

India Development Review

The best reads on development



THE EDUCATION EDITION

The numbers don't add up / Inside out: changing systems from within / Nonprofits don't need to scale dramatically / Working smartly with the government: a funder's perspective / Teamwork makes the dream work / The numbers don't add up / Inside out: changing systems from within



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THE EDUCATION EDITION

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India Development Review (IDR), produced in partnership with Ashoka University's Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy, is the country's first independent online media platform for leaders in the development community.

Our mission is to advance knowledge on social impact in India. We publish ideas, opinion, analysis and lessons from real-world practice. Although the development community in India has a vast trove of expertise and wisdom on advancing social change, that knowledge often resides in silos, either locked in people's heads, or buried within organisations.

We founded IDR as a nonprofit in April 2017 with the objective of surfacing these ideas, experiences and practices, so that together we can do more and do right by the millions of Indians whom we work with and for.

We know that knowledge is only a part of the solution for any complex problem; but we also know that it is a crucial part. Limited access to learning, insights, evidence and best practices constrains what we can achieve—both individually with our programmes and money, and also collectively as a sector seeking to create impact.

We invite experts—researchers, nonprofits, donors, government officials, academics and consultants—to share their perspectives on critical yet under-reported topics. We ask the hard questions, highlight voices on issues that matter, and talk about our sector's successes and failures.

As a platform for Indian voices, we are committed to reflecting the diversity, complexity, and inventiveness of the sector.

In the pages that follow, we have featured a few of the education-focused articles that have been published on www.idronline.org. These represent a small cross-section of ideas, approaches and lessons that our sector is grappling with.

For instance, why have learning outcomes in our country not improved despite significant investment over the past few decades? Is money being spent wisely within sub-sectors of education? How can we build more effective models of engagement with the government?

We hope these articles provide answers to at least a handful of questions that India's education sector faces today. Over the coming months, IDR will raise and analyse a host of issues relevant to the social sector—we urge you to join the conversation.

India Development Review

www.idronline.org

The numbers don't add up



Vikash Jha

Investment Associate for Education,
Villgro Innovations Foundation

Despite huge investments by the government and social enterprises, India's education sector continues to be a story of poor learning outcomes and inadequate quality. What lessons can we learn from our unsuccessful experiments so far?

Numbers related to India's education sector are mind-boggling, to say the least. With more than 1.5 million schools (1.1 million of them run by the government) and more than 250 million students enrolled in them, the country's K-12 school system is one of the largest in the world.

India's education market, currently valued at USD 100 billion, is expected to nearly double to USD 180 billion by 2020, fueled by a growth of 30 percent CAGR in the online and digital learning market over the same period.

In terms of government spend, the Union Budget has pegged an outlay of INR 79,685.95 crore for the education sector for 2017-18. Of this, nearly 60 percent (INR 46,356.25 crore) is for the school sector and the rest for higher education.

On the corporate front too, education received the highest amount of CSR funding among all social development activities in 2015-16: 920 National Stock Exchange-listed companies together spent INR 2,042 crore on education, up 30 percent from INR 1,570 crore in FY15.

Add PE money, strategic investments and grants provided by various foundations—and the amount of money in circulation in the education space is quite substantial.

Despite these large investments by both the government and private sector, quality remains unsatisfactory. There is a significant mismatch between education spending trends and learning outcomes that calls for a serious introspection on our education policy and practice.

Where did the money go?

Private capital

The Indian education landscape can broadly be classified

into pre-school, K-12, higher education, tutoring and test prep, vocational training, and multimedia & ICT. According to VCCEdge, of the 289 deals worth USD 919 million registered since 2012, more than 56 percent has gone into test prep and e-learning portals (USD 301.29 million).

Within the test prep segment, learning app maker BYJU's alone received USD 150 million in 2016-17. This was approximately 50 percent of the overall VC money received by all ed-tech companies till December that year (*source: The Economic Times*) and 22 percent of the total money received in the K-12 segment in the last seven years (according to TRACXN report).

That's not all. Even within the K-12 segment, approximately 50 percent of the investments have gone to test prep and e-learning. The graphic on page 6 highlights the distribution of the major equity deals in this segment in the last six years.

This disproportionate investment in certain segments has resulted in some imbalances in the sector:

- New entrepreneurs generally see this as a signal that the segment is lucrative and develop sub-par business models that are not aligned with the objective of improving learning outcomes.
- Public and private investment in earlier stage education (pre-school and K-12) is proving to be insufficient resulting in a large gap in the skills taught and those required by industry. This disparity between the knowledge acquired in school and those evaluated through standardised tests has also resulted in a burgeoning test prep industry.

This, in turn, has diverted funds from the other segments into this lucrative category, setting in motion another cycle of skewed investment patterns.

Government spending

The anomalies in investment are reflected in government allocations as well, but of a different kind.

As against an allocation of INR 5 crore last year, the school assessment programme has been allocated a paltry INR 67 lakh in the 2017-18 budget. Conducting learning assessment in a school system comprising 250 million students in more than 1.4 million schools with this amount is a tough ask, especially when all the players acknowledge that learning outcomes are critical.

On the other hand, the mid-day meal programme has been allocated INR 10,000 crore, up by INR 300 crore from the last budget. This meagre increase is unlikely to create a difference in the functioning of the scheme. However, had this INR 300 crore been allocated to Digital India-e-learning initiative for higher education which has been allocated INR 497 crore) or for the Department of School Education and Literacy (which has a meagre INR 14 lakh budget), both programmes would have benefitted greatly.

Despite all these efforts, why haven't we got it right?

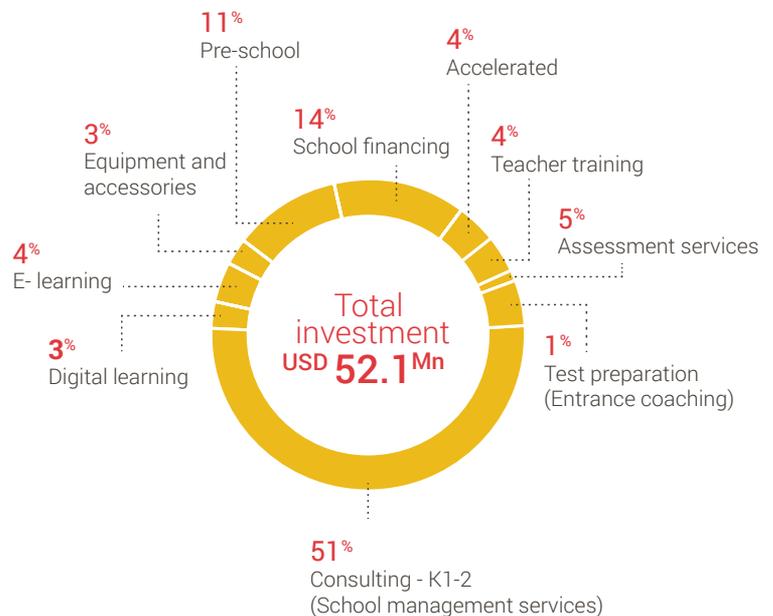
Such skewed investment patterns point to some underlying problems in the country's education sector and the inadequate response to them from various stakeholders, including government, corporates and social enterprises.

Are we solving the wrong problem?

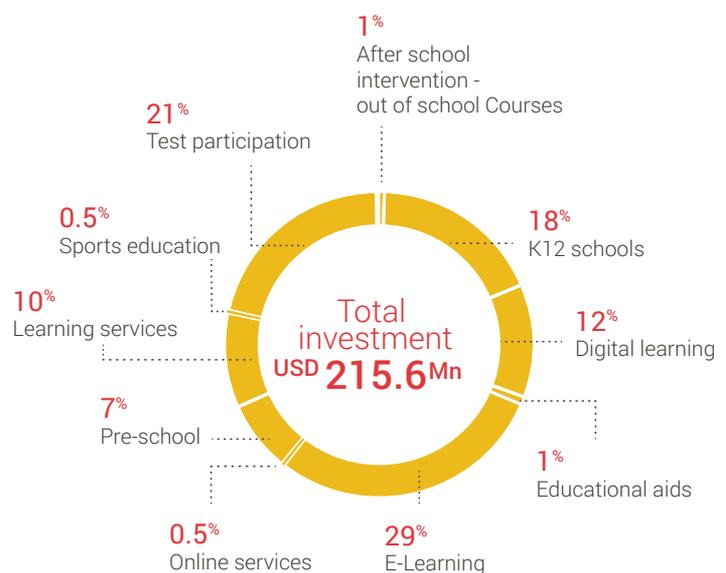
The government went in with the assumption that all teachers were good at teaching and would enhance learning outcomes, regardless of the context they taught in. This assumption allowed them to limit their role to providing access to schools for all children (through RTE) without paying any attention to the existing pedagogical system. That assumption has fallen flat.

Although 'learning outcomes' has become a talking point for policy makers, the government has chosen to not act on it even after admitting the flaw in their theory. The meagre budgetary allocations to school assessments and digital literacy are reflective of the government's lack of focus on educational outcomes.

Impact investment in K-12 education



Mainstream investment in K-12 education



Further, a break-up of government spend shows that only 0.8 percent goes towards capital expenditure, while 80 percent goes towards teachers' salaries, leaving little to be spent on infrastructure creation, which eventually translates into 'ineffective' infrastructure and poor quality of education.

Technology isn't the only answer

Several new-age entrepreneurs in the education sector believed that technology alone would improve the quality of education. Private players, entrepreneurs and tech believers assumed that well-designed products focused only on enhancing the learning outcomes of students could replace teachers in the classroom and solve the problem of poor teacher quality.

This hypothesis led to the rise of business models and products with an inadequate focus on classroom execution and facilitation, leading to the failure of many good ideas that could have been successful if only the entrepreneurs had been careful about this assumption.

Over-regulation

The highly-regulated environment in the education space is a barrier to attracting quality entrepreneurial talent to K-12 education as compared to the higher education segment. The rise of innovative solutions in test prep and digital education can, to an extent, be attributed to this gap.

A blinkered view

There is little comprehension of the fact that the education sector's challenges can not be solved by attacking individual problems: it needs a concerted effort where problems are addressed simultaneously. Thus, teacher absenteeism must be tackled along with the problem of poor quality of teacher training. The problem of test prep must be solved along with the provision of good digital literacy to students in schools, especially in rural and semi-urban areas.

The consequence of not following a multi-pronged approach can be detrimental to the sector, as we realise the distorted impact of such moves only after a few academic cycles. This is because learning outcomes are dependent on the exam cycle of schools and colleges. Any business model being experimented within the K-12 segment therefore takes at least two academic cycles to get validated in terms of its efficacy in creating impact. Conscious acceptance of this fact might help the entrepreneurs and the investors to be more patient and stick to fundamentally better solutions than just looking for easier exits.

However, currently we are constantly in fire-fighting mode, trying to solve the next immediate crises. We realise the inefficacy of such moves only after a few academic cycles, by which time the investment pattern has become further skewed.

“There is a significant mismatch between education spending trends and learning outcomes.”

What can the sector do differently?

The education system cannot be transformed by working in silos. Only when we take a holistic perspective can we talk about how impact investment is helping create the desired change in the sector. Investors, foundations, governments, educationists, activists, entrepreneurs and other stakeholders are investing considerable efforts into the sector. But we need more. Here are a few things to consider:

- The incentives for all stakeholders—parents, teachers, students, principals and school owners—should be understood with the goal of aligning them as far as possible to ensure improvement in learning outcomes. There is a great deal of literature available on the importance of incentive alignment and contract design, and it is time we translated these learnings into practice.
- Impact measurement metrics should be clearly defined and integrity of the data collected from the field should be validated. Pockets of excellence and average numbers on certain chosen parameters are not truly representative of the state of education in India.
- Weak business models that do not have well-defined impact or where the costs are too high compared to the impact generated should be allowed to perish. It is important for the market to let bad business models fail.
- Despite being the second largest education system in the world, there is a dearth of quality faculty at scale. There is a huge need for both quality pre-service and in-service training for teachers.
- Entrepreneurs should recognise that teachers are pivotal to success and must include them while designing the product or service. If there is no value proposition for them in using the product, then product adoption is going to be low and ineffective.
- Corporates should go beyond supporting tuitions, providing books or building school infrastructure with their CSR funds, says Prachi Jain Windlass, director at the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation. “Firms could look to support processes, organisations and initiatives that have clear learning outcome targets, which are also easily measurable,” she says.

When we ask the right questions, identify the issues that really matter, and find and implement the solutions that address these issues, our children might learn better—and the numbers might begin to add up. ■

Inside out: changing systems from within



Approaches to tackling development problems are most effective when they entail working within existing systems. The education sector has managed to do just that and holds important lessons on how to navigate the system successfully.



Azad Oommen

Co-founder,
Global School Leaders

Given the enormity of India's challenges, the most successful nonprofits are the ones that have found pathways to systemic change. These pathways have come either from finding market-based solutions or by engaging with the government.

The idea of working with the government to deliver solutions at scale is a holy grail in the world of nonprofits. Yet, there is no playbook by which nonprofits can understand ways in which to crack this code.

The education sector holds interesting examples of nonprofits that have worked in transformational ways to drive change within the system. We can categorise these approaches into three buckets:

1. Holding the government accountable for delivering on its responsibilities
2. Creating innovation that results in cost-effective ways of service delivery
3. Identifying gaps in policy approaches and creating solutions to meet these needs

1. Holding the government accountable

Since Independence, the government has spent extensive resources on ensuring access to education. This investment has resulted in near universal enrolment in primary school.

After addressing access, the focus of the system needed to shift to improving the quality of education received by students. Nonprofits have played a significant role in ensuring that this shift takes place within the government.

Pratham, one of India's largest nonprofits in the education space, had been working at scale, preparing children to learn in the formal school environment. In 2008, they launched the ASER survey as a means of measuring whether children were learning.

This household based learning assessment has since become the standard by which the progress (or lack thereof) of the education system is measured.

Media, policy makers and civil society pay attention to the results and the ASER Report has been a major influence in turning the attention of state and central governments toward improving the quality of education.

2. Creating innovation for cost-effective service delivery

Free of bureaucracy and institutional inertia, nonprofits can be nimble and innovative in demonstrating cost-effective ways to deliver services.

Organisations such as Gyan Shala in Gujarat emerged during the early 2000s as key innovators in delivering high-quality, low-cost education in alternative settings to government-run schools.

Unlike private low-cost schools, there was an explicit focus on innovation and working closely with the state to create pathways for adoption by the government system. After demonstrating success with its models, Gyan Shala garnered government funding that enabled it to expand significantly.

More recently, a public-private partnership (PPP) model is emerging as an institutional method to harness innovations being developed in the nonprofit sector.

While the aided school model has been a form of PPPs for decades, more recently municipalities like the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai and the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) have experimented with whole school adoption as a means of providing high-quality education and boosting enrolment in government schools.

In both these municipalities, the government has asked nonprofits to operate schools with low enrolment and given them the operational flexibility and control to innovate. Nonprofits do not charge fees and operate these schools at a cost similar to the government's per-child expenditure.

Akanksha, a Mumbai-based nonprofit, operates 21 schools across Mumbai and Pune—students in their schools consistently outperform the average municipal school learning outcomes. ARK, which began the first Delhi-based school under the SDMC policy, has recently won the Best School Award from the municipality.

Nonprofits considering this model, however, require a certain amount of operational funding to manage these schools, as municipalities have been unable to provide timelines for when they will reimburse schools on a per-student basis.

3. Identifying solutions for gaps in policy approaches

From their perspective of being on the outside of the government system, nonprofits can identify gaps in policy approaches and help create solutions to address these.

When we founded Central Square Foundation (CSF) in 2012, one of the challenges we faced was a paucity of insightful data about the education system.

For instance, there was no way of capturing or analysing data on the 18,000-plus teacher education institutions that operate across the country. Given the poor quality of teacher performance, this was a major impediment to the government's ability to identify methods to improve the system.

CSF developed a data portal called *Prashikshak* that was adopted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. It took us nearly two years to develop the initial idea through consultation with various stakeholders, create and test a prototype, and then work with the ministry to roll out the larger-scale implementation.

Today, the system—which requires teacher education institutes to disclose information about their resources and performance—serves as the primary data mechanism on the state of teacher education institutes in India.

In conclusion

These three examples are different ways in which nonprofits have worked collaboratively with governments to foster change in the education system.

As many nonprofits have experienced, working with the government requires patience, as frequent administrative leadership changes result in the need for consistent engagement and education to ensure that the project remains relevant.

Although not all nonprofits have the resources to work with the government, many more need to be proactive about developing partnerships to expand their reach and create systemic change that magnifies their impact. ■

Nonprofits don't need to **scale** dramatically



Anil Swarup

Secretary, Department of School Education
and Literacy, Government of India.

Real change can happen in India's education sector if the government and civil society work together. The solutions lie closer to home than we think.



When I took over as Secretary of Education, I received plenty of advice from experts on how education should be managed in this country. My counter to them was, if the advice were as simple as they were making it out to be, why hadn't things changed on the ground in all these years?

Tragically we have been looking for solutions in Iceland, Scotland, England, Holland, and Finland; but not in the homeland. So I thought I might as well see what was happening here, and that's what triggered the idea of travelling to over 20 states in the first few months to discover what the problems were. And to my amazement, I found solutions.

I saw that the government and nonprofits, on their own or working in tandem, were doing great work and had come up with solutions to a large number of problems. So I came back excited, and resolved that instead of importing solutions—many of which come from alien contexts and require piloting to see what works here—we should look to Indian examples. The solutions are here.

A sharp focus on the teacher value chain will change how education happens in India.

Teachers are pivotal to the education system. Though I had heard this from advisers and also experienced this during my travels, discussing it with experts in the education space confirmed that the right way forward would be to set this value chain right.

We are looking at the entire continuum of a teacher's role—from introducing rigorous pre-service training, skills testing and regular in-service training, to addressing issues related to absenteeism, administrative responsibilities and quality of teaching. Over the next 4-5 months, we will put an end to the rampant frauds in B.Ed colleges. NCTE has already sought affidavits from them, and the 40 percent that haven't responded will soon lose their affiliation.

“An idea is worth its salt if it is politically acceptable, socially desirable, technologically feasible, financially viable and administratively doable.”

In addition, we are putting in place a system to assess the quality of pre-service training at these colleges. In order to help students evaluate these colleges, we have hired a third-party agency, Quality Council of India, to rate them.

We are also looking at introducing a CAT- or SAT-like examination for entry into the teaching profession and a detailed induction programme for new teachers.

Absenteeism is a big problem among teachers, with 25-28 percent not showing up for work. Understanding the context is critical to finding a solution to this phenomenon. In Kerala, for instance, teachers can't afford not to go to school because the community does not take kindly to absenteeism.

In Uttar Pradesh, however, teachers consider it their right to remain absent at will: some of them participate in local politics and it is quite common for them to seek transfers to schools located close to their political work. Their primary interest in politics rather than in teaching, contributes to the absenteeism in UP schools. We therefore proposed that once a teacher is assigned to a school, s/he can be transferred only in the case of a promotion—similar to the system followed by the civil services.

Administrative burden is the other reason for absenteeism. For example, teachers have to send detailed hand-written administrative reports to the government. Going forward, all requirements will be housed in a tablet, through which documentation can be uploaded once every two weeks. Such measures will reduce the teachers' drudgery. Additionally, these tablets will mark biometric attendance of teachers and feature training videos to up-skill them.

A platform to facilitate greater collaboration between civil society and the government.

After having identified teachers as a key part of the solution, we held intensive workshops with more than a hundred nonprofits to understand what they were doing in the field of education, how they could scale their work, and what support they needed from the state and central governments.

Given the number of successful examples from across the country, we realised that we don't really need to run pilot programmes before scaling. Pilots often involve huge resources because the objective is to prove the model. Such resources, however, are seldom available when scaling. An idea is worth its salt if it is politically acceptable, socially desirable, technologically feasible, financially viable and administratively doable.

We had seen solutions on the ground that met these conditions; all we had to do was give states an opportunity to choose the ones they considered feasible.

So I asked the nonprofits to draft MoUs. It was at this point that we thought of holding regional workshops, where we could road-show the nonprofits' work and these MoUs, and generate interest within state governments for these solutions.

After these workshops, we are planning more detailed state-level workshops with nonprofits to enable more buy-in across stakeholders.

We are also launching a portal in a few months, which will serve as a 'marriage bureau' for nonprofits and states. It will list the gaps identified by the states, what nonprofits have to offer, and also enable them to negotiate on the platform.

When partnerships with the nonprofits do materialise, the government does not expect them to scale dramatically. The nonprofits might choose to expand from three districts to four—it is entirely their call. Ultimately, the goal is that the government funds the programme and takes over.

This has already started happening. For example, Akshara Foundation has been working in Karnataka. They just signed an MoU for expansion into Orissa, funded fully by the state government.

The results will begin to show this year.

Implementation of these plans will happen this year. Intermediate outputs will be visible within this time frame, while long-term outcomes will take some time.

From August 1, we are introducing GPS-enabled tablets in schools in Chhattisgarh. These will perform a number of functions, including taking biometric attendance of teachers. We will review progress in three months and, by December 31, we will have taken a decision on whether to launch this programme in other states. Similarly, we are launching a national digital platform for teachers in July and will monitor its performance.

Intermediate outputs will be visible within the year. Some of the outcomes (such as the impact of the action taken

“The government does not expect nonprofits to scale dramatically. They can choose to expand at their pace; it is entirely their call.”



to regulate B.Ed colleges) are longer term, but much of the implementation will take place this year. We will use technology for real-time monitoring of progress and to help identify and correct any department inefficiencies.

There are always limitations with implementation.

The fundamental limitation is attitude. You have to make people believe that alternative scenarios are possible, even if little has changed in the past. By showcasing what is already working, the ideas become more saleable.

Existing institutions within the system also inhibit the flow of ideas and new approaches. For example, *aanganwadis* are integrated with schooling in Rajasthan, but not in other states. The absence of this essential integration creates constraints with

implementation and outcomes. There are also always limitations around finance and human resources.

The private sector can provide financial and technological support.

Companies can participate in the education sector by using their CSR funds and providing technological support. With the kind of coordinated effort we are now seeing in education, companies can fund projects that fit within a larger purpose, one that is aligned with national priorities.

They will derive comfort from the fact that progress is being monitored, and due diligence has been carried out on the nonprofit partners. This is a marked difference from companies supporting a number of small initiatives scattered across different locations and which might have limited impact. ■

Working **smartly** with the government: a funder's perspective



Paresh Parasnis

CEO,
Piramal Foundation

Since private sector funders have only a minuscule proportion of the funds and reach that governments have, they must focus on co-creating solutions that leverage the latter's infrastructure and last mile connect.



A simple truth confronts funders setting out to make a difference in the Indian social sector: if you truly want to address this country's unserved and unmet needs, you must be prepared to think and design for scale. And this is not possible without engaging with the government. Compared to any funder, local, district, state or central governments have the closest understanding of any issue at the grassroots. They also have more funds and infrastructure at their disposal than any other contributor in the social sector.

For instance, government departments (related to health and family welfare, education, water and sanitation), have a cumulative annual budget of around INR 6,00,000 crore. Non-government funders, including international donor agencies, on the other hand, contribute approximately less than 2 percent of that figure. Funds mandated under CSR would probably add another percentage point.

All of which underpins the fact that the government is an important link and a valuable partner for funders as well as organisations working in the social sector.

Given the investments available with the government and the sheer reach of its infrastructure, co-creating solutions to be delivered through the government machinery therefore appears to be one of the most sustainable ways to bring about systemic change.

So how can private sector funders contribute to building a collaborative relationship? Here's how:

- Providing risk capital
- Creating shared ownership with government around untested solutions
- Providing field level support and project management skills



Non-government funding is less than 3 percent of the overall funds available for the development sector.

“The government needs to see proof of concept and demonstrated results for the programme.”

- Engaging with communities in a sustained and long-term fashion through the nonprofits you fund
- Focusing on outcomes

To put it simply, you need to invest time, money and patience, and be willing to continuously pilot, demonstrate and engage.

Getting governments interested

In the initial stages, when you (or the nonprofit you support) approach a government with a pilot idea, the latter's willingness to partner with you and provide financial support could be low. The government needs to see proof of concept and demonstrated results for the programme—it needs to be convinced that the programme works, and that it can work at scale. A good way to start engaging with a government is to:

- Identify what the government does not have and offer to bridge that gap, by providing complementary skills that are solutions-focused.
- Ask for the difficult districts, where the government has faced challenges and has not been able to move the needle much over time.
- Pilot your programme, making sure that you don't replicate the government's system.
- Use your funds as risk capital. Experiment with your money, invest in generating evidence for the programme, and prove your hypothesis.

Making the partnership work

Piramal Swasthya has been working in small, remote tribal villages in the Araku region of Andhra Pradesh with the goal of reducing maternal and child mortality in the communities through various interventions, including the use of technology. We started our work in late 2012 in 180 habitations in Araku. In the last two years, there hasn't been a single maternal death.

If you apply a numbers lens, no maternal death in 180 habitations means nothing when 55,000 new mothers die every year. But then you consider that Araku is a tribal area. And maternal deaths in tribal areas in India have stayed stubbornly high as compared to the national decline in the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR). The government acknowledges that Swasthya is working closely with its district medical and health offices, complementing its resources and facilities.

Therefore, today, if they ask us to replicate this model in other tribal blocks/districts, the ROI on Swasthya's model of four years of investment and engagement makes sense.

Invest, pilot, demonstrate, expand. Repeat.

We have seen this happen with our education programme as well. In 2007, when Aditya Natraj started the Principal Leadership Programme to focus on school leadership as a way to improve learning outcomes for children, it was not on the government's radar. In fact, they were puzzled as to why anyone would focus on training headmasters instead of just working with the children and their teachers.

Piramal Foundation for Education Leadership (PFEL) managed to convince the government to give them 10 schools to start with. We kept focusing on interim evidence such as reduced drop-out rates, higher enrolment in government schools versus private schools, and improvement in learning outcomes, to convince the government to give us more schools in more districts. Five years later, PFEL invested in a randomised control trial to demonstrate the impact of this approach on learning outcomes of children.

In 2014, the PFEL school leadership programme became an important part of the National Council of School Leadership (NCSL) under the Ministry of Human Resource Development. Today it works closely with NCSL to help create the framework on developing school leadership across multiple states.

To reiterate, knowing that non-government money is less than 3 percent of the overall funds for the development sector, let us use that money as a catalyst to innovate, pilot and demonstrate, while making sure that it is closely aligned with the government's gap areas and needs.

Bring your long-term thinking and risk appetite to the sector.

Developing new solutions collaboratively requires not just funding, but also technical and management skills, immense patience, persistence, and a willingness to learn from failures. It is not easy and not everyone might have the appetite to do this. But there are philanthropists who have successfully built and run businesses at scale, who have been patient long-term investors, and who have seen the value of risk capital and what it can truly achieve.

It is far sighted individuals like these and their foundations, who might fund and support organisations that aim to work in an integrated manner with the government and create impact at scale.

Because if one truly wants to impact the lives of millions of Indians, working with the government cannot and should not be an afterthought. ■

Teamwork makes the dream work



Vidya Shah

CEO,
EdelGive Foundation

Collaborative models can deliver great results and scale if managed efficiently and sensitively. EdelGive Foundation's experience leading a USD 7 million coalition offers insights into the art of making multiple stakeholders work for common outcomes.



Until early 2015, EdelGive, then just about seven years old, was in the business of grant-making with a venture philanthropy approach. We had begun to be known for three things: first, as a funder with an open and transparent relationship with its nonprofit partners; second, having a strong commitment to building their organisation capacity; and third, leading a fledgling yet dogged effort at building a collaborative network of funding partnerships.

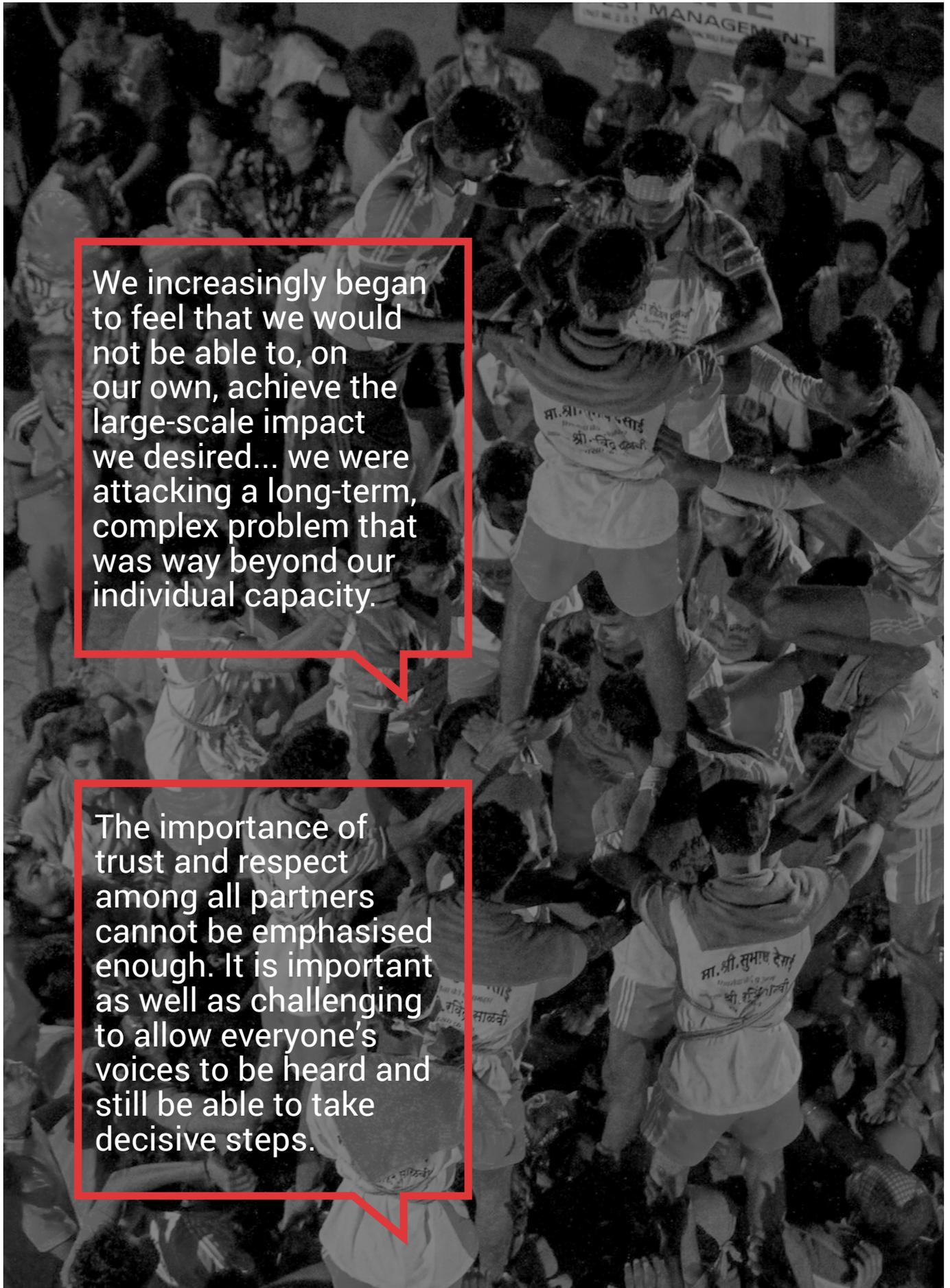
Of these, pushing the collaboration agenda was particularly difficult because we had neither the credentials nor the 'war chest' of our more established peers. What we did have was in-depth knowledge of over 50 grassroots organisations in 13 states in India, robust due diligence, monitoring and capacity building processes, and a small group of like-minded donors co-funding our projects.

Despite this, we increasingly began to feel that we would not be able to, on our own, achieve the large-scale impact we desired. We were humbled by the realisation that we were attacking a long-term, complex problem that was way beyond our individual capacity.

Our early efforts at collaboration were marked by us hosting and leading discussions with funders, largely based on what may be best described as information sharing and coordination.

It was a marvellous case of serendipity that two things happened later that year. First, there was increasing buzz around Collective Impact, with several case studies surfacing in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. We were fascinated by its promise.

More importantly, though, we got a chance to meet senior officials of Maharashtra's education department, and see its vision document embodied in *Pragat Shaikshanik Maharashtra* or PSM.



We increasingly began to feel that we would not be able to, on our own, achieve the large-scale impact we desired... we were attacking a long-term, complex problem that was way beyond our individual capacity.

The importance of trust and respect among all partners cannot be emphasised enough. It is important as well as challenging to allow everyone's voices to be heard and still be able to take decisive steps.

PSM articulated the government's vision to improve learning outcomes in the state through a set of 25 measurable metrics. There was, however, an acknowledgement of the need for support of private players to supplement elements of PSM that the government wouldn't be able to deliver.

This was mainly around capacity building of government functionaries (from the district education officer at the top to the *kendrapramukh* at the bottom). Such support, along with interventions in schools and communities, would make PSM robust and sustainable.

These early discussions with the Government of Maharashtra led to the creation of the EdelGive Coalition for Education or ECE in mid-2016.

We took up four special focus districts (SFDs) of Maharashtra—Amravati, Gadchiroli, Nandurbar and Parbhani—through an MoU with the government, partnered with Kaivalya Education Foundation and Gyan Prakash Foundation as our implementing partners on the ground, and set ourselves up as anchor funders for a USD 7 million, 5-year project.

For Phase I of the project, which began in July 2016, Tata Trusts and SDM Trust are our funding partners. The Coalition will work in 286 schools in the four SFDs and contribute directly towards enhancement in learning levels in language and mathematics for over 27,500 children.

The project will provide on-field support for government officials at multiple levels in the education system, help them access and use education data for decision making, improve classroom processes and instruction, undertake demand-based teacher training and strengthen school-home linkages.

The building blocks

It is still early days but we believe that we have invested time and thought in building certain foundational structures necessary for successful collaboration:

The leadership intent

There is a clearly articulated buy-in of the process and outcome from all the partners in the coalition. There is a desire to learn from the more experienced members and a willingness to engage in a long journey that is necessarily adaptive and involves adjustments over time.

A process to review and monitor

We have worked very hard to put in place structures and processes of review, monitoring and communication. Operational and strategic review

processes—planned and calendarised in advance—aid clear decision making and course correction. The structure also provides for an equal platform for all partners to communicate and contribute even as there is clarity and acceptance that leadership rests in EdelGive Foundation.

The flexibility factor

All of us understand the risks in social development and, therefore, the need for flexibility. There is no guarantee that known and recognised strategies are a fail-proof means of achieving impact. We may ignore unproven and untested ideas for change if we are short-term oriented. We are, therefore, open to the idea of adapting our strategies to changed circumstances and expectations, as long as we have had thoughtful conversations about them.

The hiccups

But as with anything new and collaborative, there are challenges too.

It is very difficult to convince funding partners of the efficacy of working with government. The risks perceived are high—any 'regime' change or political uncertainty is perceived as an impediment to speedy execution. We have tried to mitigate this risk by building strong local relationships at all levels of the government (such as district, block and beat) and with officials who believe in the value of the programme.

Implementing partners, despite their extensive experience, have had to adjust to new geographies, especially the four SFDs, which are among the toughest districts in the country. This is compelling them to use the more unfamiliar 'dial' approach, rather than the 'switch' approach, which involves a gradual adjustment—piloting, testing, then adopting—rather than a full-scale implementation based on past techniques. That requires a lot of maturity in both the implementing nonprofits as well as the funders.

Finally, the importance of trust and respect among all partners cannot be emphasised enough. It is important as well as challenging to allow everyone's voices to be heard and still be able to take decisive steps.

We recognise, however, that this is only the beginning of a long journey. The long-term goal post is to replicate the programme across several districts in Maharashtra and other states of India.

That will need new funding and implementing partners. It will involve building new relationships, learning from other collaborative efforts and refining the programme even as we deal with execution challenges on the ground. ■

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