The Delhi Dialogues

Edition 8

In which we discussed

Diversity

The Delhi Dialogues are born out of recognition that to progress the knowledge on development in India, we need people discussing, dissecting and debating the current gyaan that's available. And more often than not, there is not the people, not the space, and not the time to do so. The Delhi Dialogues attempt to provide all three. The Delhi Dialogues are intended to be an informal space where people in decision making positions interested and concerned about development in India can get together for a couple of hours to converse about a topic worth discussing. The topics of the Dialogues will not be strait jacketed into narrow domains, but rather be about an idea within development that is worth discussing in the specific and with the purpose of extending the current thinking around it.

This edition of the Delhi Dialogues discussed the topic of Diversity. This was in response to a suggestion by a member that it is topical and of interest. Diversity also dovetails nicely with discussions around Equity and Marginalization that the group has had in the past. Questions outlined for discussion were:

- Does the definition of diversity need to be clarified?
- Why do people and organizations resist diversity?
- What is the value of diversity? Why bring diversity into any setting?
- What are the mechanisms of integrating diversity?

A definition of diversity

Diversity means different things to different people, and is oftentimes used interchangeably with 'social inclusion'. Does diversity mean inclusion or does it mean to promote respect for the differences that individuals and groups may prefer to have? A useful definition can be found in the Diversity and Inclusion Report (2013) of the Royal Bank of Canada which states that "Diversity is any dimension that can be used to differentiate groups and people from one another. It means respect for and appreciation of differences in ethnicity, gender, age, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, education, and religion".

In India, diversity is most commonly understood to be about women's issues. Even in the west, diversity is interpreted most commonly in terms of gender and rarely goes beyond that. Greater openness to diversity is also linked to the changing social scape. With increasing urbanization, studies demonstrate that there is breakdown of caste based taboos and discrimination. However new kinds of discrimination have emerged and it may be time to expand the social parameters to gauge discrimination. Reasons for discrimination can range from class, religion, region, living space, disability, sexual orientation or even stigmatizing diseases. Yet respect for diversity is sometimes not demonstrated in concrete terms such as diversity of human resource, even by organizations that work on empowerment of women and backward castes.

Diversity is not only for the social sectors or the government sector. In the European Union, for example, there have been efforts to promote diversity in for-profit companies as well. More than 5000 companies report specifically on non-financial information, setting a whole new trend.

People resist diversity

It is common to find individuals, organizations and societies that resist diversity. It is built into our DNA – it is natural to feel more comfortable in known surroundings and in company of people who look, live and behave similarly.

Discrimination arises because there is little knowledge about the 'other' community. This dearth of information and knowledge about the 'other' leads to marginalization. Not only is this an under-researched area, there is also no platform for debates on policy changes needed to end such discrimination. And even if there are informal platforms, discussions may not be fruitful because of deeply held anger against those perceived to be in 'dominant' standing.

Another perspective is that people are anchored to their land. Rootedness, demonstrated by cultural, religious and traditional practices, is perceived as synonymous with identity. That is how societies are built. Any dilution of this rootedness is seen as a threat to their identity.

Other reasons not to adopt diversity could be financial constraints. For example, some western universities are keen to admit students from different parts of the world, bringing together different cultures, traditions, ways of living, thinking and problem solving. But foreign students have a higher fee structure, which discourages them from applying.

The value of diversity

Supporting diversity is to uphold the secular fabric of India, a stated principle of the Constitution. Diversity helps to build bridges between different kinds of people belonging to different traditions, be it of gender, caste or class.

The group discussed that adopting diversity in an organizational setting not only improves the organizational efficiency, but also improves the social situation of a society and country. It was argued that the society is very structured and if there are no proactive measures to bring in new ideas, it will maintain the status quo. This leads to stagnation of processes, systems, institutions and the society as a whole. An example of this is that before globalization began, there were several large organizations that believed in employing people from the same community, religion and even from their own families. As Indian markets began to open up, these organizations could not keep up with others that had embraced a more diverse work force.

Another example is that even when experimenting with drugs on animals, diversity plays an important role. If a drug is tested only on males or only on females, the results may be distorted. Similarly, results can differ quite significantly depending on which region a study sample is selected from. Results are therefore, only declared after testing drugs in different settings with various groups.

Diversity in social and service institutions

Women still form a minority at most work places. They are unable to express their views and opinions without inhibitions. There are examples of providing mentoring for women in private organizations in some countries to enable them to take up leadership positions. While this is a well-meaning action, it is also critical to mentor men in the same settings.

A study trying to understand the link between diversity and discrimination in the higher education space found that due to various policies and schemes of the government, classrooms in India have become more diverse. Now students from urban and rural settings, male and female and those belonging to upper and lower caste study together as do students from different religious pursuasions. But diversity poses its own challenges to attain social inclusion. If mechanisms are not in place, it could lead to formation of in-groups and out-groups. Therefore in higher education settings, there is a need for mixed group formation.

Similarly, organizations may need to define a clear and appropriate recruitment policy. Some audit studies in urban labor and rental market have revealed that there is religion-based discrimination. Five thousand applications with same level of education, qualification and skills were sent out to private organizations. The last names and their religion was mentioned in the application. The callback rate for an interview was the lowest for muslim applicants even when they had higher qualifications than upper caste hindus. Similarly, in the rental market study, muslims had the least chance of getting a house on rent. The outcome may well be ghettoization.

This has a bearing on whether services should be universal or targeted. Targeted services in some ways, codifies the discrimination. Studies show that universal affirmative action provides equal access to employment. However additional support is required to provide safeguards for discrimination for different groups. Anganwadi Workers belonging to higher caste are unwilling to visit the Anganwadi Centres. Accredited Social Health Activists from the upper caste are reluctant to visit the dalit hamlets. This means that pregnant dalit women have lower access to antenatal care, information and other related services. A study across 7 states and 122 villages has shown that even at the service delivery point, the services delivered to the dalits are done so under unfair terms and conditions e.g., ANMs placing medicines on the window sill to avoid contact.

One way to deal such issues could be to hire service providers from the affected community. Another way to address this would be to provide incentives for desirable outcomes accomplished; for example, proportion of women who deliver in hospitals, children who are fully immunized, etc. This type of system has been used in some tea estates. The social welfare index is a measurement of achievement in certain areas related to health, education, etc. The persons responsible for delivering these services are paid according the level of achievement in those areas. What actually matters is the delivery of services and therefore the potential to earn more.

Another school of thought proposes separate and different services for marginalized and non-marginalized communities. For example, two ASHAs in a village - one for the upper caste and one for the

dalits. However this may lead to a wider gap between the two communities by institutionalizing the very divide that we are fighting against.

How to introduce diversity

In some ways this is perhaps the right time to bring in diversity in its fullest form because earlier this would not have been possible. Persons in leadership roles could help address diversity in their organizations. It is imperative that they believe in diversity and understand its benefits. And donor organizations in the development sector could help accelerate the process. There is a need for mechanisms to be put in place to bridge the gap. Social media and internet-based interface could also be possible mechanisms to promote social inclusion.

A study of 175 small organizations led by dalit and muslim men and women are a proof of their resilience and sustained interest deeply connected to an issue. They have continued to work on the issue despite all challenges even without any support from international NGOs or government agencies. Their issues therefore do not get highlighted. It is important to find mechanisms to ensure adequate support to such organizations. In fact, organizations working on social and/or women's issues may also be guilty of the same pro-male bias. To bring in diversity can be quite a challenging task. One step could be to consciously recruit members of the marginalized communities and women.

It is important to understand that just by putting a mechanism in place does not always lead to the desired result. For example, just by having a school management committee does not ensure better education and learning outcomes. When mechanisms are owned and run by the members of the marginalized or affected communities, it is more effective and sustainable. A fellowship for such persons could well be one of the mechanisms that may work well.

International donor organizations need to collaborate with and support local organizations and groups whose mission and vision is to promote and facilitate social change. To meet that end, it is critical that these local organizations reflect the social change within the organization. So to address this multifaceted issue, there perhaps is a need for a peaceful war.

Changing attitudes and behavior takes time. If appropriate opportunity is given, communities can improve their status while breaking barriers of discrimination. For example, representation in the panchayats. It took almost 20 years to get where we are today, but it has happened. However, the starting point for such a change is realizing that there is a problem that needs attention instead of remaining in denial. A divided society is not sustainable in times of globalization.

P a r t i c i p a n t s
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