

“Building Innovation Ecosystems for Mega Impact”

A National Conference on Social Innovation, Technology & Government

IIT-Delhi, August 12th, 2013

Post-Conference Report

This conference, the first of its kind in India, was co-hosted by the non-profit Action For India (AFI) and two government entities: the [Centre for Innovations in Public Systems](#) (CIPS) and the Government of India, Department of Electronics and Information Technology (DeitY). The goal of the conference was to encourage collaboration between government officials and social enterprise leaders, in order to scale up the benefits of social innovation in India. Both cross-sectoral and sector-specific problems and solutions were explored. The sectors represented were: water, sanitation and health; education; energy; agriculture; and livelihood and financial inclusion. The conference was intended to be a ‘kick-off’ event to begin a long-term initiative to foster collaboration between government, social enterprises and non-profits.

Participants

The conference was by invitation only, and attendees were selected by AFI and CIPS based on their background in social innovation and ability to find solutions in their particular work area. Of the attendees, 39 were government officials, with representation from national offices and 7 states: Haryana, Maharashtra, Punjab, Bihar, Odisha, Kerala, and West Bengal. On the part of the social enterprise project leaders, there was representation from 12 states. In general, a wide range of work areas were in evidence in both the public and private sectors; for example, telecommunications, banking and venture capital, agriculture, school programmes, and rural and energy development. Parts of the event were also open to IIT students and several dozen attended.

The guest speakers were all well-known national and international figures and also represented a diversity of backgrounds:

Sam Pitroda, Adviser to the Prime Minister of India & Chairman of India’s National Innovation Council

Desh Deshpande, Advisor to the US President Barack Obama & Founder, Deshpande Foundation

Arun Maira, Member, Planning Commission, Government of India

Rentala Chandrashekhar, former Telecom Secretary, Government of India & Incoming President, NASSCOM

J Satyanarayana, Secretary, Department of Electronics & Information Technology (DeitY), Government of India

Sanjay Jaju, Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh, Department of Information Technology & Communications

Mr. Chakrapani, Director of CIPS, also presented on the activities of the Centre in championing innovation in government.

Presentations on social enterprise projects were given by:

- Devi Prasad Rao, Founder & CEO, Arohana
- *an agricultural capacity building venture in Tamil Nadu*
- Amit Jain, AFI Board member and Co-Founder & CEO, eHealth-Point
- *localized water sanitation in districts in Punjab and Andhra Pradesh*
- Ramji Raghavan, Founder & Chairman, Agastya
- *science education program active in multiple states*
- Chanchalpathi Dasa, Vice Chair & Trustee, Akshaya Patra Foundation
- *mid-day meal programme active in multiple states*

Our distinguished panel consisted of: Mr. Chakrapani Dittakavi, Director of CIPS, Rentala Chandrashekhar, IAS (as above), Nishith Desai of Nishith Desai Associates in Mumbai, and Desh Deshpande (as above).

The following were 'team leaders' who facilitated the break-out discussion groups: Ramji Raghavan (as above), Amit Jain (as above), Dr. Jaya Singh, Director, BKC WeatherSys, Ms. Manisha Varma, IAS, Director, National Advisory Council (as above) and Mr. Kantha Rao, IAS, of DeitY.

Event & Programme Support

In addition to the institutional support and funding from CIPS and DeitY, the conference organizers received logistical, material, and other support from the following event partners and these were all recognized at the event:

- Deshpande Foundation, Programme Partner
- IndiGo Airlines, Travel Partner
- Digital Empowerment Foundation, Knowledge Partner
- GFiles India, Media Partner
- IIT-Delhi, Conference Venue

As well, we had the generous support and participation of the Government of Andhra Pradesh, through the leadership of Mr. Ponnala Lakshmaiah, Minister for IT & Communications, A.P. The involvement of the Government of A.P. is highly significant, given that this state is instrumental in launching the largest ICT-enabled social innovation projects, using technology tools such as the internet and mobile telephones.

Outcomes

The calibre of participants and the energy at this conference were remarked upon. Each of the guest speakers brought a valuable perspective gained over a career of decades in business and government. To give a sample of the ideas shared at the conference:

“Why do we say scaling up, when we should be saying spreading around? That is really the more effective approach in India. We at the planning commission hear a lot about this from the states. One cannot just take a good idea and bring it to the attention of someone in power, in central government who will then try to get it implemented in a large scale. Social innovation, to be successful on the ground, cannot be franchised like a McDonalds. Regional adaptability is the key. Let’s adapt ideas to regions and communities, not simply replicate”

-- Arun Maira, quoted by Big Data Magazine, www.governancenow.com

"Indian entrepreneurs should focus on the solutions (irrespective of industry) which are very cost effective and there is scalability. Later on, quality can be injected into it,"

-- Desh Deshpande, quoted by Punjab NewsLine, www.punjabnewslines.com

"The fact that we now have a National Innovation Council, for the very first time, and the fact that this is a cabinet-level advisory role shows that the Government of India is truly committed to advocating for and assisting social enterprise. The trouble is, everyone comes to the government demanding funding and nothing else - 'You in government, you can't possibly understand what I'm doing! Just give us the money and get out of the way.' That can't be. Social innovators have to learn to make specific, feasible requests, especially around policies that directly affect them."

-- Sam Pitroda, quoted in interview with AFI

"The advent of information technology and communications (ITC) has thrown open the windows for creating new, scalable solutions, that require joint participation of government, civil society and technology." He further elaborated, "Here is a huge opportunity for growth of the sector which serves societal needs and the solutions we are talking about are scalable and lend themselves to business models, that address age old problems in India."

-- Rentala Chandrashekar, quoted in interview with AFI

The one-day event was deemed an excellent start to nurturing long-term engagement of progressive government officials with social enterprise project leaders and other advocates of social innovation, such as technology developers and non-profits working in the area of social innovation and community development. Because many of the participants were meeting one another for the first time and because of the diversity of professional backgrounds and levels of government, it is not surprising that the recommended actions that came out of this conference were somewhat broad. Nevertheless, there were a number of more specific actions that are highly feasible, well supported, and could be pursued by the host government organizations and AFI, whether singly or jointly.

In general, the recommendations were to:

- Simplify the process by working at the regional level rather than attempting an “all India” type of conference or programme. The importance of sectoral or regional context and even local customization was emphasized by a number of the guest speakers and others.

- Push for “changing the mindset” of both government officials and social entrepreneurs. There are a number of assumptions that could be challenged and great opportunities for knowledge exchange.
- Explore ways to tackle the ‘predecessor-successor’ problem; in other words, progress in innovation is often due to individuals in government and there is often no process for continuing the work institutionally.
- Simplify project models as much as possible so that they can be readily adopted in new locations. This needs to be balanced with the needs of local customization.
- Not lose the broader goal of social change while pursuing immediate solutions (direct provision of basic needs, for example, or mobile technology). The larger picture of societal change must be returned to the agenda.

More specifically, action can be taken to:

- Expand the notion of ‘mentorship’ to include the matching up of IAS officers with social entrepreneurs. AFI is well-positioned to be the facilitator as it already has a mentorship program and can connect with those progressive government officers most interested in this work.
- Create a more transparent and systemized approach for government assistance to social innovators. Participants observed that the process by which some organizations receive funding or other support can appear to be random. What could be standard guidelines or criteria for gauging the preparedness of these social enterprises? Venture capital firms are known to use rigorous methodology and significant time to narrow down a list of several thousand prospects to a smaller number that are ‘fund-ready’. The same process could be developed for government by an objective third party. AFI expressed interest in beginning this effort.
- Although there was not sufficient time in a single day to find solutions for sector- or department-specific problems with policies and procedures; these are worth recording by the conference organizers for continued work. To give just a few examples:
 - RTE policy may be inadvertently chilling school innovation since non-conventional schools or programmes do not meet the requirements for physical infrastructure
 - Solar subsidies are great on paper but often slow to implement; streamlining this could help respond to the market
 - Short-term contractors often staff e-governance and other innovative government initiatives leading to the risk of losing institutional knowledge.

A database of specific policy and procedure solutions could be part of the programme coming out of this conference.

Next Steps

Publicity was generated immediately at the conference and this should be broadly disseminated by the three hosting organizations. Among the media reporting on the conference were: SME Times, Punjab NewsLine, New Kerala, Finance Yahoo, Big Data, Live Mint/WSJ and several others. A PR firm was utilized to generate press attention and collate the stories.

With regard to planning the next event to continue the work, at least one major change to the conference format could be made and several smaller improvements. Perhaps the single most important feedback coming out of this conference and from several different career perspectives is the reality of regional diversity in India and the need to stress 'sharing' over mere 'replication' of social innovations. To this end the next conference or set of events should be regional in focus. The AFI 'Hub' model may be a good vehicle for this and there are possibly others.

Although these events can have great importance in furthering the work of social innovation, it is important to also support a continuous, year-round programme: "Building Innovation Ecosystems" that keeps the momentum between events and continues to build relationships. There were a number of action-items that could be readily taken up by AFI, in partnership with supporters in government and philanthropy.

There were also a number of smaller changes recommended. A few remarked that the working groups, although very ably led and highly participatory, could have produced more if the participants had had some preparatory material and the time to review this. Also, it was suggested that the groups could be organized differently so that higher-level government officials are meeting in one session and the more mid-level government officials are working more directly with the social enterprise project leaders. Finally, as is often the case at conferences, there is a trade-off between allowing ample time for work and networking and the desire of most participants to see more content dealt with. A day-and-a-half conference should be explored but only if there is ample commitment from IAS officers – this might be more likely for the regional or sectoral events.

A fully and diversely funded programme at AFI, "Building Innovation Ecosystems", in partnership with government, could respond to these various recommendations and make the needed changes in content, format, and between-event connections in order to keep the interest shown at the August 12th conference and build on the momentum.