Impact India

Viewpoint
Do It the Hard Way
By Eric Stowe

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Do It the Hard Way

TO ENSURE THAT ITS CLEAN-WATER INITIATIVES WILL STICK AND GROW, SPLASH WORKS WITH LOCAL PARTNERS THAT WILL TAKE OVER WHEN IT MOVES ON.

�֎ *By Eric Stowe*

If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere," Frank Sinatra sang in his hit recording "New York, New York." At Splash, the small NGO that I lead, that is sort of how we feel about Kolkata, India. Our goal there is to provide clean water to every public school in the city—around 2,000 in total, serving more than 400,000 children—and to do so by 2020. It won't be easy. But if we can "make it there . . ."

Splash is a Seattle-based international charity dedicated to bringing clean drinking water, along with hygiene and sanitation, to millions of children living in urban poverty in the developing world. We undertake this work primarily in schools, hospitals, shelters, and orphanages—the places with high concentrations of the poorest kids.

Our organization, with its $4 million budget, is simply too small to achieve the global impact we seek if we try to do it alone. So rather than focus on growing our organizational footprint, we seek scale by developing strategic partnerships with NGOs, governments, and businesses that have the wherewithal—capacity, money, infrastructure, and talent—to develop, sustain, and grow our safe-water projects long after we are gone. And we will be gone, as soon as we have helped build a local operation that has had proven impact and is sustainable as well as replicable by local people and institutions.

THE RULES WE WORK BY

Our core theory is that we can leverage international philanthropy best by creating the conditions for local success to stick and then spread.

In practice, we rely on four core precepts to guide our work: Co-create, Prove Scale, Hand Over, and Exit.

- Co-create requires that our offices and staff be primarily local, and that the model we design for a given location combines our proven core international methods with local modifications.
- Prove Scale implies that we have to substantiate the effectiveness of our product and validate our impact in ways that can withstand any academic, political, financial, or social criticism on grounds that a project is too small, exclusionary, isolated, or expensive. To this end, we look at total saturation models—100 percent coverage of whatever set of

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child-serving institutions we choose to target in a given location—within large cities, not small, one-off pilot projects.

- Hand Over requires that, upon reaching 100 percent coverage, Splash transfer ownership of the structure, networks, operational knowledge, and relationships we have built to local partners rather than continue building a presence in the country.
- Exit means we have to build the entire ecosystem to effectively and sustainably withstand our departure.

When we adhere to those precepts, we're confident that our work has been successful and that it will go on without us.

STARTING WITH THE TOUGHEST CHALLENGES

Our efforts to date have us working with the public, private, and social sectors in Nepal, China, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, and, most recently, India and Bangladesh. And ironic though it may sound, we have found that it makes sense to take on the toughest challenges in any given country first. That's because attaining 100 percent coverage in the largest, most complicated cities forces several things to happen concurrently:

- Local staffing, supply chains, businesses, and markets develop or become stronger. (You can't get to 100 percent coverage without those ingredients.)
- Local governments engage in a collaborative way, and other stakeholders nurture those relationships.
- Stakeholders also see how our core model, and the necessary operational knowledge, can adapt as needed to accommodate variations among the institutions served. (One hundred percent coverage requires a fine calibration of local flexibility and organizational consistency within the implementation model.)

Photograph courtesy of Eric Stowe

■ The impact is proven, and we are able to create and provide clear roadmaps for success so that local organizations and governments are able to replicate that same model in second-tier cities and markets going forward.

What we have learned is that if all this can happen in Kathmandu, Nepal, and Addis Ababa, Ethiopa, there are no other mid- to large-sized cities in those countries where the model loses traction or applicability. In other words, if we succeed in the most complex urban environment a country has to offer, we can succeed anywhere in that country. Tackling the most difficult city

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first gives us the most leverage for achieving our primary goals of local ownership and scaled replication of our model.

WHY WE CHOSE KOLKATA

That's why in India, which is more a continent than a country in size and regional and political diversity, we decided to start in Kolkata—the most daunting of the options we considered. What precisely made Kolkata the right choice for us? With a metropolitan area population of just over 14 million, it is the third-largest urban area in the country (after Mumbai and Delhi), has a population density of 63,000 people per square mile, and is home to more than one million children under the age of seven and more than five million school-age children. Located on the banks of the Hooghly River within the lower Ganges Delta of eastern India, the city has a plentiful water supply, but the water is typically contaminated.

This is the kind of place where Splash works best: one with a high volume of unclean water in dense urban settings with a large number of underserved and marginalized children. Size alone would have qualified Kolkata as an exceptional proof point. But for the city to act as a guide for scale, the environment had to be seriously challenging in other respects as well. Kolkata certainly met those criteria.

Politically, the West Bengal state government has been at odds with the national government for some time, a trend that has only been magnified under the new prime minister, Narendra Modi. Although Kolkata is considered the business capital of East India, many large companies have fled to other states with less rigid regulatory environments. West Bengal is the fifth poorest state in India, with nearly a quarter of its urban population living below the poverty line, and Kolkata has one of the highest slum populations of any Indian city. An influx of migrants from Bangladesh and other neighboring countries (as well as from other Indian states) has severely taxed an already anemic social safety net. Although there are certainly deep and desperate pockets of poverty in every major city in India, Kolkata is one of the toughest proving grounds for building a model that, if proven there, can be replicated at scale in any other Indian city of similar size.

We have found some bright spots at the local level in the form of tenacious and progressive governmental education officials, as well as some national policies that are helping to fuel our work in Kolkata. India's national Ministry of Human Resource Development, in partnership with state and local governments, is implementing a program for the universalization of elementary education via the Right to Education Act of 2009. Meanwhile a nationwide campaign (called Swachh Bharat Abhiyan) launched by the government of India last year aims to revitalize sanitation infrastructure throughout the country, with a focus on the poor and a heavy emphasis on toilets. Between Swachh Bharat and the Right to Education Act's requirements, there are now clear and timely national-to-local mandates regarding WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) programs in schools. As yet, however, there are few (if any) clear baselines for analyzing present needs or road maps for interventions to meet those needs in urban settings.

LOOKING GIFT HORSES IN THE MOUTH

Splash expects a rough road as we try to enlist the support of the state and national governments, figure out how much of the high cost for the work in Kolkata should be carried by which partners, create a prospectus for potential private sector and NGO investors, and prepare to exit India post-2020. Yet we remain convinced that we have chosen the right path for achieving the impact we seek. In fact, so firm is our belief that we have turned down significant investment offers (for far more financial support than we have ever received for any single initiative to date) by organizations interested in having us take our model first to other Indian cities.

In turning down these offers, we have violated the old adage about never looking a gift horse in the mouth. Difficult as it can be, though, NGOs need to do that sometimes in order to keep from being distracted from their missions and core values. And by choosing not to go down some of the easier paths we might have taken in India, Splash will come away with much more robust learning and tools (research tools, programmatic models, financial forecasts and plans, and monitoring and evaluation systems) than we otherwise would have developed, to hand off to those who will continue the work there when we have departed.

In the end, at least one lesson we have learned at Splash can be boiled down to something simple: If you want truly sustainable and replicable solutions from your philanthropic work, do it the hard way. ✤