

REPORT

**SAMVAD
CONVERSATION**

**NURTURING
CIVIL SOCIETY
PARTNERSHIPS IN
UNCERTAIN
TIMES**

**02 SEPTEMBER 2021
3:30 – 5 PM**

PRIA@40
SHAPING OUR TOMORROWS, TODAY



Empowering civil society



CONTENTS

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| Key Take-Aways----- | 02 |
| List of Speakers and Moderator----- | 03 |
| The Conversation (SAMVAD)----- | 04 |
| List of Participants----- | 11 |
| PRIA@40 Events----- | 12 |

- ❖ **Revisit and realign with the greater purpose** – Partnership among civil society organisations should be steered by shared values and strategies which must be reassessed and realigned so that the purpose and the mission of the organisations do not become passive in time.
- ❖ **Information and knowledge sharing** – Continuous engagement with partners around the societal issues helps to contribute meaningfully and communicate with each other. The sharing of knowledge and capacity building between organisations can be useful for one's own future efforts and struggles.
- ❖ **Humility and value addition** – Working together with humility and understanding the efforts taken by others are important as the commitments and obligations towards social causes are equal and contributing equally towards a commitment is a big responsibility.
- ❖ **Celebrate each milestone** – Achieving a milestone is never easy, be it small or big. So, one should always celebrate these accomplishments to value the importance and involvement of everyone in achieving success for the organisation.
- ❖ **Sharing and caring** – Mutual trust and accountability through shared learning is the most important value which bind people together for a cause as it builds transparency among the partners and the organisations and also paves a way to bring changes in the society.

LIST OF SPEAKERS & MODERATOR

- **Mr. VIJAY MAHAJAN**, CEO, *Rajiv Gandhi Foundation*
- **Mr. JAGADANANDA**, Founder, *Centre for Youth and Social Development*
- **Mr. MANU GUPTA**, Co-Founder, *SEEDS India*
- **Ms. SHEELA PATEL**, Director, *SPARC*, and Governing Board Member, *PRIA*
- **Ms. MONISHA BEHAL**, Executive Director, *North East Network*
- **Ms. HIRAL DAVE**, Development Professional, *Cohesion Foundation Trust*
- **Mr. BINOY ACHARYA**, Executive Director, *UNNATI*
- **Ms. BHARTI ALI**, Co-Founder & Executive Director, *HAQ*
- **Mr. SUDHIR SAHNI**, Director, Partnerships, *PRADAN*
- **Dr. INDRANI BHATTACHARYYA**, CEO, *Child in Need Institute (CINI)*
- **Mr. ASHOK SINGH**, Founder-Director, *Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra*
- **Mr. YOGESH KUMAR**, Founder-Trustee & Executive Director, *SAMARTHAN*
- **Dr. RAJESH TANDON**, Founder-President, *PRIA*
- **Dr. KAUSTUV KANTI BANDYOPADHYAY**, Director, *PRIA* (Moderator)

As PRIA completes its 40 years, it recommits to continue institutional strengthening and capacity development support to civil society and non-profits with a special focus on new-generation civil society and non-profit groups. Between August and December 2021, PRIA will be convening [PRIA@40 Conversations](#) with partners, associates, supporters, experts, investors and colleagues, drawn from civil society, government, business, media and academia, to share ideas and experiences that can help 're-imagine' PRIA, its interventions and the world in the coming period.

In this context, a conversation was organised by PRIA in partnership with [UNNATI \(Ahmedabad\)](#), [Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra \(Lucknow\)](#), [CYSO \(Bhubaneswar\)](#) and [Samarthan \(Bhopal\)](#) on [Nurturing Civil Society Partnerships in Uncertain Times](#) on **2 September, 2021**. The Conversation was held in hybrid mode – both online and face to face. It was attended by 61 participants and was moderated by **Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay (Director, PRIA)**. **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** invited **Dr. Rajesh Tandon (Founder-President, PRIA)** to set the stage for the conversation by giving the opening remarks.

In his opening remarks, **Dr. Rajesh Tandon** gave a historical overview of PRIA and its interventions at the grassroots level. PRIA was established in 1982 and its initial years it started working with grassroots organisations. In February 1989, a public discussion of 'support functions' in civil society for grassroots initiatives took place at PRIA, then celebrating seven years of its work. Findings of an external evaluation were shared with nearly 100 partners, colleagues and supporters. One of the key recommendations that emerged from that discussion was the need to provide such support more widely in different regions of the country but in a manner and language relevant to the diversity of India's civil society.

Against some good advice to open state branches of PRIA, the leadership explored a different route – found new initiatives that were led by the people who believed in similar support functions and who also worked towards developing the regional networks in their ways. It encouraged the emergence of support organisations within civil society, both new and existing, in different parts of the country. They were all committed to strengthening grassroots initiatives that promoted **participation, agency and voice of collectives of the marginalised communities**. By 1995, this effort resulted in a Network of Collaborating Regional Support Organisation (NCRSO) comprising a dozen such entities spread over nearly 20 states of the country.

This partnership then began to design a set of collaborative interventions. These support organisations were already providing some kinds of capacity-building support to grassroots groups. The purpose of NCRSO was to promote participatory development, empower the vulnerable through social mobilisation and participatory methodologies. Between 1996 and 2000, NCRSO seeded several new initiatives under the [Management in Development \(MiND\) Fellowships](#) – it was an incubation programme for social entrepreneurs. A flagship initiative which was implemented in three phases (from April 1995 to March 1997, April 1997 to March 2000 and March 2000 to March 2002), the programme aimed at strengthening local human and institutional capacities in four states, namely, Bihar (undivided), Uttar Pradesh (undivided), Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh (undivided). Conceived by PRIA, it was rolled out in partnership with six Regional Support Organisations (RSOs) – Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra (SSK) in Uttar Pradesh; Samarthan in Madhya Pradesh; Unnati in Rajasthan; CENCORED in North Bihar; and Sharmjivi Unnayan and Lok Jagriti Kendra (LJK) in South Bihar (now Jharkhand).

After the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) received constitutional recognition, between 1997 and 2002, a collaborative effort by the NCRSO launched a programme to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions. A wide range of initiatives were taken in nearly 27 states of the country that included Pre-Election Voter Awareness Campaign ((PEVAC), Panchayati Raj Jagrukta Abhiyan - PRJA (to building capacities of electing panchayat leaders), piloting Gram Panchayat Level Micro-Planning and later Decentralised Block and District Planning, and Research and Evidenced-based Engagement with the State Finance Commissions, among others. This large partnership was possible because these organisations had worked together as support organisations.

During the period 2002 to 2008, the NCRSO launched a joint programme called Governance Where People Matter – a programme that focussed on strengthening local governance institutions in rural and urban areas as well as promoting citizen engagement in these institutions. It also engaged with media, academia, and other civil society organisations. In the process, there was a time when this collaborative effort had many Panchayat and Urban Resource Centres all over the countries and each one of them experimented with the citizen participation and inclusive urbanisation model in the small and medium towns of the country, much before many national flagship programmes came into existence.

Today we have gathered here not only to hear the experiences of NCRSO but also to learn from those experiences where such strong civil society partnerships are not based on joint funding but on shared vision and mission of working together to bring about a just and inclusive society and development in India.

After **Dr. Tandon's** remarks, **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** opened the floor for discussion on the following questions:

- How do civil society partnerships around shared purposes sustain themselves over time? Which principles underpin the vibrancy of such partnerships?
- What challenges emerge in the course of such partnerships (competition for resources, contestation for leadership, conflicts around accountability, etc.)?
- In today's context, what will it take to nurture many more such partnerships amongst civil society?

Mr. Vijay Mahajan (CEO, Rajiv Gandhi Foundation) discussed the different ways in which collaboration works. For this, he referred to the following diagram:



He explained that the three colours – Red, Yellow and Green represent the status of collaboration. The red box depicts the initial condition or the inputs. Each stakeholder brings different values, cultures, resources, constraints and goals and they have a lot of prejudice about each other. Most organisations do their own thing, so when one brings people and organisations together in partnerships, one is dealing with these initial conditions which are listed above in the diagram. Yet what brings us together is that we agree on the problem in the past and the present. The issue is do we agree about the future – i.e., do we have shared goals and strategies? The yellow box depicts the processes that one has to have and there the community is put at the centre. The idea is to listen to the people, to the local and small grassroots organisations, to communicate with each other infinitely and iteratively again and again. One can build trust and respect by working together on problems and thereby build each other's perspectives and capabilities. However, today, it is difficult to take people on face value because trust has got eroded in society. In the past, one could treat anybody in civil society as a fellow traveller.

Lastly, the green box depicts the output/ outcome – building a future towards a shared vision. It enables quality with quantity and coverage. It enables efficient use of resources by avoiding duplication and by addressing gaps if there are any. Most importantly it enables learning. One can then create a feedback loop from this process which will enable better performance. He concluded that in practice all of us are experts who are trying to collaborate. In that sense, it is not new for us but since PRIA is a knowledge institution, we should start building a theory of practical collaborations.

Mr. Jagadananda (Co-Founder, CYSD, Bhubaneswar) said, 'The first principle that I see around partnership and collective is the compelling purpose for which people come together'. Reminiscing the old times, he said that one compelling purpose was to promote active citizenship and accountable participatory governance. This purpose brought us together. The second principle, he says, is the value system around which we work together – mutual trust and accountability. The third principle is that of sharing and caring. This principle ensured that we were not loners because the agenda that we were pursuing was

a big one that required many organisations to come together. If these organisations have to come together then solidarity among the collectives is a must so that we can build a critical mass of change agents.

Mr. Manu Gupta (Co-Founder, SEEDS, India) said that the disconnect between the three generations (the ones who emerged during the 1980s, the 1990s and then in the new millennium) of the civil society organisations often come in the way of their collective spirit. There is almost an invisible wall that creates this disconnect – a very passive but invisible disconnect. We must address this if we want to work on the long-term shared purposes. Endorsing Mr. Jagadananda's comment on sharing and caring, he said, *'If we can bring the leadership of these generations together, we will make that start, break the ice upfront.'* The other concern is around how we nurture the second and the third line of leadership? How do they connect to their fellow compatriots in other organisations? Is that bonding happening or not? These are some of the ingredients we need to look at when we talk of a long-term shared purpose and a collective journey towards a common goal.

Reiterating the importance of trust in partnerships, Ms. Sheela Patel (Executive Director, SPARC, and Governing Board Member, PRIA) added that one also needs to take note of the value addition that one brings to the partnership and also to the constituencies that one collectively works with. Generous sharing of knowledge and information is a three-way street in terms of picking up the critical issues, challenges and insights that come from the ground, give them legitimacy and then use them as the basis of every discussion and dialogue that happens. Every decade brings in new challenges and difficulties – right now we stand at a point where many organisations are facing death – death by FCRA, death by the state and institutional mechanisms, and death by the kind of donors that are giving money.

Emphasising the importance of sharing and caring, she states that only through a strong long-term partnership that believes in fundamental things that we can collectively articulate, the sector can withstand these challenging times. The collectives can survive by sharing and learning from each other where every generation brings in new perspectives. We need to ignite the enthusiasm and excitement of the younger generation and support them with things that are still fundamental and seminal in the work that we do. Many alliances are part of the fight locally but may have some global implications. She said, *'Local voices often need global support and global challenges require strong local advocacy'*.

Ms. Monisha Behal (Executive Director, North East Network) began by reflecting on 10th-anniversary celebration of PRIA and stressed that through the participatory training programmes, organised by PRIA, she learnt the participatory way of learning which is one of the crucial ways of democratic functioning. Endorsing the comment on the intergenerational gap, made by Mr Manu Gupta, she added that social media is one of the reasons why a lot of young people lack a sense of long-term commitment to the cause. She said, *'The commitment that we had, of democratic principles of participatory work, I think that is getting eroded'*.

Talking from her experience of being a part of several networks, Ms. Hiral Dave (Development Professional, Cohesion Foundation Trust) said, *'While the organisation learns from the network, the network also learns from the organisation'*. The theme or the issue on which the network is formed is most important and an issue-based network sustains when the issue is a common mission for all the organisations.

Mr. Binoy Acharya (Executive Director, UNNATI) stated that today partnerships are guided by pecuniary values, and not by the relevance of purpose. Increasingly partnerships are becoming transactional and are highly projectised. Nobody is benefiting from these kinds of partnerships – neither the NGOs nor the communities. We need to make it more transformational than transactional because we are primarily working for change – change in ourselves and in the community. It is important to have a continuous engagement with the partners around the issue at hand. Many a times, we may not have shared values or perspectives but in old days there used to be a natural convergence of people.

We need to ensure that we have a meaningful and strong partnership, which we can fall back on, in uncertain times. Today our entire relationship is based on inputs and outputs. Many a times perhaps we forget the goal. As a result, we end up chasing a mirage which we will never be able to get to. He concluded by saying that partnership is a valuable thing and without the shared spirit the partnerships cannot be sustained.

Ms. Bharti Ali (Co-Founder & Executive Director, HAQ) re-emphasised on the transactional nature of partnerships and the lack of natural convergence in collectives today. There have been times when it was about learning together and moving ahead – one would not wait for someone to act, people would just assume roles and go with the larger sentiment by taking on responsibilities and contribute to that movement or the campaign. This does not happen as naturally anymore, partly because a lot of coming together is now donor driven. Donors have created their own networks of organisations and they survive on those.

We have also seen times where people have become more important than the cause. Bringing in the role of social media into the discussion, she said that while social media may have its positives, it also has its way of making people larger than the cause. So, one needs to be a little cautious about that. We definitely need to rely on social media in the times that we are in but at the same time we need to ensure that it is about the cause and not the people. Besides natural convergence, a core needs to be created but because of competition and contestation for leadership these days a lot of sentiments become fragile. She concluded, '*We need to come back to working together and reflecting on these things whenever there is a need.*'

Drawing on his corporate sector experience, Mr. Sudhir Sahni (Director, Partnerships, PRADAN) said, '*It is fascinating for me to see how people can be driven from within in the development sector.*' He elaborates that in the corporate sector gaining profits and generating revenues tends to become the purpose and that is what drives people. However, more and more people these days feel that there needs to be a larger purpose to life than just making money. As a result, they tend to leave the corporate world when they find the greater purpose missing.

On the contrary, he says, there is an abundance of this greater purpose in the development sector. In this sector, people tend to leave the organisations when/ if there is a mismatch of purpose. Hence, it is of utmost importance that we revisit, reinstate and re-align ourselves with the greater purpose. He emphasised on the importance of 'humility' in partnerships and added, '*We might be good, but we can be great together.*' Working in the development sector needs us to be working together because there is a constant need and opportunity to learn from each other. Once we accept that and add humility to it, it will ensure that we add value into collaboration and work as equal partners. We tend to say that the times are changing, and that social media is corrupting people, but we also need to accept the fact that social media is the reality of today's world. We need to reflect on the changing times

and accordingly revisit our strategies. Lastly, he mentioned that we usually celebrate larger goals but celebrating milestones is equally important. We need to have tangible milestones which can be pursued, and every achievement need to be appreciated and celebrated, no matter how small they are.

'The ongoing pandemic has been a challenge in the sector in terms of reaching out to the communities', said Dr. Indrani Bhattacharyya (CEO, Child in Need Institute). It has been difficult not just in terms of providing services to the communities but also to acquire funds. Having said that, recently there has been a transition as some donors have expressed interest in working in the sector in a consortium mode. The other challenge has been leveraging foreign grants i.e., getting institutional grant has become difficult but it is very much needed in order to sustain the organisations and to build the capacity of the people so that they can contribute to the sector meaningfully.

People who work in slums and villages face the challenge of sharing their learning and experiences in order to become a part of the mainstream development work. A good leadership beyond projectisation is important i.e., sustaining partnerships through trust building and sharing resources. Building and nurturing second and third line of leadership is also very important. We need to adapt ourselves to the changing scenario both nationally and internationally. However, this adaptability should not be on the basis of compromising the values and the ideals of the organisations. In the context of digitalisation, she added, we can reach out to the community not only physically but also digitally.

Reflecting on his journey with PRIA, Mr. Ashok Singh (Founder-Director, Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra) said that it is important to promote and encourage regional support organisations. These regional support organisations need to have their own identity, losing of one's own identity and expertise is a major threat. The whole concept of working as a support organisation was a new concept back in the day. However, soon people recognised the value of these support organisations. Supporting and enabling grassroots organisations, so that they become more effective at the local level was the core idea of these support organisations.

Today it is a worrisome situation because there are organisations that are more into the field rather than doing the support functions. We need to, once again, collectively start this process of capacity building. Most of the grassroot organisations need this kind of support, especially because new organisations are coming, issues are changing, there are number of challenges that civil society is facing in different parts of the state. There is a need for vibrant, strengthened, strong support mechanisms for grassroots organisations in order to be more effective and functional. The regional organisations are important because they are region specific and they know the problems of the regions, therefore promoting and capacitating them becomes imperative. Mutual trust, sharing and using of knowledge resources are important. We must be willing to learn from each other to strengthen these networks.

Looking ahead, one also needs to look at the cadre of leaders – what kinds of leaders will come, how the core values of the supporting or enabling role will be taken forward, how do we orient future leaders so on and so forth. In our capacity building efforts, the tools at our disposal were 'face to face' interactions and emotions but these set of tools are changing with the wave of digitalisation that we witness today. Eventually we all have to surrender to these technological advancements and learn to use them.

Another challenge that the sector is facing is the non-conducive environment by the state and the central legislations. It makes it difficult for the grassroots organisations to survive in this new context. So as a support organisation, we need to rethink our role because many of these organisations depend on the funding from the second recipient, in the absence of which they find it difficult to survive.

'PRIA believes in the principle of people centred development and all its efforts lies in supporting and strengthening local institutions who in turn leads to social, economic and political environment', said Dr. Yogesh Kumar (Founder-Trustee & Executive Director, Samarthan). In order to do so, people's participation in their socio-economic and political empowerment is must. Sustainable development, it is not possible without the participation of these communities. In this context, NCRSOs was formed in different states in different capacities with the aim of strengthening local institutions, local governments and the communities.

Today the challenges towards promoting participatory development is only increasing and COVID-19 has only added to it. There is a need for the support organisations to come together to work towards the common goal of participatory development. However, the question at hand is: how do we ensure that these organisations are capacitated enough to fulfil their support functions and build platforms for the communities to participate in the process. We need such platforms to have an open conversation with all the stakeholders. We need to think about the new emerging leaderships – how can we support them, how can we support the new and upcoming networks and organisations.

Dr. Rajesh Tandon (Founder-President, PRIA) in his closing remarks said, *'I believe partnership is not just between organisations, but it is also between people'*. Inter-institutional relationships are mediated through inter-personal relationship. If we want to sustain a just and equal socio-economic order, then our everyday behaviour must also reflect that. Today, there is a huge disconnect between what we preach and practice. We must learn to recognise and appreciate the contributions of the partnerships we have.

We are in the business of changing relations of power in order to build an equitable and just society. It is important to note that the forms of power have changed over 40 years. There is a greater assertion of invisible, hidden, remote power and control. The power of money has increased systematically just as the power of information. If we have to change relations of power, we have to find partnerships where people understand how money and information operate.

Going forward, it is our responsibility to go out to those who understand these relations of power, to bring them to this realisation that participation is at the foundation of any transformation. We want to enable every Indian citizen so that they can make choices about their lives and thereby participate in shaping their future. In order to do so, they must have the opportunity to examine alternatives. Because if you do not have alternatives, you cannot choose. He concluded, *'Participation can be only achieved by participation'*.

The discussion ended with a vote of thanks by Dr. Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

- Mr. RAJESH KAPOOR
- Mr. PRAFULLA KUMAR SAHOO
- Mr. DEBI PRASAD MISHRA
- Mr. PRABHAT FAILBUS
- Ms. MADHU VERMA
- Ms. NAMRATA JAITLI
- Mr. ALOK PANDEY
- Mr. ANIL ROY
- Mr. G PLACID
- Mr. DEVI LAL VYAS
- Mr. MONCHO FERRER
- Mr. DATTA PATIL
- Mr. AJAY SINGH MEHTA
- Mr. SANJAY JOSHI
- Mr. CHETAN JHA
- Ms. ENAKSHI GANGULLY
- Mr. SUDARSHAN SUCHI
- Mr. KIRIT KUMAR PARMAR
- Ms. SWAPNI SHAH
- Mr. SHISHIR
- Ms. NISHA KUMARI
- Ms. CHAYNIKA PASARI
- Mr. ASHISH
- Mr. SHAILABH KUMAR
- Mr. MAZHER HUSSAIN
- Ms. DARVI JONEJA
- Ms. RIDHIMA RATHI
- Ms. PRERNA BARUA
- Mr. AMIT BHATT
- Mr. DHAN SINGH
- Ms. NIHARIKA KAUL
- Mr. SUHEIL TANDON
- Mr. SURJEET SINGH
- Ms. NANDITA BHATT
- Mr. CHANDRA SHEKHAR JOSHI
- Ms. NITYA SRIRAM
- Ms. NIKITA RAKHYANI
- Ms. NEHA S CHAUDHRY
- Mr. S RAM ARAVIND
- Ms. LINU RACHEL CHACKO
- Ms. SUMITRA SRINIVASAN
- Ms. SHANTA KM
- Mr. PRAVEEN PV
- Ms. SOJA SARAMMA MATHEW
- Mr. ANSHUMAN KAROL
- Ms. YASHVI SHARMA
- Mr. SUJIT SOURAV

| DATE | TITLE | THEME |
|------------------|--|--------------------------|
| 12 August 2021 | Youth Participation and Active Citizenship | Citizen Participation |
| 20 August 2021 | Planning for Urban Informalities | Sustainable Urban Future |
| 31 August 2021 | Accelerating Capacities in Civil Society and Non-Profits | Empowering Civil Society |
| 2 September 2021 | Nurturing Civil Society Partnerships in Uncertain Times | Empowering Civil Society |