Transforming rural Indian lives is tough but worth it

ZARINA SCREWVALA

Working with communities in rural India has multiple approaches. However, our experiences in rural India have some major learning, 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 multiplicity 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 there are no separate toilets for girls and boys, then girls tend to drop out as they reach puberty.

If our rural population is struggling for basic life water, good health and sanitation, their family incomes and chances of getting new livelihood opportunities are very meagre. We believe that key aspects of holistic development are interdependent and interlinked: water and sanitation, health and nutrition, and education and economic development. Therefore, a holistic model of development needs to be the core of sustainable change in rural India.

For this, we take a geographical approach of at least a block (gallla), and then work in all villages within that area simultaneously on all these aspects.

Quick Read

The role of VDCs in providing water and sanitation infrastructure and other essential services is crucial. We have seen that when VDCs take ownership of their own development plans, they can bring about a sustainable change in rural India. This is why we are committed to empowering VDCs to take ownership of their own development plans, connect them to government schemes, and support them to become self-sustaining communities.

One has to ensure that VDCs and other stakeholders are empowered to continue development efforts without any external support. To this, we have decided to implement a comprehensive development plan that includes training village residents on various aspects of development and empowering them to take ownership of their own development plans.

In conclusion, accepting your gaps and bridging them with specialized support through partnerships could create a larger impact. Our journey in rural India has taught us that the holistic transformation of rural India is not possible by working alone. One has to use the power of partnerships and collaboration, especially to scale up operations and reach out to all segments of the community.

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One has to ensure that VDCs are formed by passionate people. Let them create their own plans, connect them to government schemes, and support them to become self-sustaining communities. This will help achieve your goals. 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 build a bit of heart 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 can contribute in a small proportion of the cost, say, a toilet. It could be in the form of small labour contributions.

Forging partnerships with various other stakeholders is a win-win situation. It ensures that the village community is involved in the decision-making process, and everyone feels a sense of ownership and pride.

One VDC could be trained in the conceptualization and implementation of development plans, while other VDCs could be supported to develop their own plans. This approach will lead to a sustainable transformation in rural India.