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A journal of our collective action

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Capacity building for educational CSOs

CONTENTS

What is capacity building and why we need it

Capacity building is an often neglected aspect of our work in the social sector. This is especially so in the domain of education. Even in the work of those organizations which work on education in a focused manner, often the larger organizational and operational aspect of the work does not end up receiving that much importance. Often training programs focused on specific skills, for example, on facilitating reading and numeracy end up getting prioritized. This is perhaps because there is an immediate programmatic relevance of such capacity building interventions.

However, a Civil Society Organization (CSO) is not merely the programs it runs. It is a living, thinking entity that needs to respond to its context in a nuanced, thoughtful and considered manner. It also needs to put in the thinking and actions needed for ensuring its long-term existence to be able to deliver on its vision and mission. This not only needs the space and the time to do so, but rethinking about what we need capacity building in the first place.

One of the most fundamental capacities is the ability to reflect on one's actions, learn from it, and take the necessary steps to fine-tune one's response. This ability is developed in practice, while responding to different concrete contexts. However, this can also be learnt. Many new spaces, such as Communities of Practice, are being fostered to facilitate such learning, which show much promise.

An important axis around which we can perhaps productively think about developing abilities is that of the interface between individual and organization practice. Although it is true that, capacities at an organizational level are of a different order and need a special set of processes to be

honed, capacity building of individuals can also be made to be dovetailed into fulfilling organizational needs. And this need not merely happen in the context of program implementation. This is especially true at the level of the Board and the leadership. Capacity building of individuals at this level can feed into the process of realization of larger organizational development goals.

In a parallel process, a proper alignment of the organization development process seguing in to the realization of the CSO's mission and vision can bring clarity into the assessing of learning needs of team members at all levels. This has to be accompanied by a democratic process of decision making that makes course correction easier and the feedback loop complete.

Sometimes it is difficult for CSOs to convince of funders to take the larger organizational view and support Capacity Building (CB) initiatives that are not immediately to programmatic ends. CB development ultimately contributes to more effective program implementation. Therefore, apart from having a larger separate CB plan as a part of OD, if capacity building is made an integral part of all program designs, these can help make CB a routine and everyday part of our work in the sector.

CHINAR International

Creativity and reflection: a necessity for education

Saagarika Chatterji and Nisha Nair

The importance of creativity in education

In the quest to educate our nation's children, and prepare them for the 21st century, the consensus is clear. Along with a host of other 21st century skills, creativity is an indisputably important skill and attitude to inculcate in all students.

Policy discourse is replete with such references to creativity. According to World Bank (2019), "With uncertainty about the kinds of skills the jobs of the future will require, schools and teachers must prepare students with more than basic reading and writing skills. Students need to be able to interpret information, form opinions, be creative, communicate well, collaborate, and be resilient. In short, be equipped with the skills they need to thrive in an increasingly demanding and uncertain world."

The aims and commitments of the National Education Policy 2020 also state the need to, "...address real challenges faced by our country's education system. Notably that of literacy and numeracy, rote memorization, narrow goals, and inadequate resources" (NCF 2023).

The state of affairs in creativity in education

On the one hand there is this clarion call for creativity. On the other, India's education system continues to uphold an information-delivery model that perpetuates rote memorization. It is also excessively reliant on textbooks and worksheets. All of these are often antithetical to creativity.

Additionally, there are prevailing attitudes that perceive creativity as a luxury. These mindsets see it as something to be set

EdSparks Collective participants experiencing art-based educational interventions, and reflecting upon connections and outcomes

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aside while the more pressing needs of foundational literacy and numeracy are attended to. This leaves creativity in the context of education to receive inadequate attention at best or languish at worst.

When or where notions of creativity are entertained, there appears to be a disconnect between conceptual and operational understandings. In other words, there is a lack of understanding on what creativity entails.

There is also a lack of clarity on how to operationalize concepts such as creativity within school education. Concrete pedagogical practices, which can enable all students' creative participation and foster their creative development, are also not commonly known or practised.

Creative development of students as a tool of systemic change

Since its inception, ArtSparks Foundation has been committed to centering students' creative development as a critically important part of any effort to revitalize school education. ArtSparks has been committed to highlighting the essential role that the arts can play in supporting this development.

To these ends, ArtSparks' Creative Learning Labs, situated within government schools, try to serve as centres of best practices. The labs attempt to demonstrate how robust art-based curricula and pedagogy can support students' creative participation and development. Furthermore, these labs incubate transformational teacher/facilitator development practices that drive this pedagogical change.

ArtSparks' work in professional development has been a natural outgrowth of our work within the Creative Learning Labs. We run a program called EdSparks Collective to this end. It is a program for professional development in this interstitial space between the arts and education. It is designed for all those interested in exploring the full potential of the visual arts in transforming student learning.

This has allowed us to partner with diverse NGOs across geographies. It has also helped us collaboratively build their capacities. This process has been enabling them to utilize

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Bharat, an EdSparks participant, getting practical experience and applying 'reflection-in-action' through an Action Learning Project with the children he serves

the arts in contextually relevant ways. The goal is to further impact the learning and development of the children they serve.

Learning principles and practices at the intersections between the arts and education

We ground our professional development work in a few learning principles and practices. We share these here.

Hands-on, experiential, inquiry-based learning offers our participants numerous opportunities to learn by doing, and of connecting the new learnings to their own prior experiences to build deeper connections.

Reflection-in-action encourages our participants to utilize reflection as a tool to assess and understand the results and impact of the concrete strategies learned and applied.

Transformative learning allows for moments of disequilibrium that compel our participants to question their current beliefs and practices about teaching and learning. It also helps them interrogate their prevalent ideas regarding the role of the teacher, their capabilities, their students and their abilities, and much more. It is in these moments of disequilibrium that transformational change becomes possible.

Action learning allows for our participants to apply their learnings in the field. It also helps them observe the outcomes of their actions and reflect upon the same. This process supports them in planning for the next set of actions in a cycle of learning.

Contextual and situational learning allows for recognizing the specific needs of diverse contexts. This enables our participants to adapt their learnings to these diverse needs and contexts.

Social learning is fostered through EdSparks' Communities of Practice as well as the Regional Meets. In both these forums,

learning and practices are routinely shared. These processes recognize the value of, and thereby promote, relational and reciprocal encounters amongst the participants and the partner organizations.

Communities of Practice are the channels through which the results of the professional development offerings can be monitored. These can also help build specific plans to provide targeted support. Careful consideration of responses to interactions has enabled us to continuously adapt, shape and enhance our professional development offerings.

Impact stories from the field

Shalaka Deshmukh has been an educator and a teacher-trainer for 30 years in various settings, serving CSOs and schools in and around Maharashtra. And Jyothi, a bridge-school teacher from SATH Foundation based in Bengaluru, has been part of ArtSparks' various professional development offerings. In their own words, they share their capacity building journey. The experiential nature of ArtSparks' professional development interventions encouraged Shalaka and Jyothi to consider and challenge specific educational practices and viewpoints.

While comparing previous teaching experiences, Jyothi enjoyed this new way of teaching where the teacher is not providing children with all the information, but the children are learning themselves by engaging with art. Jyothi expressed, "By experiencing this methodology myself, I have realized how I can teach concepts through art which never crossed my mind before. Art actually makes learning more interesting for children."

Being a teacher-trainer, Shalaka was able to witness the impact of experiential learning. She shares, "This helped the participants realize art's varied potential in educational settings. It also helped them identify impactful pedagogical practices that could more effectively support students' learning."

In-person visits providing targeted support to partner organizations

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EdSparks Collective's participants have also been able to observe the influence of art in rejuvenating education in different settings and contexts. Shalaka discovered that she could leverage teachers' own experiences with the ArtSparks methodology, to connect to their specific focus areas through one-on-one discussions. She shares examples, "I have post-discussions with math teachers regarding how they could use art-based interventions to strengthen the understanding of a mathematical concept among their students. And discussions with science teachers on how they could integrate these teaching approaches within their science labs."

In Jyothi's context, as a teacher on the ground, she does not have the decision-making power to allocate funds toward rich art materials for the children she serves. Through EdSparks, she was elated to get a broader view of what visual art materials could be. Jyothi states, "I realized and understood how we can use easily accessible materials like newspapers, cardboard, and other recyclable materials. Even natural materials like leaves and vegetables can be utilized as an educational tool for children. By using these materials in my classroom, I see my children becoming more resourceful. They now do not look at anything as a 'waste' material'."

As a teacher, Jyothi's thought process has also changed. She adds, "I feel I have become more creative with my lesson planning. I am more aware of the resources in my surroundings. I constantly keep connecting these to the subjects I teach." EdSparks' Communities of Practice model aids in making learning a process. Through this, various participants are able to develop their knowledge and skills further through social interactions.

Jyothi identifies these benefits, saying, "The communities of practice help me see how the other participants are using their learnings. These help me get a lot of ideas. These also encourage me to continue efforts in my own space."

From a bird's eye view, Shalaka reflects that, "the Communities of Practice allow for constant creation of opportunities. These help in gaining insights from various perspectives and to look at a concept from various angles."

In conclusion

It is necessary to revitalize education by disseminating practical operational strategies involving innovative and engaging teaching and learning practices. Reflective and transformative teacher development practices are a critical part of this process. We need to acknowledge the value of targeted support and continuous learning. We must also take contextual realities into account.

This is necessary to propel this pedagogical shift. Even as an organization tasked with building others' potential, we must continuously learn, adapt and change.

Saagarika Chatterji manages the professional learning and development program at ArtSparks Foundation. She has a background in psychology and social work. Sagarika has been an art educator and a social worker for the past 10 years. She has experience in teaching, curriculum development, capacity building of teachers and educators, and in program management. Through these engagements, she has been developing her understanding in community and stakeholder engagement, and in working with, and for, children in the development sector.

Nisha Nair is an educator, education researcher and designer. She is committed to elevating the position of the arts and design as both media for pedagogy, and for facilitating individual and social transformation. Her nearly two-decade tenure in education, both in the USA and in India, has involved advancing the role of the visual arts and design in developing the whole child. Through this process, she has been focusing on building more inclusive learning environments that promote the development of 21st century learning capabilities and life skills. Her work has also involved transformative development of teachers. It is these experiences and passions that led her to start ArtSparks Foundation where she serves as the Executive Director.

Website: art-sparks.org

Email: nnair@art-sparks.org

Connect on:

Jyothi, a participant in EdSparks Collective, using art-based interventions to bridge learning gaps

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Empowering educators: CHINAR's capacity building evolution

Gulzar Ahmed Wani, Ambreen Arif, Sawleha Qadir, Javaid Malik and Asiya Ali Dar

CHINAR International began focusing on capacity building (CB) when it became clear that achieving long-term educational impact required more than just operational efficiency. It demands a strong foundation of skills and knowledge within the organization.

Initially, CHINAR was focused on delivering programs. However, as the education space for the organization matured, the need for structured training and internal capacity-building became apparent.

This shift was driven by the recognition that, to truly uplift vulnerable children, CHINAR needed a team that was not only committed but also well-equipped with the right tools and strategies for delivering quality education.

The first steps in this journey involved identifying the existing strengths and gaps within the team. Leadership played a crucial role in fostering a culture of self-reflection and continuous learning. This helped in creating an environment where capacity building became a shared goal.

There has been a deliberate focus on both individual and organizational CB. We have tried to empower staff through external trainings and learning opportunities. We have been simultaneously strengthening internal systems and processes to support growth.

This synergy between personal development and organizational enhancement became the foundation of CHINAR's capacity-building strategy. The organization's leadership has

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CHINAR

CHINAR International is a non-profit organization, established in 2011. It envisions peace, progress, and prosperity in conflict-affected areas. It focuses on empowering vulnerable children, marginalized youth, and distressed communities.

CHINAR's Quality Education initiatives operate in 12 districts in Jammu and Kashmir. These include Community Learning Centres (CLCs) where children build foundational literacy, socio-emotional skills, and digital literacy in supportive spaces, with Reading Corners fostering a love for books. Alongside CLCs, the School Transformation Program and Teach with CHINAR Fellowship aim to improve educational standards and inclusivity. Through its child development initiatives, the CSO collaborates with families to create conducive home environments for children's education.

Within its Youth Development Framework, CHINAR equips youth with essential skills and business incubation support. It thus empowers them to build sustainable livelihoods. CHINAR collaborates with communities to create lasting change and resilience for those in need. Its core belief is that education has the power to break cycles of poverty and conflict. By prioritizing holistic development, the organization aims to build resilient communities where every child can learn, grow and thrive.

tried to ensure that individual training efforts align with the organization's larger goals. This is helping us create a cohesive strategy where personal development translates into stronger program delivery and overall organizational effectiveness.

CHINAR's partnership with Wipro Foundation arrived at a critical juncture. It has helped us shape our capacity-building priorities. Wipro's strategic support has been instrumental in aligning CHINAR's CB efforts with its broader educational mission.

The partnership began in 2022. It has focused on enhancing CHINAR's institutional capacity and on improving its program delivery. Initially, the emphasis was on understanding CHINAR's existing efforts and on developing a core educational mindset.

Participation in "Embark"

Participation in "Embark" – Wipro Foundation's CB initiative - has been pivotal in supporting CHINAR International's capacity-building journey. The reflections and discussions facilitated through this process have broadened our perspectives. These have also encouraged more strategic thinking across the organization.

By engaging in thoughtful, collaborative conversations, we have managed to critically analyse our existing practices. We have also been able to identify areas for improvement. This environment of reflection and critical thinking has helped CHINAR explore various approaches to both capacity building and program delivery.

As we delved deeper into these discussions, we became more open to adopting ideas that could enhance our educational initiatives. This shift in mindset has empowered us to make more informed decisions. It has also ensured that these decisions are aligned with our long-term goals and organizational capacity needs.

Empowering CHINAR'S core team

One of the first major steps in this journey was sending Ambreen Arif and Sawleha Qadir, core members of the Quality Education team, to Vikramshila's 'Foundational Learning

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Voices of participants from Chinar's capacity building journey

"The foundational learning workshop offered a unique blend of theoretical foundations and practical applications. This allowed me to connect abstract concepts to real-world scenarios. The facilitators' expertise, coupled with the diverse experiences of the fellow participants, created a rich learning environment that exceeded my expectations." - **Ambreen Arif, Project Coordinator**

"Attending the Accelerated English Course was a turning point in my journey. It equipped me with fun, innovative strategies to teach language skills using storytelling, songs, and interactive activities. Seeing the joy of learning in my students' faces was incredibly rewarding. After the workshop, I was eager to train other facilitators. Together, we are creating a ripple effect that is enriching the learning experience for even more children. Watching their growth in both language skills and confidence has been the most fulfilling part of this journey." - **Sawleha Qadir, Project Coordinator**

"Watching my students grow from letters to sentences and seeing their confidence soar is the greatest joy. The English Accelerated Course transformed both my teaching and my students' learning experience. Using storytelling, songs, and creative writing ignited a passion for learning in them. This journey has improved my teaching practices. It has also deepened my connection with the children as we explore the joy of language together." - **Asiya Ali, Community-level Facilitator**

"Attending the workshop facilitated by Bookworm has been transformative. As a novice, my understanding of libraries was limited. However, the training broadened my vision and reshaped my perspective. It showed how libraries have grown from quiet spaces to dynamic environments, where we engage in extensive activities, fostering collaborations and creativity. This newfound insight has empowered me to share the learning with other members in my organization. This is now promoting a culture of continuous growth and resourcefulness. The workshop has truly been a catalyst for both personal and professional development." - **Javaid Malik**

Workshop'. This marked CHINAR's first out-of-state training.

This experience significantly enhanced the participants' understanding of foundational literacy and numeracy. It also equipped the organization to address learning gaps caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Upon their return, Ambreen and Sawleha conducted internal training for over 80 facilitators. They tailored the workshop's lessons to fit local contexts and the NIPUN Bharat Mission. They guided facilitators on designing lesson plans and assessment tools, improving student outcomes.

Sawleha Qadir's participation in the 'English Accelerated Course' by Sikhamaitra further contributed to CHINAR's capacity-building efforts. After implementing the program as a pilot in two Community Learning Centers (CLCs), Sawleha witnessed significant improvements in the children's English skills. Inspired by the success, she, along with community facilitator Asiya Ali, trained 30 more facilitators. This has impacted over 1,500 children.

Javaid Malik, a core team member of CHINAR, attended the workshop facilitated by Bookworm. This paved the way for CHINAR's Reading Corner Program. CHINAR has used

the learning from the workshop to establish reading corners in eight CLCs and thirteen schools. This has enhanced literacy through a curated collection of books. The hands-on approach of the workshop helped Javid see libraries as dynamic spaces that foster collaborations and creativity, furthering CHINAR's educational goals.

In addition, participation in capacity building programs like Khelghar's workshop on 'Strengthening Community Learning Centers' and Atma's 'Logic Model Workshop' helped CHINAR refine its methods for effectively serving vulnerable children.

We hope that participation in upcoming workshops, such as the one on designing worksheets, will further empower facilitators with creative tools. This will help CHINAR to continue to innovate in providing high-quality, engaging education to children.

Challenges and learnings in the CB Journey

Throughout our capacity-building journey, we have faced several challenges, particularly in aligning our initiatives with the diverse needs of the communities we serve. One of the significant hurdles has involved adapting our training programs to accommodate the varying skill levels of our facilitators, especially in remote areas.

Working alongside Wipro Foundation has been instrumental in overcoming these obstacles. Their support has helped us adopt a more structured approach to capacity building, emphasizing the importance of ongoing assessment and feedback.

We have learned that effective capacity building is not just about gaining and imparting knowledge. It is also about fostering an environment where facilitators feel empowered to share their experiences and best practices. This journey has taught us the value of collaboration. We have also become aware of the need for a flexible approach that can adapt to the evolving educational landscape.

Ultimately, our challenges have strengthened our commitment to continuous improvement.

CHINAR International

These have also reinforced the significance of a child-centered approach in shaping effective educational programs.

Conclusion

The Quality Education team at CHINAR, led by Gulzar Wani, consists of five core members and 90 dedicated facilitators. It tries to enhance educational opportunities through a few key initiatives. These include the Community Learning Centers (CLCs), the Teach with CHINAR Fellowship, school transformation projects, and the Reading Corner Programs.

This diverse team has been trying to develop its capacities in partnership with Wipro Foundation. This process has served as a catalyst for transformation within the organization. Insights gained from the workshops and training sessions have empowered the Quality Education team to adopt innovative teaching methodologies and effective strategies. These resonate with its mission to improve educational outcomes for vulnerable children.

This renewed commitment to capacity building has provided critical resources. It is also fostering a culture of collaboration and continuous learning within the team. This emphasis on professional development is transforming the Quality Education team into a strong and cohesive unit. This process has also been reinforcing the team's dedication to nurture its own potential and shape brighter futures for children in need.

The CSO feels that it is now better equipped to address the challenges faced by the communities it serves. Ultimately, CHINAR's CB journey aims to enhance its abilities to make a meaningful impact on the educational landscape.

Gulzar Ahmed Wani leads the Quality Education team at CHINAR International. With over a decade of experience in community development, he is dedicated to enhancing educational outcomes for underserved communities.

Ambreen Arif leads the Parvaaz and Digital Literacy initiatives at CHINAR International, promoting holistic development for children.

Sawleha Qadir is a specialist in capacity building and Community Learning Centre (CLC) implementation, working to enhance access and quality of education for marginalized groups.

Javaid Malik leads the library and fellowship programs at CHINAR International, focusing on creating a carder of young education leaders.

Asiya Ali Dar is an emerging trainer and educator who works with CHINAR International. She implements programs that support the education and well-being of vulnerable children.

Website: chinarinternational.org

Email: gulzar.wani@chinarinternational.org

Connect on:

CHINAR International

English capacity building in Gubbachi

Manimakalai Raja

Background

In 2016, we mainstreamed 25 children from our bridge centre to the Kodathi Government School. But, there were only two teachers and a HM for 100 children from grades 1 to 7. On the behest of the HM, two of us from Gubbachi stepped in to teach children in the Nali Kali class. We started off with Kannada, Math and EVS.

In the multigrade multilevel (MGML) Nali Kali curriculum, childrens' learning and classroom processes started settling rather effortlessly. It was when we started English that the challenge stared us in the face.

Children were just not open to it. They clearly stated their dislike for the language. They refused to co-operate in class when I switched from Kannada to English.

We had to find ways to get children to engage with English in the Nali Kali class. Two volunteers agreed to help us thrice a week with this. They came with songs, stories and simple conversation in English. It was a bi-lingual class. A few months later, we were happy that children were slowly warming up to English. One whole year passed. We did not get into introducing the alphabet. There was no chance for any reading or writing!

Bringing English literacy into the classroom

In the very beginning of the next academic year, we laid down the rules. English is a subject children have to learn in school. We can no longer restrict ourselves to only songs and stories. They will have English classes everyday.

One other strategy we used was the following. Their class teachers took care of all the other subjects. I stepped in only for English. It helped that it was an MGML class. The children who had spent the previous year familiarizing themselves with song and dance were ready to do reading and writing in English. The new admissions to grade one went with the flow.

Gubbachi

Capacity building programs that are part of Gubbachi's culture and everyday practices

Read Aloud Program by Thejaswi Shivanand in Kannada: Thejaswi's session on Read Alouds have introduced the team to the technique of Read Alouds. These have also guided teachers on how to choose the right book. After demonstrating a typical Read Aloud session with pre and post activities, Thejaswi encouraged teachers to prepare lesson plans on Read Alouds.

Teachers had to justify their choice of books. They had to engage other teachers in a Read Aloud session. They were given feedback by Thejaswi as well as their peers. Gubbachi now has a repository of Kannada Read Aloud lesson plans. All new trainees are taken through the process by their seniors. They also learn through observation. They conduct the Read Aloud session when they are confident enough to do so. This has become a standard feature in the library program every week.

Jodogyan: A few of us attented the Jodogyan workshop in Delhi. We came back and conducted the same with our team in Kannada. Teachers were taught precisely where they had to stand. They also learnt the right terminology to be used while working with the Ganitmala.

They have understood the versatility of this teaching aid. They have introduced it to the children. The Big Ganitmala is an integral part of each Nali Kali class now. The math circle time is incomplete without it.

Well-being course by Viridus: The Gubbachi co-founders attended the well-being workshops conducted by Viridus. We reworked some of our policies keeping the team's well-being in mind. We have ensured that check-ins have become a part of our culture.

The teams spent time translating the comprehensive emotion wheel from English to Kannada. This has ensured that it is a meaningful activity which helps start the day with compassion. We not only start with the feeling word, but encourage the team to state why they are feeling a certain way in a complete sentence. Not a single day or meeting goes by without it. Children also do the check-in every morning. This determines the change in the course of the day for some of us.

Gubbachi Transform Program: Teachers from the Gubbachi Transform Program work in nine government schools in the Varthur and Doddakanelli cluster. A team of 40 teachers and coordinators engage with around 800 children across 25 sections in these schools.

Unfortunately we did not find an English curriculum which was as well designed as the Nali Kali curriculum. I taught children phonics in small clusters trying to mirror the Kannada curriculum.

We can teach English too...

The following year, since we had grown in the number of schools and sections, we hired a teacher for English. The Nali Kali teachers (themselves students of Kannada medium government schools) observed her classes.

By the end of the year, they said, "We are ready to take English classes as well. We are ready to teach English, if you are ready to build our capacity to do so."

This was how the capacity building process in English started in the Nali Kali program. Evenings, weekends and summer holidays were spent in English capacity building sessions with full attendance!

We are ready to put in those extra hours of practice...

The additional time we had over the months during the lockdown were spent learning English. Here is an example of how we worked. While introducing words with

Gubbachi

flashcards (first sound flashcards or thematic cards for vocabulary building), teachers were facilitated to work on exactly what the question will be and how it will be framed.

Muliple options for the right answer were also included. This question bank was edited and curated by the coordinator. Each teacher had a printout of the same for her to practice before she went for her class. Some took the printout with them into class. New teachers continue to use the printouts. 'Senior' teachers have gained enough confidence to do away with the crutch.

Audios of songs sung by us with printouts of the lyrics were shared. These are very unlike the foreign accented ones available on the internet.

When schools re-opend after the lockdown, the teachers were ready. We ensured that the curriculum also focussed on the spoken language, much more than reading and writing.

Songs, stories and conversations are a very important part of everyday English classes in Gubbachi. Teachers practiced all of this every weekend.

Observation and feedback are crucial

The coordinator who was the facilitator of the capacity building process observed each class through the week. She made teacher-specific, meticulous feedback notes. She then shared these one-on-one at the end of the day. Common issues were addressed in the weekend workshop.

Further capacity building happened during the summer breaks. When the English curriculum was introduced by the Department of Education four years ago, teachers were taken through every single activity during the summer break.

Some senior teachers have become confident about speaking in English. They are also proficient in conducting English classes. They vet lesson plans submitted by the new teachers. Our Nali Kali teacher is now a Master Resource person for English in the monthly 'Samalochane Sabhe' conducted by the Department of Education in the the S4 Education Block.

Gubacchi's learnings to ensure successful capacity building programs

- The need has to arise from the teachers. Then the program is owned by them.
- The program has to be designed keeping the teachers' socio-cultural background in mind.
- Capacity building has to be practical and meaningful.
- The trainer has to be bi-lingual and must be able to communicate in the language of the group.
- Every session must have an element of practice by the teachers.
- Continuous observation of practice in class is necessary. Ideally, the facilitaor must also be the observer. Or a senior team member must be a part of the capacity building program, so that she can observe the classes.
- Constructive feedback must be built into the culture of the organization, so that the team is open to receiving feedback.
- Empathetic hand-holding is necessary to ensure that difficulties are ironed out on a regular basis.
- Reinforcement of practice on a weekly basis is important.
- Teachers must try and become facilitators for new teachers.

Chartering the building blocks for foundational learning

After the Covid-19 pandemic, all of us in the education sector were struggling with children's low learning levels. Uma Hrishikesh and Jayshree Venkatesh of Maja Maadi volunteered to help us. They curated a battery of audio perception, visual perception, listening comprehension and mental math activities. They spent a few days with our teachers sharing the theory behind the activities and the need to build a firm learning foundation for children who have been out of the learning cycle for almost two years. They demonstrated precisely how the activities were to be administered.

The coordinators and I were part of the training sessions. Teachers were given the handbooks. They practiced in small groups. They then made presentations to the facilitaors. This was followed by feedback and fine tuning. The Maja Maadi activites were ready to be rolled out in all the classes. Each session was observed. Recordings were sent to the facilitators. They responded with feedback for every video.

During the summer break, teachers met with the facilitators again for a refresher session. This time they conducted the session for the other teachers in the team. After peer feedback in the presence of the facilitators, the process was polished to a shine!

Senior teachers are now the trainers for the new teachers. Videos of children conducting these activities to near perfection are now doing the rounds!

Manimakalai is a co-founder of Gubbachi Learning Community. She leads the Gubbachi Transform Program that works in nine (9) government schools in the S4 Block in Bengaluru. Teachers in the Gubbachi Transform Program ensure quality foundational literacy and numeracy in the Nali Kali classes. Nali Kali is the MGML program for grades 1 to 3 in Karnataka's government schools.

Website: gubbachi.org.in

Email: mani@gubbachi.org.in

Connect on:

Making the case: how to turn every donor into a capacity building champion

Poonam Choksi

Picture this: Your nonprofit has found a breakthrough approach to achieve social outcomes. Your team is driven, and the communities you serve are counting on you more than ever. But behind this success, your organization is drained with outdated systems, exhausted staff, and limited infrastructure. Many leaders find themselves at crossroads: "Should we focus solely on the cause, or should we invest in building a stronger, more resilient organization?"

To us the answer is clear. One of the most powerful approaches to unlock an organization's full potential is investment in capacity building. This investment strengthens an organization from the inside out. Investing in capacity must start the day you have a proven model on the ground.

It is not just about fixing issues. It's about building systems and processes that allow you to grow, innovate and drive long-term change. Yet, despite its importance, capacity building often takes a back seat in donor conversations. It is often sidelined by the allure of program funding.

What NGOs need to do now, is flip the narrative and make a compelling case for capacity building funding. This must resonate

'Dreaming child': A workshop conducted by an NGO in Gurgaon

with internal and external stakeholders, especially donors. The rest of this article shares some ways of doing this.

Conduct a thorough needs assessment

The first critical step is to assess your organization's three-year strategy and goals. In the process, you must identify the internal capabilities and resources needed to accelerate the same. The capacities often include reviewing technology investments, fundraising functions, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes, among others.

A common pitfall is that organizations often evaluate their current capabilities and assume they can reach the next significant milestone with them. This leads to underestimating the level of investment needed to achieve that future ambition. As a result, many organizations risk stagnation when they should be driving forward.

Some ways to do a needs assessment include, doing an internal review using OD assessment tools like those from The Bridgespan Group to identify current and future gaps. The organization should also engage with the staff, board members, and stakeholders to gain insights, and uncover blind spots. Prioritizing the most critical needs aligned with your organization's goals are important. If government partnership is the key, then focus on capacity building around outcomes measurement and partnerships. This targeted, evidence-based approach will strengthen your case to potential funders by demonstrating a clear path for capacity building.

Develop a concrete capacity building plan aligned with your strategy

Once you have prioritized your capacity-building needs, the next step is to develop a clear plan that aligns with your organization's strategy. Start by asking: what exactly are you solving for? For instance, one of our partner NGOs working in child safety decided

Resources for CSOs' capacity building journeys

Doing an internal review using OD assessment tools like those from The Bridgespan Group to identify current and future gaps.

M&E Health Check helps partners assess the health of their M&E systems and identify cost-effective areas for improvement.

to scale its "train the trainers" model. The aim was to increase the number of trainers from 18,000 in FY21 to 35,000 by FY24. During their assessment, they realized they lacked a robust M&E framework to track the effectiveness of the training. Their solution? They invested in hiring for the M&E team and in upgrading their technology to design surveys, data collection methods, and dashboards. This allowed them to track the impact of their programs more effectively.

In your organization's case, you'll need to decide whether to invest in technology, hire in-house staff, or outsource to a vendor. It could also be upskilling existing staff to lead higher level responsibilities or a combination of these, depending on your gaps.

Once you have outlined your capacity-building needs, it's crucial to develop timelines and budgets. Leaders often hesitate to allocate resources to these areas, fearing that donors won't fund them. However, a clear, transparent plan with defined resources and budgets demonstrates that your organization is prepared for growth. This makes it easier to secure donor buy-in.

Create clear success metrics

Establishing clear success metrics is critical for ensuring accountability and for tracking the effectiveness of your capacity-building investments. To do this effectively, you need to apply the same level of discipline that

you use to measure the success of your programs. It's important to acknowledge that capacity building is a long-term process. It often takes 18 to 24 months to show tangible improvements. Patience and persistence are key. For example, one of our NGO partners focus on improving early childhood learning outcomes. They faced challenges when scaling their program beyond a few districts. They realized that while the founding team had technical expertise, they lacked the management skills to operationalize a strategic growth plan.

By investing in leadership development, they created clear success metrics at two levels. First, at the program level it involved increased student outreach and improved learning outcomes. At the leadership level it was building a senior leadership team, reducing the founders' direct reports, and operationalizing a strategic plan for scaling.

By defining metrics at both the programmatic and leadership levels, they were able to track their progress. They could, thus, also showcase the tangible impact of their capacity-building investments to their donors.

Learn from failures

One of the most critical aspects of capacity building is embracing risk and learning from both successes and failures. There's no perfect formula for organizational growth. Sometimes capacity-building efforts may not meet expectations.

However, the key is to stay committed to the learning process. You must adopt solutions that work best for your organization. It's essential to leverage your donor network during these times—share your challenges openly, engage them in problem-solving, and co-create solutions.

By involving them in your journey, you gain both their emotional investment and practical support. This makes them as invested in your success as you are.

For instance, one of our partner NGOs faced a setback after hiring a senior resource to strengthen fundraising. The plan failed as donors preferred engaging with the CEO. The assumption that this hire would bring in new donor networks didn't materialize.

Within six months, the NGO reached out to us. They candidly shared their challenges and proposed a pivot. This involved hiring a junior associate to support the CEO with donor research, proposals and engagement.

This openness led to a major turnaround. The budget doubled, ticket sizes increased, and new avenues such as retail and HNI donors

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opened. Most importantly, they covered the cost of the new hire through the funds raised.

Within a year, they became financially independent. They no longer needed additional support. Failure, when embraced and addressed openly, can be a powerful tool for growth and resilience.

Learn from your peers and the sector

To make a compelling case for capacity-building investments, it's essential that you understand what is happening in the sector. First, start with your peers to understand how they are prioritizing their focus areas, approaching their donors, making investment decisions, and the lessons they have learnt from their interventions. It is an invaluable network to bounce ideas with and learn from.

Second, look at what research studies are carried out in the sector. Open-source toolkits that are available and published case studies can help you steepen your learning curve.

For instance, a Bridgespan study shows that the average indirect cost for nonprofits is 22%, with a range of 5% to 51% depending on the organization type. By aligning your costs with these benchmarks, you can demonstrate that your capacity building investments are both necessary and in line with sectoral standards. This will help to build trust and credibility.

Another set of useful resource are the case studies that we have published in partnership with IDR on learnings and impact of capacity building investments in both urban and grassroot NGOs. You can check out the links here and here respectively.

Conclusion: all donors should become your champions

Lastly, and most critically, there are no donors exclusively dedicated to funding capacity building. This is why it's essential to embed these costs into your organization's budget.

You must make them a part of every donor conversation.

The goal is to convert every program funder into a champion for your organization's growth. The journey will be challenging. There may be more rejections than acceptances. However, persistence and conviction are key.

As Nelson Mandela wisely said, "It always seems impossible until it's done." By staying the course and continuing to advocate for these critical investments, you will be able to bring your donors along. This would also inspire your peers to do the same.

Capacity building isn't just about securing funds. It's about building a foundation for long-term impact. By turning every donor into a capacity-building champion, you are not simply asking for support. You are forging a partnership that will enable your organization to thrive and deliver lasting change.

Poonam Choksi heads the Social Sector Capacity Building vertical at A.T.E. Chandra Foundation, which is focused on building the capacity of individuals, organizations and the ecosystem to mobilize funding and talent in the sector. Prior to this, she worked with UnLtd India, an incubator for start-ups and led their monitoring and evaluation function. She has also worked with Adhyayan, a social enterprise that works with schools helping them improve their quality standards. She led the scale-up of their flagship school evaluation program to 300+ schools PAN India. Her 15+ years long career spans across the corporate and social sectors, from working for large conglomerates to social start-ups. She specializes in scaling program operations, strengthening organizational capacity, and measuring program impact.

Website: ategroup.com/csr/#tab2

Email: poonam.choksi@atecf.org

Connect on:

From scattered to focused: our learning journey continues

Surya Prakash Rai

We believe that any organization starts with a dream and a passion. There is a purpose which sets the tone while setting up the organization. At PRAYOG, we too went through this stage. During 2013-2018 we were motivated souls willing to do multiple things.

We were clear that we wanted to do library work with children since the very beginning. However, we were very scattered in our approach during this phase. In our geography of intervention, very little had been done in the education space for children. Hence, whatever we tried was well appreciated by the children and by the larger community. This led to a false sense of accomplishment that we were doing wonders.

In early 2016, Avinash from Wipro Foundation visited us in Gopalganj to see our work. That was the early stage of the Wipro Seeding Fellowship. It is now called the Wipro Education Fellowship Program. In his interaction with children, children couldn't say much about the books, or their readings. This made us realize that sheer enthusiasm is not enough for something concrete to happen.

We realized that our work was scattered. In subsequent interactions with the Foundation team from 2018 onward, we felt the need to invest in our own capacities. We thought it would help us understand deeply "Why we are doing, what we are doing."

Our first capacity building course around libraries was the one titled 'Introduction to Libraries' offered by Bookworm, Goa, in 2018. It was in this course that I got to understand

A book discussion session with the team

the purpose and possibilities of a library. The course was well designed.

It was facilitated by some of the pioneers of library work – Sujata, other Bookworm team members, and Thejaswi Shivanand. It also offered us the wherewithal to frame our vision for library work.

The fact that we could see a 'different and unimagined' children's library was an eye-opener. It urged me to think – "We, at PRAYOG, should also be practicing such library work in Bihar."

But was that course enough? And how much investment needs to be done by an organization toward building their capacities?

As a resource organization, I really treasure the efforts that Bookworm made. Sujata Noronha, during the course, asked me to consider applying for their Library Educators Course (LEC English).

I was not very sure. The introductory course had already given me a glimpse. So, why should I apply for a course seven months long?

I was also not sure about spending so much time for another reason. In 2019, we were only a two-member team, including me. We felt that this would affect the groundwork.

But Bookworm made sure to interact further with me regarding details about the course. They shared how participation in the course would help PRAYOG in our library work. They also offered a scholarship.

And by that time, it was Bookworm's library that had stuck to my mind. I had started dreaming about doing similar kind of library work in Bihar. This helped me take the call to apply. This turned out to be the re-birth of PRAYOG in 2019, after six years of doing some groundwork.

I was mesmerized by the clarity of vision of the Bookworm library and the people around there. I was awestruck by the diverse collection, the ambience and the space, and the interactions and activities around books. There was so much to learn. Bookworm made the library journey of PRAYOG special.

In 2020, we got our first ever institutional donor supporting the library work. One thing that really worked well for us was also the post course visit by Sujata to PRAYOG. She suggested engaging women from the vicinity in our library work.

We listened to her. And this has done wonders for us! Today, we have 33 women in our team working full time, out of a total staff strength of 40.

Bookworm also curated the PRAYOG Library Mentoring Support Program for us. This happened during the Covid-19 pandemic. It continued for two years, between 2020 and 2021. We owe a lot to their efforts in building our capacities and practices.

Focus has to be the buzz word when we are on our way toward a purpose that we have chosen and for which the responses from the children and the community is visible. So, we negotiated with our donors from 2021 onward

A reading corner

PRAYOG

that we need to invest in the capacity building on a routine basis. It has worked well for us.

Based on our own experiences around the importance of capacity building, it has become an organizational culture to invest in building capacities of each of the team members. We are now working very closely with our library mentor, Thejaswi Shivanand. He supports us in nurturing our team. This mentorship has helped us shape our library work very thoughtfully.

Many from our team have also attended trainings offered by different Resource Organizations. These include LEC Hindi by Parag, Eklavya's Baal Vikas Course, EdSparks Collective by ArtSparks Foundation, OELP's Foundational Literacy Course, and many others.

What we always keep in mind is that a team member attending any course must have the ground experience of directly engaging with children. At the same time, we identify the organizational needs for participating in the course very clearly.

We always ensure that at least two members are attending any course. Typically, one team member is someone who directly engages with children. And another could be from the management side. The latter would play a critical role in ensuring that the learnings from such capacity building courses are integrated into our library calendar. They also pitch for ensuring that the financial costs needed in this process of integration are met.

These courses have played a very critical role in strengthening the session designs and library calendar in our day-to-day work. This also ensures effective delivery of what we plan. We conduct weekly sessions with children. Each one has a distinct session plan. It is also well connected to the theme that we are reaching out to.

Our first yearly library calendar was developed in 2021. When we look at our 2024 calendar, we see a growing keenness toward going deep into our practices. Our collection of ~300 books in 2019 has emerged into a diverse collection of more than 8,000 books now. It is growing every quarter. It comprises of books of different themes and genres. The collection also caters to different age groups.

For purchasing books, we have mapped bookstores and publishers from across the country. Our team now travels to places like Bhopal, Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Goa and Kolkata, etc., to read and buy books. This is the transition that has happened. Every day is a new day in our learning journey. Our team comprises mostly of people who have seldom gone to colleges. They are now turning into thoughtful library practitioners.

Nothing is more soothing to hear than demands from schoolteachers and principals in schools where we are not even working to start and/or strengthen their school libraries. In a recent process, group presentations were done by children in each of the 25 government schools we work in, post 11 structured session on the theme titled 'Our World'. These were attended by all the teachers and parents as well.

The most fulfilling voices heard from each one of them were around the way children are able to articulate and speak out with confidence whatever they have read, and from the interactions after the activities conducted in the library sessions. When parents say, "My child didn't speak much at home. I have never imagined how much she spoke," it means a lot to us.

And this has been the most common observation across the schools by teachers and parents. It has all been possible by making the sessions engaging for children. This has ensured that children have access to diverse books. They are also able to understand the text and illustrations in a way that makes reading joyful.

The children have started reflecting on complex issues. They have a voice while deliberating on difficult topics like discrimination, gender, caste and emotions. Most of these usually remain left out in the routine discourse of school education.

From scattered to focused – here, we are in our five years journey since our re-birth! Everything has been possible only because of 'our people,' i.e. the library educators. And only because we took a call to make 'learning' an integral part of the organizational culture for PRAYOG. Thanks to all the resource organizations that gave us a dream and set examples for us in this journey.

Surya is the co-founder of PRAYOG and has been fostering the development of the organization's library initiatives. He has also served as a Wipro Fellow. He strongly believes that investing in human resources is essential for grassroots efforts, and developing capacities is the key to future success.

Website: prayog.org.in

Email: surya@prayog.org.in

Connect on:

Our current team

PRAYOG

Capacity building for organizational design and development for education non-profits: the need of the hour

Sujatha Rao

Pratik Aggarwal

Historically, capacity building for education non-profits has usually focused on enhancing the knowledge and skills of teachers and educators, developing curriculum, and improving teaching methodologies and educational governance. The primary objective of capacity building is to improve the quality of education and holistic learning outcomes for students.

However, over the last decade, education NGOs are also participating in a different type of capacity building process. Alongside building their capacities in education related concepts and techniques, they are building and strengthening their internal capacities to become mission-driven, resilient organizations focusing on their people, structures and processes and overall organizational effectiveness. They are developing organizational design and development (OD&D) capabilities.

Non-profits in the education sector face a diverse array of challenges. These include funding instability, changing educational policies, complex pedagogies and curricula, and evolving and emerging community needs. They must respond to contextual requirements and implement a wide range of programs and interventions.

These include direct teaching work in schools, teacher capacity building, and supporting in curriculum development. These also involve building leadership capabilities in principals and working with communities and the government. Philosophically and ideologically, education itself is contested. Organizations working in this domain must deal with these contestations as well.

Strengthening an organization's OD&D capabilities help non-profits to sense and respond to internal and external organizational tensions and demands

more effectively. Research over the years has shown strong connections between organizational capacity building that helps organizations to see the connections between the various internal components of the organization and the impact it seeks to make in the ecosystem.[1]

For example, organizations can learn how teacher motivation is deeply linked to structures and processes that condition teachers' behaviors at work. They can also learn how to engage with community involvement, as that also shapes an organization's culture. Leadership mindsets and biases can impact the operational performance of the organization, and need to be factored in as well.

OD&D capacity building initiatives can help develop effective leaders, and improve decision-making processes, accountability and transparency within the organization.[2] These help non-profits optimize their resources, reduce waste, and improve overall efficiency. These also enhance the ability of organizations to build and maintain relationships with stakeholders, including donors, partners and the community.

Related processes can lead to increased support, collaborations and funding opportunities. Research shows that organizations with well-developed internal structures and processes are more adaptable. They are better able to navigate challenges such as shifts in funding landscapes and policy changes.

They also tend to become better at building strong, collaborative partnerships within the ecosystem in which they work. This external partnership building is a key criterion for the effectiveness of the organization's impact.[3]

Additionally, effective capacity building includes developing systems for measuring and evaluating impact. Non-profits with strong internal capacity for impact measurement are better able to demonstrate their effectiveness and attract funding.

This kind of capacity building also promotes better practices in accountability and transparency. Research shows that non-profits with robust organizational systems are more likely to have effective accountability measures in place. This can enhance trust with stakeholders and funders.[4]

Organizational capacity building helps leaders build strong relational skills that are fundamental for bringing about changes in the system. Through OD&D capacity building engagements, leaders can learn to recognize the power of collaborative work and develop structures internally within the organization that encourage collaboration. These can also help them in building trust, and in working with multiple stakeholders externally.

OD&D approaches focus on developing a systems lens, and on building the capacity of the organization to take on a systems approach. This can foster much greater and more impactful collective impact work.[5] Such a perspective also encourages organizations (and leaders) to adopt an experimental mindset.

This enables education organizations to become learning organizations. They start willing to experiment with small changes and learn from the results of these experiments. They also become more willing and open to talk about both successes as well as failures. Such an agile, experimental mindset is necessary to build strong, positive organizational cultures.[6]

Finally, OD&D capacity building enables organizations to create more flourishing workplaces. This can potentially ensure that people feel heard, valued and empowered in the organization. This can lead to increased employee motivation, satisfaction and well-being at work. It also helps in building resilient organizations.

A supportive organizational culture can significantly impact staff morale and productivity. This, in turn, affects overall

Learnings from a year-long OD&D fellowship program for non-profits

Over the last few years, we have worked with over two dozen organizations working in education. We have done this by facilitating a capacity building program focused on their internal organizational design and development. These education NGOs differed from each other in their sizes, the scale of operations, and the number of years of operation. They were also varied in terms of the focus areas of their work, as well as the size of their budgets.

By participating in a year-long OD&D fellowship, these organizations had the opportunity to reflect on their organizational needs. The process allowed them to involve people within the organization on change process. Team members learnt OD&D concepts, methodologies and tools. They worked on building their whole organizational capacities rather than only their programmatic ones.

Organizations often face a common challenge - working in silos. The OD&D Fellowship Program helped tackle these challenges by encouraging a more integrated approach. For example, during the program, an NGO brought together team members from various departments to discuss their individual roles and how these roles impact one another. This process of open dialogue helped employees see beyond their own tasks. They realized that their work in education was not just about teaching. They began to see that it affected community outreach and fundraising efforts. This broader perspective fostered a more unified sense of purpose and improved collaboration across organizations units.

Building trust is another critical area where OD&D made a difference. For example, a non-profit involved in the OD&D program wanted to create a five-year strategic plan for their organization. Initially, the leadership team felt that communicating the strategic plan to the rest of the organization would be sufficient.

However, through regular, transparent conversations facilitated by OD&D processes, team members were able to express their concerns and confusions about this exercise. This trust-building helped the leaders understand that first a common vision building exercise was needed for the whole organization. This transformed the change from a source of anxiety into an opportunity for growth.

The OD&D program addressed the 'workshop to workplace cliff,' problem. Here new ideas from training often struggle to be translated into daily work. Rather than attempting a complete overhaul, the organization applied an OD&D approach of small and incremental changes. They started by piloting small changes within the organization in terms of communication and process changes, gathered feedback, and made adjustments. This iterative process made the implementation manageable and allowed the organization to learn and adapt gradually.

Leaders in the program learned to look beyond technical issues. They began to understand the social and cultural dynamics within their organizations. For example, a leader who initially saw the organization as a well-oiled machine began to view it as a living system. This shift in mindset helped them address unconscious biases. It also started fostering a more inclusive culture. The leader's new approach encouraged more open dialogue and collaboration. This significantly improved team dynamics and overall morale.

NGOs in the program also began to think of more balanced decision-making for their organization. One organization in the program found itself bogged down by immediate funding challenges. They realized that this was making them neglect more long-term, strategic goals. Through OD&D training, the leadership team learned to balance short-term needs with strategic objectives. They involved more team members in the decision-making process and used questions like, "Does this decision align with our core values and long-term vision?" This approach led to more thoughtful decisions. This has ended up supporting the organization's mission, and has helped reduce the leadership's stress.

organizational performance. Research reveals that non-profits that prioritize staff development, including learning to work with each other collaboratively, see higher levels of employee engagement and retention. These are crucial elements in maintaining program quality and organizational stability.[7]

OD&D capacity building for non-profits in the education sector is essential for their sustainability, effectiveness and impact. Research on organizational capacity building, including our own experiences with the OD&D Fellowship Program, shows us the following. Capacity building in education-related concepts and techniques focuses on improving the quality of education. However, organizational capacity building ensures that non-profits have the internal strength, cohesion and resilience to deliver their mission effectively.

By investing in both areas, education non-profits can create a motivated and empowered workforce. They can also, thus, develop strong and compassionate leaders. These processes also help non-profits to structure themselves appropriately. All this contributes to the ability to navigate the complexities of the education sector with more confidence, empathy and agility.

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Sujatha Rao is a Founder-Director of Viridus Social Impact Solutions. She is an organizational design and development practitioner. She is committed to the creation of organizations that are fair, just, equitable and purposeful, for people, societies and our planet. She works with civil society organizations, leaders and government institutions to support them in creating such workplaces. She also works with educational institutions and education non-profits on designing person-centric and purpose-centric learning ecosystems. She co-hosts The WorkWise POD, which is a podcast on designing flourishing workplaces.

Sujatha has taught at University of Western Sydney, University of Sydney, Azim Premji University and Indian School of Development Management (ISDM). She holds a postgraduate degree in Personnel Management and Industrial Relations (PMIR) from XLRI Jamshedpur, and a PhD in Organization Studies from University of Sydney.

Email: sujatha.viridus@gmail.com

Monomita Chaudhury

Building capacities of small, rural grassroot NGOs

Krishna Kumar

When we asked over 100 stakeholders in the sector what makes for a good NGO, the response was clear and vivid – 205 parameters across eight (8) subjects. This was the basis for our OD journey about seven years back.

Dhwani Foundation then experimented with 25 small, rural partners in Karnataka. It found their average scores across these parameters was a mere 40 %. We have since rolled out our OD program called 'Niranthara' to over 200 partners.

It has been a humbling experience even as Dhwani foundation is more exposed to this world of rural, small NGOs. Many of them are led by women. It tells us that there is no limit to improvement, and to learning.

Our learnings and discoveries

Several leaders of small, rural NGOs are from the community having personally grown up experiencing the pains that the community faces. They understand local issues intimately and understand the constraints. They also have a huge draw from within the community.

Their programs tend to be well run. These are also tuned to address real issues. However, they are ill exposed, hesitant during their interactions with the donors of today, lacking knowledge.

Aware of their shortcomings, they are most willing to change and adapt. They have exhibited this capability across our several cohorts consistently.

Finding the right set of partners is nevertheless crucial. Since the need for OD
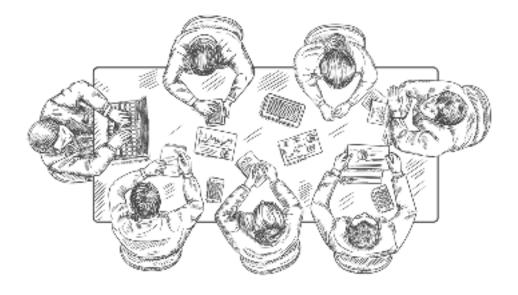
About Dhwani Foundation

Dhwani Foundation was established in 2006. It has a team of 55 members. It has a presence in Karnataka, TN, AP, Odisha and Jharkhand. The CSO hopes to have a presence in the Northeast in the near future.

Over the last seven (7) years it has worked with over 200 NGOs through its Niranthara program and its variants. An e-learning version has touched over 800 small and rural NGOs remotely. The program itself revolves around the following eight (8) subjects - F&A, Compliance, HR, MIS, Governance, Program Management, Fund Raising and Marketing, Leadership and Strategy.

Dhwani has also worked with six (6) different federation across TN and AP to build their capabilities, as well as to be the voice for the sector. More recently, it has been engaging with the CSR world through webinars and a series of CSR round table meetings.

is muted, during onboarding campaigns, we ask participants in small groups about their experience and changes seen with donors, governments, beneficiaries and the staff. The overwhelming response is an inability to deal with change. This becomes the basis for explaining Niranthara. We have also learnt to be honest about how much time, effort and change-related challenges they will undergo and be somewhat discouraging.

From about 300-350 applicants who become interested in the program, through local campaigns, application of a minimum

criterion, panel interviews and some field visits, we eventually find 30 partners.

As we enter new states where we are unknown, winning their trust, building a connect is key. "Our intent shows." It becomes the basis for buy-in or the lack of it. Hence an honest engagement, truly invested, showing respect, and one lacking any judgement, is one step. Learning by doing vs. 'gyan', and being supportive is another. Dealing in a direct way with dysfunctional behavior is the third step, combined with ongoing measurement of progress.

Cohorts compete and drive each other's behavior and actions. Much of the learning happens through peers too.

Our help desk works closely with partners on implementation. We use assessments to measure progress and share results openly. This, in turn, spurs the low performers to pick up and run hard. Informal consultations between partners, cluster meetings for sharing leanings, exposure to external speakers, and at least two field visits by senior management are ways in which the process of implementation is channeled.

The methodology is as follows. We share with them as pre-work all the material one would normally share in a classroom. Then we give the participants assignments so that they come in with certain preparations. We work with them on as many real-life situations in the classroom as possible. They complete the assignment with help from our help desk. We also assign them a field visit and a real-life experience to see the effect. The participants also discuss their leanings.

The process of change is influenced by a multi-pronged influence – from the leader, the Board, and the staff. During the field visits, a meeting is held with the leader, the Board, the two dedicated staff, and the rest of the staff. Feedback and inputs are provided based on this meeting. This serves to collectively push the organization toward the desired change.

While awards and rewards are a motivator, the greatest learnings for our partners comes from real life experiences while meeting donors, seeing changes in their staff/ their Board and the changes they see in themselves. Our partners have a good word to say about the program. We have also seen a number of them grow over the years. However, we caution that scaling and growing should not take them away from their true strengths. They must not become self-serving as opposed to serving the community. Our processes aim to help them hold on tighter to their vision than ever before. And there is so much more to do...

Why is it working

Funds in the social sector are often narrowly directed toward large, urban players. Balancing this flow is needed. Small and rural NGOs do great work. However, they have adjusted very little to the new world. Building capacities of these NGOs will mean the availability of more funds to this segment of the social sector. This money stretches more with higher probability for impact.

On the other hand, unspent funds are a growing problem. Funders are constantly looking for right partners. This gap is addressed by our OD program. This is why our approach we believe, is welcome.

Challenges faced

In implementing, several leaders are stuck in their ways. We try to move the leaders to action through exposure to other well-established players, and through straight talk. We also work with all the members of the organization across the hierarchy - from the Board to the leaders to staff members. Graduated leaders also talk to participants about the challenges they have faced and how they have dealt with these.

The process of winning the participants' trust is a long one. Being consistent, a balance of being direct and supportive with our partners, and lending good advice are ways in which they assess and accept Dhwani.

However, the fact that we have a rigorous process of selection helps. From the very beginning, we share the facts of the program 'as it is'. We highlight the challenges of the change process. We let the leaders assess for themselves if they can commit.

The Dhwani approach to building programs and interventions

We start with a survey of all the relevant stakeholders. We then seek their views. We categorize the responses into logical buckets and attempt to parameterize these. The goal is to have an objective set of indicators that can differentiate the good from the bad. These then become our endline metrics for the program at an output level.

We define scope (in and out). A curriculum is then built to address the knowledge gap and the process of addressing this. We then define a set of criteria for who will participate

The experience of Child Voice, as narrated by Annadurai S, Managing Trustee

"I am happy to express my gratitude to the entire team of Dhwani Foundation. They have helped us develop our organization's compliance and governance aspects. These include matters related to leadership, MIS, accounting and finance management systems, and fundraising skills. Now we are able to improve our administrative skills through 20 months capacity building process undertaken through their Niranthara Program.

"The training received from the experts in the field of Finance and Accounting has broadened our understanding and knowledge in handling the day-to-day activities. Niranthara has helped us fulfil all the necessary compliance. The inputs into the strategic planning process have given us a new vision and mission and insights into sustainable development.

"In the process, we have been able to develop a holistic approach in our service to children and allied communities. We have also learned to be more transparent and accountable to the donors. We have developed processes to become more professional and ethical as well.

"All of this has helped bring recognition for the organization's work. We have also been able to attract funding for the cause. Recently we received a grant from Ajim Premji Foundation.

"We have found the partnership with Dhwani Foundation to be beneficial. Its staff are committed, have a strong work ethic, and are very friendly."

vs. who will not. Following this, we define the relevant rules and outcomes.

We then run the program through potential participants, and other stakeholders. A pilot program is first held to test all the assumptions. Senior members hold these programs closely and ask the hard questions. We check the participants' feedback and changes are made even as the need appears.

This approach has been tried across our Niranthara variants. It also informs our federation program and our program with CSR initiatives.

In conclusion

Leaders and organizations respond to reason. They are responsive to solutions that work and help. As a provider, the trick is to stay close to ground and listen and respond.

Further, our hearts need to be ready to pick up real-end goals fearlessly. We must not be limited to sheer process goals or to only what is within our control. Half measures kill programs.

Lastly, we also need to persevere till the end, with the belief that it will work. It usually does.

Krishna Kumar is a Trustee of Dhwani Foundation. He has extensive experience in Sales, Sales Management, Operations, Global Client Relations and Management Consultancy across industries. Having spent most of his career in early-stage startups, he has had the opportunity to set up new centers and engagements for companies across sectors. His key skills include setting up and scaling operations, bridging gaps between front and back ends, process improvement and working with diverse teams. Krishna Kumar is an alumnus of XLRI, Jamshedpur.

Website: dhwanifoundation.org

Email: information@dhwanifoundation.org

Connect on: X f in

commons.wikimedia.org/ McKay Savage

A tale of capacity building

The case of Youngistaan Foundation

Neha Mathur

Youngistaan Foundation

Youngistaan Foundation is one of India's largest volunteer-driven, grassroots, not-for-profit organizations. It is based in Hyderabad, Telangana. It works toward improving the lives of people from underserved communities. It attempts to do this through six active programs. These are aligned with seven United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Registered in 2014, the organization has supported over five (5) million lives in 60 cities. It has been able to do this with the help of 70,000+ volunteers. The CSO has partnered with 100+ public and private organizations. The overall goal of these collaborations has been to address five key social issues. These include livelihood, health, gender, education, climate, and the environment.

In addition to the above-mentioned themes, Youngistaan assists city governments and local municipalities in providing relief support during disasters. It also coordinates the execution of social welfare and supportive initiatives. The CSO promotes active citizenship by hosting large-scale advocacy events addressing social issues as well.

Youngistaan Foundation has been closely working with the Department for Women's Development and Child Welfare, GHMC, Telangana State Police, Health Department, and other key stakeholders. Through partnerships with these governmental bodies, it has been strategically addressing social issues.

The organization's beneficiaries include preschoolers, primary grade students, adolescent boys and girls, and the youth. It has also been working with the homeless, senior citizens, the trans community, migrants, and many other communities.

From concerned citizens to an organized collective

In the origin story of an organization lies the kernel of its purpose. A young journalist in Hyderabad, Arun Daniel Yellamaty, mobilized a group of like-minded citizens. The intent was to provide food, shelter and safety to vulnerable people experiencing homelessness. This set-up continued for two years.

More young volunteers started joining the efforts. Ideas started proliferating. Therefore, in 2014, Arun felt the need to register Youngistaan Foundation (YF) as an NGO.

Social problems run deep. These require systematic intervention. In some ways, this was the first step toward capacity-building. This involved formalizing a motivated collective that would begin to articulate a shared vision and relevant outcomes.

Arun (Founder/Director) recalls how he made a conscious decision to take up a Master's in Social Work. It helped him understand the complexities of development work. "Pursuing my MSW helped me frame the direction of my work. It also connected me to mentors who guided me. This shaped my career. It changed my outlook on making a difference as well", Arun shares.

Over the next few years, Youngistaan Foundation consciously created a platform for collective action. For the youth, it opened up pertinent spaces where they could engage with social issues that were dear to them.

These included safety and rehabilitation of the homeless, active citizenship, educational inequity, menstrual health management and gender inequalities, climate change, and sensitization toward street animals.

Passionate young people with specific skill sets began to drive different grassroots operations in the field. These gradually transformed into full-fledged programs.

Autonomy as capacity

Each individual who joined had a voice. A team meeting, a team-building outing, or a team lunch - these were deliberate strategies to simultaneously share ideas and establish common ground.

Volunteers were accorded responsibilities based on their skills and interests. They started taking ownership of the work. Recognizing an individual's capabilities and offering opportunities to exercise them gives wings to their potential.

Volunteers' numbers started to grow. To support this process, we started putting in simple yet effective organizational processes.

These included selection procedures, induction, shadowing, volunteer management and roles, mandatory trainings, and meetings. These have helped to amplify our work and enhance volunteer satisfaction.

It is from within this ever-growing pool of socially aware volunteers that YF's team has grown. These volunteers, over the years, have become key decision-makers in the organization.

Many of these volunteers have also become full-time employees. Some of them constitute the current core leadership. This has

Cognitive development school

Youngistaan Foundation

been yet another step toward building the organizational capacity of a young CSO.

I joined YF as a volunteer. I have now led the education program for a number of years. I have been contributing toward framing and shaping YF's response to educational inequity.

My own journey of test-reflect-learn-do at YF was possible owing to the space I had to explore. I also have had opportunities to study the deep-rooted complexities of inequity in local contexts.

Similarly, Ruthvika Kavuru, our Operations Manager, joined as a volunteer. She led the MHM program. She took it through multiple stages of evolution before coming to a more specialized role. She shares, "I stayed with Youngistaan because I was encouraged to take up new challenges even though I was so young when I first came in. There has always been a space to learn and evolve."

In YF's formative years, vision-building exercises for the organization and the programs were an iterative and democratic series of processes. A young organization can provide rich opportunities to build and lead teams and programs.

It has the potential to offer a culture of experimentation. This, in turn, helps individuals in the organization to learn and grow continuously. YF had capacity-building baked into its operating model.

Accountability as capacity

Over the years, the YF core team has been traveling deeper in their journeys to understand the organization's role in addressing social inequalities. Through this process, we have come to realize that we need to simultaneously foster our volunteers' social consciousness.

We have felt the need to build a community of volunteers whose altruistic service was coupled with an accurate understanding of the dynamics of power and privilege. Such a group must also be alert to questions and concerns related to social injustice, oppression and identity.

We have tried to be accountable to our beneficiaries. These include the homeless, marginalized children and their parents, community leaders, adolescent girls, and women. We have tried to incubate young leaders with socially just mindsets and sustainable problem-solving strategies.

So, we brought on experts who conducted a series of experiential workshops. These involved coaching sessions on self-development, sensitization and empathy-building. The workshops also dealt with value-based decision-making, respectful responding style, and positive discipline, among other things.

At this juncture, YF's core team was building their own capacities indirectly through sessions that were designed for volunteers. This continuous capacity-building engagement, in its nascent stage, helped enrich key aspects of YF's philosophy. We had been co-creating this shared understanding during our core team meetings. The preferred methods to develop this philosophy involved discussions on self-development, leadership styles, and ownership.

Eventually, these sessions helped create some common tools to systematize necessary organizational processes. This includes democratic management of teams, an experiential learning cycle model, and constructive feedback mechanisms.

Targeted capacity building for the leadership

Along with capacity-building offerings aimed at our volunteer teams, YF also capacitates its core team by strengthening pre-existing skills and attitudes and activating their latent talent. The call for formal and targeted capacity-building is initiated by core team leaders themselves.

This agency lends authenticity to the capacity-building efforts. As a matter of fact, the YF core team has been highly motivated and self-driven when it comes to capacity-building initiatives.

Frequently, capacity-building needs arise organically from the necessity to address ground realities and challenges based on a leader's experiences and subsequent reflections.

YF's strength lies in the fact that the leadership continues to work directly in the

Puppet theatre school

Youngistaan Foundation

field. The leadership's ongoing grassroots connections have helped them develop a keen understanding of the context and the issues at hand, as well as the existing gaps.

Program Heads identify the manner of support they need at different junctures of their program's journey. They hold frank and lengthy discussions in the weekly meetings. These discussions focus on framing an intervention and improving the quality of impact. These also deal with the inclusion of stakeholders that one has not worked with, and building one's own technical capacities.

Discussions on capacity building often tend to address meeting skill gaps, improving knowledge, and identifying best practices. As Ruthvika puts it, "We have a hunger to learn. To go deeper. Our capacity-building needs originate from our work in the field."

Capacity-building is a work in progress much like our long-term programs. Our programs have undergone multiple iterations. At each stage, we have been open and welcome to learning and unlearning. Sometimes it is to prepare to pivot.

The launch of our Early Years Program (structured pedagogy approach) in school contexts was preceded by two years of self-

Youngistaan Foundation

Volunteers in a basti

study, online courses, and research. At other times it is to either deepen the impact as was in the case of our community-based SEL Program or to refine a program's theory of change as we did for our MHM-Gender Program.

We learn so that we can share. Program Heads and their teams share knowledge and skills with their stakeholders. They could be teachers in a school or mothers in a basti.

Our core team designs capacity-building interventions based on their own learnings. These often take the form of training workshops for volunteers, teachers and parents. They also create shadowing opportunities.

Weekly coaching sessions are conducted as well. Sometimes, it is a mindset that we are sharing. This takes time and patience. We also share so that we can learn.

SEL (Social-Emotional Learning) Program Head, Jesu Vandana, narrates, "I remember a workshop where I went with the objective of teaching emotional awareness and self-care. I heard the inputs of the team in a group sharing session. I listened to their struggles. In the process, I understood the importance of quietly holding that space for them. It compelled me to reflect upon and see my own challenges with a different lens."

Pausing for perspective

The strengthening of a team's capacities is sometimes akin to finding the missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle you have been building for years. In the early years, our team worked on building the self in relation to social problems. Years later, we paused to situate the self in relation to the organization. An additional goal was to recalibrate the well-being of both the individual and the collective.

We have always extended mental well-being and self-development sessions to our teams and volunteers. We have realized that certain

capacity-building endeavors encourage us to pause and reflect on our work, and our unique selves in relation to our work. It is critical to pay heed to evolving team dynamics as an organization grows.

All of us have worked in the development sector for some time now. We have reached a point where we experience some form of empathic distress. Addressing these as a team helps sustain the synergy between who we are, what we do, and where we belong.

Jesu comments on the need to choose capacity-building offerings that rejuvenate self and self-motivation. She says, "As a social worker in the development sector, I have faced emotional fatigue. This has been due to the nature of the work. My own emotional battles in my personal life have also been a factor. Taking out time to focus on myself has helped me understand the power of self-care. I have had to help myself as I have helped others."

The YF core team have taken on opportunities to strengthen resilience as individuals and team members. This has brought the team closer. It has also helped us understand each other's challenges and strengths. This includes what one could categorize as emotion-related dialogue in the workspace.

We have made time and space for honest conversations like – "What I am struggling with" or "Why I feel exhausted". This practice of introspection, sitting with discomfort, and sharing one's reflections with the team has become a way of life at YF.

Strands of rope come together

Our organization has been growing. Our work has also been diversifying. In this process, we have come to deeply value the efforts and opportunities of strengthening our own capacities and that of our teams and beneficiaries.

We acknowledge that capacity-building presupposes a disposition to seek help with

humility. It takes courage to approach fellow organizations. This also involves building networks, even as one faces rejection!

We acknowledge that we build ourselves on the decades of research and experience of those that have come before us. Sometimes reading peer-reviewed journals, knowledge papers, and policy briefs is a way to build our capacities.

We acknowledge that the capacities of CSOs, key stakeholders, and beneficiaries is inter-connected. Cross-learning is fundamental to authentic impact. Bringing experts to share a common platform is a way of strengthening capacities together.

Collaborating with government agencies to leverage existing solutions and expand our reach is another means of enhancing capacities together. At YF, we are attempting to build bridges with like-minded organizations and official government channels.

Ultimately, bolstering the assets of communities so that our beneficiaries build their own solutions is the goal of all capacity-building in the development sector. YF finds itself travelling in this very direction. This is our purpose, and this is our future. This is why we strive to build our own capacities.

Neha Mathur is the Program Head (Education – Early Years) at Youngistaan Foundation. She believes that education is a potent tool to dismantle inequity and injustice. Neha has been responsible for ideation, development and implementation of the Education Program at Youngistaan Foundation for the last eight (8) years. She has been sculpting empathetic workplaces and designing learning experiences for children, volunteers and teachers.

Website: youngistaanfoundation.org

Email: neha@youngistaanfoundation.org

Connect on:

Building nonprofit capacities, the Atma way

Diving into the why, what and how of capacity building of small to mid-sized nonprofits in India

Sneha Arora

The why

India's social issues, rooted in factors like poverty, inequality, a sizable population, and rapid economic development, are both diverse and complex. In the last five years, the National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) recorded a dramatic improvement in poverty between 2015-16 and 2019-21. Approximately 135 million people (13.5 crore) moved out of multidimensional poverty during this period. According to data shared by Press Information Bureau, the poverty rate dropped from 24.85% to 14.96%, with rural areas seeing the fastest decline. However, the post-pandemic impact on poverty in India is yet to be fully assessed.

The above is one macro indicator of national progress in tackling the most hard hitting of social problems, poverty. However, there are other indicators of overall progress that raise concerns. In the last five years India's Global Human Development Index (HDI) ranking has stagnated. This stands at 132 out of 181 countries. This indicates no major progress on life expectancy, expected and mean years of schooling, and gross national income per capita. In the same period, income inequality has gone up. The GINI coefficient has risen from 0.35 to 0.41. This indicates that the gap between the rich and poor is increasing and perpetuating the cycle of poverty

The regulatory environment has made it harder for NGOs to survive, evidenced by 12,000-14,000 NGOs shutting down in India. This has been due to the tightening of regulations, financial constraints and operational challenges. These indicate a threat to civil society. Solving these issues demands deep, patient and multifaceted approaches targeting root causes. NGOs play a vital role in addressing complex challenges by crafting solutions grounded in a contextual understanding of on-the-ground issues. As of 2023, there are 252,000 registered NGOs in India.

However, poor access to resources, limited team skills and capacities, and a lack of knowledge on organization building in NGOs leads to their inability to thrive and grow their impact. Research shows that NGOs investing in organizational development are able to scale impact faster. However, only 18% of the research survey respondents said they invest adequately in organizational development.

Atma provides customized capacity building support to address these challenges. Our vision is a thriving development sector in India that enables NGOs to sustain and grow. We do this by building the capacity of NGOs by enhancing their knowledge, skills, systems, processes, networks, agency, and access to resources.

The what

Atma's Theory of Change: A Theory of Change (ToC) is a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. Atma has adopted the Mighty Ally approach

to articulate its theory of change in a concise and compelling manner.

Picture of success - Atma's graduation goals: The question of what makes an NGO successful in the sector is a big one. Research on the topic tends to be anchored by international bodies and authors, with some evidence of Indian parallels.

One recent piece of Indian research which focuses on what makes NGOs scale, calls out three major factors of success. These are: a) organizational and leadership bandwidth; b) funding, and; c) the ability to attract and retain talent.

Another international research report, focuses on organizational effectiveness (OE) for NGOs. This aims to build on capacities such as strategic planning, leadership transition, Board development and governance, communications planning, and diversity, equity and inclusion.

Atma's measures of success are grounded in evolving evidence and practice. Over our 16-years long journey, we have constantly refined and updated our metrics of success in order to better build and understand capacity as a concept.

The four graduation goals: Our current framework focuses on four key areas of organization management. We call these graduation goals. Atma aims to build organizational capacities through its programs in these areas.

The first graduation goal relates to fundraising systems and the donor pipeline. The second one focuses on impact creation and program improvement. The third goal is about people, strategy and leadership. The fourth one centers on organizational capabilities.

Each of these goals has defined focus areas, outputs and outcome measures for us to evaluate success of any OD program. We fundamentally resort to our knowledge,

Atma's TOC

Atma's TOC follows the Mighty Ally approach. Because many NGOs in India lack the organizational capacity to sustain and grow their impact (Why), we work with small to mid-sized NGOs (Who) to enhance their organizational capabilities (What).

This is achieved through tailored capacity-building programs. These include project partnerships, workshops, the Atma Lab and volunteer engagement (How). The goal is to empower hundreds of NGOs annually to sustainably scale their impact. This is hoped to drive transformative change across the social sector over the next many decades (When).

We ground our work in a clear theory of change. By doing this we ensure that we are able to clearly articulate our outcomes, assumptions, activities and pathways through which we can create meaningful impact in the sector. For more details on Atma's TOC, feel free to reach out to the author.

skills and processes framework to measure outcomes for shorter interventions like workshops.

The how

Our approach: Atma's capacity building initiatives broadly fall under five categories. These relate to: 1) capacity building programs; 2) project partnerships; 3) workshops; 4) the Atma Lab; and 5) volunteer engagement. Our approach may vary depending on the need and intensity of the support being provided in the program. However, for our more intense programs, we follow a standardized approach to the capacity building intervention. There are three key aspects of our approach which are our USPs as a capacity builder.

Tailored support: We offer one-on-one guidance. We help each NGO craft strategies and action plans aligned with their goals for sustainability.

Collaborative: We work with donors and intermediaries as well. The goal is to broaden our reach, and support more NGOs.

Outcomes oriented: We use a review-based approach. The aim is to drive accountability and focus on measurable outcomes.

The effectiveness of a capacity building program rests on several factors. At Atma we ensure a clear step by step process is followed for our structured CB programs. This helps to ensure their relevance to our partners and effectiveness in building core capabilities.

Step 1 - selection and diagnostic: The first step in an effective CB intervention is to understand the needs, context and nuances of an NGO's realities. In our experience, no two NGOs are alike. Even when they struggle through the same challenges, the need for effective solutions requires a deeper understanding of who they are. Through the selection and diagnosis process, we try to understand the leader and organization structure. We try and gain understanding about the models, geographies, interventions and intersectionalities relating to the programs. We also try to build familiarity with the challenges they face across the various OD domains.

At the first stage, this understanding helps us take an informed decision on whether or not we will partner with an organization. We then move into a capacity diagnosis. A tool we often employ to diagnose organizational capacities is Atma's Life Stage Survey (LSS). This tool encompasses 80+ parameters of organizational health. These span across the 10 OD domains of Atma's work. These include strategy, programs, monitoring and evaluation, human resources, leadership, fundraising, finance, Board and governance,

A sample question from the Life Stage Survey (LSS)

Section: Strategy

Sub-section: Vision and plan

Element: Strategy plan

Stage 1: We do not have a set plan of action to achieve our goals, mission and vision.

Stage 2: We have a basic plan of action which is not clearly linked to our larger goals, mission and vision. It does not influence our day-to-day activities or decision-making.

Stage 3: We have a strategy plan that is aligned to our larger goals, vision and mission. It is mostly known and influences our daily activities and decision-making.

Stage 4: We have a strategy plan for the medium and long-term, it aligns well with our overall vision, mission and goals. It is broadly known and influences our programs and decision-making. It includes plans to build future capacity.

Stage 5: We have a strategy plan for the medium and long term. It is broadly known and influences our programs and decision-making. It includes plans to build future capacity. We now need to review our strategy plan to ensure that it is still aligned with the overall vision, mission and goals of our organization.

marketing and communications, and digital. The exercise is done as a self-assessment by the NGO. It is facilitated and guided by the Atma team. In a step-by-step manner, we map out the life stage of 82 parameters across 10 OD areas. This is undertaken in a workshop style facilitation for all NGOs undergoing Atma's Accelerator Program.

The NGO is provided with an LSS report at the end of the exercise. This report summarizes all aspects of their capacities. It also guides them on the next steps. We have also adapted LSS to the program constructs of other

capacity building programs at Atma. Its goal is to assess NGO needs in a leaner and more fit to purpose manner.

Step 2 - creation of OD plans: We typically encourage the creation of OD plans in the context of a bigger goal. Where does the organization want to be three years from now? What do they want to achieve in the next one year? These goals are focused largely on the communities our partners work with. They serve as anchors to the capacity building process. The question then becomes, for the NGO to effectively achieve these goals, what are the capacities that need to be prioritized in their work with Atma?

Hence, goal setting and prioritization are important aspects of our CB journey. Once done, we create detailed capacity building plans with each NGO partner for the duration of the program. Projects are identified and divided across quarters for each year, and then across years in case of longer programs. This allows for a shared understanding between Atma and the NGO partner. This also enables an effective OD process. We keep certain guidelines in mind during this process. These include the prioritization of needs vs. potential to impact the organization, NGO team size, the bandwidth of the leadership, flexibility in the planning vs. execution, and clarity in outputs and deliverables for each project.

Step 3 - program implementation: Program implementation starts from the clarity on what is to be achieved with the NGO partner for each capacity to be built. For example, while working with an NGO on strengthening their fundraising systems, a project/ output might be to put into place an annual fundraising strategy. The process of doing this would involve the following steps:

- Kick-off meeting with the NGO.
- Atma shares the fundraising strategy template, which includes several sections like organizational budget, goal setting, SWOT analysis, donor trend analysis, tracking fundraising outputs, etc.

- The partner NGO shares relevant organizational information on their budgets, goals, and current funders, etc.
- Atma conducts a workshop on best practices and guidelines for designing an effective fundraising strategy.
- The NGO and the Atma Consultant work together on putting down the information, and for taking decisions on the fundraising strategy for the organization for the next 12 months.
- A fundraising strategy document for the NGO is ready.

"Atma has been a very strong supporter. It has played a crucial role in Involve's journey to help us identify the highlights, gaps and opportunities of all the domain areas in the organization. This has given us a complete picture of where we stand." - Samyak Jain, Co-founder, Involve

NGOs will typically use this to guide their fundraising efforts in that 12-month period. They also use it to engage their Board and share it with prospective donors. However, most importantly, this system/process becomes a part of their annual activities. They start to take this approach to plan fundraising efforts each year and to track their success on efforts vs. only rewards. It streamlines their approach to building relationships in the sector. Thus, they become able to move beyond transactional funding requests to a longer term, more holistic approach to strategic fundraising.

However, this same process repeats 12-15 times over for each NGO in a year, and that way for a set of 50+ NGOs across the Atma team annually. Atma consultants face some common challenges during project

implementation. These range from ensuring bandwidth from the NGO leaders while not pulling them away from the important work they need to do on ground. The objective is to create something contextual for them, which truly brings about change practically, going beyond theoretical frameworks.

"During this quarter, a partner NGO altered the scope of work, leading to the cancellation of one project and the initiation of another. This caused delays in project completion. A key challenge moving forward will be to establish alignment with the partner from the outset concerning any potential changes in scope." - Anuprita Kelkar, Atma Consultant

How we prepare our team: Atma undertakes its capacity building through a team of internal employees, designated Atma Consultants, who work 1:1 with a set of NGOs. Each consultant comes with a mixed experience set across nonprofits, corporates and OD areas of expertise. For example, they would have typically worked in 1-2 OD areas deeply in the past - like M&E or HR. No one Atma consultant can be an expert in everything, so we hire for expertise in 1-2 areas per team member. We then enable peer learning and sharing to guide the work across OD areas as a team.

Atma also heavily relies on the OD tools, frameworks, guidelines and best practice projects that we have created over the last many years. We constantly update them to keep these relevant. We also contextualize them to the needs of the NGOs. We ground our work in research and management best practices based on reports, studies, articles

from credible management schools and organizations, both in India and abroad. Learning and development is prioritized in many ways at Atma. This includes peer learning sessions internally, signing up for courses externally, and learning from mentors. We apply the 70:20:10 L&D model for our own growth and development.

The Atma consultant's work is reviewed and managed by an experienced senior consultant and/or the lead consultant at Atma. The latter comes with more experience and expertise in capacity building and organization development. Additionally, Atma also relies on skilled experts from both the corporate and nonprofit sectors to volunteer with Atma on pro-bono and part-time basis. This helps fill any gaps in the expertise and understanding of our internal staff members on subject matters like HR, M&E, and financial management, etc.

Every quarter, the Atma consultant plans for projects in the next one. They call out where they need support to deliver on a project. The volunteer manager at Atma then looks to search and select a volunteer who can be mapped to the said consultant to enable them to more effectively support the NGO.

"From thinking about what OD consists of, to deepening the understanding of each area, to actually putting them down in quarterly development focus, Atma's support has been consistent in making strides." - Kushal Dattani, Founder-CEO, Samait Shala

At times, there could be a need for an extra pair of hands when team bandwidth is tight. This also goes a long way in us being able to provide such deep support to many NGOs

with a lean team. Atma works with ~30 volunteers every year.

Step 4 - reviews and impact measurement: Capacity is an intangible attribute of a system. Hence, measuring it has been a complex challenge in the field of organization development. However, several studies and research point toward aspects of organizational and individual capacities that drive effective nonprofit operations and growth. We measure these through a combination of quantitative and qualitative factors.

Our approach involves a baseline and endline on organizational maturity and capacities. These are punctuated with regular feedback during the implementation in terms of feedback from NGOs. We try to understand the relevance, timeliness and quality of the project support we offer. We engage deeply with their experience of working with the Atma consultant. We seek and act upon the feedback on the challenges and what could be improved on a quarterly basis.

We also measure the number of projects designed and implemented on a regular basis. We focus on not just creation but also usage in the organization as a program output. Last but not the least, outcomes measured are contextual to the needs of the NGO and the program design.

We identify metrics from our graduation goals framework and/or define a clear picture of success for each of our programs, focusing on what we are trying to achieve with the NGO. These outcomes can be an increase in knowledge on a subject/topic of organizational capacity. An example of this is clarity on how to measure the outcomes of their programs. A relevant outcome may be an increase in abilities of the leader/team, e.g., to better pitch their programs to donors. Another positive impact may be an increase in systems created. For example, they may be able to put into place a field data gathering

tool, which allows them to better track their program outcomes.

In the case of long-term interventions, over 24 months, we also track the growth in the number of beneficiaries served, team size and organizational budget. Through a combination and modularized approach, we ensure that while there might not be one standard way of measuring capacity, we commit to clear outcomes at the start, and ensure that they get achieved through our program intervention.

"The volunteer assigned to us this quarter, Aman, had great technical skills in website design. We had no idea about how website content updation worked. However, Aman's support through Atma helped us do this seamlessly. We want Aman to continue to support our website work in the next quarter as well." - Haresh Trivedi, Founder Trustee, Vidya Bharti Foundation

Challenges and learnings

Building leadership and staff capacities: We have built an approach that serves the needs of our partner organizations. We focus much more on organizational systems and processes. We have focused much less on the individual aspects of growth and development.

We have not so far consciously either designed for, or measured, change at an individual level. An example of this includes changes in the mindset of the NGO leader.

However, we regularly take feedback from them and seek responses through open ended questions. Through these processes, we have observed that leaders often call out changes in their attitude and mindset, confidence levels, specific skills and transformative experiences, as a result of Atma's program interventions.

"We were like lost sheep. You (Atma) have brought us to the light." - Tatyana Dias, CEO, Veruschka Foundation

Harnessing the power of cohorts: Evidence suggests that cohort-based capacity building models are as much a requirement as individualized support. Atma's default approach stems from a focus on the latter.

However, over the years, we have dabbled with how we can create more peer learning. We have tried to foster NGO to NGO spaces for learning, connections, partnerships and growth through our programs.

We have designed for cohorts in some of our newer program offerings. We can definitely harness the power of cohorts much more proactively with the Accelerator and our alumni base of 100+ NGOs.

Enabling other actors in the ecosystem: One of the major challenges in affecting transformative change for NGOs is in the confluence of multiple success factors that play a role in their growth. These are often beyond the capacity building support being provided by Atma.

What makes an NGO successful is a question we reflect and opine on a regular basis as a team. In our observations, organizational capacities are a critical foundation to building impactful NGOs. However additional actors that play a critical role in this drama are donors, board members, collaborators and regulatory authorities.

Capacity building can only go so far as to set the NGO on a streamlined path to sustainability and growth. However, it needs the horsepower of these other factors to set the NGO up for greater impact and scale.

Sneha Arora is the CEO at Atma. She leads the fundraising, governance, people and communications verticals. She has 15 years of experience in the private and development sector. An MBA from the ISB (Indian School of Business), Sneha has held multiple positions across strategy consulting and corporate finance. She is deeply passionate about making a positive impact in people's lives through her work and is excited to drive this through the capacity building of NGOs at Atma over the last six (6) years. She has been selected as an Acumen Fellow in 2022. Before joining Atma, she worked at Boston Consulting Group's Social Impact practice. She has experience in supporting large-scale transformation projects in education and water with state governments in India. Sneha is an avid runner and has completed over 10 half marathons. She also loves reading, baking and is a big TED fan.

Website: atma.org.in

Email: contact@atma.org.in

Connect on:

freepik.com/storyset

Enabling a shift for inclusive education through capacity building

Deepti Adsule

My career shift from the corporate sector to education brought in many answers on how I can contribute toward providing quality education to all children by being a part of the system. However, eventually it also made me realize that to be able to make a dent through my work, the efforts must be sustainable and made at the systemic level, wherever possible. As a 'Teach for India' teacher, way back in 2014, I taught in a government school for two years. That experience made me understand the ground realities and the shifts I can bring as an educator, keeping children at the core.

It also made me curious about two other key areas. First, as a teacher, how can I support children with diverse needs in a mainstream classroom? And second, it's imperative to work toward building capacities of the key stakeholders around a child. In other words, to have a bigger impact and a systemic level shift, it is important to think about amplifying the effect which will happen only if the work is toward empowering and enabling those who are the most crucial part of the education system and work directly with children. Joining 'Ummeed Child Development Center' gave me the answers to both.

Around 15% of school going children have a disability. India has the highest number of children with disabilities (CWDs) in the world. Their number is estimated at over 50 million. Through our experience of working in the space, we have noticed that there is a need to acknowledge and accept the above fact. In the recent years, inclusive education has gained momentum with new policies like National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in place. However, significant

> **About hope**
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> Ummeed, meaning 'hope', was founded in 2001 by Dr Vibha Krishnamurthy. She is one of India's first developmental paediatricians. Ummeed is a not-for-profit organization. Its vision is to help children with, and at the risk of, developmental disabilities reach their full potential and be included in society.
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> Ummeed's key areas of work include providing trans-disciplinary clinical services to children and their families across the spectrum of developmental disabilities. In addition, it also trains medical professionals, educators, community workers and parents themselves to implement high-quality interventions to support children in their development. Ummeed's teams are also actively engaged in research pertinent to the field of child development and disabilities, and work on awareness and advocacy initiatives to shift culture and attitudes toward inclusion.

gaps exist between these policies and their implementation at the school level. This happens due to lack of training for mainstream teachers to support children with diverse needs, including CWDs.

This has strengthened our purpose of work at Ummeed toward capacity building of educators and civil society organizations (CSOs) working in the education and disability space. The larger goal is to ensure that all children learn with their peers. Everyone performs better when exposed to inclusive education.

We are constantly working toward developing curriculum which CSOs and educators can

take back to mainstream classrooms and schools to cater to diverse learning needs. Our purpose is not to turn mainstream educators into special educators or experts in developmental disabilities. However, we aim to equip them with simple ways based on their classroom experiences. In the process, we want to capacitate them to be able to engage and make sure each child gets the opportunity to learn and feels included and belonged.

We believe that people are the experts of their lives. We also know that educators have the best understanding of their classroom and their own pedagogic contexts. They often have a clear sense of what might work better for them and their students. For us, it's vital that we understand the needs of the CSOs and educators first. This helps us design interventions in the most meaningful ways. For instance, one of the early stages of our conversation involves doing a needs assessment to understand their needs and context. In the process, we are also able to gauge our roles through the entire journey. We acknowledge that there is a need to continue to work toward spreading awareness and sensitizing different stakeholders like educators, professionals, caregivers, and the children themselves.

The quantum of work that's needed and all that we are trying to do toward disability inclusive education in our country cannot be done alone. This makes it inevitable to empower and equip more CSOs, schools and educators to join hands with us on this journey. Most of our capacity building efforts at Ummeed in the initial days was focused on CSOs. We worked mostly with individual CSOs and schools. It made it easier to find synergies, align objectives, needs and outcomes. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we explored the online space. We had to design programs which were situation and time sensitive, yet in alignment with our vision.

Alongside, we explored the online platform for running capacity building programs to expand our reach. School Inclusion Training

Program (SITP) is one such capacity building program. It was launched at the peak of the pandemic. Its goal was to cater to educators' needs using the online medium. It made us realize the power of connecting remotely with a diverse group of educators from across the country for a period of three months. However, the challenge was that we missed the in-person warmth and participation.

Since then, we have continued to conduct most of our capacity building programs online. We have also explored working with CSOs from different geographies for deeper engagement. Our programs are a two-way learning and sharing process. These are based on ample real-life, case-based discussions from the Indian context. These also involved experiential learning and implementation support. SITP is an example of the same. It has thrived from the insightful experiences and the co-learning spaces created within. The program has evolved over the years. It is running its fourth iteration this year. It continues to equip participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to create inclusive classrooms for all children, including those with disabilities.

By providing specialized training, the SITP empowers educators to foster an inclusive environment where every student can thrive academically and socially. We have had over 120 participants over the years. We aim to engage with around 70 more in the present cohort. The program focuses on topics ranging from understanding of inclusion and diverse learning, mental health, social-emotional well-being, child development, developmental disabilities, and social and academic inclusion. Co-learning spaces have been embedded in-between the content-based training sessions. The emphasis has been on creating safe spaces for participants to share their reflections, learning, takeaways and challenges from the sessions with each other in smaller groups.

Across these spaces, it has been observed that participants openly share what works for them and the challenges they face in

implementing some of their learnings. They bring in cases from their own context to be discussed in smaller groups and all participants meaningfully contribute to the conversations. Overall, this space encourages participants to reflect and discuss previous sessions leading to meaningful and insightful conversations which becomes difficult in the larger group. To be able to gauge the outcome of our efforts, we persistently work toward strengthening our processes and indicators defined for them. One of the simple yet efficient tools that Ummeed uses to monitor the effectiveness of any program is The Kirkpatrick Model. It is a globally recognized method of evaluating the results of training and learning programs. It assesses both formal and informal training methods. It rates them against four levels of criteria: reaction, learning, behavior and results. This model helps us understand the impact of our work at different levels. We rely equally on qualitative ways to measure and evaluate our own work. For example, we use anecdotes, impact stories, testimonials, etc., as well. Thereby we create opportunities to let participants express their learning in a way most suited to them.

A key learning from our engagements with CSOs has been to not just come up with a strong training plan. We have come to realize that we must also support them in an equally robust implementation support, monitoring processes and sustainability plan in place. In the process, we have developed a robust understanding of our role in the broader ecosystem as knowledge experts and influencers. It has become even more crucial for us to continue to work toward building a cadre of individuals to take the work forward.

All of the above helps us reflect and determine our direction, and plan through our learning journey. We have tried to produce and sustain capacity building programs in disability inclusive education of a certain quality. At the same time, we are constantly striving to become better at what we do by incorporating learnings from the previous iterations. A simple example would be that we

design the structure of our programs keeping the participants and recipients at the centre, so that they engage meaningfully. Learning looks different for different interventions. For example, we run an in-service, professional development program in partnership with Azim Premji University (APU). It is a diploma in inclusive education. This program involves a much deeper engagement, mentorship, field/school visits, assignments, etc.

Our long journey has led to the realization and continued efforts for capacity building of schools and CSOs to enhance effectiveness and to ensure sustainable movement toward the vision of inclusion of all children. In addition to empowering and enabling them by providing training and resources, we envision them to be advocates for a bigger social and systemic changes.

Deepti Adsule is the Associate Director of School Services at Ummeed Child Development Center. She has an MBA degree and has over 15 years of experience of working in the corporate and education sectors. She believes that schools should be places where all children feel safe and happy. These should enable them to learn at their pace, so that they reach their maximum potential, and are able to make the best choices for themselves. Her dream is to bring in sustainable systemic changes to make society more inclusive and focused on children's well-being.

Website: ummeed.org

Email: deepti.adsule@ummeed.org

Connect on:

Building capacities for transformative education: Mera Gaon Meri Dunia's journey

Kamlesh

In February 2022, while discussing with our grassroots leaders, we realized that we needed to expand their horizons. They wanted opportunities for learning and exposure, where they could participate in the state of the art in the development space. Then onward, our capacity-building plans have focused on boosting the growth of our leaders.

At Mera Gaon Meri Dunia (MGMD), we have always believed in the transformative power of education, especially when it is deeply connected with the community it serves. Working in the rural areas of the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh, our organization has witnessed firsthand the impact that capacity building (CB) can have on education, community engagement, and the growth of civil society organizations (CSOs) in general.

In this piece, we reflect on our capacity-building journey. We focus on identifying our needs, and how our learnings have informed our practices on the ground. In the last three years, our organization has been part of multiple CB workshops by Digantar, Bookworm, LEC-Parag, Jodo Gyan, and OELP.

These workshops are intended to build the capacity of people working in different roles from grassroots to leadership to

About Mera Gaon Meri Dunia

Mera Gaon Meri Dunia (MGMD) is a registered NGO under the Section 8 of Companies Act. The organization focuses on youth development and education transformation in rural Madhya Pradesh. Its vision is to create a world where youth drive sustainable social change.

MGMD's mission is to transform the education landscape through community-led efforts, particularly by nurturing platforms for youth to connect with themselves and their communities. The organization operates on core values of ownership, decentralization, excellence, personal growth, joy and collaboration.

MGMD believes that dedicated, invested youth can bring significant change to villages, supporting this belief with a strong foundation of community involvement. Since its inception in 2019, MGMD has impacted over 5,500 children, 850 youth, and 1,200 parents. The organization has also nurtured 20 youth education leaders and empowered 30+ women as Edupreneurs.

It has been certified as a Great Place to Work. Its key projects include Sparsh, Skills on Wheels, Shrinkhalaa, Mission Malwa, and Aaina Dekho. Each of these initiatives has been designed to empower local communities, youth, and women through education, skill development, and civic initiatives.

enhance overall mindset, skills, knowledge and understanding. Such organizational CB workshops have equipped us with pedagogical caliber. They have also helped us enhance our experiential knowledge for ground-readiness. These have broadened our horizons as well, and enabled team members to think and act systemically and rigorously.

For organizations like us, it becomes crucial to learn continuously while experimenting and practicing new methodologies in the arenas we work in. Building leaders who have a holistic sense of the purpose of the work and the work itself is the core intent we begin with. This is why nurturing the potential of people to grow at a steady process is our core focus.

Identifying capacity building needs and the team's role

One of the first steps in our capacity-building journey has been a thorough reflection on the challenges and opportunities in our work. For instance, in 2022, we become part of various workshops to address specific gaps in our educational interventions.

Workshops like 'Role of Libraries in Primary Education' by Parag and 'Foundations of Education' by Digantar were very useful. These revealed reading habits and the need for educators to foster a more child-centered approach in classrooms. These workshops helped us build foundational knowledge.

The process of identifying CB needs involves regular discussions within the team. The grassroots leaders are hungry to learn and share insights from their interactions with the community. Feedback from local leaders and teachers plays a key role in adapting the content and focus of our learnings and their implementation efforts.

At MGMD, leadership is not just about directing the team. It involves empowering everyone to be a leader in their own right. Our leadership team believes in a collaborative capacity-building approach. This means that the larger framework for CB is developed by the core team. However, the inputs of grassroots leaders and our stakeholders are crucial in tailoring it to the needs of the community.

Selecting participants for capacity building

The selection of participants for capacity-building initiatives is a carefully considered process at MGMD. For us, it is not just about

who can attend. It is about who will benefit the most and how they will cascade the learning to others.

For example, in the 'Role of Libraries in Primary Education' workshop, we specifically sent a person who has worked in libraries. We hoped that they would experiment with the learnings of the course. This was envisaged to ensure that the knowledge gained would directly impact the students and peer leaders working in similar contexts.

In the recent workshops, our Sparsh Leaders are included. Their participation is vital. They represent the future leaders of our community. By equipping them with the right skills and knowledge, we help pave the way for long-term, sustainable change.

Growth in our leaders through capacity building

Our leaders have been helped to change themselves firsthand through various CB workshops. They have built an ability to be agile in the school's working space with students and teachers. They show command over subject-specific pedagogical understanding and methodologies used to deliver the learning in different contexts.

Our leaders have been equipped with the educational mindset toward nurturing holistic educational spaces where they work, and a deeper understanding of how learning happens within a classroom or in a school space in general. Our youth leaders have been change-makers in the community. They have been involved in processes of transformation, both internal and external in terms of skills, mindsets, exposure and knowledge.

Their growth has been remarkable in the classrooms and school-level interactions. Their leadership has inspired others in the community to take a more active role in the education of their children. This has the potential of contributing to a larger cultural shift toward valuing education as a key to the future.

Integrating learnings into practice

Capacity building at MGMD is not a one-time event. After each workshop, we ensure that there is a debrief and reflection session. Here the participants share their experiences. For example, after the 'Foundations of Education' workshop, participants held a sharing meeting. Here they discussed their learnings. They also shared how these could be applied in their work with all the people who hail from the same context of work.

Mera Gaon Meri Dunia

Voices from the field

"I came to know closely how children can learn math and language without fear and without getting bored. An example of this is combining words to create a picture, like using balloons, scissors, threads, etc. Also, I got to learn the why and the how of doing evaluations. It was a lot of fun learning all of this." – Mary, a leader from the Sparsh Program, who completed the Khelghar Workshops in 2023

"I found it very enjoyable and conducive to learning to interact with people from different communities. Through activities like group reading, discussion on the article, and reading with guided questions like - "What is the author saying in the article?" - helped me establish an understanding of deeper things like what are their assumptions. and what are the implications of these?" - Manisha, Sparsh Leader, after completing the 'Foundations of Education' course organized by Digantar in 2023

These sharing-learning sessions often lead to practical action items. For instance, after the workshops by Jodo Gyan and OELP, leaders were committed to introducing a concrete approach to teaching math in their classrooms to foster a love for the subject. These small, incremental changes have had a profound impact on the learning environment in the schools we work with.

We try to ensure that the learnings from the capacity-building workshops are taken to the ground. While doing this, we also intend to ensure that CB leads to tangible changes in practice. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of the entire process.

At MGMD, we provide ongoing support to workshop participants through regular follow-ups and mentorship. In the case of Sparsh Leaders, for example, they receive guidance and handholding afterward, as they implement what they have learned in the field.

Additionally, we organize periodic review meetings. Here participants discuss their challenges in applying their new knowledge. They work together to find solutions. This continuous feedback loop ensures that capacity building is not just about learning new concepts. It ends up embedding them into everyday practice.

Outcomes and reflections

The outcomes of our capacity-building efforts have been significant. For one, we have seen a noticeable improvement in the quality of education in the schools we work with. Youth leaders are confident and enriched. Teachers are more engaged. Students have become more active learners. There is a growing sense of community ownership in education. Moreover, our local youth leaders have emerged as strong advocates for education and community development.

I have experienced two capacity-building workshops which were focused on 'libraries in primary education' and on 'foundational literacy approaches'. The amount and quality of learning I received was crucial.

In the Library Educator's Course (LEC) hosted by Parag, I learnt about the importance of nurturing a reading culture. I also got a deep sense of the vital role books play in children's early learning stages. The course emphasized how storytelling and literature contribute to children's developmental process and, by extension, to the society.

We explored children's literature. We learnt how to do an analysis of a library's collection. We also gained practical skills in library management and assessment tools.

I also learned how to integrate literacy activities through library setups. This included using books as a pedagogy within the school system to enhance language learning and to foster a love for reading.

The course on 'Foundational literacy approaches' by OELP introduced innovative methodologies. It emphasized methods like integrating children's worlds into the classroom, and creating print-rich environments for language learning. Observing OELP's teachers, I saw rapid language development in students.

In this course, collaborating with peers on theories and practical ideas was highly enriching. The techniques used to create an engaging environment provided deep insights into promoting early literacy within just 5-6 days. The way they maintain student portfolios with formative assessments was an important thing to learn. This is a very useful tool to keep track of a child's growth.

Concluding remarks

At Mera Gaon Meri Dunia, capacity building is an ongoing process. It informs every aspect of our work. As a process, it is focused on the needs of the community and on fostering local leadership. This helps to ensure that our learnings are integrated into practice.

We hope that through this, we can create meaningful and lasting change in the education sector. We believe that as CSOs, our role is not just to deliver services. It is to build the capacity of the communities we serve. We must empower them to take ownership of their development.

MGMD's efforts are intended to widen the skillset of youth by enabling them to be able to perform various important skills. These include people management, communication, community interaction, facilitation, data analysis for effective planning and design, and having a systemic approach toward solving problems, etc.

We host internal and external workshops to equip our team with the advanced skills. We hope these will eventually help them in leading the organization in various areas like human capital, program design, fundraising and partnerships, communications, and project management, etc. The larger purpose is to have distributive leadership in the organization, where multiple people have the opportunity and the ability to lead the spaces and bear the flag of the change-process.

Our grassroots leaders are also part of organizational development domains as mentioned above. Here they gain experience with learning. They also get the exposure to interact with established CSOs on domain-specific training and learning programs. Our skill-based CB processes are not limited to skills. They aim to nurture leaders who would be the torchbearers of the organization by leading it in multiple ways through their unique styles of leadership.

Kamlesh, is the Head of Human Resources at MGMD. He contributes to the Human Resources team, aiming at nurturing human capital in the organization and promoting growth among people. He also works on Program Development and Monitoring in the Sparsh Project. He has been a grassroots fellow at MGMD from 2021 to 2023. He loves to read and write. He envisions having active libraries in all the rural government schools in India.

Website: meragaonmeridunia.org

Email: kamlesh@meragaonmeridunia.org

Connect on:

Mera Gaon Meri Dunia

Capacity building of CSOs: the experience of Klorofeel Foundation

Jitendra Nayak and Siba Prasad Gauda

Klorofeel Foundation is dedicated to enhancing the education of underprivileged children attending government schools, particularly in rural tribal areas. It has a six-member field team drawn from diverse backgrounds. Its work is based in the Bissamcuttack Block of Rayagada district in Odisha.

This field team works along with 35 community volunteers called Saathis. They work with five government schools and 19 community learning centers. The goal is to improve the level of education of around 400 primary school students and the functioning of these schools and Learning Centres.

Our journey began with an assessment of the children's skills, parental aspirations, school operations, and the overall learning environment. We found that children struggled to read and comprehend textbooks. These were in Odia, a language very different from their mother tongue. Many students also faced challenges with basic math. Parents viewed schools primarily as places for mid-day meals rather than as centres for learning.

In response to these findings and the need, our strategy of intervention in Bissamcuttack block got largely influenced by our capacity to work closely with the community. At that time, we also had the limitations of not knowing how to influence the school system, and how to work with children in the age group of 3 to 6 years.

So, to begin with, we started working with children from grades 1 to 5 in the community space. We did this by setting up community learning centres. We also started working

Klorofeel Foundation

with mothers' groups and community facilitators.

However, we quickly encountered difficulties in helping children improve their reading comprehension skills. We did see some progress in their math skills and listening and speaking abilities in Odia. However, we realized that significant improvements in reading and understanding Odia text were essential. This was especially so, as the curriculum became more complex in the higher grades.

We expressed our training need to Wipro Foundation for teaching language. We were fortunate to participate in training offered by OLEP. This focused on helping children read and comprehend language. Siba, our team anchor, and Laxman, who is fluent in Odia, were selected to attend this training.

Following the partnership with Wipro Foundation, our staff started to directly facilitate the learning of children in grades 1 to 5 in the learning centres, and demonstrated activity-based learning in schools. This experience highlighted challenges such as managing multi-grade

and multi-level classrooms, helping students solve math problems, contextualizing contents in EVs, and helping children learn English.

To address these challenges, we identified capacity-building needs and explored training opportunities offered by Wipro Foundation. While exploring capacity-building opportunities, we aimed to align our needs with the offered programs.

However, this was not our only approach. We opted for trainings not only to address our challenges but also selected trainings that also complemented activities we were good at. In addition to reviewing the training brochure, we engaged in discussions with Wipro Foundation program managers to gather more information before committing to any training.

Selecting participants for the capacity-building training involved a two-step process. First, the selection process for training participants involved discussions within our team to assess both organizational needs and individual interests, allowing everyone to enhance their skills. The team anchor, who participated in all the trainings, then discussed with the staff to create a participant list that reflected both team needs and individual strengths.

Second, in case of more numbers of staff showing interest for any training, we prioritized those who would benefit the most from the training. We also simultaneously tried to ensure that they effectively shared the knowledge with other team members after the training. This decision-making process included input from our CEO.

The involvement of our CEO in various training sessions was a crucial decision. This provided insights into the core themes and processes emphasized by the trainers. For example, a training session on primary-grade math taught us to encourage critical thinking. This significantly improved our interactions with students and our teaching materials.

Another session on teaching English was about integrating creative methods related to art making exercises. Through this process, we realized the importance of the role of an anchor to foster collaboration among participants and transform individual contributions of varying quality into a cohesive and meaningful piece.

We conduct centralized training sessions for our community volunteers at least once a month. This allows us to share insights and apply what we have learned. Our staff members share the learning between themselves. They also work together to contextualize the knowledge and prepare TLMs before demonstrating them to the volunteers. Then the community volunteers and Klorofeel staff use the learning from the training to facilitate the learning at the community learning centres and the schools.

This approach has enhanced our effectiveness in community learning centers and schools. Lilabati Kadraka, our Siksha Saathi says, "After taking training on Odia language, numeracy, English and EVS, I became aware about activity-based joyful learning methods of different subjects. This approach helped the students to better understand the basic concepts of these subjects."

Weekly team meetings focus on assessing the impact of our learning strategies. Teachers have noted the effectiveness of innovative methods. These include using Varna Samuha for language instruction and Ganit Mala for math. They have shown interest in incorporating these techniques into their teaching.

We also invited the Block Education Officer (BEO) and officials from the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) to observe our practices. Their visits have helped us organize training sessions on innovative language learning using the Varna Samuha approach for the teachers.

Klorofeel Foundation

"Through the support of Klorofeel Foundation, the learning capacities of the students have improved. Before taking classes on numeracy and language, the facilitator of Klorofeel Foundation and myself discuss the lesson plan and methodology. The children are enjoying the activity-based teaching and learning processes'', says Karunakar Hial, Headmaster, Government Primary School, Chanchadamundi, Bissamcuttack, Rayagada.

Our capacity-building efforts have significantly improved our ability to assist primary-grade children. We have been able to expand our focus from just Odia language and math skills to facilitating learning across all subjects. We have also managed to improve the interactions of mothers' groups with the school system.

Our team anchor Siba Prasad Gauda says, "After attending Foundational Language Training from OELP, we contextualized the Varna Samuha method from Hindi into Odia with many joyful activities. This pedagogical approach attracted our Saathis and students. Students wrote their names with confidence within two weeks of our interventions. This boosted the confidence of our team. The decoding process was just like magic. Students recognized their spoken words in the second level of the Varna Samuha Learning Process. The first challenge was learning of all the Odia maatras. However, gradually it worked after having print-rich classrooms, as well as adopting all the processes suggested by OELP."

Trainings have significantly helped in improving the language and math skills. Children are now able to read Odia texts within six months to a year of intervention. Many grade-three students can read English stories fluently, despite English being introduced only in Class 3. In the 2023-24 academic year, 32 out of the 59 fifth-grade students who took entrance exams for model schools like Navodaya and Ekalavya qualified for admission.

Through focused interventions, mothers' groups are taking interest to observe the learning progress of their children. Our learning facilitator Bijay Batra Says, "Mothers' groups are regularly attending the PTA meetings. They are asking the teachers about the marks secured by the students in the examination. They are also following up on the necessary data of their children like accuracy of AADHAR details matching with birth certificates, etc."

Overall, our capacity-building process has boosted our staff's confidence. It has also fostered active participation from teachers, CRCs, BEO and local community members in enhancing primary education in the area.

Jitendra Nayak is a development professional with a PGDRM from IRMA. He has more than 25 years of experience working in grassroots on issues of poverty and education.

Saiba Prasad Gauda has a B.Sc. and a B.Ed. degree. He has more than 12 years of experience in the education sector on improving the learning outcomes of primary grade children.

Website: klorofeelfoundation.org

Email: jiten.nayak@klorofeelfoundation.org

Connect on:

Collaborative innovation at Satya Special School: a capacity-building framework

Chitra Shah, Jijo Jose and Winifred Sophia Ross

At Satya Special School (SSS), collaboration serves as the cornerstone of innovation. Its aim is to transform individual potential into team-driven amplification. This belief permeates the organization. It fosters an environment ripe with optimism and synergy.

The guiding principles at Satya include continuous learning and innovation, and strategic partnerships and expertise. To stay committed to our mission, we embrace challenges as opportunities for growth and celebrate the strength of collective effort. As an institution, we try to put in the hard work in a determined manner to build a more inclusive world for children.

Capacity-building programs have brought strategic agility to support our vision of inclusivity. Through these initiatives, we have developed the capacity to turn challenges into opportunities. These programs have helped us develop a culture of curiosity and cultivate a culture of persistence. This has been ensuring both organizational growth and sustainability.
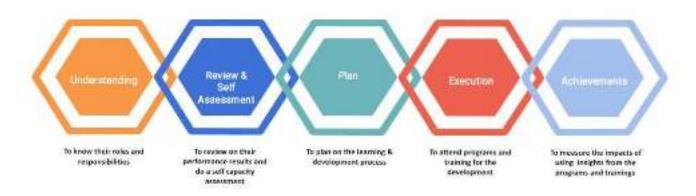
Understanding our requirements

At Satya, there is continuous improvement all around. It is an effort that starts with everybody — from top to down the line staff. Decisions are made collaboratively and at every level.

We perform a systematic assessment of where we might be able to do better. We ask our front-line staff to note observations. These are followed by a meticulous scrutiny and examination of these ideas to assess their compliance as well as influence on the objectives we want organizationally.

We then go through the most valuable suggestions. We analyze how they could help in organizational growth or in aiding staff development. This iterative process could be likened to solving a puzzle, where all the pieces will fit perfectly.

SATYA'S LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT: From Understanding to Achievements

Understanding — To know their roles and responsibilities

Review & Self Assessment — To review on their performance results and do a self capacity assessment

Plan — To plan on the learning & development process

Execution — To attend programs and training for the development

Achievements — To measure the impacts of using insight from the programs and trainings

With this process of trial and error, we have perfected our strategies for helping special needs children. Satya is as an organization of varied voices. These include both new recruits and seasoned staff. We, therefore, try to cultivate a culture that is always evolving the way we make our impact.

Strategic staff selection for training programs

In selecting candidates for training, we consider multiple core developmental dimensions, focusing on knowledge acquisition, transfer and utilization. The selection committee evaluates each candidate's learning potential, ability to synergize with colleagues, and capacity to apply acquired knowledge.

Selected candidates typically demonstrate fundamental skills. They also have a zeal for learning, and character traits that align with our institutional culture. We emphasize both skill competence and maturity in conduct.

Retention strategies are designed to support skill and capacity development. These also try to account for additional attributes beyond primary responsibilities. Selection criteria include proactive engagement, a cooperative spirit, and adaptability to evolving teaching dynamics.

Individuals who participate in capacity-building programs are expected to gain personal growth. The process also ensures that they are also better able to contribute to the institution by sharing and applying their new skills gained in the process.

Testimonies of impact

The transformative effect of these interventions is evident in the testimonials from participants.

Gayatri, a participant in our Mental Health Program, shares, "There has been immense transformation in my work ethic. It's not just about personal resilience through stress management and mindfulness techniques. It is also about improving institutional performance."

Another participant spoke of how recent training in classroom management transformed her teaching approach. They share, "This training completely changed how I teach. Working with various learning challenges has positively impacted my classroom."

Following her training, this participant conducted a comprehensive cross-center assessment. Through this, she examined the physical environment, teaching methodologies, and engagement patterns within the classrooms. She then led professional development sessions focused on hands-on activities. These were designed to foster interaction and improvement in key areas.

This approach cultivated a strong learning community with systematic activities. These included daily student check-ins, visual supports, and organized learning environments. The structured engagement led to measurable outcomes. The behavior of students improved. So did their engagement, and transition between activities. These changes underscored the effectiveness of a well-planned cultural shift within the learning environment.

Supporting change

Introducing change in an established institution can be challenging. To support the process as we implement new practices, we follow a few methods. We share these here.

We systematically use documentation to ensure consistency and clarity. We have also created mentorship programs, pairing experienced staff with those adopting new methodologies.

We conducted regular check-ins to monitor progress and address emerging issues. Roles

are assigned based on the strengths of the staff. We try to recognize and encourage their contributions to innovation and growth.

The journey continues

At Satya Special School, capacity building is a continuous journey. Our partnerships with Wipro and in-house programs have made us resilient, innovative, and aligned with our mission.

Looking forward, we are energized by the possibilities. Each new skill that is acquired, and process which is refined, brings us closer to our vision of a world where every child, regardless of ability, can thrive.

Our commitment to growth is grounded in collaborative teamwork, even in turbulent times. It inspires us to ensure organizational sustainability and development.

Chitra Shah is the Director of Satya Special School (SSS). She has two decades of experience in inclusive education. Her work has involved transforming SSS into a leading institution for special education and rehabilitation in Puducherry, starting from a modest beginning.

Jijo Jose heads Monitoring and Evaluation at Satya Special School. He leverages data-driven strategies and development management expertise to advance social impact initiatives.

Winifred Sophia Ross works as documentation manager at Satya Special School. Through her work, she tries to enhance visibility and stakeholder engagement through strategic communication, promoting inclusion and empowerment.

Website: satyaspecialschool.org

Email: admin@satyaspecialschool.org

Connect on:

Capacity building for staff

Satya Special School

Professional development in the library

Anandita Rao

Most adults who come to a professional development offering on libraries at Bookworm, carry with them some notions about libraries. We all do. These notions, simply stated, include the idea of a space, books, and an exchange of books. After experiencing the possibilities of library work through a capacity building offering, responses read like this...

A library is...

"Dynamic, it is living. It can shape shift!'

'A community space where both children and adults actively participate.'

'A place where there are books, through which we can travel the world. It helps us hone our art. It is also a place where we can feel safe and happy.'

'A happy place between teachers and students.'

"It is a space that gives without saying. It is a space with *jaan* (life)."

What enables these shifts?

In 2018, Bookworm was invited by Wipro Foundation to develop a short-term offering. Its goal was to enable organizations working in the field of education with children to

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Discussion on the topic 'Why libraries'

experience 'the why' of libraries. Another of its aims was also to help think about what one can do to change the practice of libraries in one's own work.

The macro vision has been to stimulate and support library work as an active mode of learning. This vision is inclusive of all children, both within formal systems and without. At the micro-level, the vision has been to engage educators and development sector entrepreneurs into spring-boarding their library practice within their own work contexts.

The course titled 'Introduction to libraries' has been a result of this process. It is a two-part workshop. It is facilitated over three months.

Part one is held in-person. After this, the participants are expected to plan and conduct a library activity project over six to eight sessions with children. This is the practice component of the workshop.

The workshop's second part has been explored both as a physical contact and a virtual contact in varied iterations. The contact period is designed to open elements of a children's library and library work. This includes aspects such as people, spaces, collection, engagement, administration, interaction and values.

We intentionally host the workshop at the Bookworm library. This allows the participants to experience this library space. It gives them a hands-on feel of what creating, and engaging with, a living, breathing and thriving library space means.

One of the primary objectives of the 'Introduction to Libraries' workshop is to

introduce the idea of a library. We envisage this physically as an embodied experience through our bodies and emotions. We also co-visualize this conceptually through ideas, texts and sessions.

We hope to disrupt the current conventional understanding of libraries as a severe storehouse of books. The goal is the communication and co-creation of an open vision of a living breathing library, where users feel safe and joyful, read and share, and also experience ideas both challenging and beautiful.

Another objective of the workshop has been to open theoretical aspects of a children's library along with practices and activities. Many participants share that they used to read a few books per year. However, through this workshop exposure and access to a rich collection, they now feel encouraged to read. They are beginning to see stories as an extension of human lives, as communications between one human being with another.

The selection of participants for the workshop has been a fluid process. Over the years, a percentage of the participants who

Voices from the workshop

We share here the feedback by participants of the "Introduction to libraries" workshops at Bookworm. They share their experiences and reflections in their own words.

"I have come to see libraries as creative, collaborative spaces that have potential to meet diverse objectives and needs. There is also renewed respect and value for professionals and educators working in the library space." – Participant from the cohort of 2022

"On entering I was touched by the simplicity which got reflected in the space, the people and the participants." - Participant from the cohort of 2023

"The Book Talks really opened up an emotional window to books. The library and the collection itself were a treasure trove." - Participant from the cohort of 2021

"The workshop has expanded the meaning and possibility of what a library can be." - Participant from the cohort of 2019

"How to keep the library alive forever? How to create a lovely relationship between children and the library through games? How to do teamwork? How to create a lively atmosphere, by adding small things to the library? How to create different types of books for children of different ages in a better way? I have learnt many activities and many things by watching you. That's it." - Participant from the cohort of 2024

"After the experience of the Library Activity and receiving feedback from peers and library educators at Bookworm, I see many windows of learning open up, including the inherent value of a library." - Participant from the cohort of 2022

"I knew that we could know ourselves through books. However, I didn't know that the library can be so effective in connecting with small children and their parents. This was revealed in the Saligao library when I saw parents and small children knowing and understanding each other through books. This happened only when we went to the Saligao library for an exposure visit." - Participant from the cohort of 2024

"As you walk into and spend time in a library's embrace, I invite you to fill in the blanks. A library is like a _____." - From the cohort of 2022

Small-group discussions

come for the workshop are engaged with work whose core focus is the library. Hence, the workshop is an opportunity for these participants to explore what they may want to do, and what direction they would like their work to take.

The participants' diversity adds a lot of value to the discussions and conversations in the workshop. Everything comes from real experiences and practices. This also pushes us and our team to think and deepen our work with children. In our own work, we have experienced how our ability to understand and articulate the why of the work we are doing plays a critical role in our own ownership and ability to prepare, plan and execute, in ways that are genuine and contextual.

Emily Ford in her paper on "What do we do and why do we do it?" shares this need explicitly: "When every library worker engages daily with the question, 'What do I do and why do I do it?' we will be better situated to have meaningful conversations with one another. We will be able to better articulate amongst ourselves our goals and our missions. We will have a deeper understanding of the societal benefit we provide, and we will better position ourselves when external conversations occur."

Workshops at Bookworm are experiential. Experiencing a practice, an idea, a thought that is being conveyed, tends to seed this in ways that only listening cannot. The act of learning being a multimodal one applies to adults too.

In interactions with schools, an act that has supported relationship building has been school heads and teachers experiencing that the library is filled with possibilities to enhance literacy, learning and critical thinking. This has allowed the adults to first experience the possibilities of the library, and be convinced of the role it could play in children's lives.

Taking back aspects of learning to practice in one's own work context with children has been the anchor of our interventions. This has also been a core part of the workshop design

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Theatre

process. The act of exploring a learning in practice with children's grounds the learning. It makes the process meaningful and not limited to one's own experience of it, or to the theory of it.

In our first offering in 2018, we began with 20 participants who attended the workshop's first part. It closed with 13 participants who worked on the challenge of implementing one idea from the workshop, into library practice with children. For several participants, especially those who do not work directly with children, this act of taking an idea into practice has been challenging.

We also realized as a resource organization that our own support through the distant period needs to change. In 2023, through a framework of 'Gradual Release of Responsibility', participants were closely supported in the initial phase of their library activity. It was scaffolded in a way that they could then independently work on their activities.

The design of the 'Introduction to libraries' workshop has changed with the learnings that we have absorbed as a team. A shift in recent years has been to include time in the contact for direct observations of sessions with children.

Bookworm's library work is active across schools and communities, and through different models of engagement. For many participants the opportunity to observe a library session in progress with children, and

directly experience the joys and challenges of this, has been a concrete part of learning.

In our last offering, the contact also included a Library Mela. Here the participants could directly engage with children in the field. They could also reflect on how the engagement went and what they could do differently in the future.

A learning that we have come to, as we continue this journey of professional development, is that ideas take time to transfer into practice. Practices also take time to seed. Changes at the organizational level need sustained mentoring. In several cases, founders of organizations have first participated and experienced the possibility of the library through this offering. They then recommended other team members to also participate in the same.

Some individuals and organizations have continued to invest in training and learning through varied opportunities. This has taken place through participation in long-term courses, online workshops and sessions, and being supported when faced with dilemmas. In the process, they have demonstrated that professional development is a continuous process and needs consistent interactions.

Our journey with Kalpakta Education Foundation, (founded by Tolesh Borkar and Sachin Dekate), began in 2020 during the pandemic. Tolesh reached out for guidance in activating a library for the children in the community of Sirsi.

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A read-aloud session

A glimpse of changes and learnings across the years

As we close the 7th offering of the workshop on 'Introduction to Libraries', a glimpse of the learnings across the years are shared here.

Selection: For many workshops, participation by the founder and a practitioner from the team has ensured that what is absorbed through the workshop is implemented within each organization's work in meaningful ways. This ensures that there is meaning making through the library work at an organizational level, and not just in terms of activities.

Furthermore, organizations who recognize the value of this capacity building also often choose to nominate additional team members to participate in the workshop. This helps multiple team members to share the learnings and experiences with the others. This ends up developing a shared sense of understanding of library work.

Pre-workshop engagement: During 2020, in collaboration with Wipro Foundation, Bookworm developed an online open self-paced course, Libraries: Chapter One (In English and Hindi). The course is an introductory course to libraries, and their place and importance in the community.

Each participant is requested to complete the first module of the online course, that responds and opens up the question of 'Why libraries'. This module has helped participants of the 'Introduction to Libraries workshop' to come into the workshop with a shared context of what the workshop may entail. We recognize that this is an important pre-engagement.

Learning through observation: In addition to experiential and teaching sessions, incorporating observations and the opportunity to practice and receive feedback into the design of workshops have been welcome changes. Many alumni share that observing the Bookworm team in library practice with children has helped them note and understand some of the nuances of how one could engage through the library.

Learning as we teach: Through the opportunity to offer this workshop each year, the Bookworm team's own practice and skill of capacity building, have grown over the years. In this space of cross-sharing and learning from the experience of so many practitioners across the country, our own learning takes root in wider and deeper ways.

In 2021, Tolesh and a co-team member, participated in the 'Introduction to libraries' workshop. Since then, two other team members have attended the workshop in the subsequent years. They have also been a part of other professional development offerings that Bookworm holds.

Tolesh shares, "Library work extends beyond storytelling and book issuing. It requires a deep understanding of library operations, activities and purposes. To excel, library teams need ongoing capacity building and professional development. We are fortunate to come across Bookworm Library's comprehensive training programs. These include 'Introduction to library', 'Library mentoring support (LMS)', 'Critical literacy' and 'Library educators certificate (LEC)' course. These courses foster a deeper understanding of library work and enhance the knowledge and skills of team members."

Revathi, is the founder of Vanavil. The CSO was started in 2005, to support the children of two nomadic communities in Tamil Nadu. Revathi and Mithra attended the 'Introduction to libraries' workshop in 2023. Since then, libraries have been activated in different ways in Vanavil's school, and in the community

Visual arts in the library

recognize this trust and desire to deepen practice as a key factor in strengthening capacity building.

Over the years, the workshop content and our own learning have grown and been shaped by changes on the field, and through our interactions with children. Since the scope of every workshop offering is based on direct library practice with children, we grow as facilitators through our library practice with children, and our own experiences of what is possible in a library space.

Note: This article is written by Anandita Rao, with inputs from the Bookworm team. Bookworm, as a resource organization, offers several library professional development programs. These include the 'Library educators certificate' course, the 'Library mentoring support' program, the 'Library: purpose and practice' workshops, and the 'Critical literacy' workshops, amongst others.

Anandita Rao is a part of the Professional Development team at Bookworm. Bookworm is a library-based organization in Goa. Its vision is to inspire and develop a love for reading, nurturing humane engagement in everyone.

Website: bookwormgoa.in

Email: mail@bookwormgoa.in

Connect on:

centers that Vanavil runs. In addition to this workshop, the Vanavil team have also been a part of Bookworm's other professional development offerings.

Revathi says, "As the founder was an avid reader, books were an important part of the Vanavil pedagogy. However, since regular textbooks were far removed from anything the school was grappling with, storybooks and picture books were used as the only texts in the initial days. We had access to some good children's books. We used them in a random and unplanned manner. In January 2023, when we went to the Bookworm Library for the 'Introduction to libraries' workshop, a library existed in our school. However, since then (over a period of 18 months), our library has come alive and has taken on a personality of its own."

In both the above cases, the organizations began their library professional development journeys through the 'Introduction to libraries' workshop. They have continued this journey through engagements with further professional development opportunities. We

Library cards

Lessons in capacity building

A conversation with Sudeshna Sinha

Sudeshna Sinha is a special educator and has been largely involved in establishing experimental elementary schools. These include Aashirvaad Vidyalaya at St. Joseph's School and an alternative school as a part of the initiative called Shikshamitra. Her expertise is in developing curriculum, appropriate pedagogy, materials, books and assessment tools.

Currently, she heads Shikshamitra, an education resource and teacher training center. Sudeshna has been a resource teacher for alternate initiatives, many of these being run by NGOs, in West Bengal and in other Indian states, including Digantar, Rajasthan. In this conversation, Sudeshna shares the value of creating inclusive environments and continuously building capacities of both teachers and students.

Samuhik Pahal Team: Could you share how your journey in capacity building began?

Sudeshna Sinha: I began as a special educator, focusing on children with multiple disabilities, particularly cerebral palsy. That background gave me a foundation in making learning accessible and inclusive to anyone, which became essential later in my career.

In 1992, I joined a school in Kolkata serving economically disadvantaged Anglo-Indian children. At the time, older siblings of younger students were often left out of the education system. No other schools would take them.

In 1994, I was asked to establish Ashirvaad Vidyalaya, a three-hour learning center for children aged 8 to 16 years. This opportunity allowed me to adapt my skills to work with children from migrant families facing language barriers.

Those ten years taught me a lot. Working with such eager learners showed me the gap between traditional education and the needs of students from underserved communities. Many of these children were the most dedicated learners I have ever encountered. Yet, they often rejected topics irrelevant to their lives, like historical accounts of kings and empires. It became clear that my role wasn't just to teach but to make learning resonate with their experiences.

Building trust within the community was essential. The teachers and I often visited families to understand their lives better. The process involved unlearning my assumptions, adapting to the children's specific needs, and helping teachers connect with students whose backgrounds differed from their own. Continuous in-house orientations were part of our capacity building process.

Samuhik Pahal Team: What led you to establish Shikshamitra?

Sudeshna Sinha: In 2004, I, and my spouse Sujit, envisioned Shikshamitra as both a school and a resource center. Our goal was twofold: to create an inclusive space for learning and to document and share our effective practices with others. By then,

A Shikshamitra class in a graden

I felt confident in applying what I had learned, especially foundational literacy and numeracy.

We worked with Bengali-speaking children from nearby slums. Most of them were enrolled in government schools. However, almost all struggled with basic skills. It became mandatory that we create a learning environment that acknowledged and addressed these gaps.

It wasn't enough to replicate the model we had used at Ashirvaad Vidyalaya. The context here was different. It needed new learning approaches. Moreover, there was hardly any material in Bengali to offer!

A training session facilitated by Shikshamitra

Shikshamitra's publications

Shikshamitra's foundational programs in languages and math owe their origin to these pedagogical practices in the early years.

Samuhik Pahal Team: How do you approach capacity building in your programs?

Sudeshna Sinha: Capacity building isn't just a one-time training. It's an ongoing process. It begins typically with an actual visit to the organization for a needs assessment. Here we engage with students, teachers, and community stakeholders. The goal is to identify specific challenges.

Based on this, we design workshops tailored to those needs. Then we maintain follow-ups through regular interactions.

Continuous mentorship after the training has been the most effective feature of the capacity building processes supported by us. This also includes a few physical visits when felt necessary. The post-training mentorship is offered up to a maximum period of two years.

After the training, we encourage teachers to share their experiences through videos, photos of classroom work, and students' notebooks. This helps us provide personalized feedback even when working remotely. For example, teachers often send videos of blackboard work or them taking classes. This lets us see their teaching methods in action.

Collaboration among teachers is also essential. Establishing WhatsApp groups can be very rewarding where teachers share and discuss their work. This helps foster a sense of community and collective learning.

Another critical part is engaging the community. Many teachers come from background in higher education. They need guidance in understanding and connecting with children from marginalized backgrounds. Building their capacity to connect and work within the community has been foundational to our approach.

Shikshamitra

A class in English at Chinar International

Samuhik Pahal Team: Could you please share some success stories or partnerships that stand out for you?

Sudeshna Sinha: Over the years, several partnerships have been particularly rewarding. I would like to mention here about Klorofeel Foundation. When we first engaged with them, both the coordinator and a teacher participated actively. Even before we officially began, during the needs assessment phase, they asked very focused and detailed questions about the program. It wasn't just about revisiting the basics. They were also evaluating us. I thought this was a positive sign indeed.

The sessions were divided into two phases. Each one consisted of five days, focusing on English. When they joined the sessions, I noticed their willingness to engage fully, even if they made mistakes. They were eager to try out new ideas and consistently sought clarity by asking more questions, even beyond their assignments.

Some might have perceived this as slowing down the process. However, I saw it as a reflection of their deep commitment to addressing the needs of the tribal children they worked with.

Their enthusiasm extended to the demonstration sessions as well. They participated courageously, despite the possibility of errors. They used these experiences to improve. After the training, they stayed in touch for months, consistently updating us on their progress.

One aspect I truly appreciated was their habit of sharing what they learned with other teachers in their organization and then carefully selecting the ones who would be deft in teaching. They sent photos and videos of these interactions. This allowed us to see how our methods were being implemented. However, this has been true for many other organizations too!

This level of care and attention to detail stood out. They also developed comprehensive work plans. They set clear targets for what they wanted to achieve within specific timeframes. They didn't always meet these deadlines due to unforeseen challenges. However, they maintained steady progress and kept us informed throughout.

Their commitment extended to ensuring that every class session was carefully planned and executed. They often shared videos and photos that highlighted their thoughtful

Shikshamitra

A demo class for the teachers during the Klorofeel visit

approach. What was particularly remarkable was the way they consistently reflected on feedback and implemented changes where needed. This dedication demonstrated their hard work. It also showed their willingness to refine and adapt their methods to achieve the best outcomes.

In Kashmir, another group (Chinar International) is facing unique challenges. For example, the coordinator is actively involved. However, they struggle to bring in additional teachers. This is because many families—especially those with women—are reluctant to allow participation. This creates a significant barrier.

To address this, the coordinator manages continuous engagement through virtual meetings. These sessions include live classroom interactions. They share videos of classroom activities and discuss teaching methods.

Assignments are regularly sent. I provide corrections and feedback to guide their progress. They haven't fully completed their journey. However, they are steadily working through the process and making meaningful progress.

Aripana Foundation in Bihar had two young teachers whose dedication stood out. They adapted our methods not only at their center but also in nearby government schools. The mentoring continued for a year. Their dedication had created a ripple effect. At that time (2022), this benefitted a larger network of learners.

Two more promising initiatives that are developing well and need mention are Gubbachi Learning Community and Pragat Shikshan Sanstha.

At the end, I would like to talk about our very first engagement which was with North Eastern Education Trust (NEET), and it continued for more than two years. Their

program developed mostly thanks to the efforts of one teacher, who was a persevering and intent learner all through the training program.

Soon she could single handedly shoulder much of the responsibilities of the English program in NEET. She became the chief trainer, building her team along with the founder.

Stroryboard prepared for training by NEET

The organization began to offer training as the local resource group in Assam. We mentored the group up to the point where we assessed and monitored their demonstration lessons online, before they started offering it to the other teachers' groups.

This teacher has moved on. She is a promising resource teacher at the local level. Her expertise could be tapped when required.

The interesting thing about capacity building is that it often stems from failures. There are moments when you feel stuck. You thought you have done a great job, only to see everything fall apart.

Shikshamitra

Shikshamitra

That's when you go back, reassess, and do your homework. You make changes, revise approaches, and then adapt to the situation.

Capacity building is deeply connected to the evolving dynamics of the surroundings, the community, and the times. Every group of teachers that we engage with is different. It needs constant adjustments to stay relevant. Even for us, it's not just about how we interact. It is also about how we perceive and approach the entire process. This keeps it continually engaging and transformative.

Samuhik Pahal Team: What qualities do you think are essential for an organization transitioning into a resource organization?

Sudeshna Sinha: Transitioning into a resource organization requires more than just training. I believe that firsthand teaching experience is crucial. Theoretical knowledge alone doesn't address the complexities of real classrooms.

An organization must be flexible. It must also continuously learn from others and adapt to emerging needs. The team needs to update its own skills.

Localization is also essential. To make real impact, capacity building should empower regional networks. This can enable local organizations to lead training efforts. This way, solutions become sustainable and context specific.

Over the years, I have realized that inclusive education isn't just about pedagogy. It's about understanding and addressing the learners' social, cultural and economic realities. Capacity building needs adaptability and openness to change. As educators, we must strive to create meaningful opportunities for all students by listening, learning and evolving our approaches continuously.

Email: shompare@gmail.com

An upstream journey

Atanu Sain

Vikramshila

Joining the 'Philosophy of education' course offered by Digantar was a turning point in my professional journey. By that time, it had spanned 21 years in the development sector, particularly in education.

When I first received the course schedule, I assumed the structure would be purely theoretical, with a focus on abstract intellectual exercises. As a practitioner, I typically favoured hands-on activities in capacity-building programs.

At Vikramshila, my organization, we had always emphasized acting at the micro-level while analysing those actions in the light of larger, systemic issues. We had been engaging regularly in discussions on macro-level concerns. We were striving to understand educational theories and test them in diverse contexts.

This constant feedback loop enabled us to create learning environments that were both theoretically sound and practically effective. By integrating theory with practice, we continuously refined and improved our approach.

However, I was initially sceptical about the course. I couldn't imagine how philosophical discussion alone could lead to practical solutions for driving systemic changes in education. But to my surprise, by the third day, I found myself thoroughly engaged. The discussions were intellectually stimulating and deeply enriching. It felt like an 'epistemic investigation', a shared journey of discovery, in which both the participants and the facilitators travelled together.

For a course to be successful, it needs thoughtful design. It also requires a team of skilled and expert facilitators, and participants who are open to learning. In this particular course, the facilitators were highly regarded professionals in the field. They had years of experience and deep expertise. Most participants, too, brought substantial

experience to the table, engaging actively in meaningful, epistemic discussions.

The course covered a broad range of topics. These included the philosophical, sociological and psychological perspectives of education, policy analysis, and qualitative research and methodology. The course also covered subject-specific pedagogies for languages, science, mathematics, and social sciences.

Each area was facilitated by experts who were leaders in their respective fields. Their contributions helped enrich the course content and discussions. Participants were also exposed to reflections on large-scale successful interventions, such as the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP).

This helped them understand the importance of contextualizing theory in practice. A particularly insightful aspect of the course was the emphasis on constitutional values such as equity, justice and secularism, and their essential role in shaping the idea of quality of education.

The course provided participants with a wealth of well-researched readings on various topics. These deepened our understanding of diverse educational perspectives.

One of the most commendable aspects of the facilitation was the open, inclusive approach taken by the facilitators. Participants were invited and encouraged to contribute their thoughts. Every idea was thoughtfully incorporated into the discussion. No suggestion or opinion was dismissed without thorough examination.

This fostered a sense of confidence. It also created rich and diverse dialogues. I believe this course effectively helped me bridge the gap between theory and practice. I became better equipped to guide teachers pragmatically, applying theoretical concepts while considering practical constraints

Vikramshila

such as time, class size, and the needs of individual students. Additionally, this experience has broadened my perspective. This helps me to approach issues with greater understanding before and during the process of addressing them.

I am confident that if at least two individuals from an organization complete this course, it will significantly influence their discourse and foster positive change.

In today's complex and ambiguous world, straightforward answers are rare. This makes it essential to adopt a holistic approach. We also need to engage in rigorous intellectual exercises when tackling challenges. I believe the 'Philosophy of education' course has the potential to develop reflective individuals capable of driving sustainable change.

Atanu Sain works as the Deputy Director of Vikramshila. He has been working in the field of elementary education for the last 32 years. Teacher education, content creation, resource development, education planning and management, etc., are his core areas of interest.

Website: vikramshila.org

Email: atanusain@yahoo.com / atanubigha@gmail.com

Connect on: ✕ f in

Reflections and learnings from the 'Perspectives on learning' course by Digantar

Vena Kapoor

A foundational understanding, learning, and underlying life-long curiosity is necessary to delve into and be an effective practitioner in any subject domain. The 'Perspectives on learning' course offered by Digantar in their Jaipur campus during December 2023, which I attended and participated in, reinforced this. This course is a part of their 'Bedrock series' of courses on the foundational disciplines of education.

As practitioners in the space of education we often forget that deep reflections, readings, and getting back to the basics throughout the journey of our work can make it much more meaningful, sensible and effective. This is also because many of us are accidental, and not formally trained, educationists.

We come into this space with a passion subject domain, which we want our communities of students and teachers to be equally passionate, excited and connected with. We then intuitively design learning modules, tools, resources and curricula to support our training, outreach and content.

My passion subject is ecology, nature and wildlife conservation. I believe deeply that these domains are the basis of our life on earth. I am firmly convinced that these should be an important, fundamental and necessary part of school education. I, therefore, started an initiative called Nature Classrooms to address this gap. We all believe and want this of our own subject domains, and work toward this effort in various capacities.

After almost four years into my work, I wanted to step back and engage more deeply with the theories of education, while drawing from the practical experience of working in the field of nature education. The questions that were nagging me for a while included the following.

Was our nature learning framework and pedagogical approach sound in its design and approach for the audience we were targeting? What and how can I draw from concepts in education and theories in developmental psychology to include in my work?

I hoped that engaging in this course would help me unpack some of these questions that were running through my head. The intense five-day course was both grounding and reinforcing. It was designed and planned with opportunities to work in small groups and individually.

Theoretical topics were discussed and debated every day. Additionally, there were readings and short project presentations. The co-learning and interaction opportunities with a practitioner cohort throughout the course was also of immense value.

The classroom readings and compilations that formed the basis of the course were carefully chosen and curated. These were woven into the course content and learnings. The Digantar campus has a vast library of books and reference material relevant to education and the allied fields. This is a space that every education practitioner should carve out time to visit, use and engage with.

I found the course valuable and important as part of my capacity and training journey in the field of education. Two of my team members also participated in the course the following year. Based on the learnings and insights from the course we have had discussions as a team and have been developing a common understanding.

We are now able to have a clearer view of some of our framework and pedagogical goals in nature learning. This includes critiquing and asking ourselves more pertinent questions on our processes and approaches.

It is impossible to pack everything that will be useful for an educational practitioner into a five day in-person course. However, 'Perspectives on learning' allowed me to step back from the daily work routines. Its processes helped me to reflect and learn important educational fundamentals in a formal-nonformal, academic classroom setting.

Vena Kapoor started Nature Classrooms as part of Nature Conservation Foundation's Education and Public Engagement Program in late 2018. With her team, she works closely with primary school teachers and educators through training programs on nature and ecology, and co-developing age appropriate, locally-culturally relevant nature learning modules and curricula.

Website: natureclassrooms.org

Email: vena.kapoor@gmail.com

Connect on:

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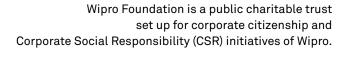
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