

Round-up session of Samagam 2022

The Round-up session of Samagam 2022 was moderated by Mr. Anoop Nautiyal and had Mr. Alex Paul Menon, IAS, Joint Development Commissioner, MEPZ, SEZ, Tamil Nadu, Dr. Mukund Rajan, Chairman, ECube Investment Advisors P. Ltd., Ms. Dhruvi Shah, CEO, Axis Bank Foundation, Mr. Ravi Sreedharan, Founder, Indian School of Development Management, Mr. Saroj Mahapatra, Executive Director, PRADAN, as panelists.

Anoop began with sharing a brief history and significance of Samagam as an event and how ten organisations have played a key role in convening Samagam 2022, which has partnerships and winning coalitions for achieving India's SDGs as its theme. Anoop asked two questions to each of the six panelists over the course of the session.

Anoop asked Dr. Rajan if the Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) issues can be seen as a part of cost of doing business rather than these are issues being addressed from business surplus and profits? Dr. Rajan mentioned that now ESG is helping to mainstream sustainability into the strategies of corporates and the most forward-looking companies are really embracing the ESG agenda in toto. In the past there was a sense that issues around sustainability could be deflected to the periphery, both within the organization and in terms of commitments made to the stakeholders. But now there is a clear understanding that unsustainable practices that impact environment and cohesion of society are potentially creating existential threats to humankind. The best companies have started responding by clear governance focus on these issues. Companies like Infosys, Airtel, Ashok Leyland are creating ESG committees with the Board. TATA Steel and NTPC have started combining mandate of the CSR committee with sustainability and all of them are creating a locus on sustainability and management of ESG issues. Increasingly one would see expectations of disclosure which members of civil society, non-profits, think tanks will scrutinize very closely and their outputs are going to determine the reputations of the corporates going forward - whether investors' support and bank loans will continue or they will be abandoned. The entire financial system will gear up to see companies' response to this agenda. The implications in terms of financing for corporates will be severe. Already around the world, USD 43 trillion are characterized as ESG or sustainable funds, which is to back companies set up ESG as a strong agenda. Also, there is a USD 120 trillion fund managed as United Nation's principle's responsive investment, dedicated at the ESG investment principles. Going forward it will be difficult for companies to raise equity or raise debt unless they have a very powerful ESG strategy in place. So, beyond monetary concerns it is increasingly becoming companies' core to invest in ESG policies and it is the biggest element in our way forward.

The next question of the panel was addressed to Ms. Dhruvi Shah – partnerships are a cornerstone of Axis Bank Foundation's development programmes. So how relevant it is for CSRs and Foundations to play a pivotal role to drive inclusive, sustainable and transformative change of scale? Dhruvi shared that CSR grants are important not only for Axis Bank Foundation but CSR grants are now called investments. How agile the funding can be by made virtue of its design and how partnerships are designed in a manner that can leverage developmental funding available from other partners as well. Since the funding has flexibility, donors and partners need to be agile. With so many collaborations happening, it's important to have complementarity within such collaborations to achieve the shared goals.

Question to Mr. Alex Paul Menon was on what are the challenges of collaborations with NGOs and corporates when they are collaborating with the government and what advise would he have as a senior government official. Mr. Menon responded by saying that it's a forced marriage when it

comes to such collaborations and the need for such collaborations arises as people in government fail to keep people's needs in mind. The absence of a shared vision has led to the artificial convergences. It could have been a natural phenomenon if Government would have reached out to the grassroots and listened to people's aspirations. Each time an innovation happens, it's important to ask if at all it is needed. We keep innovating rather than meeting the basic needs of the community. Coming together and pulling in all resources to drive that common agenda would be possible if people come together. Similarly, there are magical numbers rather than logical numbers that govern our lives when it comes to allocation of money to development work. Also, there is a lot of duplication happening on behalf of the government and it adds up to the confusion. There are government schemes for all kinds of development issues plaguing the population, but there is a siloed approach to implementation which does not help communities benefit from those schemes. Government cannot hire highly paid consultants, though there is no dearth of development funds. So, when it comes to creating agriculture assets, government can pay for building farm ponds, but the expert human resources available with NGOs can be paid by other funding organisations rather allocating the money for farm ponds – this will ensure private-money is used in scaling up.

Anoop asked the next question to Mr. Ravi Sreedharan – basis his experience what could people do to make the coalition between *samaaj-sarkaar-bazaar* work better? Ravi shared that the COVID-19 experience has taught us that the government, or the markets, or the civil society, nobody can do everything on its own. Collaboration between the three and collaboration in between the CSOs holds the key. Thanks to the domination that corporates have had on the society because of which there are phrases like “competition breeds excellence” and it's time to change it and realise that “collaboration breeds far more excellence”. Unfortunately, even in social sector people seem to be competing with each other. And as a result, despite having the government and the private philanthropy spending several thousand crores round the year, the money is not achieving the desired goals. When ISDM was formed, one of the problems that was found to be existing is the State cannot afford to take high risk decisions or experiment with huge number of populations involved so easily. But the social purpose organisations can afford to do that. So, role segregation and identification of the government, CSOs and the corporates needs to be done. Social sector management needs to bring money, people and processes together to achieve scale. Today there are more than 100 CSRs with more than Rs. 100 Cr. budgets, but hardly any NGOs with Rs. 100 Cr+ budgets. So, one needs to think about how to create a BRAC (Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee) like organization in India and achieve the required scale. Without discounting the grassroot work in the villages, we have to reinforce achieving scale in social sector work.

The next panelist was Saroj Kumar Mahapatra, and Anoop asked about the kind of role organisations like PRADAN should be playing to make such collaborations that Alex and Ravi hinted at, happen. Saroj mentioned that in the whole gamut of stakeholders, PRADAN is one, but vested with its own responsibility to bring in multi-stakeholder orchestration to bring change at the last mile. We work with government to implement flagship programmes while the organization costs are met by various donors. Orchestrating partnerships around the big ideas keeping communities' priorities in the center will create winning coalitions to achieve impact at scale. The CSOs, irrespective of their size and themes of operation have several things to offer and share, and we are learning from each one of them. At the same time, we have to engage in such a manner that the communities become more self-reliant rather than becoming more and more dependent on us.

Anoop asked his second round of questions to each of the panelists.

Anoop: How can collaborations become better and government derive more from the CSOs and Corporates?

Alex mentioned government needs to bring all stakeholders, including the government team, together and make the shared vision, keeping the communities' vision at the center. It needs to adopt an institution driven approach rather an individual driven approach. There has to be an exit strategy as a fundamental element to such a collaboration to ensure self-reliance of the communities.

Anoop: Is it possible to do good while doing well at the same time? Can SDGs and GDP targets coexist? And what role does the triumvirate have to play in realizing this?

Dr. Rajan cited example of the TATA Group - how the communities are the very reason of its existence. It was scientifically measured that the TATA brand enjoyed unparalleled stakeholders' support due to this approach and in the last 100 years it has been there in the list of top 10 companies. The growing salience of ESG among corporate sector in terms of performance measurement further goes to prove the realization of the importance of communities' agenda to enjoy the trust of the stakeholders.

Anoop: Has the pandemic forced the Axis Bank Foundation to re-think and re-strategise your programmes and interventions or has it validated the existing approach to CSR? How do you see growing your outreach and on-ground impact?

Ms. Shah mentioned about learnings from COVID-19 as the people's 'need' changed due to the pandemic, and thanks to the flexible nature of their grants, ABF accommodated all that evolving requirements. NGOs' scale means something completely different than what it signifies in corporate and government. Focus needs to be on smaller organisations who have received a set-back due to changes in CSR rules, to ensure they have adequate fund and partners to achieve their goals. The businesses have to be more responsible towards the communities from whom they are deriving money and the government money needs to be utilized properly.

Anoop: How do you see PRADAN evolving over the next five years and become more relevant in the multi-stakeholder approach of development work?

Mr. Mahapatra shared that PRADAN seeks to reach out to 50 million people along with its partners, and build evidence over time. Largescale partnerships and collaborations, striking winning-coalitions, keeping systems and perspectives in mind, focusing on tribal areas, large investment in natural resource management and creation of assets, holistic development of communities in terms of nutrition would be areas of focus. Collaborating with community-based institutions, Panchayats, and state governments will be the main driving force to bring in the desired changes keeping the complexity of challenges in mind.

Anoop: How can young and mid-career professionals be capacitated to work more effectively at the intersectionality of the stakeholders? How is innovation/creating something new, which is a natural tendency, could be preserved and nurtured?

Mr. Sreedharan said developing the domain of management for the social sector is what people at ISDM are trying to do. Innovation can be nurtured very impactfully using system thinking and design thinking tools in a participatory process involving communities.

Mr. Saroj Kr. Mahapatra delivered his vote of thanks at the end of the session.