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January 2021

Impact of Pandemic on Capacity Building Support for Civil Society and Non-Profit Organisations in India

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Acknowledgement

The study on **Impact of Pandemic on Capacity Building Support for Civil Society and Non-Profit Organisations in India** was part of a larger research initiative of INTRAC for Civil Society, Oxford, UK and was supported by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, USA. This was a modest undertaking by Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) to understand the changing nature of capacity building support to civil society and non-profit organisations during the time of pandemic in India.

We are grateful to all the civil society and non-profit leaders who participated in the study and provided enormous insights to answer the main research questions. We also acknowledge the guidance, support and encouragement by Dr Rajesh Tandon, Founder President of PRIA.

11 January 2021
New Delhi

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgement	2
Summary.....	4
Introduction	5
A Renewal of Discourse on Capacity Building of Civil Society and Non-Profit Organisations	7
A Few Words on Methodology	13
Key Study Findings	15
Areas of Capacity Building Support	15
Adjusting Capacity Building Support During the Pandemic	18
Challenges of Adjusting Capacity Building Support	22
New Opportunities for Support Organisations	25
Innovations in Capacity Building Approaches	29
Conclusion	32
References	34
Participating Organisations	36

Summary

This report presents findings from a research project undertaken to explore the capacity building landscape in India, during the pandemic and provides recommendations to improve the support functions post the pandemic.

The support organisations have been providing a range of training and capacity building services to civil society and non-profit organisations with an aim to improve organisational and programme performances. These include areas like planning, monitoring and evaluation for greater impact as well as on financial management and legal compliances for organisational sustainability and accountability. Building a “second rung of leadership in non-profits” and sustaining networks have been other priorities.

The occurrence of the pandemic, necessitated strengthening digital infrastructure and skills as well as improving grant-proposal writing skills of organisations, particularly owing to the digital divide in urban and rural India and the diminishing resources available to civil society and non-profit organisations.

Majority of support institutions had switched to digital platforms to conduct their training and capacity building activities. The switch to digital platforms has enabled wider outreach, while raising concerns about the “top-down” approach of webinars, which restrict peer-to-peer interaction.

Investing in human capital has been one of the major learnings. This renewed emphasis on capacity building is expected to change the way donor organisations perceive capacity building.

A shared emphasis on capacity building from the demand and supply side will signal the beginning of a long journey towards ensuring sustainability of civil society and non-profit organisations in India, operating at varying degrees of scale.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown has affected millions of people, particularly the poor and marginalised. The large exodus of migrant workers from larger cities have posed considerable development challenges. A large number of civil society and non-profit organisations have provided enormous support to the affected communities in diverse ways. However, a large section of these organisations has also faced challenges and obstacles to continue their work in a meaningful manner.

The group of organisations, which provide variety of capacity building support and services to other civil society and non-profit organisations and development professionals are often collectively referred to as support organisations. These support organisations provide trainings, coaching, mentoring, and other learning opportunities through seminars, workshops and conferences, facilitate organisation development, programme evaluation, impact assessment, and other support services to enhance knowledge, perspectives and skills of development organisations across themes and sectors.

The capacity building modes and methods have undergone dramatic change in the aftermath of the pandemic, as many support organisations had to rely largely on online and digital platforms for conducting their training sessions. While many support organisations have innovated on new methods to continue their support services, others still find it challenging. Given the spread and nature of the pandemic, it is unlikely that the support organisations would be able to continue with pre-pandemic methods of implementing capacity building activities, especially with the Covid-19 protocols in place which mandates the need to maintain physical distance and prohibits large gathering for considerable time.

In this background, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) undertook a participatory research in India on **“Impact of Pandemic on Capacity Building Support for Civil Society and Non-Profit Organisations”**. The purpose of the research was to explore and understand how the pandemic has affected the capacity building methods (content, learning methodology, and effectiveness) for development organisations.

The specific questions that this participatory research wanted to explore were:

1. What challenges the support organisations continue to face with respect to their capacity building services in the post-pandemic time?
2. Are there new opportunities for innovation and expansion of capacity building services in the post-pandemic time and beyond? What are those innovative approaches?
3. What would enable the support organisations to continue and even further strengthen their capacity building services?

A Renewal of Discourse on Capacity Building of Civil Society and Non-Profit Organisations

The contribution of civil society and non-profit organisations for promoting inclusive development and social justice cannot be overstated. The significance of role that civil society and non-profit organisations play in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is well documented (Mensah and Casadevall, 2019). The process of democratisation, especially in the Global South, has opened up political space for civil society and non-profit actors, as many of them take on the mantle of playing an extended role in the transformation of the society, from stagnation to sustainable development. This phenomenon has also opened up opportunities for many civil society and non-profit organisations to realise their impact on the development processes, thereby necessitating the need to maintain long-term sustainability of the sector. However, the visibility and recognition of civil society and non-profit organisations have also created a number of challenges. One of the major challenges, the civil society and non-profit organisations face, is in developing capacities to manage and organise the ever-increasing demand on their programmes and performances (IFCB, 1999a).

Capacity building has been understood and defined in different ways, since a clear, homogeneous, and universal definition of the term does not exist. Different organisations have defined capacity building from their vantage point, but in order to understand the meaning of capacity building and what it entails, it is necessary to understand what is meant by 'capacity' in civil society and non-profits. Tandon (2002) defined 'capacity' as "... it(capacity) covers the totality of an organised effort of an organisation to fulfil its mission". The definition assumes significance, since the most commonly used definitions of capacity building have been operationalised from the cultural

context of the northern NGOs (NNGOs) and from the perspective of management of for-profit organisations. Instances of funding agencies or philanthropic organisations from the Global North dictating the priorities of capacity building or allocation of resources too have been reported by southern CSOs (Van der Veken, et. al, 2017). In order to rationalise the discrepancies, there is a need to define capacity building from the vantage point of southern civil society and non-profit organisations as well, since a shared understanding of the term 'capacity' suggests that it is a 'multi-dimensional' and 'complex' attribute (Tandon and Bandyopadhyay, 2003). In the past, capacity development efforts were not considered relevant, since the existence of civil society organisations (CSOs) was viewed as transitory and as agents of service delivery with no sights on permanence or vision of sustainability. In recent times, with their emergence in providing support functions to the machinery of the state, the need for working towards long term sustenance of the sector has generated an interest into re-imagining the historical antecedents of capacity building. The occurrence of the pandemic and the subsequent mode of transition into alternate ways of functioning, necessitated by physical distancing norms, has only served to re-enforce the resolve. The impact of civil society and non-profit was more intensely demonstrated through interventions on ground, in many countries across the world, during the period of Covid-19 pandemic, even surpassing the capacity of the state to reach out to millions of people affected by the nation-wide lockdown (Tandon and Aravind, forthcoming).

However, while working towards defining or operationalising 'capacity building', the civil society practitioners should tread along a politically correct path and avoid adopting a homogeneous approach to understanding the term "capacity" or "capacity building". Such actions will have deleterious effects on understanding the term and runs the risk of excluding the cultural and social context in which the different organisations operate. Local civil society and non-profit actors have a strong understanding of the context in which they work and the particular drivers of conflict and violence that create and sustain fragility. Investment in local skills as part of civil society capacity building is always worthwhile (Alayli, 2017). IFCB (1999b) has defined capacity building as "development of both individuals and the organisation". The definition points to the need for capacity developers to focus, not only on the individuals, but also on the organisation. This is because of the transient nature of the individual, who may take the skill with them, once they leave or severe contractual obligations with the organisation. Hence, by viewing capacity building as a long-term and gradual process, there is a need to address the issue of institutionalising capacity in an organisation.

Further, Langran (2002) has defined capacity building as the "*ability of one group (NGOs) to strengthen the development abilities of another group (local*

communities) through education, skill training and organizational support". The definition reflects the role of resource or support organisations, whose multiple functions are targeted at assisting and supporting the initiatives of grassroots organisations through training, research, documentation, advocacy, and networking (IFCB, 1999a). However, for a long time, support functions were given a low priority with international fraternity refusing to accept the concept of support organisations (ibid). In recent times, the growing recognition of civil society and non-profit organisations, as development actors, by the state and private sectors has positioned civil society and non-profits as more than just the "moral voice of society in research and innovation" (Ahrwiler et. al, 2019).

The concept of capacity development gained prominence in 1990s when an international conference on environment and development observed that institutions had inadequate competency to resolve demands and evolve to meet changing demands. By incorporating capacity development effectively into its programmes and efforts, UNCED (1992) sought to establish capacity building as a priority within major global conventions. Even though the terms '*capacity development and capacity building*' are used interchangeably, there is a difference between the two. In the early 90s, with the evolution of the human development approach, many organisations broadened their emphasis on capacity building to the level of the 'individual', with the aim of enlarging the range of people's choices (UNDP, 2009a) and improving their well-being, leading to term 'capacity development' being introduced in international development paradigm.

Combining the need to broaden the definition and scope of components of capacity building and to re-define the traditional construct of 'capacity building' from a southern perspective and in congruence with the changing socio-political environment, Tandon and Bandyopadhyay (2003) has published empirical evidence, which highlights three types of capacity that organisations situated in this development context may want to acquire:

Intellectual Capacity: The analytical ability of an organisation to clarify its perspective, its vision of a desirable society, its moral and ethical base, its analysis of the given social reality - all these constitute components of such capacity.

Institutional Capacity: It involves the internal and external relationships and linkages. The primary arena for examining the meaning of this capacity is the web of relationships in organisation's immediate social context. The capacity of a civil society and non-profit organisation to manage its internal systems and procedures is crucial to achieve its mission and purposes.

Resource Capacity: The material resource base is an increasingly important element of capacity as far as civil society and non-profit organisations are concerned. This includes the physical infrastructure and assets and resources.

Organisations are poised to understand their own capacity in the context of the larger social ecosystem. Institutions within the social sphere have already expanded their focus, going from focusing strictly on skills and knowledge to understanding capacity in terms of organisational function (Raynor, 2014). Capacity building is more than the development of individual skills. A truly comprehensive approach to building capacity enables the embedding of individual gains and learning into organisational structures and processes (rather than resting solely with the individual). Institutional arrangements which enable this, in terms of strategic planning, monitoring processes, and encouraging knowledge building at broader organisational levels, are such key capacities. The assessment of capacity building initiatives undertaken by different CSOs is based on the following five axes: organisational development, sustainability and resourcing, information sharing, cooperation and advocacy, stakeholder relations and legal and regulatory environment (UNDP, 2009b).

A recent report titled "*Capacities that Make a Difference*" authored by Bandyopadhyay and Shikha (2020) highlights the importance of capacity building in context of the pandemic. The civil society groups working at the grassroots find it difficult to access authentic information on a range of areas. These include accessing information and insights on the nature of pandemic, its mode of transmission, its effect on human health, and precautionary measures to protect oneself from being infected. Fifty eight percent organisations surveyed expressed their doubts about the veracity of information that they receive on social media. In addition, they also found it difficult to track everchanging guidelines issued by the government time to time about the lockdown measures. There is confusion about how to approach the issues of returnee migrants and their safety measures such as testing, quarantine facilities, and regular health check-ups. In the absence of a comprehensive understanding on the public programmes and schemes meant for the community, the CSOs are not able to provide appropriate guidance and facilitation to the community for accessing those rights and entitlements. A thorough understanding and skills to use digital technology perhaps would have helped the CSOs to overcome the challenges of accessing information as well as disseminating those information to deserving section of the community. However, 12 percent CSOs expressed that they need to upgrade their capacity to use digital technology.

Similarly, the report titled *“The impact of Covid-19 on India’s non-profit organizations”* (CSIP, 2020) has also highlighted the need to build capacity with regard to emerging challenges of the day. The Covid-19 crisis and ensuing lockdown has brought forth the importance of modern-day digital literacy and capacity for organisations and individuals. Funders and ecosystem stakeholders can play a major role in ensuring that non-profit organisations join the digital revolution, by investing in building capacity, by providing funding for adequate digital infrastructure, and by working with non-profit organisations to consider how service delivery programmes can be tweaked, improvised or modified for the digital age while not excluding already marginalised groups.

The current discourse on capacity building revolves around corrective and incremental inputs based on past and present experiences. PRIA has highlighted the need for organisations to be more futuristic in its approach based on the uniqueness of the programme and in alignment with the mission and values of the institution. Through a number of consultations with civil society groups in the mid-90s, the opportunity was thrown up for the organisations to develop, establish and articulate values and principles and identify priority areas for capacity building. Some of the priorities include leadership development; policy research, analysis and advocacy; strategic planning and management; project design and implementation; organisational development and renewal; resource mobilisation; and information storage, access and dissemination. However, the dynamic nature of civil society and political and economic environment necessitates further refinement of the priorities.

The inclusion of capacity building, as central to the functions of civil society and non-profit organisations, should be based on the principles that call for the process to be systematic, self-reflecting, evolutionary, inclusive¹ and futuristic. Capacity building is one of the least understood yet most important aspects of development work. Building human and social capital is integral to strategic community investment because it leverages and multiplies the impact by strengthening local partner organisations, promotes self-reliance, and increases the likelihood of project success. Effective capacity building benefits both the company and local stakeholders by generating inclusive processes that strengthen trust and build commitment and good relationships.

However, civil society and non-profit organisations face considerable challenges to build their capacities. The argument for a sustained and dynamic nature of capacity building also implies a high level of investment on

¹ Inclusive implies a southern orientation; a bottom up approach rather than top-down imposition

part of the funding partner or donor agencies. The reluctance on the part of the donor agencies to provide funds for capacity building translates into a situation of unaffordability for small and medium size organisations, since they may find it too expensive given their lack of resources (Bandyopadhyay and Dwivedi, 2002). The argument by the authors provide for a stronger case for strengthening capacity of the donor agencies to recognise capacity building as intrinsic to the social development and not as a peripheral activity. In addition to the cost, a host of other barriers relating to medium of instruction, accessibility, time, coercion² and diversion of needs restrict organisations from realising their full potential from even well-meaning capacity building initiatives.

The current times of the pandemic have proved beyond doubt the vitality of grassroots organisations as support institutions to the community. As is the case with any sector, the development sector is changing rapidly, so are the contexts, relationships, issues, approaches and learning needs. The capacity building interventions, however, do not change in response to the emerging needs. There is a felt need to re-design the interventions after a process of introspection, debate, analysis and feedback. The first step towards changing the status-quo will have to emerge from the part of the providers of capacity building services or support organisations. They need to constantly upgrade their own capacity and knowledge base, along with dynamism surrounding their understanding of ground realities. The wisdom can then be passed on to the grassroots and philanthropy.

² Compulsion to receive funding under the next grant cycle, where capacity building is mandated

A Few Words on Methodology

The research team at Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) adopted a qualitative approach. A list of non-profit civil society leaders were prepared prior to the beginning of the study. Participants for the study were sampled based on the following criteria: interviewees must be heading or working for civil society and non-profit organisations providing capacity building services and must have more than 10 years of experience in conducting or leading capacity building initiatives. Based on the selection criteria, 16 participants were interviewed for the study after obtaining their consent with regard to participation in the study. The interviews were fixed in consultation with the potential interviewee after accounting for their convenience and depending on their availability. No particular setting was specified to interviewee to participate in the study, since many of the interviewed professionals were working from home, since the national lockdown in India was in effect at the time of the interview. The participants joined in for the interview from different parts of India.

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted for the purpose of the study. All the interviews were individual (except the interview with team of Sattva, where two respondents participated) and were conducted online through cloud-based video conferencing platforms, after agreeing on a date and time. The interviews were recorded, after obtaining the consent of the interviewee and detailed notes were made of the points that came up during the course of the interview. All the interviews were conducted by the same interviewer to ensure consistency in the process. Questions were developed following a review of relevant literature and by identifying the key elements of capacity building from the perspective of the capacity building service provider.

Questions were asked in English and Hindi and were open-ended in order to allow for the interviews to be led by the interviewees, as opposed to the interviewer. It allowed for additional themes to emerge, which could prove useful to cover a certain theme relevant to the scope of the interview. Interviews were conducted after requesting the interviewee to spare sufficient time, estimated at 45-60 minutes at the time of correspondence, prior to scheduling interviews. Sixteen interviews were conducted, at which data

saturation was recorded by the research team. Most interviews were around 50 minutes in duration and were recorded by obtaining prior consent from the participants at the beginning of the study.

The recordings of the interviews were used for transcription, which was done verbatim in Microsoft Word. The interviews were transcribed by the team members at PRIA and housed in an online storage system. The resulting interview transcripts were reviewed anonymously and used along with the detailed interview notes prepared at the time of the interviews. They were reviewed continuously during the stage of data collection and subsequently, during the stage of analysis, as well. The interview transcripts were organised and analysed to identify common themes regarding the perceptions of capacity building institutions and their representatives. The researchers followed inductive thematic analysis approach to develop initial codes, with no prior assumptions or theory, according to grounded theory techniques. The codes were then categorised and later, sub-categorised and organised into a code-book to be applied to the entire data set. The code-book was subject to iterations, based on new codes emerging from the data. The codes were then manually applied to the transcripts to identify key themes in data and to allow for axial coding. Axial coding was done to identify the recurring themes and to better understand the relationship between themes. The authors have also accommodated any additional responses, from the interview, to the themes that emerged as part of the coding process. To strengthen the validity of findings, the un-coded interview notes and memos were used to triangulate the emerging findings and expert help was deployed to help contextualise the findings within the study settings.

Key Study Findings

“Strengthening them to do what they are doing already, and to enable them to do that better”

Areas of Capacity Building Support

Almost all the support organisations that we had interviewed were providing capacity development support to civil society, non-profit organisations and social enterprises as part of their operations. Providing support for strategizing their **long-term plans** and endowing professionals with skills and techniques for **planning, monitoring and evaluation** enabled organisations to generate scalable outcomes and plan for a sustainable future. Providing training on quantitative techniques required for **data management** and methodology and tools for **programme evaluation** were among some of the major capacity building initiatives carried out by the support organisations.

As part of helping organisations to develop their strategies, we also encouraged them to build their capacity to continuously monitor the implementation of these strategies and their impact on the ground. – Sattva

Such training programmes were not only designed specifically for organisations operating at a smaller scale. The trainings were also designed in a manner so as to enable professionals or representatives from the middle and large-scale civil society and non-profit organisations to achieve operational efficiency, clearly indicating that capacity development cuts across structures of organisations, irrespective of scale and age.

We have been providing coaching and mentoring support; but then we realised that we also need to reach out to the smaller organisations; so, we started providing short duration trainings... four-day training We reached out to so many organisations across the region. – Civil Society Academy

A number of network and support organisations continued to provide capacity building support and training to address the issues related to **financial management, regulatory compliances, and financial sustainability** of the civil society and non-profit organisations. The need for institutions, registered as non-profit entities, to comply with provisions with respect to Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) and Income Tax laws was seen as critical in maintaining the financial prudence and accountability of institutions. Civil society and non-profit organisations, which fail, intentionally or unintentionally, to comply with laws related to receiving foreign funding, would run the risk of their licences being revoked or prevented from receiving funding from international donors.

How do you empower the organisations? We brought out various kinds of publications so that organisations have access to information regarding various compliance requirements. We connected them with networks and resource persons in the sector. – Credibility Alliance

Another area of capacity building involved linking organisations to create a network. Majority of the organisations felt that **building and sustaining a network** is pivotal during times of national crises or emergency. The recent Covid-19 outbreak and the subsequent lockdown restricted movement of goods and people. As a result, conventional modes of service delivery and relief distribution had to be re-imagined to adhere to physical distancing norms and to deal with scarcity of resources. The situation could be salvaged where organisations were connected to one another through regional or national networks.

Some support organisations were working towards addressing the gap of capacity building on the supply side. According to them, funding agencies and donors too needed to be sensitised towards identifying priority areas of work as well as with the manner in which they provide financial support. Some organisations that focussed on capacity building of the donor agencies had worked towards enabling philanthropists and funders to identify priority areas of work like institutional strengthening of non-profit organisations. In addition to working with philanthropists and donor agencies, it was equally important to link the demand and supply side, that is to facilitate access of resources to organisations, which are small and medium-sized.

Working with the philanthropic organisations was customised. We raised funds by advising the philanthropists on how their giving should match capacity building. – Samhita

How do you create an interface between various institutions?
We brought various actors within the civil society as well as CSR and philanthropic donor partners to speak to each other. – Dasra

The support organisations conducted training programmes for entry-level, mid-career and senior professionals from the development sector to equip them with skills to manage the organisation, secure funding and to work towards generating greater impact and achieving sustainability of the outcomes of their efforts. Building leadership of the professionals, or “building leadership bottoms-up”, as they called it, was the desired outcome. To ensure smooth transition and sustainability of efforts, it was vital that the organisations build a competent “second rung of leadership”, instead of concentrating all the powers of decision-making at the “top”. Capacity building efforts were directed to help institutions make the transition towards decentralisation of decision-making process.

We realised that a lot of organisations have emerging second line leadership, but there was no time to develop these leadership, there is no core money available for institution building. – Dasra

Some support organisations that were interviewed had long realised the transformational potential of digital technology, even as the current pandemic served to highlight it to emerge as the top priority of capacity building organisations. The support organisations were already running leadership training programmes and courses that were delivered online. Similarly, to enable staff from civil society and non-profit organisations situated in the hinterlands of India to attend such training sessions, efforts to include them digitally were already progressing.

Training programs have been running in cohorts for almost for a decade, where we brought social sector leaders together. The first few years, it was accelerator programme, and for the last six years, it has been a leadership programme. – Dasra

To build capacity of organisations, especially for the ones operating at the grassroots, the support organisations had instituted small grants in order to make the trainings more affordable and inclusive. In addition to providing grants for attending training programmes, some of them had also built capacity of organisations to write grant proposals and in exceptional circumstances, arranged for small grants to ensure optimum operational efficiency so that top priority activities could be carried on unhindered.

Adjusting Capacity Building Support During the Pandemic

The nation-wide lockdown, announced in the wake of the pandemic, called for a complete restriction on human mobility and human interaction. The professionals and personnel in many sectors had to move their activities online in the absence of public transport system or free movement across borders. The civil society and non-profit organisations were expected to perform their functions while adjusting to the 'new normal'.

Before COVID, everyone was doing work with whatever resources they had. However, after the pandemic, as it happens with every natural or human made disaster, lots of CSOs were expected to respond, because they were on the ground. – CSIP

The weeks, following the imposition of lockdown, forced many professionals to move to the digital space. Almost all professionals working with the support organisations were forced to 'work from home'. It was an unexpected challenge and a completely new experience for most development professionals ,who were more comfortable with field work and face-to-face interactions, adapting to digital technology.

However, the on-going situation of pandemic has seen many civil society and non-profit organisations adapting to technology and strengthening their own capacity to deal with adversities. Majority of support organisations moved their training and capacity building programmes online using cloud-based peer-to-peer software platforms. Even as the respondents admitted to the face-to-face component of training sessions being hindered as a result of virtual trainings, the silver lining was the wide outreach and the number of people that could be accommodated into the training programmes at no extra cost and expenditure on logistics.

We talked to the partners to understand the situation and what do they want to do more? Regular trainings took a backseat... We had to give up field visits that were part of our methodology... it is all online. As we started offering trainings online, the capacities of partners had to be built to use digital technology. – Bridgespan

During the pandemic, Civil Society Academy, based in New Delhi, work on building capacity of CSOs conducted their training sessions online and for that purpose, they re-designed some of their flagship courses like Leadership for Civil Society to suit the demand of virtual platforms. PRIA International

Academy was better prepared as they had moved many of their in-person training programmes online, a decade ago. It continued to offer many of the flagship courses online with additional learning tools like online workshops, webinar, learning circles, etc.

All interactions are now online. We are expanding internship cohort this year and expecting more students to be joining the internship course... With strong mobilisation potential, volunteering experience, the world view of students have been changed. – Oxfam India

We have now redesigned some of our key courses to adapt to the online courses. For example, our courses on leadership for civil society, fundraising for civil society, and how to facilitate online workshops and trainings, are now being offered online. – Civil Society Academy

A series of webinars have been organised by many support organisations as these have the advantage of reaching out to a large number of participants. With interactive features like 'chat box' and 'break-out' sessions on the platforms, webinars seem to be the 'new normal'. Over the past few months, since the time lockdown restrictions were in place, webinars were organised on a wide range of thematic areas for professionals wishing to enhance their knowledge and perspectives were invited to join the sessions.

Praxis, India had organised a series of webinars to discuss the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on the people from the margins like migrant workers, sex workers, sexual minorities, daily wage laborers, and others. It provided an opportunity for the attendees to listen to the communities' experience of coping with the disaster and to share the findings of rapid surveys being conducted with the communities. Similarly, PRIA International Academy organised a series of webinars on the issues related to informal migrant workers, access to basic urban services, role of local governance institutions, increased incidences of domestic violence against women, etc.

Since the middle of March, (after) announcement of the lockdown, we started organising a series of pandemic-related webinars "the voices from the margins". – Praxis

Most face-to-face training sessions utilised props made out on chart papers or other materials as learning activities. The use of such visual aids and reading materials were extremely useful in training sessions on certain thematic areas, especially if the learners had not been initiated into the topic at an earlier instance. For online trainings, the facilitators had to find replacements to such methods of learning. One of the commonly used means of conducting trainings was the use of Power Point presentations, which

enabled the trainer to arrange his/her thoughts in a coherent manner for easy comprehension by the trainees. Innovating on 'energisers' or formulating sessions that invigorate and refresh the participant were strategies that facilitators resorted to, in order to break the 'monotony'. Exercises for self-reflection were also administered to the participants by way of feedback and impact.

Nowadays, many organisations have started thinking of energisers and games which can be adapted in the online training. So, we kept having energisers because the participants wanted energisers from time to time. We also engage the learners in group reflection exercises. – Civil Society Academy

Notwithstanding the difficulties to access digital technology, some organisations reported that the webinars provided an opportunity for the community leaders to share their experiences, voice their concerns and also to learn from the experts. The community leaders, who otherwise would be hesitant to speak during face-to-face consultations, surprisingly registered more participation. Thus, online interactions have brought to the fore, a technique to improve community participation, provided the technology was made available to the community.

The support organisations moving their training programmes online had also faced their fair share of critics. As discussed earlier, the facilitator or the person conducting trainings online was hardly able to follow the body language of the trainees. In their opinion, it was important that the facilitator observed the learners during sessions and also receive feedback. Another thing that ailed the virtual training sessions was the longer duration of attendance, where the participants were exposed to longer 'screen-time'. Reducing the duration of lessons, along with re-designing the course curriculum and content added more value to the sessions, so that the participants could derive more out of the programmes in limited time. Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) conducts the "Youth and Democracy" fellowship, an initiative to build the skills and competencies of Indian youth to foster democracy in everyday life. Even as the fellowship commenced before the implementation of lockdown, the facilitators had to reduce the duration of programme to accommodate factors such as reliability of internet connections as well as the attention span of the attendees. The improvisation in curriculum was based on feedback from the previous sessions regarding repletion in content as well as by scrapping any video modules.

Our online programmes are not more than one and half hours, maximum two hours if there are break-out sessions. We combine coaching along with trainings. For every one

and half hour training session, we follow it up with group coaching. —Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)

Some online courses involved participants being given the option to connect personally with the facilitator through e-mails or other mode of communication. Distribution of feedback forms, post the session, and designing self-reflection exercises for the participants to be duly returned to the facilitator upon completion had done much to maximise the output of such training sessions.

One of the most important strands of Covid-19 operations conducted by civil society was the distribution of immediate relief like food materials, dry rations, soaps, sanitisers etc. Since the decision to impose lockdown was sudden, the civil society and non-profit organisations working at the grassroots were not left with sufficient time to organise relief material or to arrange for supplies to be transported to affected areas. Faced with the dire situation of impending poverty on ground and social distancing norms, a network of CSOs got together to form 'groups' on instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp to connect to providers of relief and to direct operations based on priority. The example of relief distribution through such platforms was also leveraged by the support organisations. Instant messaging platforms were used by other communities during the time of pandemic, as well. Such efforts were supplemented by the collective efforts of various civil society networks. Voluntary Action Network of India (VANI) and Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) coordinated with different CSO networks across the country and facilitated the sharing of information and relief coordination through messaging platforms like WhatsApp, revealing the tremendous potential of mobile-based applications to better connect during instances of lockdown, when physical movement is largely restricted.

We have used WhatsApp before, but never thought about the number of things this could help achieve. Almost all our work during pandemic and lockdown could be tracked or coordinated without inconvenience. — Voluntary Action Network India

A few support organisations worked on shifting the focus of training programmes so that the modules or sessions could be completed online and the inconvenience of distant learning could be reduced. Another factor that influenced support organisations to do the switch was to focus on issues of immediate relevance to the community. Organisation like Population Foundation of India (PFI), which work with frontline health workers like Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) on issues of maternal and reproductive health, found themselves equipping them with information on Covid-19, so as to reduce the spread in communities.

Challenges of Adjusting Capacity Building Support

In the aftermath of the pandemic, many sectors of the economy and the society had reported to facing tremendous challenges in service delivery and execution of plans and targets to be achieved. While the restrictions were expected to continue until lockdown was eased out in phases, many civil society and non-profit organisations did not see a return to their old ways of working in the near future. A sudden change of course correction had thrown many institutions off the track, while others were struggling to keep pace with the changing tide.

Among the most affected were the small and medium sized civil society and non-profit organisations, who were unable to reach out to their community and implement programmes. Organisations working at the grassroots level had been particularly affected, due to the visibility factor. Their inability to reach out to a wider audience could be attributed to factors like poor connectivity of transportation and networks connecting cities and people, lack of internet facilities or high-speed internet connection and their exclusion and threat to sustenance due to non-conformance or non-alignment with the changing funding priorities of donor organisations, which at that moment revolved around Covid-19. Majority of the organisations reported frequent challenges with institutions operating under severe financial, operational, and management stress.

There are challenges related to the reach of an organisation...how do you actually reach to a large number of beneficiaries or potential partners organisations which are working at the grassroot level? Is this a process related challenge? Does the process itself create exclusion of small and medium size organisations? – CSIP

A number of support organisations reported of being affected due to constraints in conducting field work or field visits. Many others had to postpone field-based work, initially planned for project management or research purposes. Operating as a site for field work or collecting data for research purposes were critical functional aspects of a lot of organisations working in the hinterland. Due to the decision to halt fieldwork to comply with governmental regulations, a number of CSOs had to postpone their field-based research and project management support indefinitely which also meant financial loss for a number of organisations.

Two of our research projects had to be postponed. Field work became difficult. It's not that we were not able to send the researchers to the field, but our non-profit partners didn't have the bandwidth to be responding to researchers.
– Bridgespan

In the previous segment, where the issue of visibility was discussed, the major hindrance to ensuring that civil society and non-profits of all 'shapes and size' exist in this atmosphere of uncertainty was clearly the question of how equipped organisations were with their digital fitness. In other words, the capacity of organisations to successfully upgrade to latest hardware, software and conferencing platforms to keep the momentum running was identified, by most respondents, as an area of priority in capacity building. Population Foundation of India revamped their infrastructure, including their digital technology, so as to facilitate work with the community, capacity building of front-line health workers and to continue policy advocacy.

Deep digital divide has served to sever the connectivity of grassroots organisations from the mainstream, thus deepening inequality and exclusion. The fault lines were starkly visible in the months following the national lockdown, even though the capacity of many organisations to transition to digital solutions before lockdown left much to be desired.

Webinars and capacity building sessions have taken the route of virtual sessions in recent times, but institutions have not been able to match the pace of increased dependence on technology. Accessibility to internet connection remains the top challenge, along with digital capacity that runs short of utility for most civil society and non-profit organisations.

Another drawback of the webinars and online sessions was the "top-down" approach to knowledge dissemination. The sessions that were conducted through various platforms, had afforded the organiser, the option of 'muting' the participants, thereby reducing them to "mere recipients of knowledge". This takes the form of a patronising approach to disseminating information, thereby distancing the 'learner from the learned'. Many webinars sent out bulk invites, with some of them accommodating up to 1000 people in one session, thus perpetuating the top-down approach of knowledge building through webinars.

Most webinars have become means for just transfer of knowledge and the responses you see in your chat box... try to give very good content... again what happened is that this format becomes the panel centric or expert centric. All participants are muted... except the panellists and in this

process, it is becoming more supply driven. – Credibility Alliance

Similarly, restricting sessions, or rather compulsion on the part of organisations to resort to online modes of teaching, have manifested in irregularities in training outcomes, especially the component involving the facilitator and the learner. In the words of the study participants, many of them who were facilitators themselves, the situation had led to a ‘widening gap’ between the two. Face-to-face training sessions enabled the facilitator to gauge response of the learner or the participant, which also involved understanding and appreciating their body language and “focusing on social and behavioural aspect of intervention”. As one of the participants in the interview has pointed out, conducting face-to-face sessions enabled the facilitator to look for signs of receptivity or non-receptivity, thus making it easier for the facilitator to switch to alternate sessions or topics to “keep the interest and energy flowing” and “to break the monotony of sessions”. However, in online sessions, many participants keep the cameras off and thus, the facilitator runs the risk of not being able to fully involve the participants.

The process of learning for changing the values and belief system is neuro cognitive it is not the knowledge only that would bring such changes but the emotive and behavioural aspects of the learners that is believing and doing is much more missing in this format. – Dasra

Conducting face-to-face training sessions also serve to promote peer-learning and peer-interaction. Similarly, the facilitator can receive and give feedback if the sessions are participatory and live, under one roof. Due to online trainings, the important and crucial aspect of capacity building went largely missing from the discourse and this was considered a challenge by many of our respondents.

How do you look at the handholding and other mechanisms for support such as peer group learning which are missing in the current context? We understand there are challenges related to Covid-19, but our serious concern is that if you do not focus on these mechanisms for learning, you end-up focussing only on transmitting knowledge. – Oxfam India

There is a distance between the capacity builder and the community. The interaction among the community members is a part of their capacity building processes and is often about how participants learn from each other. – Praxis

The lack of funding was another concern that respondents have been apprehensive of throughout the course of the study. Adding more to the woes

is the apprehension of the donor agencies to earmark funds for capacity building. Post-pandemic, funding agencies are looking to reduce the scale of operations in the budget heads.

Mobilisation of funds for capacity building became challenging when you are moving towards a web-based technology which is low-cost, everybody will ask why do you need money from a doing a webinarHow do you create a support system to sustain the organisation and the quality human resources to deliver these online training sessions? – Samhita

A large number of participants in the study opined that all around the world, different sectors of the economy and governance are unanimous in their response on uncertainties surrounding the sector. The civil society in India was already under immense financial distress following the tax reforms and demonetisation. However, with shrinking GDP and with corporate social responsibility funds being sucked by government-backed disaster mitigation funds, the sector is contracted at a rate never seen before. Job losses in the development sector will be a reality leading to lay-offs and premature retirement. One of the participants eloquently said:

It is grim, funding wise, there will be a 30-50% drop in funding, CSR will be hit, family foundations will take a hit. The situation with CSR, a large proportion has gone to PM CARES fund writing cheques for philanthropy will not justify lay-offs (internal). Second, we are going to be short of money, Indian money is taken by government and international money will decrease. – CSIP

New Opportunities for Support Organisations

The participants in the study have highlighted some of the challenges that they had to face in the months following the lockdown. The respondents have had to surmount tremendous challenges and respond to the pandemic situation. However, they did not miss the woods for the trees. Even as preparations to tide over the immediate future were being discussed and implemented, the civil society leaders were found to possess a vision to make the sector more sustainable and immune to such sudden shocks.

Many organisations were in favour of investing more on human capital by saving costs incurred on expenditure with regard to arranging logistics and

meetings. Maximising utilisation of available resources seems to be the new objective of capacity building service providers and hence, the challenge of not being able to organise face-to-face meetings presented an opportunity.

You are saving money because you're not paying for hotels, airfares, and other logistics ... in a way we are also contributing to the environment So, maybe in future this online will be one of our capacity building methods. – Population Foundation of India

Along the same lines, many participants have also commented on how the online platform can bring civil society and non-profit leaders together, irrespective of geographical boundaries, a prospect which would otherwise be lost owing to 'availability' and 'time' constraints. Similarly, the discussions in the virtual space also enable the Indian diaspora to contribute to causes of development, especially for fund raising.

It is contributing in terms of crossing the boundaries both geographic and sectoral; so, that is an opportunity ... We see a lot of people coming from corporate sector joining some of the webinars organised by CSOs. – Voluntary Action Network of India

The need to move digital has been an opportunity long impending, but received fresh stimulus under the new circumstance. Many civil society and non-profit see this as a potential avenue to build capacity of 'self' and 'others'. Organisations have already begun the process of re-strategizing their IT operations and re-structuring their IT teams. In the months to follow, as more and more work will go online, adequate and swift support from in-house IT department will be a necessity.

Opportunity is to find out how to use the digital media in much better way ... we should strengthen audio-visual mediums with more interactive features. – PRIA International Academy

There is a call to “unlock changes in the digital sector” so as to reap the dividends of use of technology. Many organisations have also advised their partner organisations to integrate capacity building in technology into their request for grants from donor agencies. As uncertainty over the pandemic intensifies, bridging the digital divide should be seen as an opportunity 'whose time has come'.

The pandemic has prompted the donor agencies to re-align their priorities towards addressing the after effects of lockdown on general population. Associated with the pandemic are a plethora of social issues related to

migration and poverty. This also implies a resurgence of new thematic areas for intervention and funding hitherto neglected. Hence, there is a need to build capacity of organisations, so that they may be able to attract grants and thus, increase their resource pool. Even though, the exclusive funding priority of funding agencies would be the Covid-19 pandemic, civil society and non-profit organisations can work on issues surrounding the pandemic and write proposals to this effect. Sattva, based in New Delhi and Mumbai, has worked with a leading non-profit working on gender issues to revisit a previously defined five-year strategy in fighting violence against women and children. In the wake of the pandemic, Sattva enabled the team to enhance their response to the community by developing a one-year strategy.

The crisis has disrupted so many systems that were fossilised in place . . . public health, education, housing, workers' rights, all these systems that were deeply dysfunctional that were not amenable to reform are suddenly amenable. – ActionAid India

Online training is going to be cheaper, donors would be willing to invest, we have to go to donors and ask them to invest money in upgrading our technology which will have good returns for us. – PRIA International Academy

As discussed earlier, since the webinars offer the advantage of anonymity and 'security', the video calling platforms have been leveraged to good extent to bring to the fore voices of people from the community like community leaders particularly women leaders among others. As more and more people increasingly join webinars and online spaces, the 'fear of online spaces' is reduced. This has the advantage of increasing participation.

In normal course, it is difficult and costly to organise face-to-face meetings in bigger cities like New Delhi . . . With moving online there is now greater participation from the grassroots organisations in these webinars. There is interest from the grassroots organisations to be part of the conversation. People at grassroots have desire to consult with people or experts. –Voluntary Action Network of India (VANI)

In face-to-face many people don't speak up . . .but we have seen in webinars, people are sitting in their safe place and they raise important points of discussion. – Oxfam India

Similarly, the webinars also present an opportunity for certain sections of population like women, who can now attend 'public events' from the comfort of their home. Women, who straddle between domestic responsibilities and professional commitments are left with little time at their disposal to be part

of learning events, which have now moved online and afford the attraction of convenience, while enriching knowledge.

With increasing recognition by the government of the roles that civil society can play, the time is right to put in place partnerships among civil society and non-profit organisations, governments, and private sector for more cooperation in different endeavours. While governments can involve the civil society towards utilising their expertise in developmental works, private sector can collaborate with civil society to better utilise their social development and corporate social responsibility funds. Coming together of government and private sector essentially signifies an opportunity to raise a fund corpus which can then be re-distributed to different social and developmental initiatives. The pandemic has also opened up new avenues where private sector cooperation can have a far-reaching impact.

The pandemic presented a unique opportunity for many providers of capacity building to re-imagine and re-strategize their existing modules to meet the challenges arising out of uncertainty that has come to characterise the future of civils society and non-profit organisations. Many support organisations have already begun to re-design their training modules and are incorporating different strategies and best practices to guide learners in times to come. It has also presented an opportunity for the organisations to evaluate their core competencies and structures. To this effect, Dasra, based in Mumbai, has curated a “Covid-19 institutional resilience and impact optimisation toolkit for non-profits and funders”. The objective is to enable non-profit leaders to tide over the existing crisis and to build a resilient structure.

This also places additional responsibility of ensuring that the material used in such digital trainings are of top quality, of comprehensible clarity and of relevance to the learner.

Some organisations have given their views on post-pandemic functioning and operability highlighting the fact that many of the initiatives that had been initiated upon the imposition of lockdown would have to be scaled back, once the economy opens. It is thus, imperative that the civil society and non-profit organisations are adequately prepared for this scenario.

Innovations in Capacity Building Approaches

More than ever, the period of pandemic has brought a lot of innovative practices to the fore within the civil society space. Many organisations have resorted to using innovative means of capacity building services. The work of civil society and non-profit organisations, during the time of pandemic, reflects the commitment towards building capacity of other organisations, which may not have the bandwidth to adapt to new ways of working in a time span of few months. In a way by adapting to situation-appropriate ways of working and connecting, the following approaches also serve to draw up a road map for future intervention.

Since a lot of work has moved online, many civil society and non-profit organisations have developed equally effective techniques of their specialisation in the virtual mode. This has enabled organisations to save time and resources that would have otherwise been re-directed or remained unutilised. Take the instance of Credibility Alliance that specialises in accreditation of civil society and non-profit organisations and provides advisory services for legal and financial compliances. The respondent, representing the organisation, conceded to the work of accreditation and audit being hit as in-person visits are essential for inspection. The team of accreditation specialists, however came up with an alternative solution. They trained community workers to use applications like WhatsApp to conduct live audit that could be viewed simultaneously by the assessors. In the process, the organisation builds capacity of community workers to do live audits and be assessors themselves.

Developing various tools that enable organisations to remotely carry out their work seems to be an innovation. With minor changes in methodology and efficient deployment of technology, organisations are working towards off-setting the setbacks and the time that could not be efficiently utilised over the months after the pandemic. For support organisations, it is important that they work towards scaling up the efforts taken by organisations during this time.

As of now, the current challenge that many support organisations admitted to was the shortage of funds and resources for developmental work. Since many funders have changed the focus of their funding priority towards Covid-19 relief, it is imperative that organisations pivot their area of interest in line with

the funding priorities. Organisations working in sanitation can adopt the themes of urban sanitation in densely populated areas and social distancing norms to find solutions to addressing the public health concern.

Some organisations are using media platforms, especially social media to enlighten the community about best practices that deserves to be applauded for their sheer innovativeness and uniqueness in approach. Publishing such stories can help similar organisations emulate the practice while servicing as inspiration and motivation for civil society and non-profit members at large. Colloquial reporting and writing of such stories was identified as the perfect story to help increase the reliability factor of the stories and case studies. Institutions like Participatory Research in Asia and Population Foundation of India, adopted the approach to disseminate information related to the pandemic, in various Indian languages and to cater to different types of audience.

Carrying on from the earlier practice of organising capacity building workshops, which would be conducted over a few days depending on the scope of the topic, the venue for the post-pandemic sessions shifted to online platforms. With use of features like break-out rooms, facilitators were able to create a personalised experience for the participant to immerse in. Even as the level of interaction was significantly hampered, many participants agreed to have altered the mode of training to suit the digital format. Organising people into groups in break out rooms also had the advantage of promoting peer interaction and co-learning.

Some of the respondents also arranged for the learning material to be sent to participants in advance. It could be in audio, video, or text format. The purpose behind the effort was to ensure that at the time of sessions, all the participants were clear of expectations and the content that is being discussed.

Some civil society leaders have also called for strengthening partnerships with private sector organisations. The exercise serves the dual benefit of mobilising and creating large funds which could be used to solve immediate challenges. Another benefit could be mentoring. The respondents, who called for strengthening partnerships were of the opinion that the development sector or organisations operating in the civil society space could learn from the best practices in corporate management and adapt the same to operations.

Many civil society and non-profit organisations predicted that the only way to stay relevant and connected is to adapt to technology and associated ways of working in virtual platforms. With social distancing norms expected to

continue in full earnest, along with restrictions on movements effectively expected to be extended until further notice, civil society and non-profit organisations are building institutional capacities to prepare themselves for the long haul. Majority of respondents expect the funding scenario to be grim with civil society and non-profit organisations and predicted to face resource crunch.

A healthy balance of online and offline work is expected to continue, with online work expected to occupy much of the space. Many organisations have reported that they will continue with online mode of working even after lockdown restrictions have eased. They see this as the 'future of work', along with the traditional mode of fieldwork or field intervention, wherever necessary. In other words, virtual workspace is here to stay.

Some of the respondents also admit that the civil society and non-profit organisations need to maintain better rapport with government agencies and involve themselves as part of their schemes and programmes. This can help attract resources, which can then be effectively utilised by the civil society and non-profit organisations to maximise utility and scale.

Conclusion

The current crisis of Covid-19 has affected the way in which civil society and non-profit organisations function. The organisations working with the community, has seen many initiatives on the ground being suspended, due to stringent social distancing norms being in force. However, the need to maintain social distancing is not the only impediment towards realising the full potential of the civil society and non-profit organisations. Severe crunch in financial resources has been predicted for the current and coming financial years. Many civil society and non-profit organisations have reported a steep cut in financial allocations for social welfare from corporate donors and funding agencies. The distress in the sector is further exacerbated by the government, sucking up almost all the corporate social responsibility funds through a dedicated relief fund, set up by the Prime Minister of India, which incentivises such donations through 100 percent tax exemptions. The widespread lay-offs in the corporate sector justify the actions of corporate funding agencies, which are now tightening their purse strings. Faced with the challenge of shortage of funds and human resource, civil society and non-profit organisations are waging a battle for their own sustenance.

The efforts of civil society and non-profit organisations were evident during the time of the pandemic. A review of the relief operations have revealed that the civil society and non-profit organisations were at the forefront of many initiatives taking the lead, in some places and communities, over state governments and district administrations. The intervention of civil society and non-profit organisations have helped avert deaths due to hunger and poverty. The capacity of civil society and non-profit organisations to assemble in such short notice points to their huge potential, which can be prepared for such uncertain times, by building their capacity.

The support organisations providing capacity building services have focussed on a wide gamut of areas, where the civil society and non-profit organisations operating at different scales can carry out their activities effectively. This stems from the realisation that many organisations might benefit from training, hand-holding, mentoring, coaching, and facilitation taking into consideration the dynamic nature of the sector. One such area could be the regulation of civil society, where new regulations and changing laws with

regard to receiving foreign donations are revised, updated or amended at regular intervals. Non-compliance with such regulations would result in cancellation of licence and thus, the organisations run the risk of being penalised. The non-compliance to regulations need not be considered an issue of wilful defaulting. It could imply the lack of knowledge or capacity in such thematic areas. Hence, building knowledge and developing strategies in this area is an intrinsic component of capacity building initiatives.

The necessity of updating and building capacity of civil society and non-profit organisations was never strongly felt before than during the time of pandemic. The period has offered a strong impetus for support organisations to consider moving to and perhaps innovating alternate ways of carrying out capacity building efforts. Being the first point of contact during disaster mitigation, the civil society and non-profit organisations' strengths lie in their capacity to mobilise at short notice. Communications and outreach is thus vital for the organisations to sustain their efforts during unforeseen times. The support organisations and facilitators believe that their major priority post the pandemic will be the strengthening of the digital and technological capacity of the organisations. Reducing the sharp digital divide will be useful to build networks that can collaborate and coordinate during times of pandemic like disasters.

The pandemic has also severely impaired the capacity of organisations to raise adequate resources to supplement their initiatives and activities. The support organisations providing capacity building services believe that the lesser avenues for fund raising is not due to the pandemic alone, but also the diversion of funds towards Covid-19 relief. The changing of funding priorities towards addressing immediate challenges reflects a parochial vision of intervention and has the potential to undo changes or gains made in achieving progress in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) over the past decade. Hence, technical expertise is required to reverse the trend. Capacity can also help build the potential of organisations to raise funds for their effective existence through writing good proposals and hence, grant proposal writing becomes the plank through which organisations can take the first leap to self-sufficiency.

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Participating Organisations

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
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| 2. Harish Vashistha | Credibility Alliance |
| 3. Harsh Jaitli | Voluntary Action Network of India |
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| 5. Neera Nundy | Dasra |
| 6. Poonam Muttreja | Population Foundation of India |
| 7. Pradeep Narayanan | Praxis |
| 8. Priya Naik | Samhita |
| 9. Priyanka Varma | Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiative |
| 10. Rahul Shah and Ambika
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| 11. Sandeep Chachra | Action Aid India |
| 12. Shashank Rastogi | Bridgespan |
| 13. Sohini Paul | Civil Society Academy |
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