

**STOPPING AS SUCCESS:
TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT**

INDIA: MENNONITE CENTRAL COMMITTEE'S PARTNERSHIP MODEL

October 2019

Kiely Barnard-Webster, CDA Collaborative Learning



CONTEXT

India's constitution mandates that the government work toward a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic, upholding the rights of its citizens. Following India's independence in 1947, the government could not initially reach many of its most marginalized citizens living in remote rural areas. Thus, civil society took on a crucial role in implementing development programs and services in areas the state could not reach. Over the years, the state has increased its outreach to remote rural areas (although it is still far from comprehensive), resulting in increasing instances of the government and CSOs coexisting and working in a complementary manner.

In contemporary Indian civil society, NGOs whose areas of work do not challenge the current government and its political leadership are often perceived as being better able to access

funding. Conversely, NGOs engaged in more vocal environmental and rights-based advocacy (for example, Green Peace in India) have had trouble raising funds either locally or from international agencies.

Civil society in India, especially during the last two decades, has been successful in bringing about major legislative change, which in turn has impacted policy-making. For example, it was strong grassroots movements that led to the Right to Information Act in 2005, which demands greater accountability and transparency regarding public information and finances.

STORY OF PARTNERSHIP MODEL

This case was selected as a result of feedback received from participants during several external engagements. In particular, participants queried whether the SAS collaborative learning project would diversify and



MCC 2017-2018 strategy displayed in the front lobby of MCC's Kolkata office

enrich existing case study evidence of exits and transitions by documenting a sustained long-term partnership model. The case study of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and its work in India is a direct response to this suggestion, capturing the organization's accompaniment approach to long-term partnerships and programmatic support.

MCC India works across five states in northeastern India. The organization has owned the same building and office in Kolkata for 75 years, using this to host partners, staff meetings and retreats, donors, and external visitors. Over the last 20 years, there have been only one or two international Mennonite staff – called “Representatives” – at any one time. The remaining staff come from the states where MCC works, and are of various religious backgrounds.

MCC India sees itself as a mid-sized NGO reliant as much on human resources as funding to sustain its programs.

The organization is funded through multiple small grants (approximately US\$25,000 per grant), which cover MCC's peacebuilding and development projects. Due to its size, and given that the salaries it offers are generally less competitive than those at larger INGOs, MCC India's leadership hires national staff to “... develop their capacity, rather than hire with high capacity.” Some staff have chosen to pursue higher education while working for MCC, and staff retention rates at the organization are quite high. Staff work closely with partners at all stages of programming, supporting and building partner capacities as needed for planning, reporting, monitoring, and learning. MCC staff spend at least one year visiting communities to assess their needs before co-designing strategic programs and multi-year budgets with partners.

MCC India do not directly implement programming as they feel “... it's not up to us as an international organization to do this work but to support local organizations to do this work.”

KEY LESSONS

Good (“dedicated, dynamic”) leadership is critical among partners. The partnership and accompaniment approach works best when MCC's partners demonstrate strong leadership.

Language matters: the way funding is framed can bolster a sense of true partnership. How funding is framed and the processes by which funds are distributed matters, with one MCC Representative noting: “We frame the funding we provide that each rupee is the pocket money of individuals, not governments.”

Strategies and projects should, without exception, be developed with communities. Joint strategizing and planning is preferable to more traditional, top-down approaches that seek to plan every aspect of a project in advance.

International and national partners should consistently question notions of ownership and “sustainability.” NGOs and CSOs globally are often dependent on private and public donations, grants, and myriad other types of funding. MCC India staff focus less on discussing financial dependency with partners, choosing instead to monitor how comfortable partners feel with their approach to programming, and whether they believe they are on their own path to achieving longer-term impacts. When partnering, MCC staff have learned it is important to not only understand the needs of partner organizations, but also ensure communities hosting programs understand and have agreed to participate.

Expecting mutual transformation is critical for healthy partnerships. MCC staff repeatedly mentioned that they learned from partners and supported frequent peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. Many felt this mindset to be at the root of an equal, productive partnership.

This document was made possible by the generous support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents of this case study are the sole responsibility of Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning and Search for Common Ground, and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

All photos by Kiely Barnard-Webster

Cover Photo: Lunch in Kolkata with MCC staff and SAS case study team. Manjula Patnaik, MCC Peace Sector Coordinator, Ajay Mittal, SAS case writer and Independent Consultant, and Prakash Thankachan, MCC Project Officer