

Transforming rural Indian lives is tough but worth it

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Working with communities in rural India has multiple approaches. However, our experiences in rural India have some major learnings, a few of them hard lessons that we have learnt on our journey, and I share them in the hope that they will contribute to all endeavours aimed at bringing about a sustainable transformation in the lives of our rural residents.

A 360-degree model of holistic development: In 2013, when I finished addressing a group of women on the importance of education for girls, one of the community women said, "If my daughter goes to school, who will get water for the family?" This question revealed the complexity of the ecosystem of rural India. If a family is struggling for water, then education for children, especially girls, will be a second priority. Similarly, if the community doesn't have personal toilets at home and defecates in the open, the health and dignity of community members, especially women, are at risk.

Similarly, if schools have no separate toilets for girls and boys, then girls tend to drop out as they reach puberty.

If our rural population is struggling for basics like water, good health and sanitation, their family incomes and chances of getting new livelihood opportunities are very meagre. We believe that key aspects for holistic development are inter-dependent and interlinked: water and sanitation, health and nutrition, and education and economic development. Therefore, a holistic model of development needs to be at the core of sustainable change in rural India. For this, we take a geographical approach of at least a block (*tahuka*), and then work in all villages within that area simultaneously on all those aspects.

Push versus pull approach or empowerment versus charity: A Chinese proverb says, "Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand." Our field experiences have convinced me that this is true when we engage with rural communities. On our road to uplift rural lives, our lens can often be one-sided. Pushing communities to meet your set of visions and goals might not create much impact on rural lives. But, if community members

express what they really need and then set their own goals for their village's development, you have truly started an empowerment process.

Build empowered village development committees (VDCs): We believe our exit from villages under our plan is the most crucial part in their holistic development. This part requires utmost planning, as you must create leaders who are informed and empowered to continue development efforts without or with only minimal support.

Thus, to create self-sustaining communities, empowered to transform their own lives, strong community driven institutions are a must. We need VDCs, or groups of motivated volunteers, with an equal representation of men, women and youth in the community. Such VDCs, which are similar to local self-governance bodies in structure, ensure that all community efforts have synergy.

One has to ensure that VDCs are formed by passionate people. Let them create their own plans, connect them to government schemes, even other non-government organizations (NGOs), and then help them where you can. This will help achieve your aims. This understanding has come from many failures. One must test the buy-in of the community, and also the convening power of the VDC, and then see that it's working well before granting any funds to the village. You might have to be a bit hard

hearted at this stage, but believe me, it's worth it. Ensure that every household contributes something. This gives them a stake in the process. They could, for example, pay a small proportion of the cost of, say, a toilet. Or it could be in the form of *shramdaan* (voluntary labour). They must feel a strong sense of ownership and pride.

Once VDCs are trained in the conceptualization and implementation of

development plans, they can bridge gaps between the community and other stakeholders. The empowered VDC of Majare, once a small tribal settlement of 11 mud homes in Sudhagad, Raigad, for example, ensured that every home is now *pucca*. It applied to the Union government's Gharkul Yojna, followed it up, and got approval for cemented homes.

Collaborate: Accepting your gaps and bridging them with specialized support through partnerships could let you create a larger impact. Our journey in rural Raigad has convinced us that the holistic transformation of Indian villages is not possible by working alone. One has to use the power of partnerships and collaboration, especially to scale up operations and reach out. By forging partnerships with companies for financial resources, with governments for support and guidance, and with other NGOs and vendors for their expertise, you can create an impact that's truly scalable. All this, while keeping in mind that the community we serve is our most important partner.

At the end, I hope your journey of transforming lives in rural India brings you as much inspiration and joy as it has brought us. Remember, it's hard but worth it.

QUICK READ

The real key to aiding village development lies in helping rural residents form councils and empowering them to conceive and execute plans that local communities consider worthy.

Forging partnerships with various other stakeholders is essential, but ensuring that village folk have a firm sense of project ownership was found to go a long way in achieving success.