

Samuhik सामूहिक पहल Pahal

A Journal of Our Collective Action

December 2024 | Vol 4 Issue 11



Capacity building for and by
civil society organizations

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Nurturing partnerships

At Wipro Foundation, we have long been inspired by the transformative power of collaboration. We have supported a network of over 250 dedicated civil society partners across India. These partners are united by a common goal. It is to address diverse educational challenges and create meaningful change in the education sector.

The Wipro Education Partners' Forum has been a cornerstone of our journey with partners. It began in the early 2000s. It is a three-day residential gathering that fosters mutual learning and informal bonding. Its processes lead to collaborative networking. Each of its sessions is structured around topics that are relevant to our collective work. We share our experiences, learn from one another, and exchange ideas.

Our participation in the Forum helps us return to our missions with renewed energy and inspiration. Over the years, the Forum has featured partners presenting their work and delved into a diverse set of themes ranging from ecology and education, textbooks, to assessment.

The 2024 theme: Capacity building for and by civil society organizations

Strengthening India's public education system is a long-term commitment. It demands the enhancement of capacities for all involved. It also involves building the skills and abilities of teachers, government officials, and the community at large.

But what does it truly mean to enhance capacities? Is it just about organizing workshops and seminars for knowledge sharing? Does capacity building involve changing practices and mindsets? Should it be a stand-alone activity? Or can it be integrated into the regular processes of an organization? The 2024 edition of Partners' Forum held during December 4-6, 2024, at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, addressed these and many related questions.

In the following section, we share with you some of the critical pieces of shared understanding that developed and emerged through intense yet playful engagements by the participants with this year's theme at the Forum.

Key insights and recommendations

Clarity and focus are central to effective organizational learning journeys: If we are clear about what we want to do, and the way in which we want to go about doing it, it helps in bringing rigor and depth to our work. The focus itself, and the authenticity in seeking the vision's fruition, support us in crafting our learning journeys. These help us grow and develop as organizations and individuals. Enabling access to quality education has been elusive, as it requires deep and patient investment in multiple capacities. If civil society is to play a role in facilitating social and educational change, we must be willing to advocate for and invest in building internal and external capacities.

Learning is a collective enterprise: Learning takes place in a social context. We learn together as social animals. Therefore, to create effective learning processes at the organizational and individual levels in CSOs, getting the appropriate group processes going is critical. We must also remember that diversity can be an enabler in collective learning.

Trust and nurture are key values in organizational learning journeys: Cognition of the social nature of learning helps us understand that everyone can learn. However, everyone can learn, only if there is an environment of trust, care, nurture and support at the place of learning. To create a learning organization, we need to build an organizational culture in which each one is supported, and everyone is cared for.

Self-knowledge is a key: To be able to learn effectively, and in a self-motivated manner, the learner needs self-knowledge. This helps in figuring out what we need to learn and why. It also gives us clarity on what kind of learner we are as individuals, and the methods we must, therefore, follow. Learning how to learn is foundational to all learning journeys.

To learn, both formal and informal spaces and processes are a critical part of the mix: Workshops, training programs, courses, webinars, and blended academic programs, etc., are all important formal spaces in which learning in the social sector can take place. However, informal spaces such as self-driven communities of learning, activity-based groups at work, and informal mentoring relationships are also equally important.

Knowledge transfer is easy, behavioral change is not: Relatively speaking, it is easier to transfer content knowledge. However, effective behavioral change is a much harder process. This often needs spaces and time for being able to reflect on one's own practices, beliefs and mental frameworks. It also requires collective, nurturing processes that support both the goals and methods of the envisaged behavioral change.

Capacity building for systemic change: Often talked about "systemic changes" rarely come about by one organization attempting to transform the entire system. These take place in continuous, and often simultaneous, ways with a large number of rigorous and authentic attempts to change small and specific parts of the larger system.

Need for demonstration sites: It is critical to evolve demonstration sites where the claimed changes are obvious. We are more convinced by what we see than by what we hear or are told.

The criticality of capacity building

Avinash Kumar leads Education and Communication at Wipro Foundation.

The presentation by Avinash Kumar focused on three key questions: *Why* do we need to think of capacity building? What does capacity building *mean* for civil society organizations? What *is* civil society? Capacity building can enable us to do what we are doing, or what we want to do, (more) effectively. This leads us to the question - what are we doing or want to do, as educational civil society organizations? Achieving equity, quantity and quality in education has been our goal since independence. Over the last few decades, we have made significant progress in quantity and equity, although much still needs to be done. However, despite our efforts, quality education remains elusive. The goal for most of us, thus, has now become enabling access to *quality education*. Strong civil society organizations can play an important role in helping the country meet this goal.

In this context, capacity building needs to be thought of, at least on three different fronts. These are:

- Educational capacity (e.g., foundational issues in education, general pedagogic skills, content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, curriculum and assessment);
- Organizational capacity (e.g., attracting and retaining people, financial planning and management, resource generation/ fundraising, communication, and governance);
- Operational capacity (program design and delivery, 'grounded wisdom' and ability to operate successfully in different spaces and contexts, and with different stakeholders).

Capacitating CSOs is crucial not only in terms of facilitating delivery of quality education. History tells us that human progress and development are not inevitable. It is, therefore, important to strengthen the third sector, outside of the state and the market, which can create solidarities and fraternity among various social groups. And in doing so, civil society helps keep the very structure of human societies somewhat balanced.



Learning as an individual

Ravi Gulati has been building and nurturing a learning community of across-age learners from low-income backgrounds through Manzil, a non-profit he co-founded with his mother and her friend over 25 years ago.

Surya Prakash Rai, co-founder of PRAYOG, is a library educator committed to advancing library practices and fostering a vibrant library culture across Bihar.

Tultul Biswas is the Director of Eklavya Foundation. She is actively engaged in designing learning opportunities, workshops, and short courses for teachers and grassroots-level education activists.

The scope of learning for the individual is vast. Given this reality, the opening plenary session focused on the role of practice and reflection in learning journeys. It then moved toward learning in the context of work.



Ravi Gulati (Manzil)

Diverse learning spaces are important for learning. Breaking and making habits also contribute to learning processes. We tend to see learning as getting content knowledge. This needs to change.

Leadership is about meeting changing needs with a fixed purpose. One must also know one's limitations. It is this that can help in facilitating co-learning journeys. Feedback is valuable. However, one has to go beyond the words. As they say, "Don't listen to the words, but through the words."

We are motivated only if we value something. And one key method through which we come to know what we value and why, is by being alert to situations in which a couple or more of our deeply held values come into conflict with each other.



From left to right: Thejaswi Shivanand, Surya Prakash Rai, Ravi Gulati and Tultul Biswas.

Surya Prakash Rai (PRAYOG)

Focus is central to learning. As an organization, it is important to realize that learning is a collective process. When we reflect on our practices, and question ourselves and our experiences, learning takes place. Such regular, reflective practice is central to learning as it leads to depth over a period of time, it also needs gentle holding as a process.

A large number of us come from a sense of privilege. We must be sensitive and caring while facilitating the learning journeys of others. We must care for each other as a community of learners. In a library, it is important to have a diverse set of books on challenging and difficult themes. This helps young learners. It can also support the journeys of team members in becoming sensitive.

Tultul Biswas (Eklavya Foundation)

Learning involves processes of change, essentially changes in oneself. It is both an individual and collective process. In this, one must question the status quo all the time, as learning never stops.

So-called monitoring has very little space here. Trust is the key. Trust means having the faith that all learners, all children, all teachers, and oneself, can learn.

Having fun and building relationships is a part of learning. To take all one's stakeholder communities (children, teachers, etc.) seriously is also an important part of learning.

We often find focus by meeting challenges. However, learning challenges must be thrown at folks with care and nurture. One needs space and time in organizations to do this, to experiment, to fail, and then to try again through a process of open communication, dialogue and exploration.

It's important to have both structured and unstructured spaces for learning beyond what performing well for the job entails. This is critical for both the individual's and the organization's development.





Insights from the discussions following the introductory plenary session

Emphasis on scale tends to bring in a certain flatness and erases nuances. However, with a clusterized approach, it may be possible to facilitate reflective practice among teachers at a slightly larger scale.

In the non-profit sector, lack of proficiency in English sometimes acts as an impediment in our learning journeys. This needs to be factored in, and addressed adequately.

Building self-awareness as a part of our learning journeys is important. This is especially critical in the context of the leadership in CSOs.

Learning journeys happen in communities. However, we often assess outcomes at the level of the individual. We need to figure out how to make sense of and assess our journeys as collectives and organizations as well.

Learning is a shared/community experience. Learning how to sustain motivation is a critical part of learning.

Diversity needs to be factored into all learning processes. Diversity is a resource that needs to be used as a source of learning.

Learning in and as an organization - I

The goal of the sub-group discussions was to expand the conversation from individual learning to learning within an organizational context. Learning journeys in organizations involve dynamic interactions between individual growth, organizational goals, work culture, timelines, and other contextual factors. We present here insights and learnings from two such sub-groups. A few key questions guided these discussions. Some of these were:

- How do individual learning journeys contribute to building organizational capacities such as institutional memory and sustainability beyond individual members?
- How can individual learning journeys inform program interventions?
- What organizational factors play a crucial role in fostering meaningful and satisfying learning experiences?

Soumya Bhaskaracharya is a Founding Member of Kshamtalaya Foundation and works as its Learning and Innovation Lead.

Tultul Biswas is the Director of Eklavya Foundation. She has also worked with Eklavya's publishing unit as its Editorial Coordinator for over two decades.





Remarks by the facilitators

Tultul shared that acknowledging not having all the answers is the first step toward learning. Being open to questions and engaging collectively in finding answers is essential. Learning also involves being receptive to insights from others, including children.

Soumya from Kshamtalaya reflecting on her own learning journey, emphasized the value of understanding personal experiences that shape individuals. Creating an open learning space during induction was transformative for her. This prompted her to question whether new employees continue to receive a similar experience as the organization grows.

Discussion points

Reflection and questioning are essential for learning and growth. However, in some local contexts, children are often discouraged from asking questions. Even as an adult, building the courage and capacity to question, thus, becomes a struggle.

In schools, teachers often react negatively to questions. This creates a fear of asking. Many learners struggle to articulate their thoughts due to this conditioning.

There is also often a lack of open spaces for discussion and learning. Even understanding the basic meaning of concepts can be challenging without a supportive environment like the Partners' Forum.

Questioning has a dual nature. One must balance the fear of how others might react with the power of gaining clarity. Group discussions that encourage both agreements and disagreements are crucial for learning from peers.

Unlearning is an important part of the learning process. Reflecting without judgment and seeking positive lessons from experiences fosters continuous growth.

Key takeaways

Individual learning journeys can strengthen and enhance organizational work in unexpected ways. Learning needs compassion and a non-judgmental attitude toward oneself. Reflecting on experiences with an open mind fosters resilience and motivation for lifelong learning.

Skills like self-directed learning, questioning, and reflection are essential for both children and adults. Organizations should create inclusive spaces that encourage the development of these capacities.

Peer learning environments enable individuals to explore concepts from multiple perspectives, enhancing collective understanding. Recognizing learning gaps and taking collective action to address them can elevate individual learning journeys within organizations.



Learning in and as an organization - II

Ritikaa Khunnah has over 20 years of experience in the development sector. She is currently CEO of Pravah and a member of the VartaLeap coalition.

An engineer by education, yet a teacher at heart, **Gowtham Reddy** has been working at the intersection of the social and education sectors for almost 14 years now. In the age of ChatGPT, he vociferously vouches for the critical role a teacher plays in enabling a meaningful school experience for students.

Remarks by the facilitators

The sub-group session built on the panel discussion about learning as an individual. It began with a short energizer that connected to the theme, prompting participants to reflect on how challenges reveal behavioral patterns and how teams serve as protective shields, fostering self-awareness. Ritikaa emphasized that learning is non-linear. It occurs within interconnected systems where individuals both influence and are influenced by others. Gowtham shared personal insights, reflecting on how his learning journey shaped his organization. He recounted experiences in Chennai and Mumbai. Here, he initially believed his seven years of experience meant that he knew everything. However, he realized otherwise when teachers continued old practices despite training.

Both the facilitators shared how they shifted their approach by asking the participants, “What do you need?” In some cases, participants even designed their own agendas based on their needs. This ensured better alignment between training outcomes and classroom practices. The discussion also explored internal challenges within learning teams. These included declining motivation over time and strategies other teams use to build internal capacities. These include, taking intentional breaks from work, connecting with each other as a team through travel/ other spaces that allow development of camaraderie, giving people opportunities to develop capacities in areas of their interest during discussions around self-assessment of teams, etc. Participants highlighted the importance of shared goals for team and organizational alignment. They also discussed the challenges of misalignment when individuals’ personal interests diverge from their assigned roles. Additionally, the group emphasized the value of having self-assessment structures within organizations.

Key takeaways

The group collectively agreed that having a clear purpose, shared vision, and goals is essential for alignment in learning. Intrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in the learning journey, alongside external factors. True learning begins with the acknowledgment that we don’t know everything.

For problem-solving, structure and discipline are very important. Problem-solving is driven by what we want or need to become.

Engaging with civil society for systemic change: overview of Wipro Foundation's journey

P. S. Narayan (PSN) has been instrumental in the creation of Wipro's sustainability program. He has been stewarding it since its inception in early 2008.

At Wipro, we think it is critical to engage with the social and ecological challenges facing humanity. We believe that engagement with social issues must be deep, meaningful, and formed on the bedrock of long-term commitment — this is the only way real change can happen on the ground. We run our social programs on a strong foundation of ethical principles, good governance, and sound management. Our foundational values are embodied in the 'Spirit of Wipro' that emphasizes unyielding integrity in every aspect of our work, treating people everywhere fairly and with respect – at the workplace and in communities outside, and demonstrating ecological sensitivity in thought and action. In 2000, we had a significant internal debate on our worldview outside of making profits. We felt that businesses were blinded to several social and ecological issues outside the business world and that we must engage and contribute to society beyond making profits. Unanimously, we invested our efforts in 'Education', given that it is a powerful force multiplier that has cascading impacts on almost all other development areas. We have focused on building and nurturing an ecosystem of social organizations working in education reform and help existing organizations build capacity to influence the larger system.



What, why and how of teaching-learning material (TLM)



From left to right: Rohit Dhankar, Shivani Taneja and Neelima Gokhale.

Neelima Gokhale has been a kindergarten teacher for 10 years in Hong Kong and an ECE teacher, principal, teacher trainer and curriculum developer in Singapore for 13 years. She headed the team at PSS to develop the 'Pragat Early Childhood Educators' Course for Rural India' in 2007.

Rohit Dhankar is a former Professor of Philosophy of Education at Azim Premji University, and the Founder-Secretary of Digantar, Jaipur. Rohit has been part of many initiatives in developing material and curriculum through various committees and collaborative efforts across the country.

Shivani Taneja, the Founder of Muskan, has been working with people of de-notified tribal backgrounds and impoverished communities in and around Bhopal for 25 years.

When working in schools, pedagogy and classroom management practices are important. However, the capacity to create and use contextual and relevant teaching-learning materials (TLMs) is equally crucial. Different TLMs engage different senses of the child. The panel explored the following questions.

- What do we mean by TLMs? How do we understand the role of TLMs within learning?
- What led these organizations to initiate the process of creating their own TLM?
- What was the process they engaged in (what principles were considered, what approaches were used, how did they decide what had to be created from scratch, and what could be adapted from others, etc.)
- What were some of the key learnings from this process? How did this build their internal capacities?

Neelima Gokhale (PSS)

In an ECE classroom both the children and the teacher must learn. Young children are naturally curious. Trust, freedom to think, and the freedom to move around and share are critical.

Children should participate in creating TLMs using materials like clay as it fosters ownership and deeper engagement. TLMs must be open ended. These have to be exploratory.

When activities are open ended, these give children the opportunity to think and the freedom to explore.

Rohit Dhankar (Digantar)

TLMs aid teaching by enabling meaningful engagement between teachers and learners through content.

These can potentially play a role in learning. Learning involves forming and connecting ideas. TLMs should support this, by being both teacher-led and facilitating self-learning. For TLMs to play a useful role in the latter, we need to have a clear understanding of how a child's mind works.

Over-reliance on TLMs can hinder abstract thinking. One should use TLMs for direct and experiential learning. Self-learning TLMs should be introduced gradually, as children must learn to follow the rules in stages.



Shivani Taneja (Muskaan)

Children's literature are critical as TLMs. Their role in teaching and learning is often overlooked. Books can broaden children's understanding by opening up new worlds.

In underserved communities, they help children feel represented and seen. Children also develop agency through language and storytelling. Children's books and magazines can be used to start many different types of conversations. These provide useful spaces for the child to see themselves in narratives and develop their identities.

Insights from the discussions

Sometimes when teachers are expected to use too many TLMs, it can overwhelm them. TLMs should be therefore aids and should never be visualized to replace the teacher. Connecting learning objectives with open-ended TLM usage is also important. Sometimes, TLMs might not even be necessary. For example, many mathematical concepts can be explained using simpler tools like pen and paper.

Difficult social issues can be learnt by using children's literature as TLMs. A sensitive selection and curation of such material that is alert to the child's context is crucial.

TLMs need not interfere with the agency of the children and the teachers. They can create TLMs separately and collaboratively. TLMs can also come in handy in the learning journeys of adults. TLMs are practice tools for independent learning. Children must have the freedom to choose.



Teaching learning material (TLM) mela

A TLM mela was organized at Azim Premji University as a part of Partners' Forum 2024. Twenty-one (21) organizations participated in the mela. It gave the participants an opportunity to explore and engage with different types of TLMs created by various partner organizations on different themes related to education. It also helped them understand some of the aspects discussed in the panel on TLMs in greater detail.



Organizations participating in the TLM mela

Azim Premji University Geography Lab Muskaan
 Digantar Ektara Navnirmiti Learning Foundation
 Swatantra Talim Foundation Eco Vigyan Foundation
 Eklavya Foundation AAVISHKAAR- Center of Science,
 Shikshamitra Math, Arts & Technology
 Makkala Jagriti Nature Conservation Foudation
 Kalpavriksh Graham Bell Centre for the Deaf
 Centre for Learning Resources Nature Science Initiative
 Centre for Environment Education Samait Shala
 Vision Empower Pragat Shikshan Sanstha



Supporting others in their learning journeys



From left to right: Supriya Menon, Gurleen Malhotra, Joy Sreenivasan, Keerthi Jayaram

Gurleen Malhotra is a Member of Jodo Gyan, a not-for-profit social organization with over two decades of successful experiences in supporting schools across the country in mathematics education.

Joy Srinivasan, Founder of Makkala Jagriti, has over 30 years of work experience across the corporate and development sectors, and as a leadership development consultant.

Keerti Jayaram, Founder and Director of OELP, has more than 40 years of experience in the field of Elementary Education as a teacher at the school and university levels, and as a teacher educator, curriculum developer and researcher.

There are intersections and overlaps around what enables one to be a good learner and a good facilitator. However, there are perhaps also some distinct abilities and skills that are needed to become a good facilitator for others. Also, it may not be sufficient to have one or two good facilitators within an organization for it to become an effective resource-organization for other CSOs.

In such a scenario, this panel discussed the following questions: What characterizes a good facilitating organization? What capabilities and experience do I as an individual, and my organization as a group, need to be able to offer learning programs for other individuals and organizations? What internal processes, structures and capabilities would an organization need to enable them to facilitate others' learning? How do we make learning visible to adults? How can adults express themselves to demonstrate learning?

Gurleen Malhotra (Jodo Gyan)

Positive changes in learning involve two things - bettering what exists and fundamental, qualitative shifts. The focus of Jodo Gyan's work is qualitative change. Working together with teachers regularly in real life classrooms is critical.

For this purpose, Jodogyan has its own school. It also works with six nodal schools. In all these spaces regular interventions and interactions take place, ensuring consistent support and development. They emphasize transforming assessments, often considered one of the biggest challenges, by reshaping how learning outcomes are measured.

A critical aspect of Jodo Gyan's approach is the role of leadership and the involvement of key stakeholders such as math coordinators and school administrators. Their work seeks to shift mindsets and establish systems and structures that support sustained educational improvement. Gurleen shared that education must drive qualitative change and align with global best practices.

Joy Srinivasan (Makkala Jagriti)

Facilitation of capacity building processes requires respecting the diversity of people an organization works with, while maintaining shared values. There is a need to foster an empowering ethos through collaboration, staying open to capacity building, and continuously assessing whether meaningful value is being added through organizational efforts.



One must trust that people can contribute meaningfully to all aspects of an organization's work. For the leadership, 'letting go' is a capacity that needs to be actively built. For a resource organization it is important to figure out the core and focus of one's work in which one can develop expertise through reflective practice. This can then help in knowledge partnering and working at scale. One can build capacities only by becoming co-travellers.

Facilitation is an art. One must have diagnostic understanding of processes as a facilitator and capacity builder. Knowledge partnering happens best when the designing of the capacity building programs and modules happens in a collaborative manner.



Keerti Jayaram (Organization for Early Literacy Promotion - OELP)

Keerti shared that learning should be simple, address specific requirements and interests, consider teachers' needs and available resources, be doable, and be flexible enough to adapt to diverse learning contexts.

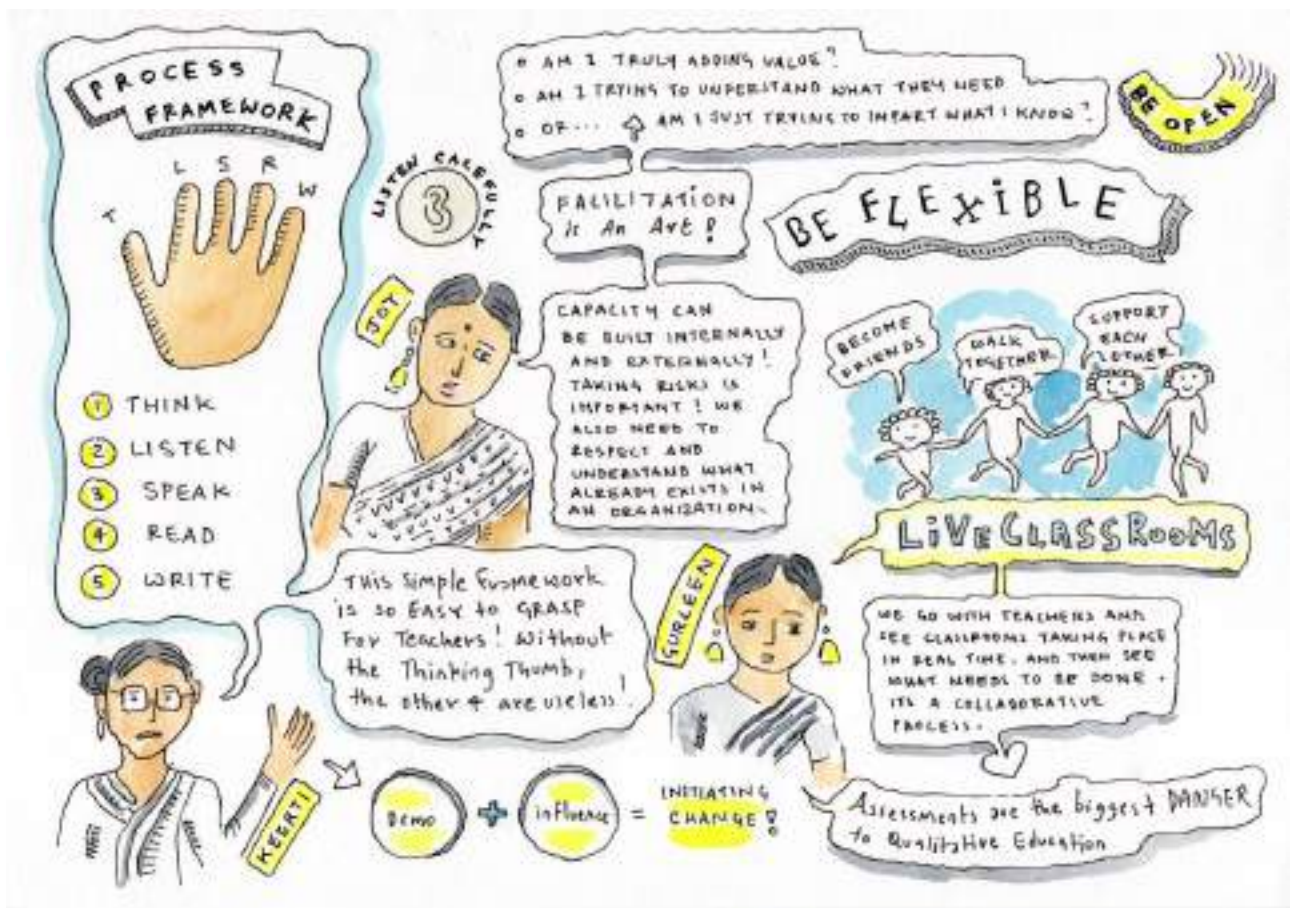
A few underlying learning principles her team values include the belief that learning occurs in a nurturing and non-threatening environment. It is built upon relationships that honor and support differences.

Learning thrives within relationships based on mutual respect and cooperation. It builds on the knowledge and experiences the learner already possesses. Learning blossoms when a learner experiences success.

Insights from the discussions

Inclusion must be prioritized. Recognizing that every child has unique needs is critical. Special educators' help can be taken to support children with disabilities. Sensitization efforts play a critical role in fostering an inclusive environment.

Demonstrating the effects of work through changes in real classrooms is crucial. This helps in teachers and NGO facilitators coming on to the same page. Such classrooms also serve as sites of demonstration of positive change for members of the larger ecosystem, such as headteachers, bureaucrats of the education department, etc.



Purpose of capacity building: knowledge transfer vs. changes in practice - I

Shivani Taneja, the Founder of Muskan, has been working with people of de-notified tribal backgrounds and impoverished communities in and around Bhopal for 25 years.

By profession **Sudeshna Sinha** is a special educator, and has been largely involved in establishing experimental elementary schools (Aashirvad Vidyalaya at St. Joseph's School and Shikshamitra in Kolkata). Currently she heads Shikshamitra, an education resource and teacher training centre.

The group consisted of 24 people, most of them practitioners from various library programs. To start, the participants sat in a circle and introduced themselves with their names and that of their respective organizations. This round of sharing connected to the preceding plenary session, as each one also responded to the (facilitators') question: Which factors have contributed and helped your own capacity building?



Key remarks, questions and prompts by the facilitators

The discussions were facilitated with prompts such as the following:

- Think about a learning experience that has been very personal. Articulate it. For example, it could be a kind of realization – “I understood this (only much) later in life”, a reflective consolidation (of learning journey).
- When we talk about capacity, what are we (actually) talking about?

After the first round of sharing, the facilitator led on to the second round of reflections. Many of the participants spoke of structured training programs, experiences from communities and within teams, trying out ideas, and seeing the response and learning from that.

Learning is not always in classrooms and formal spaces. We must be able to continuously learn from life, from all spaces. Experiences in life guide us.

Capacity building cannot cover all that life has to offer – or the world, or people. We must keep ourselves open to learning from all that is there.

Participants' voices

“When I see an expert, a panel member, a facilitator, I ask myself - How did this person reach here? What did she or he do? What books did they read? How did they learn?”

“After each capacity building process, ask yourself - What did I learn? What are the new questions that have emerged?”

“We just can't be running projects. We must keep learning.”

“Do what you love and just start!”

Questions, thoughts and concerns shared by the participants

Capacity building can happen in safe and inviting spaces. These allow the vulnerability to reflect on weaknesses and areas of improvement. In turn, capacity building can provide the space for experimentation. Ideas about what to do also evolve over a period of time.

Mapping individual and organizational capacity building with what is to be done, and the vision and the mission of the organization is critical. Planning is essential, even if one is not able to stick to it entirely.

One must not burden others with one's own agenda, not until they are ready to take on the responsibility. Trust and support are essential for capacity building. Are our expectations from capacity building the same for ourselves as those from our team? Having mentors helps.

Key takeaways

Each one is a learner and must be able to consolidate one's learning. One must accept the things that one does not know, take initiative, and have rigor in practice.

Questions provoke learning. To be an open learner, one must be self-aware, listen to others, experience, and correlate learning with this process. One also must be a thinking person.

One must make capacity building into a personal affair, because learning begins at the personal level. At the same time, we also need to think of the team's capacities and determine what the program can deliver, and build from there.

Capacity building is triggered by experiences and situations. These can be external – workshops, training programs and webinars, etc. These can also be internal and involve reflections and introspection. In an organizational context, sometimes visits by funders also help by supporting the process of identification of the gaps where capacity building is needed.

Failures can help develop resilience. An incubation period can also give direction. We must build perspective to acquire clarity. Recognizing areas of required change is also crucial.

Learning from, and being in, different contexts, communities and cultures, can help change perspective and attitude. Learning initially targeted for one specific objective may lead to many related and unrelated learning process and help in acquiring much needed information, knowledge and skills.



Purpose of capacity building: knowledge transfer vs. changes in practice - II

Anupama Muralidharan and **Gurleen Malhotra** are Members of Jodo Gyan, a not-for-profit social organization with over two decades of successful experiences in supporting schools across the country in mathematics education.

Hriday Kant Dewan has been working in teacher development and in elementary education for the last 35 years. He continues to devote his energies for systemic improvement in our public education. He has a Ph.D. in Particle Physics from Delhi University.

Introduction

Capacity building is seen at multiple level - capacity building for and by the organization, capacity building for the functionaries who directly work on the ground, and capacity building of others like policy makers and members of the administrative machinery.

Capacity building is a slow and self-driven process. Supporting others in their learning journeys and being a part of their journeys is also a part of one's own capacity building process. Sharing knowledge creates abundance.

Key question

How do we make a person understand that they need to build their capacity, i.e., how to trigger capacity building needs in a person?

Participants' voices

“Knowledge and behaviour are critical components of capacity building. Knowledge building is far easier than behavioural change.”

“Show people what impact capacity building will bring. Help them in their own journeys. You don't make their journey.”

Key takeaways

There is a need to create spaces for capacity building. We must also ensure adequate emotional and mental safety for capacity building.

Capacity building can be triggered through demonstration, creating a space to achieve a goal, a process of reflection, and experiencing motivation in the work.

Capacity building should be looked at holistically in terms of knowledge, skills, mindsets and behaviours. It should encompass not only work but life as a whole as well.

Thoughts shared by the facilitators

There is a need to have an understanding of what capacities can one share. We should create something which others can see, study and learn from. Making the other organization feel the need for what we are doing is done mostly through demonstration.

Some of the questions raised by the participants revolved on how to identify capacity building needs and how do we know that capacity building has been done. Some of the responses were about how one can derive and direct capacity building needs from one's purpose.

Discussion also took place around the fact that only having a vision or purpose won't help in capacity building. The vision needs to be seen in practice for the capacity building journey to start effectively.



Capacity building for and by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): In conversation with Anurag Behar



Anurag Behar at Partners' Forum 2024

Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation and the founding Vice Chancellor of Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. His book 'A matter of the heart', paints a grassroots view of education in India.

What donors do and don't do, their worldview, belief systems and notions about social change, etc., have profound impact on the larger civil society. Therefore, it is important that they invest in their capacity building. A key part of doing relevant work in the social sector, especially in education, involves authentically pursuing rigor.

Rigor involves improving everyday, so that in the context of educational interventions, children learn better. Authenticity is the ability to see and communicate things truthfully and clearly. However, the larger trends in the sector are moving in the opposite direction. Both donors and the regulatory framework seem to be a part of this situation.

Many popular ideas in the social sector, for example, those emphasizing scale, speed and sustainability, etc., seem to be working against authenticity and rigor. If we compromise on rigour, the work can become flaky and compromising on authenticity can make it fake. Our interventions in education and in other social domains must strengthen the public systems. Public systems are critical as these are spaces in which large human societies can collectively work toward the good of all. Identifying some part of the system and deciding what we need to work on is critical in our work.

Discussion points

We must all cognize the fact that we are small social actors, no matter what our size is. Therefore, we can only work with a small part of the public system and not with 'the public system' per se. There is a need to accept the situation on the ground. This can help us realistically plan and execute interventions.

Facts do not change people. Appealing to their hearts does. We must figure out ways of addressing these concerns of the heart, with respect to education.

Governments across the country have done many things over the last few decades that have improved the public education system. Access has improved. However, a large number of issues, especially those related to educational quality, need to see improvement.



Launch of the Samuhik Pahal website



Anurag Behar with the Samuhik Pahal team

The website of Samuhik Pahal - www.samuhikpahal.org - was launched at the 2024 edition of Partners' Forum, held at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. It is a new online platform dedicated to empowering civil society organizations (CSOs) across India.

The website represents the digital evolution of the Samuhik Pahal journal, originally launched in May 2020. It serves as a comprehensive resource hub aimed at enhancing the capabilities of CSOs nationwide, providing essential tools and resources to drive effective social change.

In its new format, development sector practitioners can access hundreds of articles supporting education CSOs, covering topics such as curriculum and pedagogy, learning spaces, and systemic reforms. The platform plans to expand its content to other domains, including health and ecology.

Over 200 contributors from the development sector have shared their reflections, insights, and resources through Samuhik Pahal over the past five years. The platform also features interviews and stories from the ground, benefiting CSOs, practitioners, researchers, and anyone interested in social change.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to all our readers and contributors, as your support has been instrumental in helping us achieve this milestone. Explore the new www.samuhikpahal.org platform and subscribe to our newsletter for the latest updates. If you want to contribute to Samuhik Pahal, please check out the FAQ section of the website to know more.

Masterclasses

The 2024 edition of Partners' Forum had 11 masterclasses being conducted as parallel sessions. The themes covered included a wide variety of topics such as 'Experiential approaches in learning history: exploring historical landscapes', and 'Nature education for all: the need and impact for the individual'. These were facilitated by experts in their respective areas.

The Forum participants had the opportunity to attend these masterclasses based on a theme of their choice. The tone of the sessions was informal and conversational. Most of the classes were practical in nature, with the attendees walking away from the session with some specific learning.



Visual literacy through picture books

Prachi Kalra teaches courses in the pedagogy of language and children's literature at the Department of Elementary Education at Gargi College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest are children's literature, literacy and storytelling.

Children use all their senses in different and complex ways when they learn. However, they strongly orient themselves in relationship to the physical world largely through vision. Children are drawn to objects and images from an early age. They easily engage with illustrated books.

In the context of early literacy, images in books can play a major role in enabling a child to explore and express their learning as they come into the print world. They bring their early childhood experiences and conditioning while interpreting these images.

This masterclass explored ways in which picture books enable visual literacy in early readers. The participants got an opportunity to explore a wide range of picture books in the context of the play between text and image in the books, as well as books which are completely wordless. A key takeaway was an activity that can be used to explore wordless books with children.



Remarks by the facilitator

The session focused on the importance of visual literacy through picture books. The facilitator, Prachi Kalra showed the book 'Where is the cat?' and discussed methods of visual literacy in the classrooms.

Prachi Kalra shared through examples how picture books help children in visualization. She shared that we should take time out to talk about pictures in the book. We need to explore the following things in picture books – color, lines, texture and shapes. We also need to discuss the 'design' and the 'point of view' of the book.

After explaining the concepts, the participants were divided into groups. Here, they had to read and explore a book together and share about its design and point of view. They also had to find out the focus of book - whether the artist has focused on colors, lines, textures or shapes.

Key takeaways

Even in picture books children often end up focusing on words because they are expected to read and speak. Picture books are very helpful in building creative thinking among children.

Picture books are for adults also. Adults can explore different layers of picture books. Understanding the artist's point of view, and the book's design, is an interesting process. This can help us understand the motivation behind the art.

For example, some books use expressions like animation movies. Some artists take inspiration from camera pictures. Some other artists love to play with layers or colors in their books.



Children's experiments in writing

Jane Sahi has taught in an alternative school - Sita School- for several years. She is presently involved in The Fig Tree Learning Centre, which works with local government schools, particularly in relation to library activities and sessions with children, looking at nature through observations, stories and artwork.

A child's journey into formal language expression begins with learning and using writing skills. This process often focuses on acquiring symbolic knowledge—writing letters and words. However, writing is more than putting symbols on paper. It is about using these symbols to communicate meaning.

This masterclass explored children's writing as a creative and reflective process. It emphasized self-expression and meaning-making. The participants reflected on their own relationships with writing. They also discussed strategies to encourage children's creative expressions.



Remarks by the facilitator

The masterclass prompted discussions on fostering children's creative writing. Jane Sahi shared a short film showing a teacher working with 11- and 12-year-old students expressing their experiences of losing loved ones.

The film highlighted how sensitive topics like death and grief are often missing from textbooks. In these, children are expected to write only happy stories. Through writing, the children articulated their emotions and memories, showing the potential of writing as a powerful tool for emotional expression.

Jane emphasized that writing offers a space for exploration and reflection. It could also provide something distinct from spoken expression. Writing allows individuals to step back and engage with their thoughts reflectively and intentionally.

The session also explored the concept of becoming a writer, discussing strategies to encourage writing. These include pattern making and picture dictionaries. One can also use writing prompts that accommodate diverse abilities and experiences and multi-modal responses such as monologues, drawings, and written narratives.

Jane also shared a poem from the book "In our own words", where a child wrote about a night watchman. This helped in illustrating how writing can help children imagine other people's experiences.

Toward the end of the session, Jane introduced a writing prompt: "What surprised me". Participants responded with a word or a sentence, and shared their thoughts with a partner. This simple exercise demonstrated how prompts can spark diverse and meaningful responses.

Jane concluded by encouraging participants to reflect on their own writing practices, asking: "How can we better support children's writing by understanding our own writing experiences?"

Key takeaways

Participants connected their personal writing experiences with Jane's insights on children's writing development.

Jane emphasized creating a safe space for writing, where teachers avoid being intrusive. They must allow children the freedom to write without the fear of judgment.

Teachers should refrain from imposing expectations they wouldn't place on themselves. They must try and make the writing process inviting rather than demanding for the learners.

Children should be encouraged to write about what feels meaningful and comfortable to them. This has the potential to foster a genuine and supportive writing environment.

Performance by Strings and Echoes



'Strings and Echoes' are a Bengaluru based band comprising Soumyadeep Dasgupta (lead singer), Saikat Mitra (guitarist) and Ami Roosha. They performed a song sequence threaded by a story, based on the works of Gulzar in the evening of December 5, 2024.





Bird watching session facilitated by AERO (Goa) and mushroom walk led by Eco-Vigyan (Himachal Pradesh)

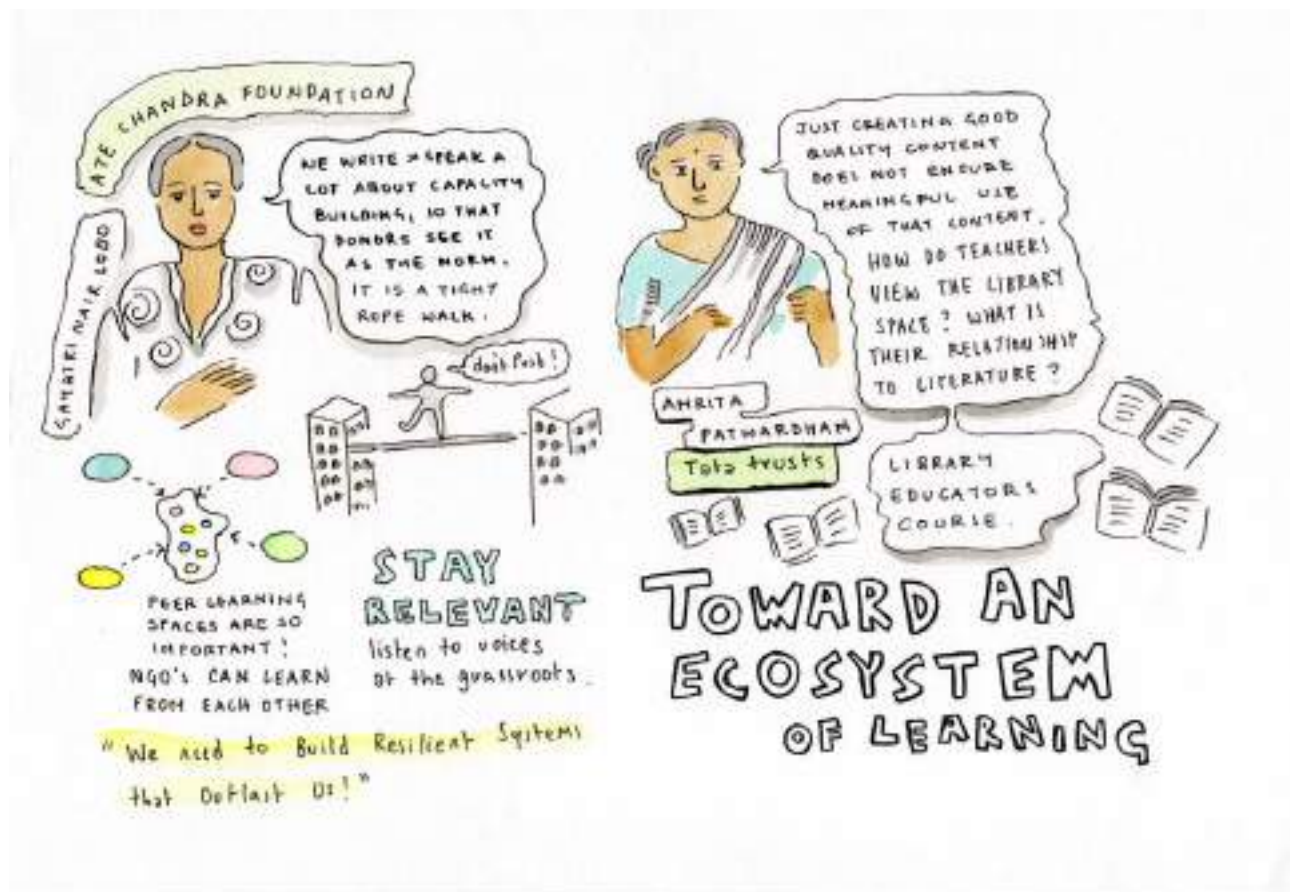
Toward an ecosystem of learning

Amrita Patwardhan heads the Education Theme of Tata Trusts, where she has been working since 2003. Before joining Tata Trusts, she taught in a primary school and in a college, and worked as a teacher educator as well.

Gayatri Nair Lobo is Member, Board of Directors, Artha India, and is the Chief Executive Officer of ATE Chandra Foundation. She has over 20 years of strategy consulting and development sector experience.

Nisha Nair, Founder and Executive Director of ArtSparks Foundation, is an educator, researcher and designer. She is committed to elevating the position of art and design as mediums for pedagogy and transformation.

This plenary session focused on the process of creating ecosystems of learning that address the needs of individuals and CSOs, and that include formal and non-formal learning spaces. The speakers also discussed how individuals and organizations can participate in creating learning networks.



Amrita Patwardhan (Tata Trusts)

Tata Trusts do a lot of work on capacity building. An important part of this has been done in their Parag initiative through the Library Educator's Course.

Children's literature can become an important part of a child's learning journey. However, for this to happen effectively, issues surrounding access and use need to be addressed effectively. Libraries are a crucial part of this ecosystem. Tata Trusts felt the need for a structured learning program in this space, as courses work better than shorter workshops. It led to the LEC (Library Educator's Course). It was started as a blended program. The course involves experiential pedagogy, field projects and mentorship.

In this space, creating a community of learners is needed. However, it is also a challenging process. Some of it can be organic. However, some amount of handholding and planning is also necessary.



From left to right: Supriya Menon, Nisha Nair, Gayatri Nair Lobo, Amrita Patwardhan

Gayatri Nair Lobo (ATE Chandra Foundation)

To create an ecosystem of learning, facilitating resilient, inclusive, and collaborative processes of capacity building is crucial. CSOs have to often undertake a tightrope walk balancing program outcomes with organizational growth.

Leadership sets the tone for learning. Peer learning spaces foster shared growth. Funders need to listen to ground stories and address systemic barriers like caste, gender and language. We also need to design capacity building programs that resonate with local realities.

Capacity-building costs must be embedded in funding proposals. Impact must be tracked at both programmatic and organizational levels. Technology enables learning networks, but balance is key. The ultimate goal is resilient systems that outlast us.

Nisha Nair (ArtSparks Foundation)

There can be two approaches to scaling one's work. One is geographical. The other is through capacity building. ArtSparks tends to follow the second one. It does this by its professional development initiatives including the EdSparks Collective, where they work with CSOs on co-learning journeys at the interface between the arts and education.

Capacity building can entail knowledge transfer or belief change. Initially ArtSparks focused on the former. However, the organization started working on belief change, when they started seeing problems with only focusing on knowledge transfer.

ArtSparks has been using learning circles as a space for unpacking beliefs. Action learning projects (ALPs) and communities of practice (CoP) are the other spaces that have been helping the CSO facilitate capacity building journeys of CSOs.

Key takeaways

Organizational capacity building programs need to be sensitive to the needs and contexts of CSOs.

There is a requirement to share stories of transformation of facilitators and learn from these. Much work needs to take place on the capacity building of mentors.

The funding community must be honest about its own role. There has to be clarity on what can be enabled and what cannot be.

Learning how to learn is a key skill. How to do this formally is a challenge. However, we undeniably need to focus on this.



Accessing higher education spaces for continued learning



Sudheesh Venkatesh

Sudheesh Venkatesh is the Chief Communications Officer and Managing Editor of Azim Premji Foundation. He is an alumnus of IIM - Calcutta.

Higher education opportunities for grassroots practitioners are limited and inaccessible. This session shared information on the courses and workshops offered by Azim Premji University. These offer flexible spaces for accessing learning opportunities for grassroots practitioners.

In the social sector, building the capacities of people already working in the sector is as important as programs that target new workers and/or fresh students. Toward this purpose, Azim Premji University, which was set up in 2010 with a clear social purpose, offers flexible diploma and certificate programs.

For example, the university offers four diplomas in various relevant sub-fields of education. These are one-year programs and are designed in a modular fashion comprising certificate programs. These are blended programs and involve some amount of face-to-face to contact at the university, and online engagements and self-study. Subsidized fee is available for participants from select CSO partners.

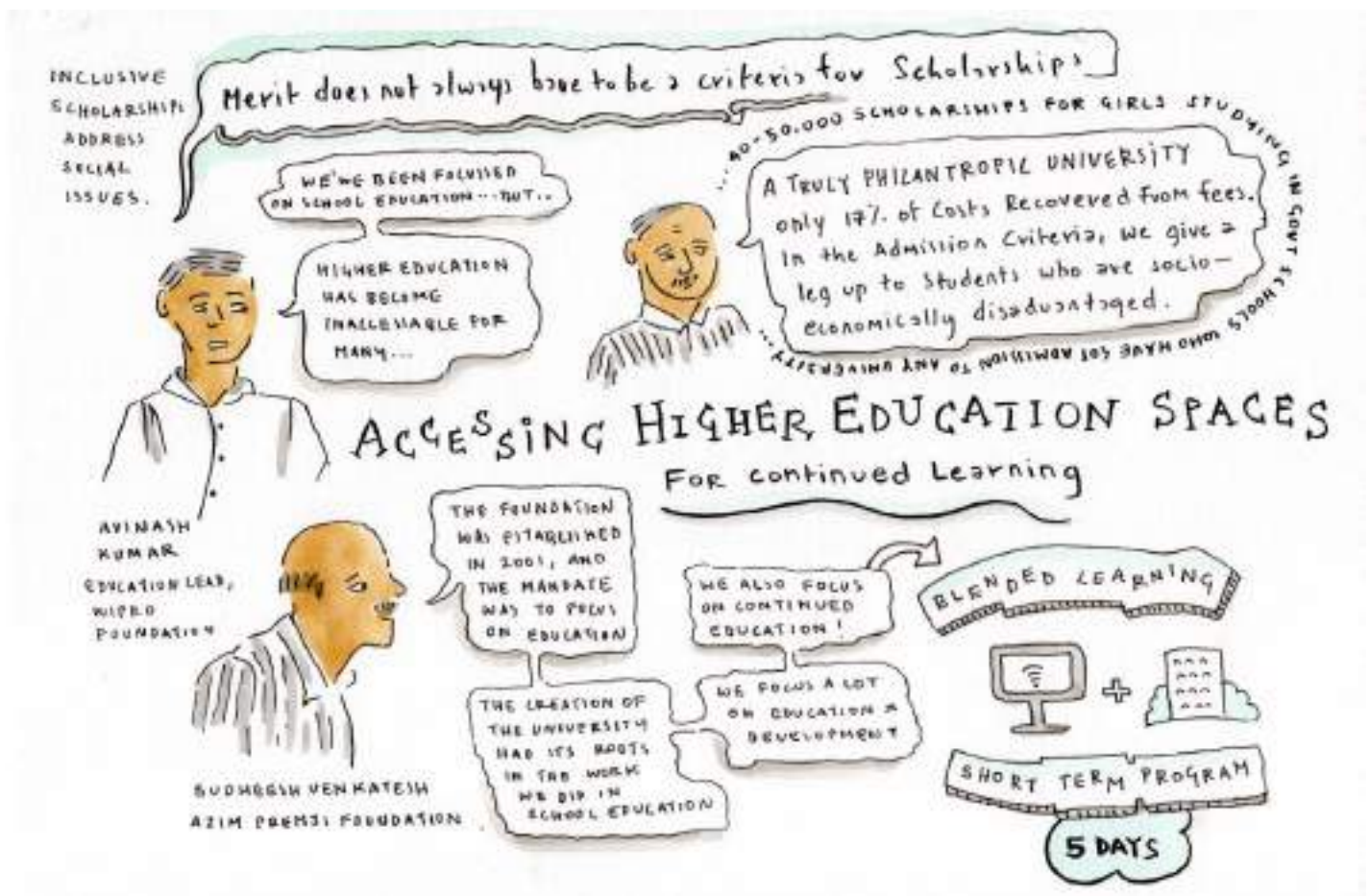
The university actively encourages individuals from underprivileged backgrounds and underserved geographies to apply to its programs. It also offers a bridge program for building the capacities of applicants to be able to take the entrance tests.

After joining its programs, students receive both academic and financial support for their studies. Translated material in Hindi and Kannada is a part of the process, so is mental health support.

Right now, the university operates out of two campuses, one in Bengaluru and the other in Bhopal. The university, at the moment, offers six postgraduate programs, undergraduate programs in multiple subjects. Some of these are available in both Bengaluru and Bhopal, some others in one of these.

Students' fees contribute to less than ten percent of the operating costs of the university. This model is envisaged to continue in the long-term as Azim Premji University has been set up with a clear social purpose.

APF has also initiated a large-scale, means-based scholarship program, which will support lakhs of girl students access higher education in the coming years.



Program group discussions - I

Learning at different scales, sectors and socio-cultural and geographical contexts may need different programmatic responses. Through small group discussions (two of which are shared here), the attempt was to understand the capacity building requirements and challenges faced by the partners based on their specific programmatic approaches. The role of networks and collectives in organizational journeys was also explored.

Hriday Kant Dewan has been working in teacher development and in elementary education for the last 35 years. He continues to devote his energies for systemic improvement in our public education. He has a Ph.D. in Particle Physics from Delhi University.

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

Mainak Roy is the co-founder of Simple Education Foundation, where he leads strategy, government relations and the organizational development functions of the organization. He is a former Teach For India, Wipro and Acumen Fellow.

Facilitators' insights

Jitendra Nayak shared experiences of working with school systems in Odisha. He focused on Klorofeel's journey of improving children's learning levels through community and school engagements.

The organization has also established Community Learning Centers (CLCs) to address teacher motivation and classroom challenges, and to support their growth. It has also undertaken initiatives targeted at single-teacher schools and multi-grade classrooms, fostering strong relationships with teachers.

They have been able to demonstrate success in small clusters. There is growing interest from teachers and the local administration.

Mainak Roy, from SEF, discussed a four-level systemic approach: values, principles, needs for capacity building, and context. He emphasized the importance of internalizing change within state structures for long-term impact.

He also highlighted tools like personalized teacher feedback systems and data-driven decision-making. He shared his organization's focused work on practical teacher training, co-creation of solutions, and inclusive frameworks to scale impact.

Discussion points

There is a need to emphasize the importance of understanding context for systemic work. Grassroots-level initiatives need to be advocated to drive sustainable changes in governance and education.

Challenges of leadership transitions and systemic adaptation to interventions was highlighted. The importance of understanding hierarchical roles and engaging stakeholders, including teachers, community members, and parents, in systemic work was also stressed.

Questions about the necessity of external civil society organizations (CSOs) to support and navigate challenges like unstable leadership within government collaborations was raised.

A bottom-up approach was suggested. The need for localized and contextual solutions as being crucial for systemic reforms was emphasized.



Program group discussions - II

Rita Mishra, Founder and CEO of Patang, holds a Ph.D. in Psychology and Education from JNU and has 28 years of pan-India experience. She has been part of the leadership teams at Pravah, C3, and TAP India Foundation.

Varun Nallur works with Azim Premji Foundation, Bengaluru.

Reflections and discussion points

One of the key reflections from the discussion related to accountability in working with teachers and public systems and hence the importance of fostering strong relationships. Engaging with public systems at the micro-level was seen to be essential, emphasising that building trust and strong connections is foundational to creating meaningful change. By acknowledging our own responsibility in the system, we can start to understand how to change the picture and work collaboratively to address the challenges.

Key questions that emerged are: How do I work to make things better? What is the core problem? What are we teaching unknowingly? What role do I play in the system to change the picture?

The group spent some time in discussing about collectives of organizations and their role in building the capacities of member CSOs. These collectives include - WIPRO Partners' Forum, Edumentum, Life Skills Collaborative, Pravah Changeloomer Collective, Acumen India, Free Library Network, TFlx, AECED (Association for Early Childhood), RTE Forum, ILSS, Empower Skill Collective, Evidence Community of Practice, ATMA, and the SEL Forum.

These collectives address organizations' needs by providing exposure, resources, and organizational development opportunities. They foster sharing of ideas and knowledge. These also provide a sense of belonging, mentorship, solidarity, collaboration, purpose, and avenues for collective action. Sometimes these also work as sources of funding, learning opportunities, and capacity-building support.



Key takeaways

Distinguishing between external givens and internal choices helps organizations focus on actionable areas and prioritize strategic efforts.

Organizations' challenges and capacity building needs are being addressed by some collectives. Regional forums are needed to deep-dive on the challenges, and offer support to each other.

Remarks by the facilitators

Rita from Patang shared her grassroots experience in Odisha. In Patang, they have adopted a community-driven approach through School Management Committees (SMCs). This has enabled the organization to design and implement initiatives that directly address the community's need of multi-lingualism. It has led to collaborations with education department leaders. This has also aligned their initiatives with policy frameworks and allowed them to advocate for incorporating a multi-lingual approach to learning through state institutions.

Varun Nallur from Azim Premji Foundation provided insights from his work in Bengaluru, researching the dominance of private schools over government schools due to factors like aspirations, English-medium instruction, peer learning (Nali Kali systems), and unsafe school environments. He shared a case study of stakeholders—including Wipro, APF, and APU—collaborating to rethink education by building two model schools, which has inspired the government to replicate the initiative with 20 additional schools.

Through a mapping-exercise to figure out where the participants saw themselves in the public education system, most organizations in the group were seen to be working with teachers and children. The following are the key capacity building needs shared by the participants.

- Strengthening the team's capacity for school infrastructure projects.
- Enhancing assessment methodology and analysis skills.
- Improving pedagogy and the use of technology in MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning).
- Building project management skills.
- Deepening understanding of education systems and policies.
- Enhancing documentation, communication, and advocacy capabilities.
- Providing user-friendly resources in local languages.

The following are the key challenges faced by the organizations:

- Student migration and teacher/administrative transfers.
- Standardization of exams and interventions.
- Teacher shortages and inactive School Management Committees (SMCs).
- Discriminatory mindsets among teachers.
- Lack of an multi-lingual approach.
- Rapidly changing priorities and resource shortages.
- Gender inclusivity gaps in resources and behaviors.
- Lack of self-motivation within educational communities.



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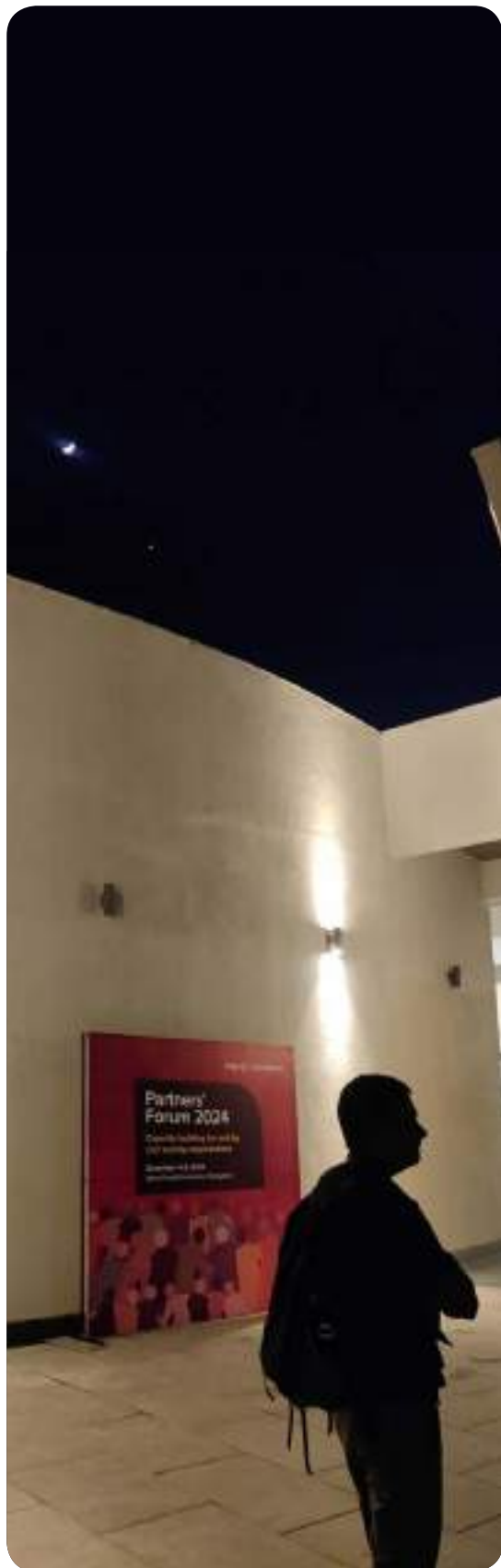
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