



PHILANTHROPY
for
SOCIAL JUSTICE
and
PEACE


INTERVIEW WITH SUMITRA MISHRA, iPARTNER INDIA, INDIA

As a fundraiser and a grantmaker, what is the role of iPartner India in pushing a progressive social change agenda?

As a fundraiser that raises funds mostly from individual donors, it becomes very important to do what we are doing especially when there are people committed to becoming change makers. Fortunately some of these people are willing to commit their wealth as a part of the solution for social change. Our role is important because it is not the lack of commitment or wealth, but the lack of knowledge of what the solution is - where is the most useful investment of their money, that hinders their giving for progressive social change. I see iPartner India as bridging that gap.

As a grantmaker, I will give you an example of the lower Assam districts in the conflict-affected areas of Assam, India where I have just visited our grantee partners. During my visit I saw 17 year old gun-trotting boys who will not bat an eye lid before shooting at someone and 13 year old girls dazed under the influence of drugs, so abused and brutally traumatized after being trafficked and sexually exploited, that the only way of coping with their pain is with the help of drugs.



 *I feel proud that iPartner India as a donor keeps its ear to the ground and supports such brave initiatives, irrespective of the political situation, conflict and the associated risks - we care that we are in a position where we can enable transformation and we push forward.*

This area has been in conflict for decades. There are hardly any schools for children who are victims of this conflict and where there is one, it is rarely safe for children to attend it. There is no hope. And yet, for most big donors, with a “development agenda” it is a red zone for investing in social change because of the high risks involved.

Finding peace, resolving conflict and resettling large displaced communities is the priority in this

politically sensitive region. It is this that makes doing what we do so important- to support the small and courageous organisations struggling to work directly with the people affected by trauma and conflict to rebuild the community and a sense of normalcy in life. I feel proud that iPartner India as a donor keeps its ear to the ground and supports such brave initiatives, irrespective of

the political situation, conflict and the associated risks – we care that we are in a position where we can enable transformation and we push forward.

In that sense as a grantmaker I see our role as standing by small organisations that work directly with the communities affected by injustice and inequity.



How do you strike a balance between individual donor agendas and the “agency” that lies within the community initiatives you support?

We are very clear we will not compromise on the respect and dignity of the people from the communities we work with. We believe that the local people know their communities, their problems better than anyone of us and so they know the solutions that will improve their communities. We as donors and intermediaries are enablers and facilitators in this journey of change.

I will give you an example of how we would approach a typical conflict between a donor and a community's agenda. For instance there maybe a community where girls typically do not attend school for various reasons we already know of such as patriarchal mindsets, they are expected to stay home to look after younger siblings, work as farm hands to contribute to the family wages, it is risky for them to go to school that is a couple of kilometers away because of the abuse and violence they may face, the government school does not have toilets for girls, teachers are not regular...these are the multiple challenges which keep girls away from attending school.

A particular donor maybe very committed to education and passionately believes that all children including girls must be in school. It is the perfect fit between the community needs and donor's motivations. The donor maybe ready to establish a new school for girls in the community, employ teachers, train them and provide the best infrastructure for the students. However, this is not the model we will impose on the community. As an enabling organisation, we understand that change doesn't necessarily come

from duplicating resources. It is the government's commitment to provide free and compulsory education for all children till the age of 14. Our role is to support a long term and sustainable solution that is community driven. We strengthen the community and the existing government school infrastructure and resources so that it is open and safe for all girls to attend school. This enables the community to be a part of the girl child's education and monitor the progress made by the school.

Our challenge is to move the donor's passion about education to this long term 'enabling' approach. In this particular case it is about a change in mindsets whereby the community recognizes that girls need to be in school, a structural change in the institutions whereby the government school is accountable and responsible for all children including girls, and about empowering all people in the community particularly mothers to ensure that the school is a safe place for their children.

This is how we seek to balance the priorities of both the donor and the community. It is a long educative experience for both sides.

What is the push back to such an approach? Do you think there are particular challenges because you are an “intermediary” organisation?

As an 'intermediary' organisation our responsibility is doubled. On the one hand we need to invest time to connect with our individual donors at a personal level, it is important to meet them where they are to understand their motivations for giving, what stirs them the most, the world they would like to leave behind as a part of their legacy and of



We are very clear we will not compromise on the respect and dignity of the people from the communities we work with.



As an enabling organisation, we understand that change doesn't necessarily come from duplicating resources... Our role is to support a long term and sustainable solution that is community driven.



course their personal engagement to this process of change. On the other hand, we support our partner organisations in developing their agendas for change that address the most urgent and critical needs of the community and its people. In order to make the case to our donors in a way that excites and engages them sometimes, this means, deconstructing the entire process of social change and putting it back together in simpler, tangible blocks or milestones that are easy for everyone to understand, participate, measure and be proud of. This often aligns with our donors' vision and expectation and they commit to being part of addressing a very complex social problem because it resonates with them at a personal level.

Being available for our partners in developing this plan for change enables the grassroots team to be better prepared for taking the process forward. This process takes a long time, as you can see. And there are costs attached to this. Often the challenge is in articulating to donors, why this process is imperative and valuable for effective charitable giving not only in getting programmes started on the ground, but even long after. Sometimes, donors perceive this as an additional level of bureaucracy in their charitable giving plans. The challenge lies in changing this perception to appreciate it as a 'value-add' to their philanthropic vision.

Can you share an example from your work that made an impact? What do you believe led to this impact?

As an organization we believe in incubating brave ideas for social change and trusting the leaders committed to it to lead the process. We worked with [Azad Foundation](#) in Delhi in 2009 when they had just about started. Our grant helped them mobilise women from an urban slum community of Delhi, challenge the traditional concept of livelihoods programmes for women to create a force of women trained in professional driving going on to work as personal chauffeurs, cab

drivers and commercial drivers. At the heart of the programme, it addressed difficult issues of violence against women, increasing women's access to choice, equity in financial resources and enabling individual women in their march towards an empowered independent being. Many of the trained drivers realized that their driving license was the first piece of paper that counted them as a citizen of India. Women who had never sat in a car in their lives are today driving them around the city of Delhi.

What started as a crazy pilot project has evolved into a separate for-profit company, Sakha Consulting, running a professional service of women cab drivers in Delhi. The programme that was incubated in one slum community of Delhi now mobilizes women of six urban slum communities of Delhi, Noida and Gurgaon. And the model is being replicated in two other cities, Jaipur and Kolkata. The impact is immense on all women who now have access to a competitive and remunerative livelihood. You can imagine the impact this has on their acceptance within their families and neighbourhood. Equally significant is the impact on Azad Foundation as an institution that has been able to test a successful model for social change, scale up and replicate its model in other cities and reach more women. Most importantly the programme challenged the lens on typical women's livelihoods projects by breaking the stereotypes around it. We were able to achieve this impact because we had the risk appetite to invest in what at the time seemed like a crazy idea.

Sumitra Mishra is the Country Director, India of iPartner India. For more information visit <http://www.ipartnerindia.org/about-us-introduction.php> or contact Sumitra Mishra at sumitra.mishra@ipartnerindia.org