

Make rural development cool

Only a 360-degree approach to poverty alleviation can work

We believe that India will never achieve its true growth story until the rural sector of the country is empowered to make choices and transform their own lives. Not only do we want to lift one million people in rural India out of poverty every five years, but most importantly, we want to change rural mindsets. We set ourselves the challenge... can we make rural cool?

We started as a small NGO called SHARE in 2000 in one village called Vihule Kond. In 2013, SHARE metamorphosed into the Swades Foundation with a mission to empower a million rural lives every five years. Today, our Swades community is spread across 2,500 villages and our team is 1,300 strong: 300 full-time Swades employees plus over 1,000 community volunteers. In this column, I reflect on our journey and would like to share some key learnings:

There is no silver bullet to poverty alleviation. Zarina (my wife and managing trustee of Swades Foundation) and I were convinced that only a 360-degree approach to poverty alleviation would work. Back then we met with immense resistance as most of the excellent work was being done in silos. Today, it is more accepted that a holistic approach is the key. Our unique 360-degree development model covers four key thematic areas namely Health & Nutrition, Education, Water & Sanitation and Economic Development. Our aim is to ensure that this model can be replicated at scale across India and perhaps globally.

Know that you don't know. In the beginning we were two media people who had some experience of working in rural India, but it lacked depth and real understanding of ground realities. For one year we studied and visited NGOs, met communities, government experts, philanthropists. Finally, being highly inspired by Sir Fazle Abed's BRAC in Bangladesh, we adopted his holistic approach at Swades.

Go with what you believe to be right. Though the holistic model was hard and complex, we believed that it was the right thing to do and we did it. We believed that a tap in every home was the way to go, even in rural India. Today, with our partners, we have over 32,600 homes and 148 schools with a tap, impacting close to 200,000 lives. We are delighted that our Prime Minister Narendra Modi's latest 'Jal Jeevan Mission' would bring piped water through tap into every rural home by 2022.

We believed that an individual household toilet and not community toilets was the way to go, and



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today this is an accepted norm. Today, again with partners, we have built almost 22,000 toilets at homes and further in about 148 schools, impacting nearly 130,000 people.

Know that Trust of the community is your most valuable asset and the most difficult thing to change are minds and hearts.

The biggest problem we face is lack of aspirations among the rural community. Their willingness to take risks and do something that nobody has done before in their family. We had to do a lot of recalibration for our livelihood programmes and we are still learning. For instance, you have a lot of people who have four acres of land, but to get them to take a risk to try a new crop or even invest a little in, say, drip irrigation is very tough. If you have low appetite for risk, your aspiration will always remain low. This said we have now created a wonderful methodology to create new mindsets and inspire our community through building local leadership. Today, we have impacted over 30,000 households through farming, animal husbandry and skilling programmes.

Dream Together! Earlier this year, we have signed an MoU with the Maharashtra Govt. for 1,000 Swades Dream Villages, where every village will have access to health, education, water, and sanitation facilities and have ample means for livelihoods thereby enhancing their overall quality of life. Additionally, the 'Swades Dream Village' community will be empowered with the capability to transform their lives and will create a conducive environment for reverse migration from urban areas to their native village to pursue sustainable livelihoods.

Follow crazy ideas. When migration from the villages to the cities is the norm worldwide, we have the crazy idea to do the opposite – To encourage young working people (especially men) to go from the mega-cities back home to their villages. When you have built a conducive ecosystem with all the basic infrastructure in place in the villages, it not only gives the returnees a better life but also the motivation to become entrepreneurs, something that is very difficult to achieve in overcrowded cities. We have over 100 such returnees already who have started some entrepreneurial activity and are influencing others to return home to their villages and lead a dignified and fulfilling life.

And all this is our proof that slowly rural is getting COOL.

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