People-Powered Partnerships Vol.4

Interconnectedness in the Development Sector
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We’re excited to launch the fourth volume of our People-Powered Partnerships series, a publication of the AIF Fellowship program that focuses on the impact of cross-cultural partnerships on the Sustainable Development Goals. This year’s publication focuses on “Interconnectedness in the Development Sector.” Informed by the lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, this volume explores the interconnectedness and interdependence among all the various spaces in the Indian development sector. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted this relationship, and how tackling various issues through an interdisciplinary approach is critical to bringing about an equitable recovery. This publication sheds an important light on how the development sector was underprepared for the pandemic and what measures we should now take to tackle the challenges that lie ahead. It centers around an important moment in our sector to rethink, reevaluate, and refocus our commitment with dedication and resolve.

Over the last 20 years, AIF has been at the helm of creating a “living bridge” between India and the U.S. Since inception in 2001, AIF has harnessed the power of cross-cultural exchange to cultivate the value of service and drive social impact through the Fellowship program. At the same time, the complex global challenges exacerbated by climate change demand concerted and swift action, which is why strengthening civil society is more important now than ever. People-to-people ties are the bedrock of innovation. The AIF Fellowship has created an “innovation lab” for Fellows and host communities to tackle local challenges through collaborative, creative, and inclusive solutions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these innovations took on a new level of urgency.

This volume illustrates this commitment by describing stories from the ground, and how our Fellows have created innovative solutions to help different communities and organizations across India during a critical time in our history. They have conducted truly unique and unprecedented work, and we are proud to present this at a time when development work has not been more challenging or more necessary. AIF’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic over the last 18 months has further exemplified this spirit of service. It also affirmed how sustainable relief work requires an interdisciplinary approach that is informed by the interconnections between development issues.

This volume features contributions by four passionate members of the 2020-21 cohort: Mehar Jauhar, Tonmoy Talukdar, Shashi Kumar, and Anushri Saxena. They have had to navigate the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and they have not only done so successfully but even have used virtual tools to create impact in new ways. As a batch of all-Indian Fellows, they are unique compared to cohorts in the past, yet their commitment to their work and to AIF’s mission has continued to define the spirit of the AIF Fellowship program during this unusual year. We hope that you will enjoy reading this volume.

In Service and Gratitude,

Mathew Joseph
Country Director
New Delhi

Nishant Pandey
Chief Executive Officer
New York

| 1 |
This year has been a challenge, to say the least. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the world to its core in more ways than one. At the time this was written, over 4 million people have died from the virus worldwide, with over 600,000 of those deaths in the United States and approximately 418,000 in India. This doesn’t even touch upon those who were infected and have recovered or those who are currently dealing with the disease. Every single person on our planet has been affected in one way or another, either physically, mentally, or financially. Those brave people, or I could say warriors, who have had to respond to the pandemic by treating those who have been infected, or by working on the preventative side, have had their own internal struggles. The tremendous responsibility can have lifelong consequences.

In general, the International Development sector has also been thrown into a whirlwind. Many organizations who provide vital social services to underserved communities all over the world, have had to either slow down or discontinue their programs. This is a secondary affect of the pandemic that often goes unnoticed. What happens to that man in rural India who can no longer get his diabetes medication, or the new mother in Delhi who had her baby’s vital check-ups cancelled? Organizations like the Rural India Supporting Trust (RIST) and the America India Foundation have had to quickly pivot and go into emergency response mode. Thankfully, so many other international aid organizations have done the same and have truly made a life-or-death difference.

During “normal” times, the International Development community is constantly evolving. There are always new ways to implement complex programs. Innovation in program design is proof that there is a consistent drive to do better. How can we improve our services to the community? I know that RIST is always asking our partner organizations this question. AIF has stepped up to the plate in this vein and has been a reliable partner with RIST for years. The AIF Clinton Fellowship program has not disappointed us! One way that the program answered the call to service during this tough time is to have its first all-Indian Fellows group. Understanding that travel from the US to India would not be possible, AIF decided to find a solution. The Fellows’ contribution brought together organizations who provide a variety of services across sectors and assisted them in figuring out what they can do to pivot and become an interconnected force in focusing on how they could contribute to fighting the effects of the pandemic. This People-Powered Partnerships volume addresses how the pandemic affected the development sector and outlines stories of how the 2021 AIF Clinton Fellowship cohort navigated this ever-changing space and continued their commitment to serve others. Although this latest group of Fellows are all Indian nationals, this does not mean that they have not encountered hurdles to overcome. India has diverse cultural norms and Fellows are not always familiar with the region they are placed in. They have had to understand how to take their own personal experiences and connect with local level issues to ensure that their interventions were appropriate and effective.

This is the fourth year in which the Rural India Supporting Trust (RIST) is sponsoring the AIF Clinton Fellowship program. I was a part of the original negotiations on this project and I have been proud and fortunate to be involved with it over all these years. AIF has proven itself once again and I thank the AIF Clinton Fellowship staff and Fellows for their hard work and dedication to improving the quality of life for all the people of India! I hope you enjoy the stories as much as I did!

Thank you,

Paul Glick
Executive Director of the Rural India Supporting Trust (RIST)
Welcome readers!

We, the contributors to this publication, express our sincerest gratitude to you for taking the plunge and choosing to read our People-Powered-Partnerships publication.

The 2020-21 American India Foundation’s cohort of Fellows is unique in a lot of ways. To name some of them: we are the first all-Indian batch, the first batch to undergo a hybrid form of both online and offline Fellowship, and the first batch to serve during an entire pandemic struck year - which also brought in a lot of anxious thoughts and uncertainty for all of us, as Fellows. All of these unique points created a sense of commonality and a sense of belonging amidst the cohort.

Another aspect of “commonality” that a majority of the Fellows of our cohort could relate to is a sense of “interconnectedness”, “interdependence”, and “interlinkage” between our diverse set of projects, irrespective of them ranging across different sectors and different regions of the country. Thus, whenever we came together to talk about our ongoing projects, we eventually ended up talking about how a particular sector in which one specific Fellow is working in, is interconnected, interlinked and inter-dependent on some other sector in which another Fellow is working. For example, if a discussion starts on a topic of “public health”, it would eventually cover all other topics and sectors, ranging across climate, agriculture, livelihoods, and so on.

For many of the Fellows, our experiences on the ground and such discussions with the rest of the cohort would put us in a state of confusion with regard to the question of “which sector should we prioritize first?” - similar to the chicken and egg analogy. However, all contributors eventually understood that in order for our projects to be successful and to achieve sustainable change in the truest of sense, all sectors need to join hands, collaborate and have their engines running simultaneously. Our experiences of working during a pandemic has further highlighted the importance of the 3 I’s - Interconnectedness-Interlinkage-Interdependence.

Through this publication, we want to share with you our cohort’s “commonality” - the most significant learning of the cohort - i.e., to look at development work from the perspective of the 3 I’s mentioned above. We want to convey this to you through our personal on-ground experiences. We especially want to showcase this keeping in mind the context of the pandemic. Consequently, we also want to highlight how we, as a society, could have been better prepared to handle the pandemic if we had approached development work by keeping in mind the 3 I’s, while also showcasing the steps that we can take in the future to avoid such disastrous consequences of a pandemic-like event.

As the name “People-Powered Partnerships” suggests, we all can achieve such an interconnected-interlinked-interdependence approach to development work only if people from various groups, sections of society and professions come together as partners and forge multiple partnerships that aim at achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and improving the lives of so many.

We hope you will enjoy reading our stories and simultaneously draw some learnings from this piece in ways that you find valuable. We look forward to hearing from you!

Anushri Saxena, Shashi Kumar, Tonmoy Talukdar and Mehari Jauhar
Interconnectedness Between Livelihoods, Health, Technology and Climate Change

-Anushri Saxena
How are the Tribal Communities of Odisha Affected by the Pandemic?

Interconnectedness Between Livelihoods, Health, Technology and Climate Change

Pandemics are not new to the world, and the state of Odisha is no stranger to it. In pre-colonial times, Odisha was struck by smallpox (peaking in 1908-09), cholera (1934-35), influenza (1957) and anthrax outbreaks (2015 in Koraput district).1 With low access to health, lack of awareness of risks, and poor communication, transportation and diagnostic services, the fatality rate remained high. A similar scenario persisted in the tribal areas during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, during the first wave in 2020, the positivity rate remained low, thanks to the traditional way of tribal life that already conformed to COVID-19 appropriate measures like ‘physical distancing.’ The tribal communities build their houses at a distance from one another, either in linear or scattered patterns, they do not visit others’ houses but rather meet neighbours outside, have large boundaries for the houses to maintain distance from others, visit the market once in a week, walk in rows and not groups and wash hands with heath ash keeping microbial infection away. Particularly during the lockdown, residents did not let outsiders enter their village.2 All these measures helped combat the spread of COVID-19.

Furthermore, in rural and tribal areas of Odisha, a lockdown was enforced to check the spread of COVID-19, affecting the livelihoods and health of these humble communities differently. The main occupations in these regions are agriculture, collection of forest produce and manual labour. In 2020, the harvesting time of watermelons coincided with the lockdown. Jogiram, a chaashi (Odia for ‘farmer’) gathered watermelons from his farm and as he loaded them on a vehicle, the lockdown came into force. Since the mandi or marketplace was shut down, he had no option but to leave his fruits on the street since there was no cold storage available to preserve his perishable watermelons.

In another instance during the second wave in 2021, when a farmer tested positive for COVID-19, the agricultural workers harvesting his crop left the field in the middle of the process, out of fear of infection. Such instances highlight the problems faced by farmers during the pandemic.

Many migrant workers had to be quarantined on their return, and those people who were suffering during COVID-19 could not do any income generating work. In the latter case, even the family members avoided going to the market or to work to avoid backlash from the community. All this made their survival more difficult.

COVID-19 is here to stay for a while and with these on-ground insights, the government and the non-profit sector can take prudent measures to reduce the hardship faced by vulnerable populations.

Serological surveys in villages can help assess exposure and immunity, and special measures can be taken for more vulnerable communities. Two months’ worth of dry rations can be given to people who are tested COVID-positive, to make up for the loss of livelihood. For all future lockdowns and emergency situations, a few cold storages can be set up in every block. The government can procure and store the produce from farmers in storage so that their hard work does not go in vain, and the farmers are able to cover the costs of cultivation.

RuKart Technologies, founded by three IIT Bombay alumni, offers a green alternative for this – “Subjee cooler” or vegetables cold storage – which is easy to operate, requires watering once a day, has no recurring costs and can store up to 120 kilograms of fruits and vegetables.3 Co-founder Vikash Jha shared the story of Kamala Ekka, a tribal farmer from Odisha who turned from a migrant worker to farmer, and with the help of the Subjee cooler, could store her crops and thereby earn greater profit and savings.4 A cooler can protect farmers from price fluctuation of farm produce, and instead of selling produce at throwaway prices, farmers can sell them at a stable price and earn more.5 Through philanthropic funding and inclusion within the Odisha Livelihoods Mission, cold storage can become a reality for hundreds of farmers in Kalahandi, Odisha.

This is one small but poignant example that such interconnectedness between livelihoods and green technology can help bring a positive impact on the health of individuals, with greater revenue allowing them to have larger purchasing power, and consequently access to better healthcare. Such sustainable solutions can furthermore help combat climate change in the long run as well. All there is left to be done is to build partnerships between local communities, NGOs, funding agencies, technological experts and the government, beginning today.

Pandemic Resilient Sustainable Agriculture

-Shashi Kumar
These lines may not seem poetic or rhyming, but speak to the interdependence between nature, food and life. Mother earth and nature are the supreme givers in providing food, water, oxygen, home, scenic beauty, and every other living necessity. The adversity brought by the COVID-19 outbreak has hit planet earth badly. With the urgent need to understand sustainable agriculture in these tough times, we will explore the dynamics for practices such as organic farming, chemical farming, pandemic implications and the way forward for sustainable development.

Initially, agricultural farming practices met the need for food and water and were a self-sufficient way of life, despite there being no use of modern technology. The nutrients and values of the soil were balanced by natural processes, living organisms and organic supplements.

The era of rapid agricultural production was brought by the Green Revolution in the 1970s, to address the shortage of food grains. This was a handy agricultural shift with the use of catalytic agents of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and more water to achieve higher yields. The implications were a short term solution without any safeguard for the future. Damaged soil, expensive and needless farming inputs, water-intensive and ecologically harmful farming practices were adopted, adding to the disturbance of natural processes in nature for agriculture at the same time maximising the cost of production and machinery inputs.

Chemical farming advancements worsened the ecology, crop yield, increased intensity of chemical use, and severely impacted public health through low nutritional security. Short-term remedies came through loan waivers, fertilizer subsidies, Minimum Support Price and contractual farming instead of focusing on the issues of farming distress and public health.

The chemical-free practices involved in the agricultural activities popularly known as "organic farming" have been gaining traction in India for quite some time. The NITI Aayog prefers calling this "natural farming". Initially the Indian states majorly depended on the Union government’s schemes to promote organic farming. Later, some states also started channelizing funds from other schemes such as Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana and the Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture to promote organic farming.
Uttarakhand was the first state to have an organic farming policy in 2000. In 2003, a dedicated organic commodity board, a nodal state agency to promote organic farming, was established. The board identifies clusters and areas, and provides them awareness on how to practice organic agriculture. About 128,000 hectares are under organic cultivation as of November 2019, which totals 18 percent of its net sown area. They make the effort to have Uttarakhand reach a 100 percent organic state by 2021.

The government further plans to increase the annual allocation to Rs 200 crore under the scheme with the implementation of sustainable organic farming. The scheme benefited 83,075 farmers and led to the promotion of 169 Farmers Producer Organisations (FPOs) covering 74,889 hectares of organic farming. The government also increased the annual allocation of Rs 670 crore from 2015 to 2021 with average annual allocation of Rs 134 crore for organic farming utilization. According to the government, the scheme benefited 83,075 farmers and led to the promotion of 169 Farmers Producer Organisations (FPOs) covering 74,889 hectares of organic farming. The government further plans to increase the annual allocation to Rs 200 crore under the scheme with the implementation of sustainable organic farming. The scheme benefited 83,075 farmers and led to the promotion of 169 Farmers Producer Organisations (FPOs) covering 74,889 hectares of organic farming. The government further plans to increase the annual allocation to Rs 200 crore under the scheme with the implementation of sustainable organic farming. The scheme benefited 83,075 farmers and led to the promotion of 169 Farmers Producer Organisations (FPOs) covering 74,889 hectares of organic farming. The government further plans to increase the annual allocation to Rs 200 crore under the scheme with the implementation of sustainable organic farming. The scheme benefited 83,075 farmers and led to the promotion of 169 Farmers Producer Organisations (FPOs) covering 74,889 hectares of organic farming. The government further plans to increase the annual allocation to Rs 200 crore under the scheme with the implementation of sustainable organic farming. The scheme benefited 83,075 farmers and led to the promotion of 169 Farmers Producer Organisations (FPOs) covering 74,889 hectares of organic farming. The government further plans to increase the annual allocation to Rs 200 crore under the scheme with the implementation of sustainable organic farming.

Organic farming is the process of farming that involves treatment of seed, reliance on green manure, compost, biological methods for pest control, crop rotation, and livestock. Other methodologies like mixed cropping, mulching, drip-irrigated, and allied livestock management are included in the traditional agriculture practices. The use of organic practices in crop yield serve to boost the agro-ecosystem, water management, health situation, natural cycles, biodiversity, and biological activities, along with adding values in the soil at lower costs.

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The Pandemic has affected the market roles in two dimensions. Firstly, sale of raw materials declined with the closure of stores and secondly distribution through channels got reduced. and community mobilization events are organised to tell them about the significance of organic farming. Farmers Field School, a training-cum-piloting centre plays the central role in awareness generation by engaging women farmers through class teaching, field demonstrations of organic models and practices, and offers a platform to address the challenges they face. A series of opportunities like meetings, training and exposures are organised locally in the communities to help change attitudes towards organic farming models. Distribution of resource materials -like brochures, pamphlets, and other information, education and communication (IEC materials) - are also used to educate the family members along with the women farmers. For performing these community-based awareness programs, a few high-performing women farmers like Renu Devi are trained as part of cadres, each promoting organic farming models such as Community Mobilizers and Community Resource Persons. These localised cadres have technical knowledge for promoting climate resilient sustainable farming with demonstrations of sustainable field practices. All these are addressed to promote organic practices at a household level and to bring community based traditional seed banks, nursery, organic pesticides and adoption of such allied techniques in farming. Until March 2020, prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, under normal circumstances, agricultural activities were prioritized to respond to climatic change needs and evolve sustainable practices to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The following serves as a case study. Renu Devi (name changed), a resident of Ichak block, was initially not pleased with the organic farming practices during her training phases. She believed in traditional agriculture where toxic chemicals and chemical fertilizers were used to improve quantity and crop production. But during the field demonstrations of the various low-cost and replicable organic farming methods, she noticed its benefits in terms of the quality and variety of the crop herself. Now she visits other women’s houses to encourage them, showcases her models, supplies self-made organic pesticides and lends support related to the development of various organic models. The pandemic has affected the market roles in two dimensions. Firstly, sale of raw materials declined with the closure of stores and secondly distribution through channels got reduced. and community mobilization events are organised to tell them about the significance of organic farming. 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A series of opportunities like meetings, training and exposures are organised locally in the communities to help change attitudes towards organic farming models. Distribution of resource materials -like brochures, pamphlets, and other information, education and communication (IEC materials) - are also used to educate the family members along with the women farmers.
In addition to this, the organically produced fruits and vegetables could not reach the market in the absence of transportation. Rare functional storage units lead to either sale of produce at much lower costs in the local market or wastage of surplus food items. The biggest problem after market access has been the training support given to women farmers. The group training sessions, field demonstrations and handholding support provided to women farmers has either been limited to very few (with Covid safety measures) or entirely stopped. The support channel of seeds supply, input support, government linkages and community sharing during mobilization has been restricted with the new normalcy induced by the pandemic.

There have been several attempts to mitigate the devastation. With the sense of urgency, the training sessions have been made to reach the households through digital media such as short videos, photos and messages in local language, and awareness through IEC materials. However, the non-availability of mobile phones, lack of digital literacy and network connectivity still limits the alternative solution. The Community Mobilizers and Community Resource Persons are encouraging women farmers and families through regular safe home visits to ensure that the awareness and adoption of organic farming models reach last-mile farmers in these tough times.

Some of the opportunities brought by the pandemic include the popularisation of organic farming, higher interest in farmers and a shift in greener and rural economies. Indian agriculture contributes greatly to the Indian economy with a growth rate of 3.4% despite the COVID-19 pandemic and a contraction of 23.9% in national GDP. Many migrants who have left farming activities and found work in semi-organised daily wage work, were forced to return to their villages in Jharkhand. These people were left with no alternative but agriculture labour to get food and generate income. Post their quarantine periods, they showed interest in organic farming focusing on both ecological and revenue gains. Also, the focus of the people has been shifted to increase the immunity and the organic fruits and vegetables that can serve this purpose.

Agrarian development must switch priorities and subsidies from chemical to organic farming and train farmers across the country to make the transition to organic farming practices, thereby enhancing their livelihoods and protecting their lives. Governments should also focus towards promoting green rural enterprises and establish market linkages for organic farming products. The government schools, Anganwadi centres, primary health centres (PHCs), and other offices with an open space should adopt backyard kitchen gardens and generate public awareness of the benefits. The focus should be made towards attaining climate change resilient farming, meeting nutritional values, integrating practices with the SDGs and taking forward the lessons brought by the pandemic situation.
Health - Education - Livelihoods: A Much-Needed Love Affair

-Tonmoy Talukdar
One morning early in May, I was expecting to have a regular day of conducting interviews and patient follow-ups in different villages at my host location. Little did I know that a supposed typical field day will turn out to be quite a transformative one - a day that will forever change my outlook towards development work and the development sector as a whole.

At my host organization, we were running a Tuberculosis (TB) support program. For decades, tuberculosis, an infectious disease, has been plaguing the world. Identifying TB cases and patients discontinuing their medications without completing their entire course are the main hindrances in solving the TB epidemic. Considering this, my host organization launched a Tuberculosis support program to address these problems.

Through the efforts of our program, Jhari Lal Hansda (name changed), a daily wage labourer at a local pineapple farm, was identified and diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis. To conduct an interview and a follow-up session with Jhari, I accompanied the local team to his home. As soon as I entered his house, I could see that the TB medications had taken a toll on him. TB medications are powerful - a primary reason that causes patients to discontinue their medications in between. Henceforth, during the treatment, one needs to increase their intake of nutritious food for the medications to work and not take a toll on one's body.

As I began explaining to him the need to consume nutritious food, I soon hit a dead-end when he mentioned that he could not afford “nutrition”. Since his diagnosis, he has not been able to go for work. His wife had taken a job as a tea plucker and earned a meagre wage of 130 rupees per day. As I came to know that he had a family of five, I could only wonder about the per head expenditure on nutrition that the family could afford. The kids were visibly malnourished too. The ongoing pandemic only made things hard for the family.

As medical resources were diverted to responding to the COVID-19 crisis, and public transportation was limited and not safe anymore, accessing medical infrastructure for other ailments like TB became an enormous challenge for people like Jhari. With employers shutting down operations and temporarily laying off people, Jhari’s wife found herself out of work, making it all the more difficult for the family to afford nutrition. This example highlights the interconnected relationship between health and livelihoods. With schools staying shut and rural populations lacking digital skills, I fear that children like that of Jhari’s will never get the opportunity to learn crucial concepts like “family planning”, “health is wealth”, etc. Alongside, they may miss out on acquiring and learning some critical skills and knowledge to help improve their livelihood opportunities. As a result, the vicious cycle of health issues and poverty may carry on. This experience made me realize how the health, livelihood and education sectors are interconnected.

Some of my recommendations to solve the above mentioned issues are highlighted below:

1. Making Healthcare Mobile.

If people are unable to come to health facilities, why not take healthcare to them? Healthcare delivery through “telemedicine” is a great way to achieve this. The ongoing pandemic has highlighted the importance of telemedicine, more so than ever. It has the potential to revolutionize the Indian health sector. The process makes consultation and following up with patients, locating health information and communicating with practitioners easier. This reduces the amount of potential travel for both physicians and patients. In addition, cell phones (either a handset or a smartphone) and network connectivity have reached many parts of our country, further highlighting this field’s immense potential.

Another crucial element for the success of telemedicine is to have pharmacies, and regular availability of medicines in rural areas. If the nearest pharmacy is 12-15 kilometres away from a village, it acts as an obstacle in completing the telemedicine process. All these observations have come from my personal experience of implementing a recently launched “telemedicine” program at my host organization had as an AIF Fellow.

While telemedicine is one option, concepts like mobile medical vans and organizing regular medical camps in villages with specialists can significantly improve access to quality healthcare as well. Of course, treatment of significant ailments may remain a challenge. But, most importantly, disease identification will happen at an early stage.
proving to be vital in saving many lives. The local health administration is presently using such a mobile format to improve the vaccination rates in the villages in my locality. The “Tika Express” goes from one village to another, vaccinating as many people as possible. This has proven to be a huge success. I can only wonder about the positive impacts of implementing the same model to deliver other healthcare services. However, all-season road connectivity in rural areas is of crucial importance for this concept to be a success.


The pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns have highlighted the food security issues in our country. The pandemic restricted people’s movements and made procurement of vegetables a challenge. Similarly, due to reduction in supplies, the prices of vegetables soared, and many families could not afford them. Many communities and families like that of Jhari had to face the brunt of this. Ironically, a small distance away from Jhari’s home—a similar household from a different community did not face many problems accessing vegetables and nutritious food because they had a small kitchen garden in their backyard. Observing this made me wonder about the possibilities of having a community-owned and led kitchen garden in villages, and the impact it can have in providing affordable food security to the population of a village, irrespective of a pandemic. The added advantage will be if these kitchen gardens were based on an organic farming model by which we can achieve sustainability on many levels such as in regard to climate change. Most importantly, such a model would make “nutrition” affordable and available at all times, irrespective of external circumstances. Henceforth, improved nutrition equals good health, and that equals continuous livelihood opportunities.

3. Education! Education! Education!

A holistic education that focuses on the upskilling of the underprivileged communities is the key to achieve all the targets mentioned above. Topics such as family planning, health is wealth, etc., need to be introduced from an early age. Even awareness and importance of ideas like kitchen gardens and organic farming can only come through proper education, preferably from one’s childhood onwards. The pandemic has also highlighted the need to uplift children's digital skills and the digital literacy of the general population in rural areas. While many education activities have taken the online route, children and adults from poor communities face difficulties accessing these modes of learning due to their lack of basic digital skills, even if equipment and access are there. Furthermore, for successful implementation of the telemedicine process, basic digital skills and literacy like navigating a mobile phone and reading a prescription are a must.

Therefore, as we look into a post-pandemic world, education curricula need to give importance to topics like computer literacy and public health awareness right from an early age. Along with that, improving the infrastructure that aids such learning should be given importance too—for example improving network connectivity, making data plans affordable, and having computers in rural schools.

As I stepped out of Jhari’s house reflecting, I hit a confusing point as to which sector I should prioritise first in my project? Should I start with the education sector, or the livelihoods sector, or the health sector? However, after a few days, I realised that my question was wrong as health = education = livelihoods. The engines of all these sectors need to be running simultaneously for sustainable change to occur. The pandemic has further underscored this aspect. Jhari fought extremely hard, but unfortunately, he passed away a few days later. As I look back, I can only thank him for teaching me to be courageous, empathetic and giving me a much-needed perspective on how to approach development work to improve people’s lives in the truest sense.
The Interconnectedness and Holistic Approach to Climate Change: A Case for Climate Resilient Sustainable Development

-Mehar Jauhar
Whilst serving as an AIF Fellow in the past year, it has dawned upon me that the conceptualization of sustainable change relies on the principles of holistic development and the growth of all sectors equally - all along keeping in mind the thread of equity. The experience of entering, learning, working and growing in the space of climate change has often made me face the absolute truth of interconnectedness within all development sectors and how this is a vital driver of sustainable change. The essentiality of interconnectedness and holistic development of all sectors is also depicted through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) derived by the United Nations - a widely renowned international standard for achieving growth, development and accelerated progress across the world.26 The UN’s 17 goals, which collectively aim to “end poverty, and ensure prosperity for all” cannot be tackled one-by-one or in a piecemeal fashion.27 To put it another way: “We cannot ensure the health and wellbeing (SDG 3) of all the world’s citizens without eliminating poverty (SDG 1) and hunger (SDG 2). We cannot achieve gender equality (SDG 5) without decent work and economic growth for all (SDG 8). Further, we cannot take climate action (SDG 13) without delivering affordable and clean energy (SDG 7).”28

With the unfortunate and unprecedented onset of the widespread COVID-19 pandemic and its tremendous fallout being a constant battle throughout the Fellowship year, it has further showcased the lack of coordination and collaboration between different sectors of the development arena while highlighting the urgency of ensuring their overall growth, lest we set into a vicious cycle of crisis, followed by stop-gap measures, and myopic approaches to combating climate change, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, is cognisant of the understanding that the most vulnerable are often disproportionately impacted by the costs of addressing climate change and it is thus vital to ensure their growth and wellbeing through a mutually beneficial and symbiotic process, rather than one based on “trade-offs.”29 Through this piece, the aim is to look at the impact of the pandemic on the fight against climate change, why it is essential to prioritise the sector strategically and in an interconnected manner with other developmental sectors, as well as the way forward for us to leverage the current global crisis and combat its tremendous fallout by building back better and stronger through a green and clean recovery.

COVID-19 and the battle against Climate Change

Serving within the space of climate sustainability, the AIF Fellowship allowed me to engage with a diverse and veritable set of stakeholders. With my Fellowship project being focused on accelerating the adoption of energy efficiency technologies through innovative business models in India and South and Southeast Asia (particularly Bangladesh, Vietnam and Indonesia), I have had the opportunity to interact with and understand the perspective of stakeholders representing the various domains of industry, government, finance, the energy sector, technology vendors, international organisations and key institutions implementing energy efficiency within the region.
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Through such consultations and interactions, it has been an important observation and realisation that the battle against climate change has become tougher and been put on the back burner as the COVID-19 pandemic has led to governments, institutions and agencies all around the world de-prioritising their efforts towards climate change - given that the threats of climate change still seem like a far-off possibility which can be dealt with eventually, instead of an “urgent” need that requires immediate attention without affecting the concentrated efforts in combating the consequences of the pandemic.

However, as the world grapples with the ravaging effects of this crisis, climate change continues to accelerate impact and the people most exposed to the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting economic crisis are largely those who are also most vulnerable to climate change impacts: lower-income and disadvantaged people, including women, minorities and marginalized ethnic groups, the elderly, informal workers and those in essential but undervalued jobs on the front lines. With millions infected, more than half the global workforce is at immediate risk of losing their livelihoods and with the number of people facing acute hunger potentially doubling to 265 million, the COVID crisis is worsening inequality, with dire consequences for our societies and economies.

In this context, the anticipated recovery from COVID-19 provides us with a window of opportunity to reunite against the climate emergency. With governments, organisations and nations throughout the world mobilizing historic sums of money, it is vital that they make the most of the fiscal stimulus in order to build back a more resilient, sustainable and greener society through embracing green initiatives and approaches weaved into such inclusive stimulus which is aimed at tackling inequality.

The Interconnected approach to battling Climate Change

The idea of such a green recovery is contingent heavily on one leveraging the principle of interconnectedness through approaches, interventions, policies and solutions that focus on addressing the issues within key development sectors while also ensuring that the same is implemented in a sustainable way keeping in mind the goal of climate change mitigation.

One such interconnected approach is to look at combating the humongous economic fallout of the pandemic through effective livelihood generation, and stimulating industrial growth - both coupled with climate resilience. In the second quarter of 2020, the world lost the equivalent of about 400 million full time jobs, a devastating drop that has damaged livelihoods of families everywhere. This provides a window investment towards creating green jobs and green livelihood opportunities while also ensuring investment in sustainable infrastructure, clean energy transition strategies to boost industrial growth (for instance through adopting energy efficient technologies for increased energy savings and better economic outcomes) and economy restoration through integrating climate resilient innovations. Particularly, in India, where 400 million workers in the informal economy are at risk of falling deeper in poverty, the interventions towards recovery can emphasise on creating livelihoods in green sectors such that in renewable energy which provides an opportunity sized up to 11 million jobs in the sector alone. This can be further interconnected to sectors of education and human resource development through conducting effective capacity building and training programs to build a ready sustainable youth workforce. The approach invariably uplifts the battle against inequality since expanding renewable energy opportunities strengthens the implementation of clean energy measures which helps provide vulnerable communities, especially in the rural areas, the access to affordable energy - an integral aspect of their day to day lives as well as standard of living given that it ensures their livelihood and access to essential services such as healthcare, water and even sanitation.

Further, as the pandemic continues to deeply threaten food security, it sheds light on how weak and vulnerable existing food systems continue to be. The widely apparent barriers to production and supply chains need to be addressed keeping in mind the unexpected extreme weather changes and increasing severity of other climate change impacts.

Towards that end, COVID-19 recovery plans can channel investment in sustainable, resilient agriculture and food supply chains at the local, national and regional levels through well-designed, climate-smart and agroecological practices which are essential to strengthen food security, and can adapt to as well prevent the worsening impacts of climate change. This can be further interconnected to sectors of education and health (for instance through adopting energy efficient technologies for increased energy savings and better economic outcomes) and economy restoration through integrating climate resilient innovations. This provides a window to garner the household, economic and societal level.
In fact, the battle against COVID-19 itself, through effective and accessible healthcare infrastructure, also holds the opportunity of being accelerated through climate resilient and energy efficient technological innovations. “As the vaccine cold chains are deployed at scale, the potential is enormous for integrating cost-effective energy efficient and solar refrigeration technologies, switching to cleaner refrigerants and adopting other sustainable measures, to achieve the same cooling effect” as stated by Dr. Ashok Sarkar, Senior Energy Specialist Team Leader at the World Bank is his address at a World Bank workshop series related to Vaccine Cold-chain Challenges.

The World Health Organization estimates that up to 50% of vaccines are wasted globally every year; a large part because of lack of temperature control and the logistics to support an unbroken cold-chain. At the scale of COVID-19, this spoilage rate could waste potentially a billion vaccines, which, even if valued at a non-profit cost of around $10 a vaccine, represents a staggering wasted investment. To reduce such wastage by leaps and bounds, one can leverage the benefits of sustainable cooling options and cold-chains. The exploration and implementation of such an interconnected approach has already made headway. Based in Rwanda, The African Centre of Excellence for Excellence for Cold Chain (founded by the Rwanda Cooling Initiative (RCOOL) and the United Nations Environment Program’s team) aims to link the country’s farmers, logistics providers and agri-food businesses with a range of experts and investors keen to minimize wasted food and wasted medicines, and support solutions that return the value of this decreased wastage back to the smallholders and stakeholders throughout the chain. Researchers from across the world are currently joining the efforts of RCOOL in deriving a methodology capable of significantly improving cold-chain infrastructure systems (through optimized and sustainable cold-chains) so that countries can better meet the challenge of food loss and be better prepared for the sudden, mass distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine to reach the people who need it. Researchers across the world are currently joining the efforts of RCOOL in deriving a methodology capable of significantly improving cold-chain infrastructure systems (through optimized and sustainable cold-chains) so that countries can better meet the challenge of food loss and be better prepared for the sudden, mass distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine to reach the people who need it.

To end with, the extremely viable and beneficial potential of leveraging the principle of interconnectedness is widely evident and apparent as we chart out pathways and pave the way forward to emerging victorious from the battle against the harsh COVID-19 pandemic - stronger, more climate resilient and standing on sustainable grounds. From where I stand, it is our only chance at enabling the unconditional truth of the equality of being, the harmony of nature and the kindness of peace.
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RURAL INDIA SUPPORTING TRUST

The Rural India Supporting Trust (RIST) was established in 2007 as a family-based grant making organization. RIST's goal is to assist in alleviating poverty and improving the quality of life for communities in India. RIST partners with value aligned, publicly supported organizations to achieve its goal. Since 2017, RIST and the AIF Clinton Fellowship program have partnered to enhance capacity and the impact of India's social sector through the placement of knowledgeable Fellows who can impart specialized skills, expertise, and best practices to Indian social service sector organizations. From 2017 - 2019 the RIST supported AIF Clinton Fellowship has dispatched ten Fellows to Uttarakhand and other under-served regions of India on an annual basis. Due to the U.S.-India cross-cultural nature of this project, RIST and AIF are assisting in creating a cohesive ecosystem of understanding between these two countries. The Fellows who participate are on their way to becoming the global leaders of tomorrow. In order to create a higher level of program impact, an “eleventh month of service” was added to the existing 10-month program model. This is an opportunity for recently returned Fellows to use this extended program time to strengthen the Alumni network, enhance the impact of the Fellowship program, create innovative program practices, help train the incoming cohort, and engage the broader public. In the second phase of the RIST-AIF Fellowship partnership, RIST committed to support eight Fellows each year from 2019 - 2022. During the pandemic, RIST generously agreed to support an all-Indian cohort of Fellows during the 2020-21 program year and assisted the AIF Clinton Fellowship in establishing critical infrastructure needed to run a successful hybrid program. RIST’s contributions have enabled the AIF Fellowship in increasing accessibility for persons with disabilities and advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in all program practices.

LATA KRISHNAN AND AJAY SHAH

We are grateful to Lata Krishnan and Ajay Shah for providing long-term support of the AIF Fellowship program. On March 14th, 2021, they announced the largest gift to AIF, a $5 million gift to the Fellowship program. Building on the legacy created over 20 years, the gift carries a bold vision for the future. Lata Krishnan’s and Ajay Shah’s historic gift ushers the Fellowship program into a decade of action, focusing on accelerating impact and supercharging ideas to solutions. Under the avatar of the AIF Banyan Impact Fellowship, the next phase of the program will invest in a cross-generational force of change makers building an equitable and sustainable world. The new name embodies this promise: the Banyan tree is a symbol of strength, resilience, and interconnectedness. It’s a powerful metaphor for mobilizing a collective force towards sustainable impact. Lata Krishnan is the Co-Founder and former President of AIF, and serves as Co-Chair of AIF’s Board of Directors. Ajay Shah serves as Co-Chair of the AIF Fellowship program. Both are award-winning technology entrepreneurs, start-up investors, and engaged philanthropists, passionate about AIF’s mission. We are immensely grateful to Lata Krishnan, Ajay Shah, and the Krishnan Shah Family Foundation, for their leadership and vision.
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