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Compendium of COVID-19
Related Success Stories
from the Voluntary
Sector of India

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Sector of India

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PREFACE

Our world and life have not been the same since March 2020. The pandemic has led to an unprecedented crisis creating a social, economic, and emotional set back. It was a time when working in silos was not an option. Coming together and working in collaboration with one another was what helped us emerge from the trying times.

Voluntary Organisations (VOs) that were working extensively on diverse causes for decades, emerged as soldiers in this fight against the deadly virus. They helped mobilise as well as respond to the situation. They have been working individually and in partnership with other VOs, government, and companies to provide relief to the affected and vulnerable communities of the society. They have also been at the forefront for mobilising resources to aid COVID-19 mitigation related activities.

The VOs have a unique selling pot that they have access to the interiors of the country. They operate in even those remotest areas of the country, where no one else has reached. Therefore, they have a pivotal role in connecting the weakest links to COVID-19 relief services. They have done some pathbreaking work in extending support to vulnerable, women, children, elderly, migrants, daily-wagers, homeless, sick, etc. and left no one behind. Their access to such areas, experience in interacting with the community, knowledge about the needs of the community and passion proved extremely significant in reaching out to the vast population of India.

However, in doing so, due to the magnitude of the crisis, and the amount of resources that had to be invested in countering the effects of it, the VOs in India soon ran out of funds. The existing funders ran away, and their ongoing projects came to a standstill. They were not able to sustain their employees. The existing skills were inadequate to fight the pandemic. The survival of their own organisation's was at stake.

Despite all these challenges, the voluntary sector remained at the forefront and generated innovative ideas and techniques to combat the challenges. Come what may, they were able to find unique ways to solve those problems and continue supporting those in need.

VANI, being a network of VOs all over India, felt the need to highlight the success stories of the sector in these trying times and acknowledge their contribution in navigating the effects of COVID-19.

In the end, I would like to thank our research team at VANI, Dr. Pallavi Rekhi (Programme Officer) and Ms. Nivedita Dutta (Programme Manager) for successfully undertaking this study.

Harsh Jaitli

Chief Executive Officer,
VANI

Abbreviations

CSO - Civil Society Organization

COVID-19 - Corona Virus Disease 2019

ICU - Intensive Care Unit

CSR - Corporate Social Responsibility

VO - Voluntary Organisation

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INTRODUCTION

On March 25, 2020, a nation-wide lockdown was announced and enforced, to curb the movement and spread of the deadly pandemic that hit anyone and everyone in the world. The faults and gaps in our systems were exposed, as a result of the urgency and distress created by the pandemic.

Due to the uncertainty around the virus, and the nature of it, it had become a necessity to educate the population of India about the safety norms and COVID- appropriate behaviour, in order to contain the spread of the virus and reduce panic amongst masses. The Voluntary Sector of India, true to its values, stepped forward to play the role of a saviour. Civil society plays a major role in reaching out to the unreached and has a presence in the remotest parts of the country where the government is unable to reach.

Despite inadequate resources even for their own survival and non-cooperation from the state to allow them to venture out during the lockdown, all the CSOs, regardless of the size, stance or geographical location of it, stepped out and proved the value and strength of the civil society in India. Mitigation activities ranging from distribution of dry ration and other necessities, medicines, first aid, medical equipments, etc. to creating awareness amongst masses, providing relief to migrants, and running isolation centers.

CSOs have played a crucial role during the unprecedented pandemic. The CSOs played a wide range of roles during the pandemic:

Relief for Migrant Workers:

Sadly, the chaos created by the uncertainty of the pandemic, converted a few inter-state borders and highways into shambles, with a colossal number of migrant workers from all over India were seen marching towards their villages. The civil society sector in India did everything in their capacity to provide relief services to these migrants, ensuring ample supply of food, water, medicines, sanitary pads, etc. In addition, the CSOs also provided safety equipments like masks and sanitizers, and provided the right information, to minimise the risk of exposure to the virus.

Healthcare Support:

During the second wave of COVID-19, that shook the country in March 2021, left a severe crisis and shortage of medical equipments, hospital beds, ventilators, ICU facilities, medicines, oxygen cylinders, and other medical supplies, as a result of the surge in demand. Mass destruction was seen, complete families were finished, the number of infected people increased to crores, but the health system in India could not bear such an extensive burden and crashed. Yet, the civil society tried to bridge the gap between the demand and supply in the country. They continued with ration distribution, awareness generation and testing and medical facilities. The civil society also served as a guardian for the poor and marginalized in the country, whose scanty resource base was not enough to fight and survive the pandemic on their own.

Child Protection:

Many families were ruined, and many children were left abandoned as they lost both their parents to the pandemic. However, the government did acknowledge the plight of these children and launched some financial aid programmes for such children in India, but the execution of these programmes, including identification of orphaned children, linking them to a suitable programme and execution of it, was taken care of by the CSOs. Capacity building and awareness regarding child care was also looked after by CSOs for the guardians of these children. Psychological care and support were also provided by the civil society to such children, for a better and faster recovery and rehabilitation.

Children who were unable to go to school due to the lockdown, or whose parents could not afford to continue their education due to lack of income and job losses, were also provided with committed education services by CSOs in India. As a result of their inability to continue their classes, many children, especially girl children were forced to return to helping in household chores and coerced child marriages.

Emotional support and counselling were also provided by CSOs to children who suffered from exhaustion and fatigue due to inability to go out, interact with others and limited communication.

Prioritizing, Remodeling and Repurposing:

To address the immediate requirements to fight the pandemic, the CSOs in India, made major shift in their area of work, style of work and purpose of work. Emergency relief services for the marginalized and vulnerable population, became the main agenda of the civil society. Partnerships with the state and central government, with the private sector and fellow CSOs were developed in order to mutually mitigate the crisis.

The sector restructured and repurposed their main activities and shifted to COVID-19 relief. The CSOs in India have always extended tremendous support and services at the time of disasters and this situation was no different. They left no stone unturned in reaching out to the affected and vulnerable communities.

Other activities that the CSOs were committed to during the crisis were, protection and promotion of human rights, monitoring and evaluation of compliance towards donors and the government and creating awareness.

While the future of the pandemic and our lives might be ambiguous, despite the multiple challenges, some common and some unique to different CSOs in their COVID-19 mitigation services, they overcame these hurdles with innovation, creativity and conviction.

CONTEXT

As the lockdown was announced in March 2020, almost immediately, many CSOs in India arranged dry ration, health services, awareness creation, cash relief, and support services to vulnerable and affected communities. However, executing these activities was a mammoth task for the CSOs, especially at the time of a financial crunch and increased compliances. Their own capacities were severely affected by the pandemic.

Majority of the CSOs were actively engaged in relief work, including last-mile delivery of ration and relief material, creating awareness *viz a viz* COVID-19 safety, managing testing and isolation facilities, supporting migrants, arranging monetary support to the needy, amongst others. However, only a minute number of them received additional funding for COVID-19 specific activities.

The pandemic had a devastating effect on the Voluntary Sector, just like the other sectors. The work and sustainability of the CSOs was at stake. Financial stress, unpreparedness for digital transformation and diverted attention from existing projects were a few key challenges faced by the CSOs.

As COVID-19 relief activities and healthcare swept away all core sources of funding to the CSOs, i.e., philanthropy, CSR, etc., the sustainability of the voluntary organisations was under threat. Since the undivided focus of these sources was to invest in COVID-19 related activities, the usual projects of the voluntary organisations were neglected.

Another major shift that happened as a result of the lockdown enforced by the government was the extensive use and dependency on the digital platforms to continue working from home. The organisations that had been procrastinating for long and kept delaying this shift to becoming digital, had no other option once the lockdown was enforced. However, this change caught them by surprise, and it became easier for them to cope with work related activities and monitoring while working remotely.

Apart from this, because of the discontinued funding for non-COVID related activities, many organisations had to suffer programmatic setback, in terms of closing projects, laying off project staff, etc. They were caught by fear of losing whatever progress they might have achieved in their specific areas of work, in the previous years. In addition, communities that were dependent on them for certain things, will suffer the most.

The COVID crisis will definitely have a long-lasting impact on the voluntary sector. Therefore, it has become imperative for non-profits to think out of the box and adapt to the changing environment with innovation and technology, in order to survive and sustain.

Purpose of this Report:

This report sums up the innovations and success stories of VOs in India and provides a manual for other organisations to refer to and take inspiration from. It examines the status of governance in VOs in India. By engaging in ground research and in-depth analysis of the VOs across India, it aims to identify key trends and good practices being adopted by the sector to overcome daily challenges that have become part and parcel of their existence. This report is meant for organisations of the voluntary sector to upscale their practices and organisational strategies. Additionally, it encourages these organisations to adapt to the changing environment and develop a preparedness plan to be ready to face any future crisis.

OBJECTIVES

- To assess the innovative methods adopted by VOs across India to overcome organisational challenges during COVID-19 crisis.
- To document the good practices adopted and practiced by the VOs in India.
- To inspire other VOs to continue efforts and learn from the success stories of others.

METHODOLOGY

This study is only an indicative study that reflects the trends prevailing in the VOs pertaining to overcoming challenges during COVID-19 mitigation. This report has been developed using a mixed methodology. Secondary research has been used to understand the role of VOs in providing relief and mitigating COVID-19. Primary research through telephonic interviews was conducted to gather data from organisational leaders on their experiences of overcoming challenges and emerging as winners even during these tough times.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to the small sample size, the conclusions that have been drawn are only indicative, and do not apply to the entire voluntary sector in India. The data collection mode being telephonic, a constraint was to receive the desired number of responses. The interviews had to be kept precise and short to respect time constraints and busy schedules of the senior leaders. Therefore, the data received, was subject to the understanding of the responder.

CHAPTER I

A Successful Money Story: Resource Mobilisation during COVID-19

The pandemic affected the whole world at an unprecedented scale. Every species, country, community, sector, organisation, and person have been struggling to emerge from the effects of the pandemic, on health, economy, systems, and population. The meaning of a “normal life” has fundamentally changed.

The voluntary sector was acutely aware of their emerging role and responsibility in mitigating the effects of this crisis and acting as a saviour for the vulnerable population. They continued to play their part to meet the needs of the communities who rely on them. The voluntary organisations played a double role in mitigating COVID-19, both in immediately responding to the crisis and to address the long-term impact of the pandemic. Yet, the voluntary sector in India has been facing a critical threat to their existence, *viz a viz* lack of funding, increased compliance, etc., which has eventually led to activity constraints, laying off staff, closing projects, amongst others, at a time when the sector is needed the most.

On one hand, few participants experienced complete flexibility and support from the funding agencies to provide COVID-19 relief activities, apart from the usual area of work, and were also fortunate to receive additional grants for the same. On the other hand, the lockdown resulted in many funding agencies, backing out from investing in certain sectors. For instance, one of the participant organisations shared that it was extremely challenging to make their funders understand the importance and impact of virtual classes for children. This gave rise to an unforeseen scarcity of funds to continue the existing projects. Many organisations had to discontinue their ongoing activities as they did not have resources to sustain project staff.

The voluntary sector known for its grit and determination had to overcome these challenges and evolve as a winner. The interviewees shared various key solutions that they adopted during these times of financial restraints.

Temporary cuts in salaries of employees, with a promise to pay the balance if the organisation can raise enough funds by the end of the year. Rented spaces were vacated and organisations with multiple activity centres, office branches etc., were shifted under one roof to lower expenses. Once these efforts yielded results and also showcased the organisation’s credibility towards its beneficiaries, donors and staff members, the traditional projects were pitched again.

Involving each and every member of the organisation in different models of fundraising was another innovative idea. Fundraising options like crowd funding, which many organisations had never tapped before, and had limited knowledge about, were explored. Different platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and others were utilised for reaching out to maximum audiences and mobilise funds. Virtual trainings were arranged for the employees to be able to maximise efforts and increase impact.

Another way to mobilise funds during this emergency was creation and utilization of a “*corpus fund*”. For a VO, a corpus fund has become a basic necessity for survival. This kind of a fund is generally kept for basic administrative expenditures of the organisation or at the time of an emergency. Therefore, it came in handy for many organisations interviewed, that already had a corpus fund in their organisation. The whole idea of a corpus fund is to have a backup plan in case of exceptional circumstances, wherein the existence of the organisation is under threat. Since, the pandemic, along with the other financial and regulatory burden on the VOs in India, jeopardized the existence of many of them, such a fund was the easiest and fastest solution.

The pandemic has highlighted the urgency to develop a fore thoughtful financing mechanism for the VOs in India to secure an emergency fund which can be utilised to address immediate needs, and to evolve and adapt according to the changed contexts. Some of the innovative ideas for the future that emerged through VANI’s data are:

- Establishing a National Liquidity Fund for the voluntary sector. It has become the need of the hour, now, more than ever. This fund can be used by VOs to cover overheads in the short term, and potentially return it over time once response funding starts flowing in.
- Developing a Risk Analysis Framework that takes guarantee for any increased risks to which the sector is exposed. Risk-sharing must be the basis of such a framework so that the VOs alone do not have to shoulder the burden of the financial crisis. A zero tolerance for any loss risk approach of donors towards VOs, working in the most vulnerable and controlling environments, needs to change and some pre-determined risk threshold must be considered.

The CSOs in India have demonstrated an extremely high threshold for risks during this unprecedented pandemic and have emerged victorious. Through their continuous efforts, motivated staff, increased sense of responsibility, remodelling and transformation, the sector was able to mobilise funds for COVID-19 related relief work and to support their ongoing projects. Strong teamwork and value for everyone’s lives, proved beneficial and paved the path for the sector’s success.

CHAPTER II

Staff Mobilisation is More than Just Motivation

Bearing the brunt of the pandemic, even with a slow growing economy, majority of the service delivery VOs remained fully functional. For other sectors, the work continued, but with increased flexibility to work remotely. Regardless of which sector they belonged to, all employees were at an increased risk of burn out and exhaustion, therefore making it difficult for organisations to retain staff members.

In these changing times and a more demanding “new normal”, it became essential to motivate, mobilise and support employees, to emanate a feeling of positivity and self-worth in them. This helped in reinforcing their commitment towards the organisation and their work.

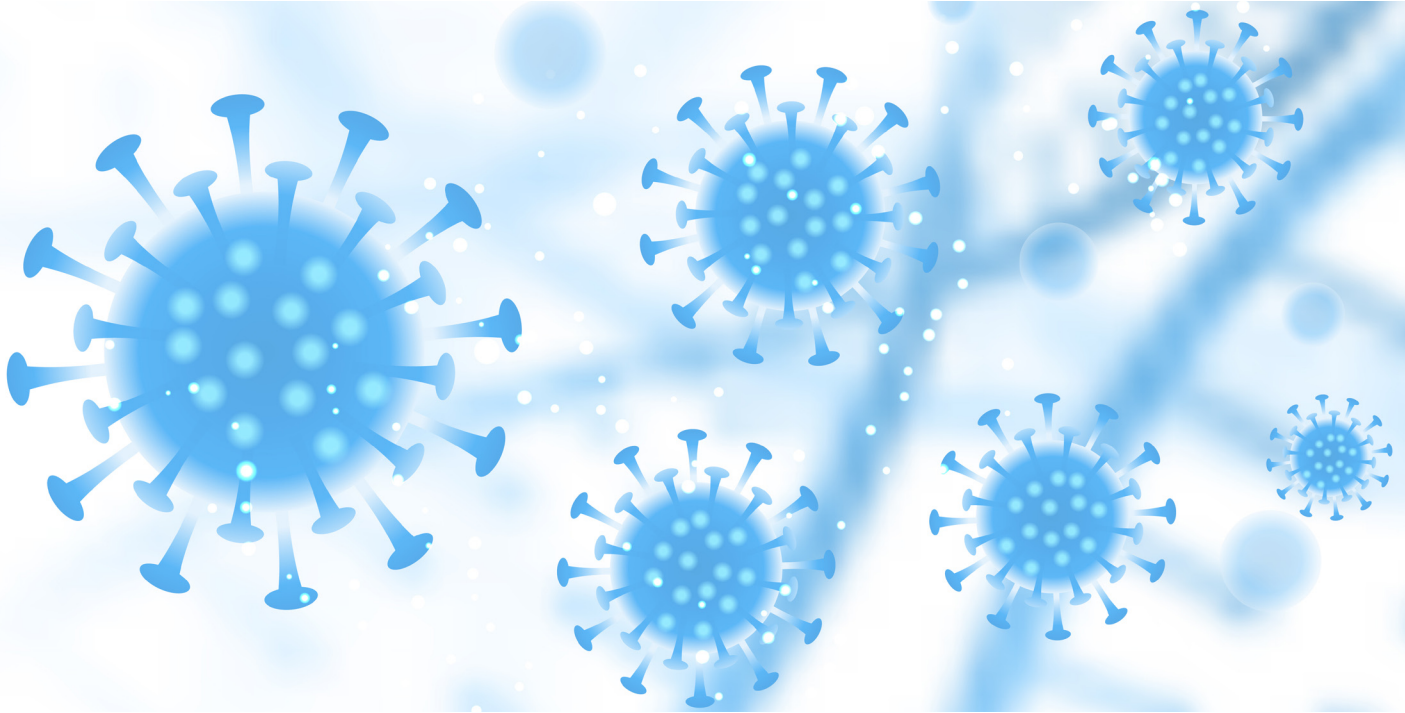
Despite the internal fire of enthusiasm that blazed within the employees of the sector, it wasn't enough to cater to the escalated demand and pressure on the VOs to provide immediate response to the pandemic hit, while protecting their own lives from the deadly virus.

Apart from providing motivation, mobilizing the employees was also a critical step that empowered them. Trust, confidence, support, teamwork, and respect for each other's opinions is what fundamentally mobilisation comprises of. A motivated and mobilised employee will definitely make extra efforts to continuously strive at what they do and achieve greater impact, and that is what was required during the crisis.

However, staff mobilisation emerged as a big challenge during the pandemic induced lockdown. The voluntary sector employees, especially those who were continuously working in the field and were more susceptible to the virus, were the ones that needed to be empowered and supported the most. Recruitment of new employees declined significantly in the voluntary sector. Only very few organisations hired employees during the crisis, and these mainly were essential jobs such as counsellors, nurses, etc.

Nevertheless, the data suggested that the voluntary sector, that runs on the principle of togetherness, successfully empowered its employees and was able to create an impact as a team.

Rapid skill building of the employees took place during the COVID-19 crisis based on immediate emergency needs. Several VOs quickly developed short training programmes to address immediate demand pressures. In some cases, training programmes were



targeted at field workers who needed to interact with beneficiaries and create awareness regarding COVID-19 safety measures, others focused on training the counsellors, who were required to counsel families on various fronts like letting girls continue their education through virtual classes, amongst others, while others were to upskill their knowledge related to pandemic response or to redeploy to higher-demand functions. In other cases, the training programmes were intended to equip displaced workers with the basic skills and knowledge required to temporarily fill roles in essential services.

Apart from skill building of employees, several organisations also practiced incentivising their employees, not necessarily monetary incentives but in the form of appreciation and recognition. Giving away *employee of the month* awards were another way to motivate staff members.

Providing basic safety gears and arranging for sanitised transportation for the field staff was yet another common practice that emerged during the lockdown. This also helped build confidence among the employees on their organisations. Special safety measures for women employees, such as allowing them to work remotely and arranging a pickup and drop facility whenever necessary, proved beneficial in mobilising them as well.

With these small efforts and innovative steps, the voluntary sector succeeded in retaining their staff, keeping them motivated and making them believe that they are a valued member of the organisation.

CHAPTER III

Innovative Approaches for Ensuring Social Security for Staff

Social security is a human right which responds to the universal need for protection against certain life risks and social needs. Effective social security systems guarantee income security and health protection, thereby contributing to the prevention and reduction of poverty and inequality, and the promotion of social inclusion and human dignity. They do so through the provision of benefits, in cash or in kind, intended to ensure access to medical care and health services, as well as income security throughout the life cycle, particularly in the event of illness, unemployment, employment injury, maternity, family responsibilities, invalidity, loss of the family breadwinner, as well as during retirement and old age. Social security systems therefore constitute an important investment in the well-being of workers and the community, and facilitate access to education and vocational training, nutrition and essential goods and services. In relation with other policies, social security contributes to improving productivity and employability, and to economic development. For employers and enterprises, social security helps to maintain a stable workforce that can adapt to changes. Finally, it reinforces social cohesion and therefore contributes to building social peace, inclusive societies, and a fair globalization by ensuring decent living conditions for all.⁽¹⁾

A few government schemes and programmes comprise of the social security system for employees in India. However, these schemes are spread across various legislations and fall under the ambit of separate laws. Therefore, these provisions do not necessarily apply to or benefit the complete employee base in India. They are limited to a small portion of the population. Furthermore, according to the Indian system of social security, apart from a fixed insurance premium, the employees are obligated to pay a lump sum to the employer as well.

The following are a list of the common social security practices, usually followed in the voluntary sector in India:

- Health Insurance and Medical Benefit;
- Employee Provident Fund;
- Maternity Benefit; and
- Gratuity.

Apart from these traditional benefits to the employees, the VOs also shared a few innovative and original ideas that they came up with to support the families of their employees in case of loss of life and provide the families with an immediate social security to address their urgent expenses.

One of the ideas to generate funds for this purpose was obligating all staff members to contribute one day's salary towards this cause and the organisation will also contribute the same amount gathered from the employees. This ensured collection of a generous amount of monetary support for the grieving family of the organisation's employee who has just lost an earning member.

Certain other organisations also decided to provide social security by providing three times the monthly salary of the employee, to their families, in case required. The money was extracted from the existing corpus funds within organisations or contributions by the other staff or through additional support from the funders, in a few cases.

While some organisations that had the resources and the manpower to support the other employees, were able to successfully adopt a strong social security plan in their organisations, while the others struggled. The need of the hour is for the sector to enhance and develop a sound social security system, ensuring that employees laid off due to structural and functional changes in the organisation, or those deceased due to unforeseen circumstances, can rely on the financial support so that their basic living standards and their families, are not impacted. It also ensures providing necessary aid to families of the lost employees, who are on a run to restart their lives.

CHAPTER IV

The Voluntary Sector Helped People Breathe...

Medical oxygen emerged as a primary measure for treating COVID-19 patients. Sadly, the supply of this lifesaving treatment was inadequate to meet the enormous amount of demand during the second wave of the pandemic in India. Structural and functional gaps in the health systems in India were clearly highlighted during this time.

The lack of oxygen cylinders and scanty supply rate have caused delays in providing immediate treatment to a huge number of critically ill patients. This shortage and delays

in medical care led to a massive number of deaths and complications that could have been avoided. Medical professionals in the hospitals also carried the burden of not being able to properly ration the available medical oxygen and provide medical care.

A lot of VOs came forward and contributed immensely in distributing oxygen cylinders, getting them refilled and even providing free deliveries at home. Another initiative was to arrange a drive through facility to provide oxygen to patients inside their own vehicles. Oxygen collection centres were also opened by many VOs. Support from taken from Gurudwaras across the country to help distribute oxygen tanks and provide relief to the maximum number of people in need.

However, even after providing services with strict scrutiny and set criteria, prioritizing patients with oxygen levels below a particular percentage, there was a gap between the demand and supply. This could be anticipated by the sharp rise in the number of calls received in a day by organisations for oxygen supply.

One of the challenges amongst many that the VOs shared was the shortage of staff for procurement and distribution of oxygen cylinders. A fully functional and trained backend team was required to successfully run such a serious programme. Despite the sincere efforts of these VOs, many of them faced difficulties in managing such massive demands with a small team. However, they involved many self-motivated volunteers that could help with distribution of the cylinders limited to their own localities, following the safety guidelines of the government. Multiple donation drives were run using social media platforms and organisational networks to arrange resources to address the increased demand.

To gauge the authenticity of the condition of the patient, initially many organisations relied on test results, but eventually, since testing facilities also became scanty and test results were extremely delayed, they resorted to oxygen levels of the patient. Medical oxygen was made available to only those patients that met the criteria.

The VOs shared that despite having the resources, sometimes procurement of oxygen tanks in time was a challenge. As we know, in critically ill COVID positive patients, even a single minute was of paramount importance. After a few months, when the available resources were enough to supply free medical oxygen, a minimal fee was charged from the patients to help sustain the programme and continue to provide services to maximum people.

We congratulate the voluntary sector for standing together in this critical phase and emerging as a saviour for the population of India. We sincerely thank the sector for their miraculous contribution in saving thousands of lives.

CHAPTER V

Donor Flexibility: Essential for Humanitarian Response

A prerequisite for any VO to operate is the availability of donor funding. Therefore, the activities they perform also revolve around the approvals and rejections of the donor. As a result, for the voluntary sector to function freely, donor flexibility is extremely crucial.

Donor flexibility could be understood under two headings: flexibility in existing funding and flexibility in new funding and disbursement. The former aspect highlights the need for existing donors to be flexible enough to repurpose and reprogramme, if the need arises, like in case of the COVID crisis. The first and foremost priority must be to save lives, provide support and reduce suffering. The latter aspect deals with the need for flexibility in new sponsor negotiations, and while discussing new expenditure. This shall facilitate rapid action by the VOs in case required.

The study data suggested that donors provided ample flexibility to their partner organisations and understood the depth of the situation, thereby facilitating ease in their work. They facilitated simplifying of daily processes and compliances, those with respect to budgeting, disbursement, reporting, monitoring and evaluation and audits, that allowed the sector to constructively work on ground and create impact.

The following were a few aspects where funders provided maximum liberty and freedom to VOs to be able to function and provide services:

- *Flexibility in budget* – Many organisations shared that cost recovery was allowed by the donors in case of cancellation of certain activities due to unprecedented changes in the environment, whose costs had been already incurred or for unforeseen expenditure and staff costs that were not planned earlier, for example, masks, sanitizers, and PPE kits for field staff.

Apart from a few organisations, rest all mentioned that they received complete support from donors even when their operations were completely impacted. This helped organisations cover staff costs to the extent possible so that their basic lifestyle is not impacted. A few organisations also mentioned receiving additional grants for specifically COVID-19 relief activities.

In some cases, extending the current project end-date was also considered. Due to the lockdown-imposed restrictions, these time extensions allowed the VOs some additional time to complete their promised activities.

- *Repurposing*– For rapid response to the pandemic, the funders permitted repurposing of the existing funds, allowed expenditure for completely new outputs depending on the need of the hour, however, the priority remained supporting the most vulnerable communities.

Restructuring of the programme and defined activities was also allowed in terms of mode in which it will be conducted. Due to the pandemic and the following constraints, some activities were shifted to the online medium, keeping in mind the safety of the staff as well as the beneficiaries.

- *Eased reporting and reduced compliance* – Due to restrictions in movement, and everything becoming digital, it took some time for the VOs to adapt to this new style of working. This caused a few hiccups in the smooth functioning of the organisation and completing activities on time. As a result, the reporting and compliance procedures were also affected. However, the donor organisations were considerate and granted bonus time to complete all due diligence related tasks. Due to the inability to travel, procedures such as the audit, field visits etc, were performed online.

While the funders were generous enough to provide such flexibilities that really simplified the work of the VOs, at the same time recognizing the importance of transparency and accountability is also vital. The VOs must commit to transparently report repurposing, expenditure and impact achieved, to the donors. This shall ensure a positive and healthy donor relationship and also help change the negative narrative of the sector.

CHAPTER VI

The Voluntary Sector Paved the Way for Migrant Workers

The daily wagers in India, who had migrated to larger cities in search of jobs, commonly called as the “migrants”, were one of the worst affected due to the pandemic. The COVID-19 induced, countrywide lockdown, not only left lakhs of migrants jobless, but also helpless due to the loss of their daily wages, which their complete families were dependent on for survival⁽²⁾. They became vulnerable to many physical and psychological illnesses and received hardly any medical care from the government. In addition to suffering from the lack of basic physical facilities and the scarcity in the allocated resources, they also faced social issues such as discrimination and attacks from the local people⁽³⁾.

The voluntary sector all over India, worked in collaboration with the state governments as well as in their own individual capacities to mitigate some of the unique issues faced by migrant workers, urban poor, and daily wage labourers⁽⁴⁾. The following were some of the interventions carried out by numerous NGOs in support of the stranded migrants:

- *Awareness creation on COVID-19:* Various awareness campaigns for migrants were planned and executed. They mainly focused safety guidelines, maintaining hygiene, social distancing, and coping with the disgrace around migrants.
 - *Food & Ration Distribution:* All the participant VOs distributed food and medicines to migrant workers, at borders, railway stations, bus stands, etc. to provide them with the strength to continue their journey back home. Simultaneously, the sector also distributed free dry ration kits, containing ration for up to 2-3 weeks at camp sites, to enable migrant workers to sustain their families.
 - *Hygiene & Sanitary Kits:* Sanitary kits containing basic hygiene equipments like soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, mask, sanitizers, sanitary pads for women and girls, etc. Many VOs shared, that this practice helped in changing the attitude and behavior of the migrants towards maintaining basic hygiene and following safety guidelines for COVID-19, to stop the spread.
 - *Counselling and Mental Health Support for Migrants:* Many VOs in India, especially the ones working in the grass roots, launched counselling programmes for migrants. Due to the sudden inability to sustain their families and being left stranded with no shelter or basic income, gave rise to extreme frustration, anxiety, and depression amongst migrants. These programs provided psychological support and counselling to migrants and addressed their depression, anxieties and fears emerging from various threats due to the pandemic.

The voluntary sector was successful in carrying out such interventions at an extensive scale because they understand what the community needs, have access to even the remotest corners of the country, they prioritize the needs of the community over their own interest, and have built a long-standing trust and accountability amongst the society. The above interventions clearly highlight the success story of the voluntary sector. The biggest constraint that any NGO faces is in raising money to carry out their activities. Here, the public and donations from large organisations come handy. During this pandemic, we witnessed large and genuine outreach programmes to raise money for Covid-19 relief that NGOs of all scales and sizes, were able to channel towards relief programmes.⁽⁵⁾

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About Voluntary Action Network India (VANI)

VANI is a national network of Indian Voluntary Development Organisations (VDOs). Currently VANI has 624 members with an outreach to around 10,000 VDOs across India. The membership of VANI ranges from grass roots to the national organizations. The members work on a range of priority development issues of the government including education, health, nutrition, integrated child development, livelihood, skill development, environment, natural resource management, climate change, water and sanitation, emergency response and preparedness, agriculture, poverty and so on, in some of the most remote areas of the country. In the year 2017-18 our network collectively reached out to over 32 million people belonging to vulnerable and marginalized groups including children, disabled people, women, elderly, farmers, dalit, tribals, disaster survivors, unemployed, youth, LGBT, sex workers etc. VANI through its efforts and strategies aims to build a strong civil society sector not only at national but regional and local level as well.

VANI was set up with the mission to promote voluntarism, create space for the sector by fostering value based voluntary action. VANI's interventions are focused to strengthen the external and internal enabling environment. To ensure the external enabling environment, VANI conducts evidence-based advocacy which includes regulatory frameworks and resource generation. In order to achieve this VANI works with the government, private sector, bilateral, multilaterals and other stakeholders. For strengthening the internal enabling environment, VANI works towards building resilience and promoting accountability, transparency and compliance through the interactive educational events and information dissemination. VANI strives to become a resource centre by conducting evidence-based research; publishing studies, articles and reports not only at state level but national and global level as well.



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(An Apex Body of Voluntary Organisations)

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