

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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*Viewpoint*  
**From the Ground Up**  
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# From the Ground Up

TOP-DOWN DEVELOPMENT DOESN'T WORK. WHAT'S NEEDED IS A "PULL MODEL" CREATED BY LOCALS, FUNDERS, AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES WORKING TOGETHER AS EQUALS.

✱ BY PREETI MANN & AMIT CHANDRA

**G**lobal developmental mandates and economic planning models often reduce India's poor to a set of abstract data. Along with funding flows, these forces traditionally dictate developmental agendas that, all too frequently, fail to reflect the real, micro-level needs of communities. What's more, people rarely get to choose the projects and programs that land in their backyards; too often, they are subjected to development instead.

As a result, many efforts labeled as "progress" in India—whether they're focused on industrialization, urbanization, modernization, or liberalization—have led to increased marginalization and inequality for the rural poor. Some people have rightly attributed this bitter irony to the inability of locals to be part of the process. In response, "participatory development" has become development's new avatar, and the rhetoric is replete with promises of empowerment and inclusion. But the fixes have been mostly semantic. In practice, there's been little change in most outcomes and realities on the ground.

More specifically, the vast checklists that constitute participatory exercises only give an impression of empowering the locals. Meantime, top-down directives, tight project timelines, and resource constraints (both capital and human) have ensured that participation remains but a "feel good" factor in many cases. Simply put, local populations' participation is seen as part of a donor's or developer's project when what's needed is the opposite: donors and developers participating in projects that are locally driven.

Occasionally, donors and recipients have worked collaboratively to create a "pull" model of development where people's needs, in-depth research, and collaborative discussions among all stakeholders lead to open-ended solutions and issue-specific programs and projects. The end result is sustainable social impact for groups of people in targeted locations.

Barefoot College is an example of the pull model. Despite the challenges of this approach, it represents the outlines of a model that can effect holistic and sustainable development. Established in Tilonia, a small village in rural Rajasthan, in 1972, Barefoot College operates on the core belief that local communities are fundamentally equipped to identify and provide for their own needs, without relying on external expert interventions. Today, with the help of Barefoot College's collaboration, the

villagers of Tilonia have self-reliant solutions in solar electricity, health care, education, wasteland management, handicrafts, ecology and conservation, and water and sanitation, to name a few. Barefoot College has now extended its reach to more than 80 countries. Five principles are integral to Barefoot College's success: equality, collectiveness, self-reliance, decentralization, and austerity. They make a good template for revising Indian development.

## REIMAGINING SOCIAL CHANGE

**T**o paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, we believe that development has to be of the people, by the people, and for the people. Reimagining the development promise in this way is significant as it overlays two important emerging trends within India: One is that youth are increasingly looking to create social impact. The other is that there's a significant and growing pool of Indian corporate and private philanthropic capital (totaling approximately \$2 billion on its own as of this writing, separate from development aid and foundation funds) waiting to be put to use. This money is accumulating as the result of India's Corporate Social Responsibility law, passed in 2013, requiring large Indian companies to spend 2 percent of their net profits on social issues.

As the bulk of this capital is not yet tied into the development machine, a genuine opportunity is opening up to find ways to match these funds directly with the needs of Indian people. Such a fresh look at social impact will require disconnecting from the lures of global mandates, such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, that tend to steer agencies and organizations toward central planning and all its attendant traps.

Philanthropists will also need to withstand the temptation of committing funds before deeply understanding a region and its people. The rule



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of thumb is: Don't believe what you first hear. Communities have learned to give answers that the representatives of development agencies want to hear because they fear losing whatever benefits are being offered: vaccination programs, toilets, a road, a hand-pump. But by doing this, they may be masking deeper or more urgent needs, or inadvertently steering potential philanthropists in the wrong direction. Also, for some, the world of development is a source of employment or, sadly, easy corruption.

Taking the time up front to conduct sound ethnographic research—getting to know the people and the region—is a good way to surface a community's real concerns, stories, norms, attitudes, and aspirations.

One lesson that emergent philanthropy could take away from traditional philanthropists is to commit to regions and communities over the long term.

Slowing down the overall investment process in this way enables philanthropists to think *with*, and not *for*, the locals.

Making public any knowledge gained through this research is also worth considering. Doing so enables locals to contribute to, challenge, or verify findings. Public databases can also help disseminate information and enable peer-to-peer learning among NGOs, philanthropists, policymakers, and others by showcasing lessons learned, mistakes, and best practices.

The quality of the knowledge captured in social impact investigations will determine its ultimate value. Bear in mind: Locals may not have all the answers to issues, and their answers may not be better or different than those of the outsider. What's more, communities are not homogeneous, and there is no one version of local knowledge. This process is an exercise in unearthing power relations within a community, and understanding how power and perspective cut across gender, caste, and age. The goal is to surface knowledge that accurately captures the community's taproot issues, not to prioritize one voice over another.

Local leadership is critical to the success of any bottom-up effort. But local leaders (and potential leaders) may not immediately be apparent. Philanthropists may need to invest in developing local leaders and engaging with popular movements, community-based organizations, and grassroots activist groups that are close to locals. Liaising with these people, who are typically undersupported and underacknowledged, will help enable a strong framework for inclusion.

These efforts will also foster better citizenship at the grassroots level. Citizenship in this sense means that inhabitants know their rights and obligations, have the capacity to think critically, and operate according

to frameworks for justice and ethics. Such a strong citizenry also upholds and demands transparency and accountability.

#### SUSTAINABILITY, MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT, AND MEASUREMENT

Since material development—schools, roads, sanitation—is easy to quantify and measure, funders and developers frequently favor such “safe” projects. But funders also need to keep an eye on longer-term outcomes and end goals. Holistic solutions need patient people and patient capital. Philanthropists will therefore need to develop an appetite for the long haul and not be shy to course-correct or admit failures.

Put more specifically, the usual two- to five-year timelines aren't sufficient to address cultural, social, or behavioral issues. For instance, the issue of female child mortality cannot be remedied through solutions such as making girls' education free or giving incentives to raise girls. While such approaches are relatively easy to monitor, they address only the tip of the problem. We're not suggesting that

material development is not important. It is. But material solutions alone cannot solve sociocultural problems. Investing in changing attitudes and behaviors, while intangible and difficult to measure, takes a longer-term commitment.

Systemic social problems rarely disappear with a onetime or single type of intervention. Complex by nature, these issues require an understanding of the interlocking factors that underlie them. Some solutions involve generational changes. In this regard, one lesson that emergent philanthropy could take away from traditional philanthropists is to commit to regions and communities over the long term.

In turning away from bolt-on solutions, philanthropists will need to revamp their grantmaking processes, offering more open-ended support. Doing so will likely benefit grantees who may be reluctant to be honest about how change is adding up on the ground. It will mean making accountability genuinely collaborative, from those who control the purse strings to the last person on the ground. If only one partner is accountable, the path to social change can never be inclusive or participatory.

#### THE ISSUE OF SCALE

A brief word on scalability, especially as philanthropists seek to bring business practices to bear to accomplish social change in India's poorest regions: Bottom-up change is almost by definition a region- and custom-specific undertaking. The solution that really helps one community may not be easily replicable on a grand stage.

What's needed is a more flexible model that enables diverse and organically evolving programs. Barefoot College found this to be the case with its work in Tilonia. The guiding principles that led to success there were equality and equitability, involving all sections of the society, strengthening local leadership, decentralization, and self-reliance. And the main takeaway? A successful pull effort requires locals, funders, and social impact agencies to interact as equals—but the agenda needs to belong to the locals. ■