

7.2 The Swades Foundation

- **Year of founding:** 2013 (known as SHARE 1983–2013; renamed the Swades Foundation in 2013)
- **Location:** Mumbai, India
- **Duration of time-limited program (Dream Villages):** Approximately seven years
- **Number of staff:** Approximately 300 staff and 1,000 volunteers

Foundation history and guiding principles

When Ronnie and Zarina Screwvala sold their telecommunications and entertainment business to Disney in 2012, they found themselves in the privileged position of being able to try to fulfill their dream of, as Ms. Screwvala notes, “lifting one million people out of poverty every five years in rural India.” To do so, they decided on a holistic 360-degree rural development model for the Swades Foundation. The founders’ philanthropic activities had started decades earlier, supporting health, water, and sanitation projects in Mumbai and other parts of the state of Maharashtra, in western India. The foundation, earlier known as Society to Heal, Aid, Restore, and Educate (SHARE) had been in operation since 1983. In 2013, the Screwvalas renamed the organization the Swades Foundation.

Expanding the reach of their giving and developing a holistic model at Swades was a culmination of a long journey. The Screwvalas’ involvement in rural philanthropy made them realize that they had much to learn about rural India. As a result, they embarked on a year-long trip across the country, visiting communities and meeting with NGOs, government officials, and local philanthropists.

The Screwvalas observed that the communities they visited shared a common feature: the NGOs that operated there had existed for decades, with no intention of exiting. Their belief that this was stifling the communities’ self-empowerment inspired their time-limited approach, which gave programs a seven-year time horizon. The Screwvalas also thought the NGOs’ remits were too narrowly focused on single issues and failed to address the communities’ full breadth of needs, thereby limiting their ability to emerge from poverty.

"[Our dream is] to lift one million people out of poverty every five years in rural India."

ZARINA SCREWVALA, CO-FOUNDER,
THE SWADES FOUNDATION
(Pictured below)





The Dream Village program

To address these issues, the Screwvalas introduced the Dream Village program, which was founded on a holistic 360-degree rural development model in 2013. Today, having benefited more than half a million people, the program operates in 2,500 villages and hamlets in the Riagad district of the state of Maharashtra. The program currently has approximately 1,000 community volunteers and 300 staff.

Using a 360-degree strategy, the program is time-limited in approach and based on three guiding principles: (1) empower rural communities to shape and implement their own development projects; (2) employ a holistic approach to community development that covers health, education, economic development, and water/sanitation; and (3) install an exit plan that ensures that communities are self-sufficient upon the foundation's departure.

To date, the program has benefited 135,000 children through its engagement with over 1,300 rural schools, awarded 4,000 scholarships to students, and trained an equal number of teachers/principals. As a result of its work, tens of thousands of homes have been provided with potable water taps and toilet facilities. More than 10,000 entrepreneurs in animal husbandry have been nurtured, and nearly 15,000 cataract surgeries have been performed.

The foundation uses what Ms. Screwvala refers to as a “4E” strategy, which stands for engage, empower, execute, exit. She explains, “We involve a community from the start by building up a relationship with its members, so as to really understand them before we execute programs which will impact them. As these programs unfold, we build up community members’ skill sets and the know-how needed to maintain the programs after our departure. Finally, when we exit, we monitor the communities’ progress, stepping in where needed to help them become competent owners of the programs.”

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Above: Economic Development — Farmers harvesting vegetables (second crop) through drip irrigation supported by the foundation

Scaling up and scaling down: the role of government and local partners

The Dream Village program can be flexibly adapted to different scales. Government bodies can roll out the program on a large scale, and local partners can implement it on a smaller scale.

To illustrate, from an early stage, the government of Maharashtra has praised the Dream Village program as a powerful example of rural development. As a result, the foundation has signed a memorandum of understanding with the state government to create 1,000 Dream Villages within the next five years.

On a smaller scale, the foundation has also partnered with multiple NGOs to create synergies, making use of their capabilities and on-the-ground experience. “We don’t do anything on the ground that another NGO can do better,” remarks Ms. Screwvala. “We invite them in, take utmost care in selecting them, supervise them heavily, and pay for the service they provide. We have had some excellent experiences working in this way. Currently we have approximately 17 partners across the board.”

Challenges faced, lessons learned

Like any other large initiative, the foundation has faced its share of challenges. To begin with, “it was, and continues to be, a challenge to convince people of the merits of a 360-degree development strategy,” notes Ms. Screwvala. “My peers have told me to do one thing but do it well, as they have believed that a full-circle approach would not work. The real challenge here has been to change people’s mindsets, so as to drive the program forward. Physical factors are not really a problem; the main barriers are always mental.” Through achieving one success after another, however, the foundation has been proving the effectiveness of its approach one step at a time, changing minds along the way.

Identifying and implementing an effective sequence for projects’ work streams was another challenge. Basing the foundation’s work on a limited time horizon “has given us a sense of urgency and purpose,” notes Ms. Screwvala. “However, we have learned not to be in a hurry. The first Dream Villages we rolled out were rushed. We were still in the planning stage for projects while rolling them out, and this created confusion and delay. It also left the community uncertain about how to carry forward projects after our exit. In the second wave of Dream Villages, we took our time with planning, using the first six months of the project to speak with communities and ask them about their aspirations and priorities. Projects were implemented later, but they ultimately progressed faster and the exits will be cleaner. In other words, if you want to go fast, you first need to go slow and start small.”

A third (and current) challenge the foundation is facing concerns how best to exit some of its trickier projects. The foundation’s earliest programs, launched in 2013, were given a seven-year time horizon for exiting. In preparation for this hand-over, the foundation learned that its health and education projects are more difficult to exit than its water, sanitation, and economic development projects. For instance,



Top: Ronnie and Zarina Screwvala conducting a poll with the Gathemal village community

Below: Education — Girls enjoy reading a variety of books at the foundation’s libraries



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ZARINA SCREWVALA, CO-FOUNDER,
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water and sanitation works have been well established, so local groups will readily assume ownership of them. However, as Ms. Screwvala puts it, “How does one exit—and what does it mean to exit—the health and education areas? Whom do we hand over to? Do we hand over to the government? If so, will it continue to operate the program properly?” To address the issue, the foundation has been working with the community and state government to implement a longer-term strategy, such as it has with the Maharashtra government. It has also made itself available to offer post-exit support to ensure a smooth and effective transition.

The Swades Foundation is still forging its path as an innovator in full-circle philanthropy in rural India. With many successes under its belt, the foundation is gaining new experience and wisdom with each new village it impacts, embracing the philosophy of “nothing ventured, nothing gained.” ■

Top, left: Zarina and Ronnie Screwvala visiting the mari-gold farm of one of Swades’ on-farm (drip irrigation) beneficiaries

Top, right: Water — The foundation believes in providing every household with a toilet, plus drinking water through a tap