty Uncle has once again cornered you in the buffet line, and instead of savouring the *gulaab jamuns* you have to deal with the dreaded, "So *beta*, what are you doing these days?" question. Now in the past, you may have been tempted to try and simplify your job and say something like, "I work for a nonprofit".

That would be a BIG mistake as you are then likely to spend the next 30 minutes listening to Bunty Uncle's own vast experience with this. For example, the recent contribution to the *gaushala* built by the neighbour's guruji's *ashram* support group (surely, you've heard of it?).

What you should do instead:

With a straight face and constant eye contact, deliver the most incomprehensible version of your job description as possible. The aim is to be completely confusing, yet distinctly important sounding. Much like the privacy settings on your Facebook page.

The more jargon you use the better. For example, instead of working for a vocational training organisation you now 'facilitate multi-faceted skill acquisition that delivers enhanced economic potential'.

If after this, anyone still has the temerity to say something along the lines of,

"What the hell does that mean?" shout things like 'ecosystem building' and 'systemic impact' till they leave you alone. Forever.

2. Situation:

You're half asleep in a meeting that you never wanted to attend but did because someone promised that there would be snacks.

Just then, your director asks for your opinion on your overpaid 'innovation' consultant's latest hairbrained idea. Now you could be honest and say this is the worst idea you've heard since the plot of Race 3 (seriously why would anyone cast Salman Khan in a movie about driving recklessly fast?)

But that would be poor form and not in keeping with the 'disruption' that your organisation is unleashing on the world.

What you should do instead:

Instead, try using phrases that sound insightful and thought-provoking but are actually vaguer than Batman's superpowers. My favorite two are 'I think we need to zoom out a little,' and, 'What is it that we are REALLY, really trying to solve for?' (you can add another 'really' for dramatic effect).

These phrases while utterly useless to the conversation, make you sound like a 'big-picture' person and really hard to disagree with (everyone cares about the big picture). They also deftly allow you to have avoided having an opinion and continue focusing on real problems, like where to get those free snacks from.

For best results, precede them with a long pause and some thoughtful chin stroking.

3. Situation:

Now everyone is already familiar with the (over)use of jargon for job applications and resumes. People are often tempted to try and fit as many words like 'scale' and 'sustainable' as the word limit and decency allow. Especially when they are applying for that cushy UN job that comes with hazard pay (it's only fair for having to live in a Lodhi Gardens bungalow with a mere five bedrooms). Unfortunately, these have become so overused that they are about as useful as family WhatsApp groups—and just as tiresome.

What you should do instead:

Like Rahul Gandhi's twitter game, it's time to give your jargon vocabulary a makeover. The trick is to remember that less is more. Instead of trying to compete with the number of toppings crammed onto a Gujarati pizza, focus on a few trending phrases that have the maximum...erm...impact (shut up). Top picks include things like 'outcome oriented', 'private sector engagement', and 'knowledge management'.

Using these makes you sound well-informed, trendy, and thus perfect for the many hours you will spend on panels talking about these latest revolutions (that is, when you're not on your well-deserved month-long home leave). ∎

10 ways to address lack of caste diversity in your organisation

Photo Credit - Wikimedia Commons

For India's social sector to become a truly equitable space for under-represented groups, development organisations must revisit traditional approaches to talent, culture, and language, among other things.

Benson Neethipudi
Independent consultant

In response to my recent article on the lack of Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi (DBA) representation in India's development sector—the very communities the sector seeks to serve—friends and colleagues from the sector reached out acknowledging the issue and requesting actionable recommendations that could change the status quo. So, after conversations with DBA peers well-versed in caste representation and inclusion dialogue, I have put together a list of ten things India's development sector could do to address its caste diversity shortcomings.

These recommendations are neither silver bullets to make the sector's caste problem disappear, nor are they quick fixes to increase DBA representation in organisations. Instead, they address the various dimensions that need to change to make the sector an equitable space for under-represented groups to participate and thrive in, and for developmental organisations to have sustained impact in the communities they serve.

1. Conduct diversity and inclusion audits

The first step in solving a problem is to formally acknowledge it. Annual diversity audits that include a caste question should be the first step towards acknowledging the under-representation in organisations. An analysis of diversity audits results will help organisations set diversity and inclusion goals, and over time will help them identify best practices. When diversity audit results find a place in an organisation's 'comms materials', it sends out a positive message to DBA development sector aspirants about the organisation and its efforts for representation.

2. Prioritise value fit over culture fit

'Culture' is often a product of social capital attained by upbringing in certain economic classes, attending certain academic institutions, and having access to certain networks. It can quickly become exclusionary. On the other hand, 'values' reflect an organisation's purpose and overarching goals more accurately.

'Culture fit' has risen to the top of the criterion list for hiring/not hiring a candidate in the development sector and elsewhere. But in the myriad intangibles that recruiters look for, culture fit has turned into a subconscious bias to exclude candidates who do not look or speak or have similar life experiences as the majority in an office. And this definition of culture fit disproportionately affects Dalits, Bahujans, Adivasis and other minority groups.

3. Remember, the talent pipeline is not the problem, your definition of it is

When Silicon Valley blamed its race problem on the 'pipeline', it was quickly pointed out how their recruitment efforts were limited to Bay Area and Ivy League schools and overlooked historically black colleges.

Likewise, if India's development sector wants to benefit from talent that is representative of its constituents, then it needs to look beyond St. Stephens, LSR, LSE, Harvard and the likes. While a government school student educated in the local language and graduating from a lesser known state college in Odisha may or may not be able to make 'sharp' powerpoint presentations, they will definitely be qualified to build a statistics model using SPSS, or conduct a data collection exercise with new mothers in rural Odisha.

Academic success and credentials from elite universities or programmes are not merely a function of intellect, but are instead a consequence of sustained access to quality education throughout one's life, along with the privilege of being in an environment that financially supports one's aspirations. People in the development sector should know this better than anyone else.

"'Culture' is often a product of social capital attained by upbringing in certain economic classes, attending certain academic institutions, and having access to certain networks."

4. Create mentorship, internship, and fellowship opportunities

College students and young professionals discover the development sector through internships and service fellowships. The mentorship they receive during these opportunities helps them gain tangible skills and prepares them to be future leaders.

Currently, even large organisations and think tanks that run well-funded, recognised service fellowships and internships have not adequately invested in making their programmes accessible to those who cannot afford unpaid internships and those who have not benefitted from issues pointed out in points two and three.

"Empowerment of DBA communities will not occur if representation turns into a headcount exercise."

5. Ensure representation in leadership

Empowerment of DBA communities will not occur if representation turns into a headcount exercise. Representation should extend to decision-making and resource allocation.

Programmes will not benefit from diversity unless the community voice finds a place in the sector leadership, and until the ownership of the processes is passed on to the communities for whom the programmes are implemented. This will require the current leadership to first acknowledge the power structures within the development sector.

A caste conscious leadership, who model diversity in their order of business, will set the tone for their organisations, and become examples for their sector peers.

"Culture fit has turned into a subconscious bias to exclude candidates who do not have similar life experiences as the majority in an office."

6. Foster an environment that supports and retains diverse talent

Fostering a work environment where DBA individuals feel welcome, supported, and empowered is critical to blunt the many ways in which caste plays out in the development sector.

I have lost count of the number of times I have heard references to caste pride and caste stereotypes passed off as jokes in professional settings. This stems from the normalisation of casteism in everyday affairs, and people not recognising the historical context for what passes off as casual banter. The burden of constantly giving the benefit of doubt to colleagues will negatively impact DBA

"Caste practices are deeply rooted into the Indian subconsciousness, and any effort to address caste in professional spaces needs to begin with introspection of caste in personal spaces."

professionals, making it hard to retain them in organisations. HR trainings that include caste sensitivity protocols, supplemented with honest conversations about caste at the workplace, and displays of social courage to confront casual casteism, will foster a work environment where DBA individuals will thrive and contribute to their organisation's mission.

7. Partner with grassroots organisations

If your interaction with communities is limited to collecting data, testing innovations or conducting interviews for research publications, then you remain takers, and become complicit in continuing the long tradition of taking away access, opportunity and dignity from those communities.

Partnering with grassroots organisations, supporting them, and utilising their wisdom, will result in local empowerment, community participation, and sustained impact in the communities where you work. The more you interact with grassroots organisations, the more you will incorporate their knowledge into your offerings; the more you collaborate with them, the more you will find opportunities to bring exemplar talent from the communities you engage with into your organisations.

8. Reorient the sector's language

"The average Dalit woman dies 14.6 years younger than women from higher castes."
- Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a report by UN Women.

Words can erase histories just like they can precisely depict lived realities. Annual reports, presentations, and impact studies should use words that accurately highlight the problems and the people that are affected by those problems.

Instead of using broad terms—marginalised, disadvantaged or underprivileged—to describe the population groups included in a study or in the programmes implemented by organisations, efforts must be made to recognise the population groups using the empowering terms they have chosen for themselves: Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi. This will go a long way into factoring historical context to understand social

problems and developing appropriate solutions.

9. Be proactive, creative, and action-oriented

The above diversity concerns and recommendations may not be new information to India's development sector. But it is important to acknowledge caste realities, discuss them, and then take the next steps to remove barriers that prevent your organisation from turning those conversations into tangible actions.

The development sector prides itself on innovating and arriving at solutions for some very complex social problems through pilots, trials, and controlled tests. Begin with some, all, or a variation of those approaches to address caste diversity in the sector and, maybe in 5-10 years, this article will become obsolete.

10. Make it personal

Caste practices are deeply rooted into the Indian subconsciousness, and any effort to address caste in professional spaces needs to begin with introspection of caste in personal spaces. Unlike in the professional, policies can't be mandated, monitored, or enforced in the personal. But it is the personal where change has to begin. If the kitchen at your home has two sets of tumblers—one for family and friends and a different set for others—then advocating caste representation in your organisation and participating in diversity audits will end up being performance art. Make it personal.

In India's context, when we talk about inequality and measures to reduce it, the conversation will remain incomplete and disingenuous without discussing caste. And for the development sector, which strives to reduce societal inequalities, conversations about the implication of caste in the communities we serve cannot be an afterthought.

It is therefore paramount that the development sector includes the voices of individuals with lived experiences into the solutions they are building for complex social challenges. ◼

With inputs from Christina Thomas Dhanaraj, Karthik Navayan, Mahendra Rokade, and Rahul Gaware.

More from IDR

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If we go in 'knowing' what the problem is, we are basically saying that only we can develop the solution as well. The people and communities, then, are reduced to being mere bystanders in the process; it's no surprise then that the solutions fail to address their needs or improve their lives.

Anshu Gupta, Goonj

"

We invest in people and their passion, and we encourage our network of associates to apply the same lens.

Nimesh Sumati, Caring Friends

"

It takes two to make non-programmatic investments become a reality in the nonprofit sector. While it is imperative for funders to engage their energies into funding factors that enrich sustainability and scalability initiatives, it is equally critical for nonprofits to communicate the importance of doing so.

Shridhar Venkat, The Akshaya Patra Foundation

To read more head over to www.idronline.org

Photo Credit - Charlotte Anderson

Look east.
And invest there.

Photo Credit - Dhruvank Vaidya

The Northeast, despite poor development indicators, is a region that many in our sector know little about. Dispelling our myths and assumptions is crucial to increasing both investments and efforts there.

Biswanath Sinha
Associate Director, Tata Trusts

There has been little or no interest among funders in looking at the northeast region in our country. But this lack of attention and investment is impacting not only the development of the communities in the eight states of the region but also the economic opportunities that they have access to.

It is therefore important for all of us in the sector—especially funders—to understand the nuances of the region better if we are to improve the development indicators for the country as a whole.

Reasons for lack of funder interest in the Northeast

Most funders are unfamiliar with the region and territory

Twenty years ago, when there was any development report in India and there was data being collected and analysed, there would be data on all the states and then there would be

a category called 'other states'—which basically comprised Jammu and Kashmir, Sikkim, and the seven Northeastern states.

Everyone knows (or ought to know) that Manipur is not the same as Assam, which is not the same as Arunachal Pradesh, and it's definitely not the same as Jammu and Kashmir. But they were still all lumped together as 'other states'.

While today there is state- and district-wise data available, there is still little interest in understanding the region and the issues there. Funders and practitioners find it easier to stay away.

There is limited knowledge regarding the issues facing the states in the Northeast

Take the criteria of economic development or per capita income of the population. Contrary to popular

opinion, it's not the districts in the north-central states of India like Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, that are the lowest performing in terms of economic development and per capita income, but those in the Northeast. If you see the different Human Development Reports published by the UN agencies and Government of India, in a survey where they mapped all the districts in India on multiple parameters, the northeastern states fared well on health and education but did poorly on economic development.

However, since the index was a composite comprising multiple indicators—health, education, employability, per capita income, and so on—in the 25 lowest performing districts, there are only one or two from the Northeast. Most of the 'poor performing' districts were from Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh. As a result, the development rupees and investment went to these regions.

"The region is considered too far from where most decision-makers work and live."

Therefore, an index like this was unable to tell the whole story of just how much the northeastern states lagged on the economic development front; this meant that little or no attention was paid to these districts.

We, at the Tata Trusts, did a similar exercise in 2007 where we listed all districts across the country by economic development indicators: we found Tirap and Lower Subansiri in Arunachal Pradesh to be the worst performing districts.

There is an assumption that overheads incurred in managing operations in this region will be high

The region is considered too far from where most of the decision-makers work and live—Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. Second, given the low density of populations served and the distances between local habitations, the costs incurred in running a programme are likely to be higher than densely populated villages in central India. There is also the belief that the 'impact' will be less because people 'reached' will be lower in absolute numbers.

There is uncertainty and fear regarding the region

There are assumptions made by decision-makers in the large cities regarding the intensity of conflict in the region. There is also a fear of whether the money will go into the wrong hands. And, while that might have or haven't been the case earlier, it definitely isn't the case now. The law and order situation has improved significantly across the different states in the region, and in general, the aspirations of the youth have driven the states to become more politically stable.

It is critical to get support from the state governments

Even if funders are willing to look at investing in programmes in the Northeast, it is important that they receive adequate support from the local governments. And given the influence that the states exercise on the lives of the people—most of the employment is provided by government jobs—it is important to work with them.

But in most cases, the priority of the state departments is how to get more money from the central government. Moreover, because there is uncertainty regarding the quantum of funds that can be availed, and the time it takes to get this money, there is less priority within the states on preparing a road map for development, and improving things on the ground.

The focus on development of the communities might have been stronger had the states generated their own incomes instead of being heavily dependent on central assistance.

In this context funders can help demonstrate good developmental models and then work towards influencing the priorities of the state governments or autonomous councils.

Lessons from our experience in the Northeast

The Tata Trusts have been working in the Northeast for the last 12 years. In that time, we've had our challenges but we've also learned a great deal from the state governments, nonprofits, communities, and the people in the region.

We believe that the northeastern states need more attention and investment and we hope that our learnings might be useful for funders who are keen to create

"We believe that the northeastern states need more attention and investment and we hope that our learnings might be useful for funders who are keen to create significant change in an area that has been neglected till date."

significant change in an area that has been neglected till date.

It's important to look at the right indicators

If you go by enrolment in primary schools and overall literacy rates, then the northeastern states perform better than the other Indian states. It makes sense then, that donors don't feel the need to invest in the Northeast, at least in elementary education.

But if you look at health, some of these states are at the bottom of the pile. Assam is the worst performing state in the country when it comes to maternal mortality rates, and the northeastern states put together have the highest incidence of cancer in the country. Nagaland, for instance, doesn't have a single medical college.

Even in the case of education, there is no data on learning outcomes; so, despite high enrolment, we still don't know if children are benefitting from going to school. The percentage of students completing a degree course is also abysmally low.

Don't judge success by numbers

One can't compare the scale of operations here with other parts of the country. In India we have a population of 382 people per sq km; this is the average number many funders and nonprofits factor in when talking about project outreach, scaling up, and so on.

When we are working in Arunachal Pradesh however, we have to bear in mind that we are working in 15 villages, each of which has only between 40-60 households and is possibly 5 km away from the neighbouring village.

One therefore cannot compare these programmes with projects from other areas and say, "Why are we able to reach 5,000 farmers in Satara with an investment of INR 1 crore while in Arunachal, we can

only manage to reach 500 farmers?"

First, you are working with a community whose exposure to the outside world is extremely limited. There is no railway line in Manipur and Sikkim, while Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim have airports. Most of the states are devoid of good public transport too.

"One can't compare the scale of operations here with other parts of the country."

Second, you are working in a place that is thinly populated; so one shouldn't compare to mainland states in terms of scale and time required to bring about results. Maybe Tripura and Assam can be compared to the other states in India, in terms of population density, but with the mountainous states, one needs to be more patient.

This cannot be a numbers game.

The numbers will be smaller but the change is transformational

If as a funder, you and your partners are able to identify the right issues, work on the right kind of projects, and create models and prototypes that show how these projects can be impactful, you can influence where government funding can be directed.

Make the state governments understand that these are issues that matter, these are the right investments, and expose them to new approaches.

For instance, given the demand for pork in the state and the fact that most of it is currently imported from non-northeastern states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, can we demonstrate a sustainable piggery model that

will encourage a change in the pig breeding policy of the Nagaland government? Or can we influence the Nagaland government to consider that 'if you are getting a budget of INR 100 for livestock, can you invest INR 80 in piggery and can you do this in a manner that is sustainable?'

There's also the example of the development of the milk production industry in Manipur. Traditionally the way the supply of milk has happened in this state is that one ties up with a farmer who has one to two cows; they will come to your house and you pay them on a weekly or monthly basis. Now with our intervention, which involves helping the communities form dairy activity groups and providing marketing and supply chain support, Manipur produces, packages, and sells packaged milk.

These are not big projects—we started with 5,000 litres per day—now it's more than 10,000 litres per day. But the state now has farmer producer groups and a sustainable means of livelihood—a marked change from the past. The cooperative we worked with, YVU Milk Producer Company, is now the largest market player in dairy products in the state. More importantly, it helped demonstrate a successful model to the state government.

There is strong acceptance from the communities

Once you spend enough time with the communities however, there is greater acceptance of the development work than in communities from other parts of India. Most of them are small communities, closely knit, once they accept you, then there is very strong acceptance of the programmes. There is no ambiguity on their part.

It is important to have diversity in the team that serves the Northeast

The region is extremely diverse in terms of populations that reside there. It is more diverse than the rest of the

country put together. We work with so many tribes— micro and minor tribes, some not recognised by the state government, and some whose citizenship is under question. We need to take all of them along.

In many places each village is populated with only one tribe and each one is very different from the other in customs, language, practices. It is therefore important to have diversity in the team that supports the northeastern work.

Put the right team together and invest in them. Generally speaking, no one from the rest of India will want to move there. Therefore, it is important to develop local talent and put time, energy and resources on human resources there. We started from zero. We knew that nobody from Maharashtra or Gujarat would be interested in coming to the Northeast to work on a long-term basis. So, we had to bet on the locals. We did however take the required help and support from across the country.

There isn't a dearth of qualified people—if you go to TISS Mumbai, there are at least 100 students from the Northeast doing their Masters and PhD. They just need platforms that allow them to earn decent money and do good work. ∎

Above all, be patient.

IDR Interviews | Sujata Khandekar

Photo Credit - CORO

For three decades, CORO has been at the forefront of grassroots leadership. Sujata Khandekar shares what she has learnt and unlearnt about the process of empowerment within marginalised communities, and what it takes to be truly participatory.

Over the past three decades, Sujata Khandekar has led one of the country's foremost organisations in grassroots leadership and activism: Committee of Resource Organisations, or CORO. Under her leadership, CORO has grown from working on adult literacy in Mumbai's slums, to a resource organisation on gender and grassroots leadership development. It now focuses on integrated community development, in particular, addressing issues identified by the community itself. Today, CORO runs a programme on domestic violence specifically focused on changing social norms that perpetuate and justify violence against women. It also works on child rights within school and community settings, and has developed a model programme on grassroots leadership development.

In this interview with IDR, Sujata speaks about CORO's evolution, how the process of empowerment within marginalised communities unfolds, and what it takes to be truly participatory.

How did your journey with CORO start?

CORO was formed in 1989, its origins rooted in the adult literacy movement of the time. The Government of India had just launched the National Literacy Mission, which aimed to impart functional literacy to all non-literate people aged 15-35 years.

Seven social organisations came together at the time with a view to mobilise marginalised people to solve their own issues with adult literacy as the foundation. This was how CORO came to life, becoming a committee with representatives from each of its constituent organisations. Many CORO founders came from privileged backgrounds; employed and well-educated, we were in many ways, 'outsiders'.

As a junior engineer in the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB), I was deputed to CORO by the Secretary Education, Government of Maharashtra, and I joined it as the volunteer representative from two organisations, Stree Mukti Sanghatana—which worked on empowerment of women, and Yuva Shakti Pratishthan— which fought for low-cost, clean food for all.

Tell us about the early years at CORO

Literacy-related work was a big teacher, personally and organisationally. Coming from a middle class, Brahmin background, I had a stereotypical understanding of low-income communities, crudely labelling them as 'slums'. One either hates people living in these communities or pities their conditions, but there's never a sense of equality or connectedness with them.

"Many CORO founders came from privileged backgrounds; we were in many ways, 'outsiders'."

In my mind, I had gone to the community to help them, to teach them. The 'I' was prominent. But through CORO, I learnt about human life, human nature, social structures, and social change. My work has since impacted the way I perceive, feel, think, express, connect, and analyse; and I had to work a lot on myself over the years.

Organisationally, the work taught us about why and when interventions become relevant to people's lives and priorities, why and how people 'own' processes of development, and what it means to be participatory.

So how did CORO's work evolve? Why did it become women-centric?

Women from the community were largely non-literate; and unlike men, they did not hesitate to admit it. So, we started working more with them.

But this wasn't the only reason. Many of CORO's founders came from the women's movement. Plus, women from the community consistently pushed us, bringing forth their issues and priorities, almost demanding solutions. They spoke about everything from the kinds of violence inflicted upon them, to their health issues, to unsafe and unclean toilets. In the process of trying to find solutions with them, CORO became increasingly women-centric.

"Women from the community were largely non-literate; and unlike men, they did not hesitate to admit it."

I remember early on, each time I saw a woman being beaten by a drunk husband, I would think, "Why is she not walking out of this marriage?" It was through my immersion in CORO that I began to understand that such alternatives did not exist for most of these women. The 'cure' in their case was 'costlier than the ailment'.

Was that a turning point for you?

There were many turning points, but I distinctly remember two in the early 1990s. The first was when CORO helped the community access the public distribution system.

Most government-licensed shops for rations are run by private shop-owners. And because many are protected by the local mafia and political parties, they wield a lot of power. Nobody dares defy them. Women in CORO's work area of Chembur-Trombay in Mumbai had many grievances against this system. They also felt helpless because there was no redressal mechanism.

We realised that as required by the law, every ration shop had a complaint book, which could be accessed at any time by its customers. Within 15 days of any complaint being lodged, the designated officer had to inform you about what action they had taken. This bore a strong connection to literacy, because writing a complaint needed writing skills, and so we saw this as an opportunity.

The women in the area had 24 types of grievances around the quality of commodities, mechanisms for obtaining them, and shop-owner behaviour. So, we set aside the government-issued literacy kits and designed our own; the first lesson was on how to write wheat —*gehu*. Then sugar, then kerosene, and so on. We structured our literacy programme around this kit, and encouraged and mobilised women to go in groups and lodge complaints.

What came next was magical.

When women, *en masse*, started writing complaints, shop owners began pleading with them to rescind them, offering in exchange a 15-day advance of kerosene supply. This was pivotal; it made women realise their power, and the power of their words. All of a sudden, literacy didn't seem so irrelevant anymore.

"It made women realise their power, and the power of their words. All of a sudden, literacy didn't seem so irrelevant anymore."

The second turning point came at a time when CORO was struggling financially. With no funding in sight, I held a meeting with our community organisers (all women) and told them to join other organisations, for CORO

Rachita Vora
Co-founder and Director, IDR

Smarinita Shetty
Co-founder and CEO, IDR

Photo Credit - Charlotte Anderson

"Individuals alone cannot make a difference, but together, they can. We saw this time and again with our work supporting people to access their rights."

could no longer afford to pay the INR 1,200 we were offering as honorarium, and most of these women were the sole earners in their families. I assured them that if CORO received any funding, they would be the first to be invited to re-join. I admitted my inadequacy as the leader of the organisation.

The next morning my doorbell rang at 8.00 AM. At my doorstep stood my friend and colleague, one of CORO's community organisers, Sagar More. After coming into my home, Sagar's husband, who had accompanied her, handed me INR 20,000 in cash.

"Sagar told me about your meeting yesterday", he said. "I have this much money with me and I think CORO needs it at this time. You can return it when you receive funds". Sagar was standing beside him with tearful eyes. The couple had sold a small piece of land in their village to build *pucca* walls (brick walls) for their hut, which was currently made of tin sheets with holes everywhere. This was the money they gave us. Thankfully, CORO got funding a few months later, and in the interim, the team worked for free.

Both of these experiences encouraged CORO to do what we do today. It also enlightened me on what grassroots work entails. In addition, it clarified some key lessons for us.

● First was that people will not actively and emotionally participate in an intervention unless it has relevance to their lives and their strengths.

● The second debunked the notion that 'poor people are lazy and don't want to change'. They want to change, but don't know how. They need information and hand-holding. Our only role was to give women tools and words, and suggest that using them might offer some respite. It was the women who fought for their rights.

● Third, community people don't act out of fear and helplessness. They gather courage by coming together. Collective risk is both possible and incredibly powerful, because nobody's fighting alone.

CORO merely instilled in them a sense of hope and helped facilitate their efforts. Doing so revealed for us the crux of building ownership of the social change process. The initiative for change has to come from

'within'—within a person, and within the community. And the mental shift from being a victim to being a changemaker is crucial in the social change process. Enhancing inner strength of a person or a community is more important than external or material supports.

Was that then the beginning of your work on grassroots leadership building?

Absolutely.

How did your work grow? Can you speak about 'organic leadership' at CORO?

We saw early on that people at the grassroots were the changemakers. But 'beneficiaries'—as we call them—are never recognised as such. We wanted to shift this paradigm.

Today, CORO has evolved to be community-led. Barring me and one or two others, every team member is from the community. This is CORO's strength, and the reason why our impact is sustainable and different.

Mahendra Rokade, a volunteer from 1989 is our programme director now. Pallavi Palav, our accounts assistant from 1992 is our treasurer on the board of trustees today. Mumtaz Shaikh, who joined CORO in 2000 for redressal of her domestic violence, featured in BBC's list of 100 most influential women in 2015. People have stayed with the organisation for close to 28 years, largely because our programme is homegrown, with people at the grassroots having designed and implemented it themselves.

Seeing this evolution, we asked ourselves: why are people at the grassroots not seen as leaders? That's when we began a fellowship to develop grassroots leadership from within the community. The experience has taught us some fundamental lessons about identity and empowerment. In marginalised communities, people are discriminated against on the basis of caste, class and gender, amongst other factors.

"A big challenge is when people accept discrimination or oppression as part of their 'fate'."

Socialisation teaches us that 'things will not change for me; I cannot express, I cannot resist, my existence has no meaning. And if my existence has no meaning, I accept everything as part of my fate'. This leads to a fractured sense of identity, despair, and helplessness.

But, when identity gets triggered, and people feel worthy, they believe they can effect change.

We have three premises:

● **A sense of one's own identity is closely related to empowerment, and this is true not just for women.**

Empowerment is about recognising one's own 'power within'. It is also about how comfortable I am with my identity. It's important to recognise one's disempowerment. Without this, it's impossible to embark on an empowerment journey, which requires reflection, patience, and process. Unfortunately, today in our haste of calling outputs impact (due to the obsession with measurement), we tend to equate empowerment with proxy indicators, most of which are rudimentary external manifestations of a process that is entirely internal. For instance, how many women are in SHGs, how many are accessing healthcare services, how many girls are in school, and so on. These are not indicators of empowerment at all.

● **Solidarity is the biggest asset of marginalised people.**

Individuals alone cannot make a difference, but together, they can. We saw this time and again with our work supporting people to access their rights.

● **We need strong, 'nearest' ecosystems, for changing our near environment.**

This is why our fellowship, through critical reflection, acts first on the inner space, and then helps individuals understand their context. It's a very simple trick: keep asking the question 'why?' to every answer, until you get to the root. In the process fellows build their nearest ecosystem, in the family, organisation, and community.

Where is the grassroots leadership programme today?

We have run the fellowship programme—Quest—in Maharashtra for the last 10 years, and Rajasthan for the last three. We have also had one cohort in Delhi, NCR. We've worked with more than 280 nonprofits and community-based organisations (CBOs) across these states, with participation from more than 1,300 grassroots leaders.

After the fellowship year, the leaders, their mentors and organisations collectively initiate campaigns in their communities, all of which are incubated by CORO.

"Empowerment is about recognising one's own 'power within'. It is also about how comfortable I am with my identity."

For instance, Mumbai fellows launched the 'Right to Pee' campaign for demanding clean, safe, and free urinals for women in public spaces; in Vidarbha the campaign is about seeking community forest rights; in Marathwada it's about single women's rights; in western Maharashtra it is about water-related interventions in drought-prone villages. All campaigns are led by grassroots leaders, 68 percent of whom are women; a majority being from Scheduled Caste, tribal, Muslim, and OBC communities.

So, what's next for CORO?

We are keen to use our experience with the grassroots leadership development programme as a foundation for a national grassroots centre that aims at shifting power dynamics in favour of the grassroots, primarily in leadership, in organisation building, and in knowledge building.

Now that we have developed a proven mechanism for building grassroots leadership, and in leading issue-specific change in communities, the next frontier for us is striving for thought leadership that comes from the grassroots. ∎

Sangeeta Menon contributed to this interview.

The development sector glass ceiling

Photo Credit - Pixabay

Women face a number of barriers in reaching leadership both structurally, as well as internally within organisations; and an uneven playing field is among the top challenges.

Tara Rao
Founding Director, ourgroundworks

In the early 2000s, the 'indigenisation' of international NGOs (INGOs) began to take root. This was an initiative on the part of these organisations to start including people from the global south in their leadership—global south being a more politically correct term for 'developing' nations.

The rationale was to create a work culture that would have representation from a broader part of the world, while also building local legitimacy in the developing countries that they were working in.

To start with, INGO indigenisation focused significantly on representation in leadership; and these organisations experienced an increase in the population of men from the global south—definitely a step in the right direction for widening representation.

This development though, quite unfortunately, also seemed to reinforce the ground reality in the geographies that these organisations worked in. The growing visibility of this group of 'southern males' not only heightened but also reinforced local realities, thereby perpetuating the gender disparity they were there to change.

If there were breakout sparks they were few and far between at the international level—and that too of women in senior leadership positions from the global north (the 'developed' world): Barbara Stocking (Executive Director, Oxfam); Joanna Kerr (ED, ActionAid); Loretta Minghella, (ED, Christian Aid); Bunny McDiarmid and Jennifer Morgan (Co-EDs, Greenpeace International).

Women head only 12-14 percent of the nonprofits with the largest budgets in the US and 24 percent of the top 100 nonprofits in the UK. Of the UK's top development nonprofits—Action Aid, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children UK—collectively known as the British Overseas Aid Group, just two are headed by women, today. Over time, in the 'wider representation drive', we seem to have cemented ourselves to this new reality of 'indigenised skewedness'.

"Women head only 12-14 percent of the nonprofits with the largest budgets in the US."

The revolving door

One of the more visible symptoms that seems to have evolved from this indigenised skewedness across international and national leadership positions, is a 'revolving door' situation, where the southern male seems to be organisation hopping—from one leadership position to next.

The convenience of taking someone in who has the credentials and experience is clear, but possibly not quite acceptable, given the emphasis that most of these organisations place on gender balanced leadership. The skewedness towards appointing male leaders reveals a bias, which systemically takes root and reinforces itself; this then creates the ideal conditions for a revolving door, where the accumulated credentials and experience furthers the respective individual's career path by way of organisation hopping.

"The skewedness towards appointing male leaders reveals a bias."

So, while the staff is largely female, the highest rung in many of the organisations is still dominated by men, with little signs of letting up. Despite some organisations' aims to hire women leaders, systems don't seem to be in place to turn intentions into reality.

"The biggest barrier to women advancing into these positions is the internal process and belief system," according to Barbara Stocking. There are a number of barriers that women face in reaching leadership both structurally and internally. An uneven playing field is among the top challenges. "There is this prime assumption that the men who are leading these organisations are really good. They're not…some are pretty mediocre. At the moment women are having to be very, very good to get to the top," indicates Stocking.

If it's not the nonprofit world that can show the way, I can't imagine which sector can. Gender empowerment has been championed in the context of overall development for decades, however, women professionals in the development sector mirror the challenges faced by women working in male-dominated fields.

"Women in the development sector mirror the challenges faced by women in male-dominated fields."

Loretta Minghella, director at Christian Aid and a lawyer formerly working in the financial sector, reflects, "I'm not sure the barriers for women's leadership in the nonprofit sector generally are that different from those in other sectors, which is a bit disappointing."

It is interesting to see how the ground seems to be squirming beneath our feet crying out for a different reality. Here I draw the reader's attention to the #MeToo campaign.

The campaign is a reaction to this persistent and resistant systemic male bias, where one gender has systematically benefited more, and even at the cost of the other.

I invite the nonprofit community to see #MeToo not only as a distant 'Weinstein episode' but also a sign of an eruption closer to home. The reactive energy in such campaigns stems from a certain kind of male-centric organisational culture and the day-to-day reality that organisations have managed and sustained. One needs to ask—what is the gender dynamic playing out among our own nonprofits?

Time to change, time to act

Change often comes from a combination of imbibing a new courage and a new imagination. In the present environment of deep-seated, deep conservatism, both are urgently required, and appallingly in short supply. We need to ask whether and how organisations that identify themselves as representing the interests of civil society are equipped to help reverse this extreme situation from deepening.

Here are a few on my checklist that I believe need addressing: the composition of boards and their agendas, the objectives of organisational development of each of these organisations, and the level of funding offered by grantmakers towards making strategic investments in gender-responsive organisation building.

Boards of NGOs need to muster a renewed and concerted drive both individually and collectively to respond to the illiberal wave that has gripped our world. Organisations must propel themselves into understanding the new reality and engage with it, rather than cowering away; they must challenge the prevailing resistance to actively seeking women leaders.

Women in leadership, moreover, cannot not be seen only as 'women in leadership', but as symbolising a shift to a much-needed progressive track. Otherwise we can rest assured that that revolving door will continue to revolve. And will continue to revolve at odds with what is the need of the hour.

I believe, courage and imagination also seem to be getting stunted by the uncertainty that the present regime in India imposes (though the 'wave' seems to be a global one too). In this scenario, agendas like stepping up on women in leadership does seem to be taking a back seat. I'd also argue that the current regime even allows for the organisations own breed of conservatism to persist, which possibly could exclude the 'women in leadership' agenda.

In the world out there though, the lines of acceptability are being pushed. What is critical is how we view this as a jiu-jitsu moment—using the energy of the opposing force to make positive change happen. This positive change is vital to ensure civil society organisations don't make themselves irrelevant. ◼

Humour | The annual retreat

Photo Credit - Wikimedia Commons

The nonprofit annual retreat - we've all been there, and (hopefully) survived that. Now, finally, it's time to laugh about it.

Karan Malik
India Programmes Lead,
British Asian Trust

Day -30

A committee is convened to choose a committee to plan the retreat. The managers each select a person they dislike to be a part of this committee.

Day -29

Everyone on the committee already hates each other. There is an argument about where the retreat should be held. Everyone suggests Goa wistfully before the Finance Guy waves around a piece of paper shouting "Budget!" It is unclear whether the paper has a budget on it.

Day -15

The former private sector consultant who just transitioned to the nonprofit sector launches into a story, again, about the sheer extravagance in consulting, and how it's so much better in the development sector where they respect the value of money.

Everyone hates her even more.

Day -5

Everyone is googling 'team building sessions'.

Day 0

The finance team is late *en masse* for the bus. They then sing loudly on the entire journey. Everyone hates them.

The entire organisation finds out how much Senior Management likes them (or not) based on who they have been assigned to share rooms with.

The first session is off to a great start as everyone listens enthusiastically to the impact they have had this past year. Someone asks a question about attribution versus contribution. Everyone quickly swivels to check if any funders are in the room (they haven't arrived yet) and then glares at the questioner.

Everyone has lost interest after one hour and is Instagramming/snoozing/playing Sudoku on their phones. Even the intern isn't pretending to pay attention any more. This is the perfect time to have the finance presentation on the budget.

Lunch, thankfully.

Everyone has had too much rice. The next coffee break is so, so far away. Their eyes are closing, gently.

Oh good, there is a break for a team building activity.

Team building activities are the worst. No one likes drawing on chart papers that will be immediately discarded as soon as this is done. Can we go back to listening to plans for next year?

Thank God for chai. Can't say the same about the soul crushingly watery Nescafé.

Everyone escapes joyfully as soon as there is an evening break. The finance team jumps into the pool immediately in an impressively synchronised display.

Everyone is reminded that there is a play their groups have to prepare for dinnertime. They all sulk. The finance team splashes louder and pretends they can't hear.

The former consultant is very aggressive about preparing for the play. She has decided to put on a solo performance given the incompetence of her teammates.

Everyone decides to have a beer in the 15 minutes available before the plays are supposed to start. It is decided to cut down the time available for performances by half.

More drinks are had. Everyone forgets to award the winner for the best play.

The finance team is dancing on the tables. Everyone else is recording them, mouths agape. Any children in the vicinity are quickly whisked away lest they be scarred for life.

The rest of the party moves inside in various factions. Everyone tells each other how much they love working with them, and commits to changing the world, man.

Day +1

Everyone has a headache. Three people oversleep for the morning session. They turn up eventually and must sit there without breakfast.

There is a Distinguished Corporate Guru who has been invited to share his wisdom with the team. He has magnanimously offered to provide his *gyaan* for free. He talks at length about the Scrambled Egg Theory of Positive Reinforcement, and Recharging Your Inner Batteries and Un-cluttering Your Mind (i.e. expensive glamping trips in unpronounceable Nordic regions).

Everyone's confusion turns to disbelief when they find out they have to organise volunteering opportunities for his core team—in return for his pro-bono inspiration.

There is another team building session. The Cheerful Facilitator is making everyone do a TREASURE HUNT. No one likes treasure hunts or being forced to talk about what lessons they learned from working together. They like naps in the shade on Saturdays.

Everyone actively resents the Cheerful Facilitator and wishes bodily harm upon him. They preferred the Distinguished Corporate Guru.

Lunch passes by too soon and is followed by a presentation by a consulting firm doing a pro-bono project on how the organisation can achieve ALL THE IMPACT.

Everyone glares at the two rookies stammering their way through a mixture of the obvious and the obviously stupid. They want to go back to team building activities. There is some momentary amusement through the gentle snores of the finance team, who have found this presentation conducive for nap-time.

Day +2

Comms sends out an email with the highlights of the retreat. They will keep sending a link with a feedback form for the next three weeks, asking people to fill it. Response rates shoot up only when it is implied that lack of responses could lead to more than one retreat each year. ∎

How funders become their own enemy

Photo Credit - Creative Commons

The findings from this analysis provide the first-ever empirical dataset on 'what goes wrong' in nonprofit programmes. The results are unexpected, but familiar.

The philanthropic sector as a whole has spent the better part of the past decade seeking to increase effectiveness through increased accountability, measuring impact, and heightened due diligence. However, recent research by Open Road Alliance (ORA), a private philanthropic initiative based in Washington DC, suggests that these efforts to professionalise our own work through increased policy and procedure have made funders the biggest barrier to effective impact. In other words, funders have become their own enemy in the pursuit of impact and ROI, and are the greatest pain point for nonprofits and social enterprises.

Since 2012, ORA has been providing capital to social impact organisations facing an unexpected roadblock during project implementation.

A 2017 roadblock analysis report by ORA says that almost 46% of challenges or obstacles faced by organisations are either funder-related or funder-created. In total, ORA analysed 102 applications from the past five years to assess trends in its portfolio, looking at multiple variables, including the organisation's size, project type, sector focus, geographic focus, legal status, and type of original funder. The findings from this multivariable roadblock analysis provide the first-ever empirical dataset on 'what goes wrong' in impact focused projects and offers early conclusions on how specific roadblocks correlate with other variables.

"As such, every organisation that approaches ORA for funding is facing an impact-threatening problem."

Methodology

Over the past five years, ORA has systematically collected data on its portfolio of applicants for grants and loans, including applications that were ultimately denied. As of September 1, 2017, this dataset comprised 102 applications, which were analysed for trends, patterns, and any statistically significant correlations using descriptive analysis and statistical analysis via probit regressions in STATA.

Each data point in their set represents a project that was mid-implementation (i.e., fully funded) and that experienced an unforeseen disruption that required a one-time grant or loan to implement a solution. So, each of the 102 projects encountered an unexpected obstacle that, without additional funding, would have derailed impact.
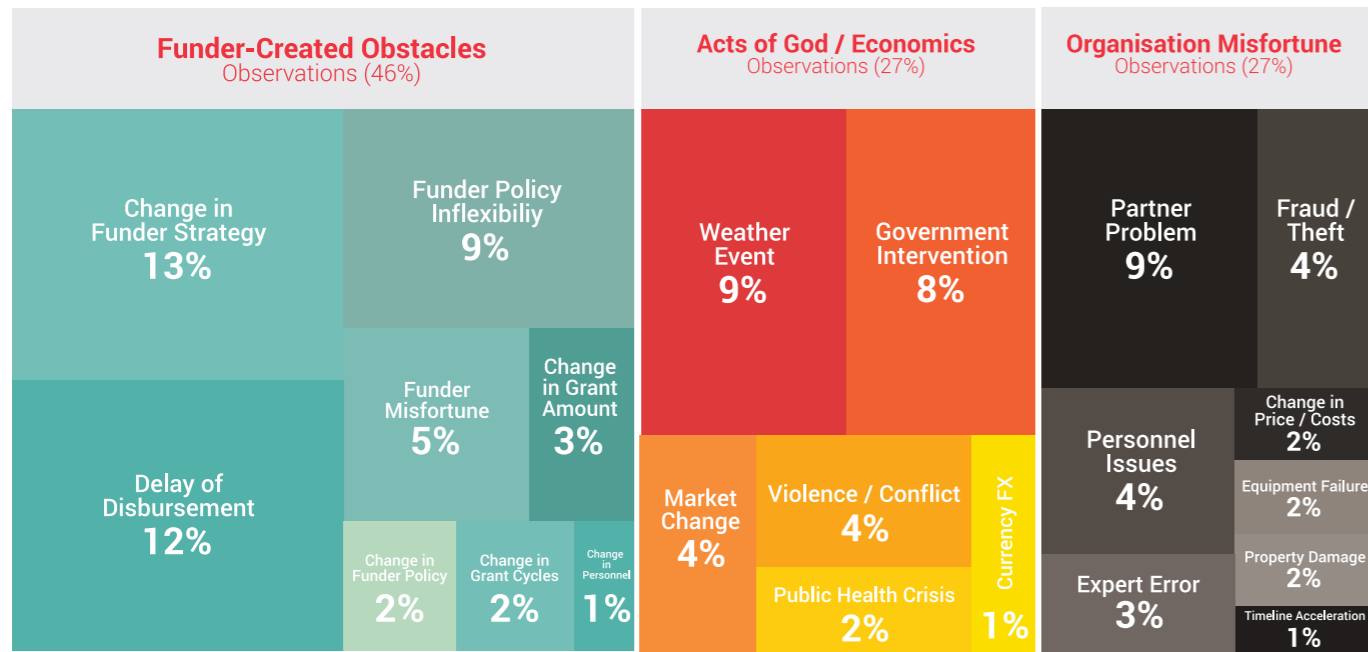
Sub-Saharan Africa projects make up 52% of roadblock's portfolio. Southeast Asia (including India) projects make up 7% of roadblock's portfolio. The other regions' percentages remain relatively consistent from the roadblock portfolio.

Findings

The biggest obstacles faced by nonprofits are created by none other than their own funders. In Asia, the Middle East and Northern Africa, Southeast Asia (including India), sub-Saharan Africa, the United States and Canada, and global projects, the most frequent roadblocks are funder-created obstacles. Specifically, in Southeast Asia (including India) projects, 57% of roadblocks are funder-created obstacles. In Latin America and the Caribbean, however, the most frequent roadblocks are acts of God or market economics.

The report divides these obstacles into three umbrella categories—organisation misfortune, acts of God/market economics, and funder-created obstacles. Each category contains sub-categories which provide further emphasis on the respective challenge in detail.

There are three specific funder-created obstacles— change in funder strategy, delay of disbursement, and funder policy inflexibility that are the most frequently occurring roadblocks across all sectors, funder types, project types, geographic focus, and organisation size, with only some exceptions.

Funder-Created Obstacles
Observations (46%)

Change in Funder Strategy **13%**

Funder Policy Inflexibiliy **9%**

Funder Misfortune **5%**

Change in Grant Amount **3%**

Delay of Disbursement **12%**

Change in Funder Policy **2%**

Change in Grant Cycles **2%**

Change in Personnel **1%**

Acts of God / Economics
Observations (27%)

Weather Event **9%**

Government Intervention **8%**

Market Change **4%**

Violence / Conflict **4%**

Currency FX

Public Health Crisis **2%**

1%

Organisation Misfortune
Observations (27%)

Partner Problem **9%**

Fraud / Theft **4%**

Personnel Issues **4%**

Change in Price / Costs **2%**

Equipment Failure **2%**

Property Damage **2%**

Expert Error **3%**

Timeline Acceleration **1%**

Source: Open Road Alliance

Funders are frequently—if unintentionally—contributing to disruptions in project implementation and threatening the impact of their own investments. The analysis also found—by examining the individual stories told by applicants—that most applicants cited failed communication or poor expectation setting with their original funder.

1. Change in funder strategy

During the analysis, whenever applicants reported a change in funder strategy as the roadblock, often that change did not occur out of the blue. Rather, nonprofits and social enterprises were informed of an upcoming shift but were reassured (often multiple times) that they would not be affected. Then, at the last minute, these assurances were reversed and applicants were informed that they would not receive funding because of a change in funder strategy. The main funder of a savings project in India, for instance, did a strategy refresh and decided to no longer target projects in India, cutting off funding despite a multi-year commitment.

2. Delay of disbursement

Likewise, delay of disbursement largely represents scenarios in which a specific date or timeline was given to the nonprofit or social enterprise by the funder, and despite repeated assurances, receipt of funds was significantly delayed to the point of threatening the viability of the project and, in some cases, the organisation itself.

3. Funder policy inflexibility

In the case of funder policy inflexibility, ORA found that funders inadvertently undercut their own investments due to internal red tape, despite genuinely wanting to assist their grantees.

In one classic example, a foundation with more than USD

1 billion in endowed funds referred one of its grantees to Open Road because it could not access an internal mechanism to provide an interim USD 90,000 grant to the project between grant cycles. Without the USD 90,000, the grantee—whom the foundation touted as the most impactful project in that particular portfolio—would have been unable to meet payroll. As this data indicates, the actions (or often, inactions) that funders take have material consequences for the organisations they partner with.

The prevalence of funder-created obstacles suggests that funders have the opportunity to significantly maximise impact by re-evaluating their grantmaking and investment practices to determine what changes can better serve the needs of their partners.

Exceptions

A few exceptions to the analysed data (by individual roadblocks) were agriculture and health, where funder-created obstacles were not the most common roadblocks. Agriculture projects are disproportionately affected by weather (falling under the acts of God/ market economics category).

Health projects are disproportionately affected by partner problems (falling under the organisation misfortune category), defined as a scenario in which the actions of a third party threaten to derail the project. While it is unclear from the data why this is the case, one hypothesis is that since most healthcare projects work at a very localised community level, by necessity they are more dependent on local partners and/or local/regional/ federal governing bodies than projects focused on other sectors.

Another area where funder-created obstacles is not the primary roadblock is projects funded by family foundations. Their hypothesis is that since family foundations tend to be smaller, they enjoy more

flexibility, greater speed, and more direct communication with their grantees than government funders or larger institutional donors.

Reduce roadblocks? How?

The implications of this analysis are sobering because this data suggests that the biggest barrier for nonprofits and social enterprises are their own funders.

Based on this data, along with additional research by ORA, this study suggests two ways forward that promise to offer the greatest reduction in roadblocks:

1. Communication and expectation-setting

The issues of change in funder strategy and delay in disbursement become major roadblocks when clarity and accuracy of funder-grantee communications are compromised. The main difficulties arise primarily from what is communicated, rather than how often. Whether or not they intend it, their comments—no matter how unofficial or informal—often translate into real-life budget and cash flow projections in the plans and timelines of their partners. When promises are unfulfilled, decisions reversed, or delivery of funds delayed, grantees or investees often do not have the ability to absorb costs or pivot to alternate sources of funding within short time frames.

Organisations should also expect a bit more uncertainty in their funder relationships and, where at all possible, adjust budget projections accordingly. Moreover, this study offers a valuable window into internal funder constraints, an area often invisible to grantees. At larger institutions, for example, programme officers themselves may be misinformed about the availability of funds or a new strategic direction. In five years of working with foundations large and small, ORA has never met a funder who intentionally misled its grantee. The dataset also includes stories where grantees themselves

failed to communicate their cash-flow needs because they didn't want to seem 'pushy' or 'over-ask'.

2. Organisational flexibility

Looking at the third most common roadblock, funder policy inflexibility, the correctional course of action is suggested in the roadblock itself: flexibility. Too often, funders treat their current grantmaking procedures as inviolable law. Many of the applicants in this dataset were initially referred to ORA by other funders who say they want to help their grantees but can't because 'it's against policy' or 'we don't have a procedure for that' or 'we don't have the money', which typically just means they didn't budget for it. Changing or adjusting established procedures is difficult. However, this study suggests that changing funder policies to increase flexibility can directly avoid a significant number of impact-threatening roadblocks downstream.

Three specific ideas of more flexible policies include:

- Adjusting grant cycles to meet grantee cash flow needs (rather than funder convenience).

- Including contingency funds in annual grantmaking budgets with the expectation that some grantee, somewhere, will need additional funding between grant cycles.

- Reducing limitations on what grant money can be spent on and when it can be spent. ◼

Priyanka Dhaundiyal contributed to this article.

Why does undernutrition persist in India's tribal populations?

The data tells us that India's aspirations to improve its nutrition status cannot be realised without focused policy changes towards the Scheduled Tribes.

Photo Credit - Charlotte Anderson

The Prime Minister launched the National Nutrition Mission in March this year, with an objective of accelerating improvements in nutrition levels in India, for which annual targets have been set for reduction in levels of stunting, undernutrition, anaemia, and low birth weight, to be achieved by 2022.

This reduction in key undernutrition indicators would not be possible without improving the nutrition status of the most nutritionally deprived communities—the Scheduled Tribes (STs). The recently released NFHS-4 India Report* yet again brought home the widely anticipated truth that, despite

Saumya Shrivastava
Research Officer, Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability

improvements, the undernutrition among STs has remained poor, and much higher than that for All Groups taken together. As per the report, in India, 44 percent of tribal children under 5 years of age are stunted, (low height for age); 45 percent are underweight, (low weight for age) and 27 percent are wasted (low weight for height).*

The high levels of hunger and malnutrition among tribal people received considerable attention after reports of malnutrition deaths among children in pockets inhabited by tribal people, specifically in states like Odisha, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The policy response in such scenarios is either denial or action for immediate redressal, with little thought about the long-term strategy to alleviate the situation. Moreover, the discussion on the policy framework to address the issue in a sustained manner has not received the attention it deserves, in the popular discourse.

"Shortage of basic infrastructure and human resources constrain access to public health and nutrition services in tribal areas."

It is widely accepted that undernutrition results from multiple causes, which can be categorised as immediate (inadequate diet and disease), underlying (household food insecurity, poverty, poor access to health and WASH services) and basic causes (overall social, political, and economic environment). In case of tribal people, additional factors like discrimination, geographical isolation, limited access to public services, cultural differences, among others, add to the existing deprivations faced by them across sectors. Given their high dependence on government provisioning of

essential services across sectors, additional efforts are required to overcome some of the challenges that are specific to STs and improve their access to these essential services in nutrition-related sectors.

In the last decade or so, initiatives have been taken by the government to reach out to tribal people and increase their access to public health and nutrition services, which are crucial for addressing immediate causes of undernutrition. These include relaxing population norms in tribal habitations for setting up of anganwadi and mini-anganwadi centres under Integrated Child Development Services scheme; or setting up of the health centres under National Health Mission (NHM), taking into account the scattered and sparse population in a number of tribal habitations. In addition, some states have introduced state-specific schemes specifically for tribal people; such as Maharashtra's APJ Abdul Kalam Amrut Aahaar Yojana, a full-meal scheme for pregnant and lactating women and Village Child Development Centre for severely undernourished children.

However, shortage of basic infrastructure as well as human resources for delivery of these schemes, constrain the quality as well as outreach of these services in tribal areas.

As per the Rural Health Survey 2017, there is an overall shortfall (difference between required and in-position) of 21 percent, 26 percent and 23 percent respectively for sub-centres, Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and Community Health Centres (CHCs) in tribal areas at the all-India level. This shortfall is much higher in tribal-dominated states; for example, the shortfall for PHCs is 52 percent in Rajasthan, 53 percent in Madhya Pradesh, 58 percent in Jharkhand, 36 percent in Telangana, and 30 percent in Maharashtra.

The issue is compounded by the acute and persistent shortage of personnel to deliver these services in tribal areas. For example, the same survey reveals that in tribal areas the vacancy of doctors in PHCs is as high as 28 percent, and for nursing staff at PHC and CHC levels it is 22 percent at the all-India level, with significant shortfall and vacancies in tribal-dominated states. These shortages are compounded by high rates of non-functionality of the health centres, absenteeism of personnel for delivery of services, as well as unavailability of basic drugs and equipment. For example, NFHS-4 revealed that 57 percent of STs expressed concern that no drugs would be available at the health centres, and 42 percent felt that distance from health facilities restricts their access to medical advice or treatment.

In this regard, we may note that the availability of budgetary resources play an important role in addressing these deficits. Apart from general flow of funds, to ensure targeted policy driven budgets for STs, the Government of India initiated a strategy of Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) in 1974. As per the TSP strategy, the Union and state governments had to earmark plan funds** for tribal people at least in proportion to their share in the total population of India

(8.6% as per Census 2011) or of respective states. The objective was to ensure separate funding to address specific development deficits in tribal areas.

However, the allocations for TSP never met the mandate and TSP allocations remained much below the prescribed norm. For example, Singh and Sethi (2017) in their analysis of TSP outlays for nutrition-related ministries show that between 2014-15 and 2016-17, the Union Government was allocating only around 4.4 percent of its plan budget under TSP (against the norm of 8.6 percent).

Moreover, with the merger of plan and non-plan heads of expenditure in Union Budget 2017-18, the future implementation strategy for TSP is uncertain. So far, the Union Government has not shown any inclination to introduce a revised policy for TSP to ensure targeted flow of funds for STs.

As a policy, TSP can be used to address challenges in access to food, potable water, sanitation facilities, quality health services and other facilities in tribal areas which together lead to poor nutrition among tribal women and children. TSP can be used to fill in the critical gaps in resources to ensure quality and outreach of interventions across nutrition-related sectors, and thus address the multiple causes of undernutrition.

"There has been no specific policy to address the issue of tribal undernutrition and streamline the government's efforts across sectors."

Despite tribal undernutrition being a persisting concern over the years, there is as yet no specific policy to address the issue and streamline the government's efforts across sectors. The efforts at both Union Government and state levels remain fragmented and lack effective implementation. While some states have shown initiative to introduce specific schemes, the approach remains limited to tackling immediate issues relating to diet and disease, and does not sufficiently address the larger issues of poverty, food insecurity at household level, landlessness and shrinking livelihoods, among others.

In this context, the government needs to play a more proactive role and form a policy for coordinated action across ministries, such as tribal affairs, women and child development, agriculture, rural development, drinking water and sanitation, and human resource development (education), to inform and strengthen their efforts towards tackling tribal undernutrition. ∎

* Figures taken from International Institute for Population Sciences (2017): "National Family Health Survey (NFHS–4), 2015–2016: India Report," Mumbai, India: International Institute for Population Sciences.

**Conventionally, in the budgeting system followed in India, all kinds of budget allocations/ expenditures (whether on recurring heads like staff salaries or on capital heads like construction of infrastructure) are reported as 'Plan' allocations/expenditures if they are incurred on any of the programmes/schemes that are part of the ongoing Five Year Plan (national or state-specific Five Year Plan). All other kinds of budget allocations expenditures (whether on recurring or on capital heads), which are outside the purview of the ongoing FYP, are reported as 'Non-plan'.

Funding small nonprofits can be a giant step for development

Photo Credit - Max Pixel

Working at the grassroots, away from the gaze of large funders, community-funded organisations are changing the way people think and act. How do we support these nonprofits and the great work they do?

I founded and run a small nonprofit, Prajnya, far from the capital city and off the radar of foundation offices; our work features neither in CSR schedules, nor in government schemes; we have no FCRA or marketing genius.

All I had when I started off was a decent slate of academic and interpersonal skills, an idea about what needed to be done and how one might do it, and a sense of urgency—I had no clue that most of my work would be better suited to an MBA or administrative genius.

Acutely conscious of what I didn't know—including the corporate jargon of the new millennium—I sought advice and constantly tried to follow it, looking up phrases like 'elevator pitch' and even trying to write a SWOT analysis even before we had started working.

Finally, someone gave me advice that made sense: "Do what comes naturally to you. Forget all the advice." Life just became easier after that.

"We are constantly short of money for the things that nobody thinks nonprofits should need—space, paper, ink cartridges, anti-virus, and of course, salaries."

I continue to seek fundraising advice because we are constantly short of money for the things that nobody thinks nonprofits should need—space, cleaners and disinfectants for that space, paper, ink cartridges, storage devices, anti-virus and, of course, salaries.

We have a salary bill of 1.5 persons at this time: one programme officer and one administrator, only part of whose salary is paid by the nonprofit. They are both paid modestly. A small number of other positions now allow us to grow, but all involve stipends or retainers that are inadequate as livelihoods go.

We have a community of smaller, individual donors—mostly outside the city where we work. Initially, the donations were gifts from friends and family but now they come from those who follow our work, attend our programmes and have been part of our training. But, middle-class individuals can manage INR 500; 2,000; or the occasional 10,000, rarely more. We have one special circle of donors that support the programme but that's a three-year commitment

Swarna Rajagopalan,
Founder, The Prajnya Trust

and we are running out of time on that.

Most of the advice we get is of no use to smaller nonprofits

I search desperately for solutions. People tell me things like, "Money gets money" or "Scale is everything." They sound good to me, but irrelevant, as is most advice that I read.

There is a lot of impractical *gyaan* about CSR money and approaching this or that philanthropist. I hear about so-and-so getting an endowment grant or seed money. I have no idea how to go from here to there. It just leaves me feeling incompetent.

I came into the sector to contribute to changing the world for the better. In our case, this involves not service provision, but research, public education, and network-building towards a peaceful and just world, for which our chosen spheres are gender equality and peace education.

Being a small and community-funded organisation comes with some benefits:

- Individual donors are a measure of how persuasive our work has been; every new or returning donor is buying into our cause.

- We are accountable in a higher, ethical sense and free from the time-sink of quarterly report-writing in someone else's format—time freed for actual work.

- We are free to pilot, fail, tweak and adapt to actual needs and circumstances. We neither have to stick to someone else's script nor rewrite all experiences as success.

- We can be true to our voice and vision because our donors—our community—expect only that from us. This autonomy is invaluable. But it will only take most organisations so far.

Who will support the smaller organisations that do great work?

I worry about organisations that no one hears about, braving horrendous political and social odds in small towns and remote areas, doing wonderful work that those of us with shinier degrees cannot.

These may be neighbourhood women's collectives that are not shelters but rush to help women in distress; women's trade unions that defy mainstream labour organisations to speak for women; small nonprofits that organise after-school tuition classes for children in underprivileged neighbourhoods; or even a loose band of volunteers who spend their own money to support other people's needs.

They respond to real need, live where they work. Many

witness, and many bear witness to, human rights violations. Their work can be so transformative that it is scary to governments.

Who will fund all of them? How will they stay afloat? And without their work, what will happen to all of us?

There are ways to support the plurality of the sector

The slick, shiny world of fundraising and philanthropy discussed on platforms like this seems distant, and they tell us that scale and large amounts of money are the only way to drive change. But there's another way to bring about this change—and there are ways in which funders can support this approach.

- **Reach people where they are:** Pro-active outreach by large Indian donors, who might build a network of small to medium nonprofits—inherently valuable— would help identify organisations doing vital work with minimal resources.

- **Be accessible and responsive to queries:** Simplifying access or accepting queries as they come and responding to them individually would mentor organisations and build their capacity to fill out more complicated paperwork.

- **Simplify measurement and reporting:** "It has to be done this way" must yield to "This is what we need to know, and these are some ways in which you can document and share this." In other words, allow people to speak in their own words.

- **Plant grant-making trees:** Support one local nonprofit with the administrative capacity to make small local grants. You can put in place filtering, monitoring and reporting mechanisms but decentralise resources so that those who cannot write complicated proposals or travel long distances have an option.

The legal frameworks of grant-making in India prohibit support to political activity, and people interpret this very broadly and fearfully. But social change is intrinsically political. Just supporting projects and events is mere tinkering; supporting advocacy work is important—from legal aid, to policy advocacy by grassroots and union organisers.

"The slick, shiny world of fundraising and philanthropy tells us that scale and large amounts of money are the only way to drive change."

Whether or not this happens, small organisations will change the world: like termites and caterpillars, they will, through small, persistent, resilient, resourceful and focused effort, break down injustice and shift its foundations. Donors who seek to align with these earth movers are the ones deserving of the title 'visionary.'

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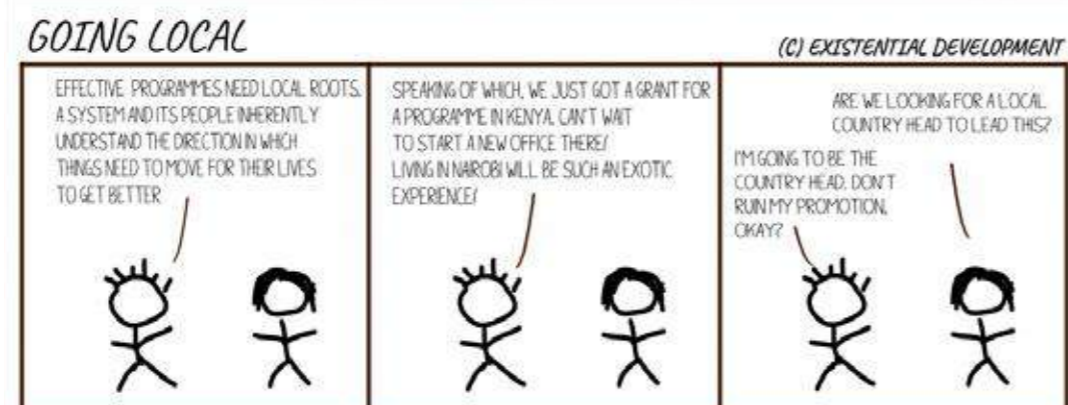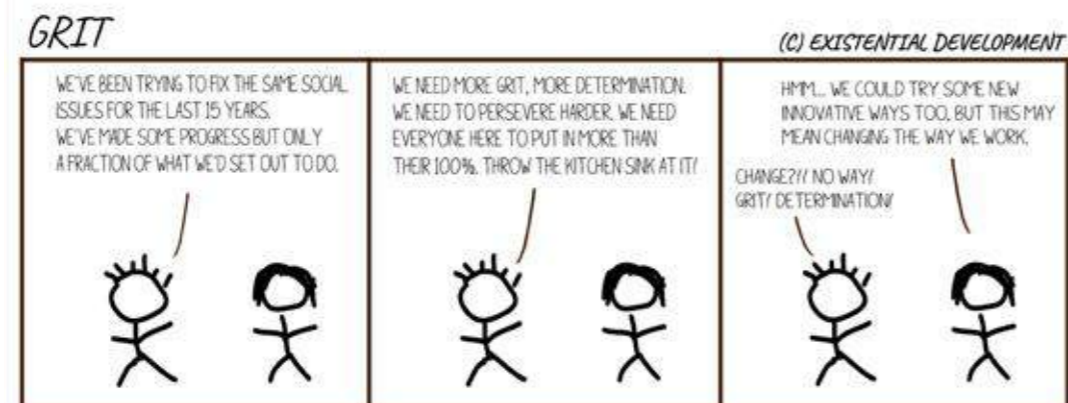
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