

THE RISE OF COLLABORATIVES FOR SOCIAL IMPACT

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Role of NGOs, SHGs, Donors & Charities, and Institutional & other Stakeholders in Development Process

In early 2020, The Bridgespan Group released a report, [“Philanthropic Collaboratives in India: The Power of Many”](#), that examined alliances between development sector actors — funders, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governments. Those stakeholders bet that their combined funding, skills and assets would make the impact of collaboratives greater than the sum of their parts.

And, yet, at the time, India had few philanthropic collaboratives. This is no longer the case.

Co-created by three or more independent actors, including at least one funder, a philanthropic collaborative pursues a shared vision and strategy for social impact. In 2019, we studied 15 such collaboratives in India. Since then, at least 18 more collaboratives have come together. These include COVID ActionCollab, India Protectors Alliance, The Future of Impact Collaborative, and The Coalition for Women Empowerment.

Sixteen of these operate across multiple States. Most focus on implementing social programmes and mobilising funding. Swasth, for instance, has created a one-stop tele-medicine portal, while ACT Grants pools financial resources for innovations in tackling COVID.

Collaboratives are also mobilising greater funding. The annual budgets of the 13 collaboratives in 2019 ranged from 50 lakh to 50 crore. In comparison, multi-year financial commitments for eight of the new collaboratives range from 2 crore to 600 crore (budget data is not available for the other 10). At least three of them aim to raise about 100 crore.

There is growing emphasis on inclusion, equity, and justice. The new generation of collaboratives increasingly focuses on marginalised communities such as informal waste pickers, front-line workers, and migrant labour.

The devastation caused to lives and livelihoods by the novel coronavirus pandemic is clearly driving organisations to work collectively. Several partnerships now involve businesses, harnessing the power of private capital for social good.

Consider the Migrants Resilience Collaborative (MRC).

Soon after the nation-wide COVID-19 lockdown on March 24, 2020, the NGO Jan Sahas released the results of a survey that revealed the lockdown’s disproportionate impact on migrant workers. Of the 3,196 migrant construction workers interviewed, a staggering 90% had lost their source of income and 62% were unaware of the Government’s emergency assistance efforts.

India has approximately 140 million migrant workers. Jan Sahas’ founder, Ashif Shaikh, concluded that the scale of the problem far outstripped the capabilities of any single NGO and necessitated collaboration. Jan Sahas, in partnership with EdelGive Foundation, Global Development Network and other organisations, launched MRC, whose goal is to facilitate relief for more than 10 million migrant workers across 13 States. More than 40 community-based organisations, 25 companies and industry associations, and three State governments have partnered with MRC.

Although collaboratives can increase the odds of achieving outsize impact, collaboration is

complicated. Building trust across multiple partners and balancing their priorities and the collaborative's goals can be challenging. In 2020, we found that it took several years for collaboratives to move from “coming together” — where they define their shared mission and strategy — to actually “working together” and delivering results.

This new crop of collaboratives is forming relatively faster. Of the 18 we examined, 15 are already “working together”. No doubt, the pandemic has spurred collaboratives to raise funds and evolve swiftly. Equally important for MRC has been its credibility and clarity.

Since 2000, Jan Sahas has worked to end commercial sexual exploitation and forced labour, focusing on migrant workers from socially excluded communities; 90% of Jan Sahas' staff comes from the communities it serves. Jan Sahas could hence draw on a deep well of trust and relationships for MRC.

To ensure alignment of MRC's stakeholders, Mr. Shaikh drew up a list of “non-negotiable” goals: such as securing a minimum wage for migrant workers and ending exploitation of female workers. While there were some disagreements among the partners, clarity on the “non-negotiables” ensured that they remained on the same page.

Mr. Shaikh identified another factor, besides the pandemic, that is driving collaboration.

“Funding for NGOs, especially for community-based and grassroots organisations, has dropped significantly,” he observed. “That is pushing small- and medium-sized organisations, particularly at the State and district level, to collaborate. They can then get strategic and financial support, and a platform to implement their programmes.”

To be sure, as more NGOs and funders pool their resources and expertise, some start-up collaboratives will struggle to partner effectively and achieve collective impact. Still, given the significant increase in philanthropic collaboratives over the past two years, it is likely that formal collaboration between multiple stakeholders — including private business — is set to become a distinctive and lasting feature of India's social sector.

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