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## Why philanthropic collaborations should thrive and lead the battle against COVID-19

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Collaboration has been a critical multiplier of human endeavour throughout history. Here's how philanthropic collaborations could help lead the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Collaboration has been a critical multiplier of human endeavour throughout history. The same holds true in philanthropy, through which funders and changemakers aggregate capital, networks, and talent to pursue solving the looming climate, social, economic, and other challenges facing India. And as the nation combats the COVID-19 crisis and its far-reaching effects, the advantages of collective action have never been more apparent.

A recent report by The Bridgespan Group investigates why social sector actors collaborate, what conditions give rise to impactful collaboratives in India, and how actors work together to overcome the barriers to amplifying social change. As part of its report, Bridgespan surveyed multiple stakeholders across 13 philanthropic collaboratives in India. The team later examined several newly formed collaboratives that have emerged in response to COVID-19.

More than 70 percent of the survey respondents strongly agreed that working collectively has enabled them to make more progress against India's social problems than working alone. How?

First, by leveraging the diverse skills and experiences of different partners and stakeholders, collaboration's total effect can be greater than the sum of its parts. For example, the COVID Action Collaborative (CAC), anchored by the Catalyst Group, consists of more than 150 organisations focussed on healthcare and mitigating negative effects on livelihoods.

The impact of the pandemic is not limited to the health impacts of the disease; communities are dealing with interconnected shocks to their economic, public health, and civic systems. The CAC activates the specialised expertise of its members—from the public and private sectors, civil society, and academia—to bring communities a holistic package of services, including testing, livelihood recovery, and water, sanitation, and hygiene. The collaborative's reach extends to two million people across 15 states.

Second, collaboration expands the circle of influence and the impact of individual actors, including civil society organisations (CSOs). Consider the National Coalition of CSOs, a collaborative of more than 30 NGOs—including Pradan, Srijan, Jan Swasthya Sahyog, and Kaivalya Education Foundation—that was formed to enable a rapid rural community response to COVID-19 (RCRC).

By sharing knowledge with and supporting one another, the collaborative's stakeholders have been able to anticipate communities' future needs and replicate successful models—such as “Veg on Wheels,” which connects farmers to local consumers—in other geographies.

Third, collaboration mitigates risk by spreading it across multiple players. In some cases, philanthropic collaboratives are able to mobilise significantly more funding for a field than the money invested in them and have a greater share of voice than individual organisations to influence policy and investments. As the National Coalition of CSOs notes in its charter, its collaborative approach allows members to make stronger arguments for changes in government policies, programmes, and funding at the national and state levels.

During a webinar hosted by the collaborative on May 5, Nagendra Nath Sinha, Secretary of India's Department of Rural Development, discussed COVID-19-related concerns about the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act with coalition members and poor rural women, panchayat representatives, and migrant workers from seven states.

Collaboration, however, is not a one-size-fits-all solution. The conditions must be ripe for a collaborative to work. Participants should be aligned on at least one of three goals outlined in Bridgespan's study: scaling solutions, strengthening entire fields (such as nutrition or primary education), and building a case for promising innovations. Collaborating to achieve those goals makes sense because they are often too substantial or complex for any one entity to achieve alone.

India is uniquely poised to build on the promise of multi-stakeholder collaboratives during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in partnering with the government when the benefits are mutually reinforcing. At the central, state, and district levels, the government is a key partner in or target influencer for several collaboratives, bringing to bear strong political will and the resources and networks to help scale solutions.

For instance, when the A.T.E. Chandra Foundation (ATECF) sought to distribute 70,000 food kits to families in Mumbai's slum containment zones during the nationwide lockdown, it partnered with the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai and the Mumbai Police to secure the necessary permissions.

Additional donors joined ATECF to provide funding, and other partners in this collaborative effort included Praja, which provided ground-level support and mobilised the community, and Donatekart, which managed logistics and distribution of food supplies.

Although most collaboratives in India are comparatively young and it is still too soon to measure their full impact, the early signals are encouraging. More than 90 percent of Bridgespan's survey respondents agreed that the benefits of collaboration exceeded their investments in the collaborative, a sentiment strongly echoed by stakeholders of the recently established collaboratives that are responding to COVID-19.

The pandemic has prompted large numbers of social sector actors at the grassroots and state/national levels to come together and embrace “the power of many”—a power that can be harnessed to solve numerous other complex social problems faced by India.

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