



The Bhavishya Alliance: A Silent Emergency

Reducing Child Malnutrition in India

THE PROJECT AT A GLANCE:

Issue: Child Malnutrition
Geography: Maharashtra, India
Duration: 2006--2012
Co-Convenors: Unilever, UNICEF, The Synergos Institute

Impacts: 11 Pilots Launched; widespread education and capacity building for women and girls in the areas of health, nutrition and life-skills; extended services in day--care centers to include nutrition food and health; collaboration between government and community service providers.



HUMAN
CAPITAL



SOCIAL
CAPITAL



INTELLECTUAL
CAPITAL



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The Context

Child malnutrition, described by some as India's "silent emergency", is a complex systemic problem of staggering scale. Forty-seven percent of India's 414 million children under the age of 6 suffer from some form of malnutrition. In response, India runs the largest development programme in the world, with a budget of over \$2B per year, and yet the challenges persist.

From the urban slums of Mumbai to the forests of Nandurbar, malnutrition, especially amongst children, is endemic to the population of the state of Maharashtra. Half of the children in this state are classified as being underweight.

In children, malnourishment can have many severe and far-reaching effects. Unfortunately, there are few visible signs of early to moderate malnutrition; children, particularly under the age of 6, can look healthy without showing any signs of illness. This factor makes the condition difficult to diagnose and to address as a social problem. Many parents in India do not even know that their children are undernourished.

Malnutrition has no singular cause. Rather, it is the result of a diverse mixture of socio-economic, political, and geographical factors. Millions of people from very different parts of the Indian social system are involved in—and affected by—malnutrition. Young mothers, nutritionists, food manufacturers and distributors, government regulators and representatives, and others are all involved in the crisis. Consequently, any plan of action to combat this problem must necessarily engage a diversity of stakeholders from across the system. Doing so presents immense technical, political, and social challenges. Establishing partnerships of trust among these stakeholders, who more often than not come from extremely different realities, is a delicate matter in such a complex system.

Since 1973, with the launch of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, the Indian government has used conventional technical



approaches to address the problem of child malnourishment with limited success. In response to this ongoing systemic challenge, from 2003-2006, Reos Partners convened a group of government, business, and civil society organisations in an interview and dialogue process to engage with this complex issue in a new way. With the Synergos Institute, Unilever, and UNICEF as co-convenors, the group grew to more than 30 organisations. The Maharashtra Change Lab was launched in 2006, and was designed to address the issue in a systemic, participatory, and emergent way through a set of large-scale, system-wide initiatives.

The set of programmes that resulted from the Maharashtra Change Lab was called the Bhavishya Alliance. The Bhavishya Alliance emerged from a single conversation in which the then-chairman of Unilever Asia expressed his desire to see a significant effort being made to address the issue of malnutrition in India. The Alliance ran for six years, between 2006 and 2012, during which time it broke new ground on several fronts and became the most significant multi-stakeholder effort ever seen in India.

The Process

The Maharashtra Change Lab focused on generating results in three key areas. The targeted outcomes were:

Solutions: Three to six systemic, scalable, sustainable initiatives to substantially reduce child malnutrition in the five hardest-hit districts in Maharashtra by the end of 2007

Relationships: High-trust relationships among participant-leaders and their organisations, enabling them to continue to develop and implement breakthrough solutions to this and other vital societal problems

Capacities: Strengthened capacity of participating individuals and teams to undertake such deep innovation and change in large and complex organisational and societal systems

Once convened, the Maharashtra Change Lab was organised into eight modules over the course of three months, from April to June 2006. The modules corresponded to the three phases of the U-Process:

Part One: Sensing

The sensing phase of the Change Lab included a foundation workshop, community learning journeys, and system learning journeys.

Foundation Workshop: The foundation workshop was a four-day event designed to connect the stakeholders and begin to bridge their diverse perspectives into one systemic view of the challenge. Participants also gained an in-depth understanding of the Change Lab approach and the U-Process.



Community Learning Journeys: During this module, for four days, participants immersed themselves in the communities they were seeking to help. To aid in the understanding of the everyday reality of malnutrition, they were trained in disciplined observation. Daily debriefings were held using the group's collective learning to model the current system. The members also formulated initiatives they believed could shift the system toward a reduction in child malnutrition. These focused on employment, nutritious food, and water conservation. Finally, the team members were organized into "family groups," each led by one facilitator, and then into smaller groups centered on a common learning question in preparation for the system learning journeys.

System Learning Journeys: During these journeys, Lab members dispersed throughout Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Orissa to study the current programmes and systems affecting child nutrition. A conflict resolution process was then employed to share learnings. Champions and team members discussed the state of the system and its strengths and weaknesses, and began the first iteration of initiatives. Most importantly, participants began to formulate a shared vision of what success in the Lab would look like.

Part Two: Presencing

The presencing phase took the form of a nature retreat. The team members were prepared for three days alone in the wilderness of Uttaranchal in the foothills of the Himalayas. In these "solos", team members connected with the natural world and with themselves, spending time in self-reflection and revisiting the issue of malnutrition, their roles within the system, and how they could work to help shift the system. Many of the members experienced a sense of self-transformation during the retreat. After participants returned, a debriefing session was held, and team members made presentations about their roles in the Lab and their areas of expertise. Finally, the team members divided into groups to discuss the 16 initiative areas identified.

Part Three: Realizing

In the realizing phase, teams moved into systemic action. This involved four modules: three rounds of initiative prototyping and the launch of the initiatives of the Bhavishya Alliance.

Prototyping: In the initiative prototyping phase, new initiative teams formed and, with the help of other collaborators, began the process of rapidly prototyping their programs. We provided the teams with guidance on how to bring forth breakthrough innovations in a



relatively short time. Then the teams tested the models they had developed through dialogue with the communities they were intended for. As a result of this vetting process, the original 16 initiatives were reduced to four. Once the initiatives had been vetted, the Lab team members began planning pilots—real-world initiatives that would be tested in the field.

Launch: The final module, the initiative launch, focused on discussions of how to pilot and support the programs in the field. The initiative teams made presentations to the Lab team and the champions, who agreed on the focal points of each initiative. The module then concluded with a discussion by the Bhavishya Alliance executive team on the future of the Alliance and the initiatives.

Results

Over the course of the six years that followed, the Bhavishya Alliance launched 11 pilots, four of which showed significant results and were therefore scaled up to become large-scale projects. These projects focused mainly on education and capacity building in the areas of nutrition, health, and life skills. One Bhavishya Alliance project began collaborating with day-care centers to expand the breadth of their services and provide more nutritious, palatable, and diverse foods to

the children there. Another project focused on building the life skills and confidence of adolescent girls, who were recognized as key stakeholders in the system. Over a three-year timeframe, more than 10,000 girls were trained, 1,800 were supported in launching enterprises, and 1,250 volunteered to assist nurses, midwives, and childcare providers. In yet another project, the Alliance worked at a community level to build computer-aided health and nutrition literacy to local women. More than 1,000 women were trained at local centers, and 63% of these women achieved functional literacy in the program.

The Bhavishya Alliance and the Maharashtra Change Lab were highly successful in enabling members to build and leverage new relationships, which enabled the creation of new initiatives for addressing the issue of child malnutrition in Maharashtra. The Alliance also succeeded in building the capacities within and across partnering organizations and government agencies to collaborate and work directly with one another.

For more information on the Bhavisha Change Lab, please see these related materials:

www.reospartners.com/project-view/19

www.synergos.org/knowledge/12/bhavishyaalliancelegacyandlearning.pdf