

REPORT

SAMVAD CONVERSATION

INVESTING IN CIVIL SOCIETY INNOVATIONS

30 SEPTEMBER 2021

4 – 6 PM

PRIA@40
SHAPING OUR TOMORROWS, TODAY

 Ashoka
UNIVERSITY

Centre for
Social Impact
and Philanthropy

THE/NUDGE



Empowering civil society



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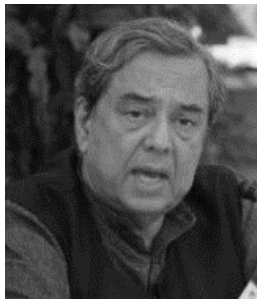
- ❖ **Provisioning Risk Capital for Civil Society Innovations** – It is important to restore the agency of civil society for innovation. Civil society needs to reject ‘conditional funding’. A long-term and patient risk capital, with systematic funding over several rounds is imperative for building the foundational strength of civil society organisations (CSOs). CSOs need multi-year core support that gives practitioners the space and time to reflect and be stimulated to develop new ideas.
- ❖ **Accountability of the Funders** – Donors have the primary responsibility to be progressive. They need to have the courage to try something new and develop a large tolerance for failure. We are living in a global world and therefore conversations about partnerships should be anchored in a global framework. Many of our philanthropists are making profits in a global market so they must be held accountable to their global peers as well.
- ❖ **Create Safer Spaces** – There is a need for creating a safer space sector-wide where funders can have conversations with each other and reflect on their actions. We need to create such institutions that produce not only knowledge regularly but also help improve the credibility and increase the visibility of the sector, as a whole. A sector-wide knowledge platform that, over a period, with contributions from the donor community, will act as a mirror for us to reflect on our actions and learn from the same.
- ❖ **Importance of Evidence** – Civil society needs to learn the new instruments for generating data and evidence. Sometimes, evidence alone may not be enough, because there is a lack of political will or lack of capacity in the system to create the circumstances for scaling up the change we want to see.
- ❖ **Re-examining Strategies** – Spending time in re-examining how change happens, and developing a shared understanding, with everyone in the ecosystem, about how we want to make transformational change happen is a must. Producing results on the ground, but also working to influence the governments and markets to support a level of momentum that can change the world. It is important to recognise that a participatory approach to knowledge, changes the way we can bring about change.

PROFILE OF THE PANEILLISTS



Mr. Martin O'Brien, Founder and Executive Director, Social Change Initiative, Ireland, is a seasoned activist for social change having worked for over 20 years in the peace and human rights movement in Northern Ireland. He led the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) which campaigned locally and internationally to advance human rights in Northern Ireland.

Ms. Ingrid Srinath, Director, Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy, Ashoka University, India has been a passionate advocate for human rights, social justice and civil society in India and around the world for the past 20 years. Prior to that, she was associated with Lowe and Grey Worldwide, CRY, served as Secretary-General of CIVICUS and Executive Director of CHILDLINE India Foundation



Dr. Ashok Khosla, Founder Chairperson, Development Alternatives Group, India is also the President of the Club of Rome and has been a Member of the Governing Bodies of the World Economic Forum in Davos, IUCN, WWF, IISD, the Stockholm Environment Institute, WETV and several other Indian and international organisations

Dr. Samar Varma, Program Officer, Ford Foundation, India has 25 years of professional experience in the corporate sector, conducting policy research, building institutions, international development and grant management based in India and UK. As Senior Program Specialist at International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada, he managed the global Think Tank Initiative program in South Asia & Myanmar



PROFILE OF THE PANEILLISTS



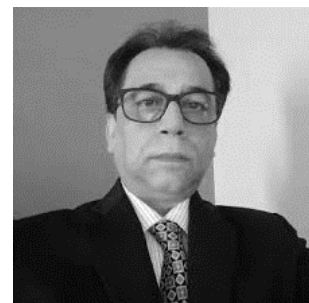
Dr. Barry Knight, Executive Director, Centre for Research and Innovation in Social Policy Ltd (CENTRIS), UK and Independent Researcher with WINGS, UK is a social scientist who has worked for the UK government as an adviser on policy and grants for non-profit organisations. He has written books on economic development, family policy, inner cities, the voluntary sector, and social enterprise.

Ms. Sudha Srinivasan is the Chief Executive Officer of The/Nudge Centre for Social Innovation, India which is an impact stream of The/Nudge Foundation, on a mission to nudge and nurture top talent to solve India's most critical problems. She has a great passion for enabling organisations to ramp in scale and competence and achieve audacious goals



Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Founder President, Participatory Research in Asia, India, is currently a UNESCO Co-Chair on Community Based Research and Social Responsibilities in Higher Education. He serves as chairperson of the Global Alliance on Community-Engaged Research (GACER) network, which facilitates the sharing of knowledge and information worldwide to further community-based research and has also served as an Advisor to the Commonwealth Foundation, UNDP, and numerous other international agencies.

Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay is the Director of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India. For more than 30 years he has been working on citizen participation in urban and rural contexts. He is an internationally acclaimed researcher, trainer, and facilitator of organisation development and participatory planning, monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment. Currently, he is the Co-Coordinator of Asia Democracy Research Networks (ADRN) and serves on the Governing Council of Asia Democracy Network (ADN).



As Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) completes its 40 years, it re-commits 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 communities, 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, PRIA convened a Conversation (Samvad) on [Investing in Civil Society Innovations](#) on 30 September 2021 in collaboration with the [Centre for Social Impact and Philosophy \(CSIP\), Ashoka University](#) and [The/Nudge Centre for Social Innovation](#). The webinar, attended by 69 participants, was moderated by **Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay**, Director, PRIA.

The Conversation (Samvad) delved into the following key questions:

- What are the best funding practices that foster development innovation by civil society?
- What needs to change in the current funding practices of resource providers to foster development innovations by civil society?

The webinar began with a short presentation by **Ms. Yashvi Sharma**, Training Specialist, PRIA on PRIA's journey of the past four decades with a special focus on its various interventions on the theme of Empowering Civil Society. Empowering Civil Society has been one of the oldest programmes of PRIA and therefore it has the longest history of interventions. To read more about PRIA's interventions on the theme, click [here](#).

In his opening remarks, **Dr Bandyopadhyay** said that civil society has served as a groundswell for development innovations over several decades not only in India but across the world, particularly in the developing world. These innovations have been possible in an enabling ecosystem. Some elements of this enabling system are One, the flexible funding from the international and domestic resource-providing organisations. Two, a deep recognition and willingness of the government and other stakeholders to utilise those innovations and scale them up which can positively impact millions of people, particularly the poor and the marginalised. As newer development challenges emerge, these would require newer solutions which means that innovations must continue.

In this context, **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** invited **Ms. Ingrid Srinath**, Director, Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy, Ashoka University, India and **Mr. Martin O'Brien**, Founder and Executive Director, Social Change Initiative, Ireland and to set the stage for the discussion.

Ms. Ingrid Srinath opened the discussion by saying, 'Despite the multiple global and regional recognition that civil society actors in India have received, somehow in the last 20 years the sector has been perceived to be ineffective and inefficient. The reason, she said, is that as a sector we are too self-effacing, we don't take credit for the contributions that we make. Perhaps there is a syndrome called 'pilotitis' i.e., where too many pilot programmes are run but not many translate into the scale operations. Maybe some of this is a result of looking at innovations as a tiny new toy that is ideally technology driven. Certainly, there is a lack of a platform to showcase the contributions and innovations of civil society and most importantly claiming credit is often counter-productive if one wants to achieve impact.

Addressing the question of how philanthropy can foster innovation, she emphasised on the importance of restoring agency. Post-2013, the CSR laws have rendered the non-profits as

the implementing agency and the donor as the provider of capital. Philanthropy needs to go back to its core role as the provider of long-term, patient risk capital and stop substituting for government or the market in the ways that it has been increasingly doing. In this context, flexible funding becomes crucial as it would offer more latitude. Funders have the privilege of looking at the sector – of viewing across geographies, across themes, across partners, so they should be able to spot patterns and make connections across those diverse entities. Innovation happens at intersections – intersections between organisations, between people across sectors, people across geographies and between people with different experiences. Funders must make those connections. In addition to their financial assets, funders also need to bring their non-financial aspects in terms of their knowledge, their social capital, their influence, their advocacy to lift the narrative of civil society. Finally, funders need to make systematic investments in developing the ecosystems for civil society in terms of knowledge, networks, norms, and so on. The civil society needs to reflect on its role and strive to do a better job in promotion and recognition of the sector led by the sector itself.

She concluded by posing some questions for the panellists and participants to ponder upon: Can we start to carve out and seek the risk capital that we need to innovate? Can we begin to understand some of the social impacts of capital instruments that are coming our way? Can we strengthen our network so that we have a better voice in shaping the narrative?

“innovations happen at the periphery and margins”

Mr. Martin O’Brien began by sharing his experience of working with Atlantic Philanthropy. The mission of this Philanthropy is to make difference in the lives of disadvantaged communities. Therefore, the foundation had a particular focus on innovation and on changing policies and practices. He suggested we adapt the quote *“necessity is the mother of invention”* to say *“necessity is the mother of innovation”*.

He stressed on bringing the people, who are experiencing problems, at the centre of the decision-making because they have the best ideas, solutions, and innovations for dealing with problems. Because problems are multifaceted, a single frame of looking at it isn’t going to be effective. It requires time, space, stimulation and a mixed set of skills and ideas. We need a diverse set of strategies for delivering change. He reiterated the importance of flexible funding in this context. Further he stressed on the importance of allocating resources for leadership development and support for fellowship.

Taking **Ms. Srinath’s** comment on ‘pilotitis’ further, he said that it’s important to influence mainstream policy and actors because it often leads to partnerships with the government. In addition to the partnerships with the government, it is important to be committed to funding advocacy and strategic litigation alongside the pilots, leadership development and capacity building. The donors and the philanthropy that are keen to support innovation and change, need to think about who is it providing its resources to? This circles back to the idea of putting the poor and marginalised people in the driving seat. However, often philanthropy’s resources do not find their way to the people. Also there needs to be a large tolerance for failure. It’s a long-term project, there are no short-term answers to these problems, and hence one needs to have patience. Philanthropy needs to provide a space and the time for people to reflect and co-learn to come up with the most feasible and effective ways of tackling a particular issue.

“innovation requires cross-pollination of ideas”

Moving on to the next segment of the discussion, **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** requested the panellists to share their reflections on **the best funding practices that foster development innovation by civil society**.

Ms. Sudha Srinivasan, Chief Executive Officer, The/Nudge began with the question: who is the most motivated to innovate and solve social problems? She said that it's not the markets because there is no money to be made in solving a lot of social issues. However, markets do play a critical role in creating innovations that eventually trickle down to the base of the pyramid. However, the motivation to solve social problems is very scarce. It's not the government either because the government is not in the business of innovations. Government is in the business of scaling up the right innovations after they have been proven at some meaningful scale by the private sector. The most motivated to solve the social problems is civil society. Unfortunately, civil society has been chartered to deliver, what they signed up for, to the grant makers. This reflects the paucity of innovation capital in the sector. Donor support and participation of the government and other private sector players is significant for deep innovations and refinements. The quest is for models that will bring to existence a different breed of non-profits that are hungry and impatient to achieve their goals. Nonetheless, the process needs to be thoughtful and in close collaboration with the communities.

“there is a dearth of innovation capital in the sector”

Dr. Samar Varma, Programme Officer, Ford Foundation pointed out that a lot of discussion on institution building and the need for learning space has been going on for a long time but we have not been able to do address it completely. It's important to understand why this has been so? He emphasised that while some funders have been progressive on this account, many others have found it difficult. While there might be factors related to internal dynamics of the division of the funders themselves, it is the significance of providing a multi-year/ long-term core support that matters the most for building institutions.

In this context, he mentions the [Pay-What-It-Takes Philanthropy](#) where four donor partners – [A.T.E. Chandra Foundation](#), [Children's Investment Fund Foundation](#), [EdelGive Foundation](#) and the [Ford Foundation](#), have come together to work with non-profits to develop a more realistic form of grant-making. There is a need to reflect on the ongoing funding practices. It's important to have an element of empathy into the funding practices and funder's engagement across different stakeholders that they interact with. Furthermore, it is important to value evidence/ data because, in the absence of it, funders tend to make mistakes. There needs to be an openness to change based on the evidence/ data. One needs to be willing to take create collaborative networks to take new ideas forward.

“funding practices need to change across the board”

Recalling PRIA's approach to let the civil society define funding mechanism and its implementation, **Dr. Ashok Khosla**, Founder Chairperson, Development Alternatives Group said that this approach was later endorsed by the [Department for International Development \(DFID\) of the UK Government](#). It provided a budget of £25 million, and the money was meant to be spent on the ground to work in the hundred poorest districts of India which was defined by the erstwhile Planning Commission at the time. The idea was to build the capacity in these seven states of hundred districts of civil society.

Reflecting on his journey of 39 years in the development sector, he said that a major contribution in innovation whether it's technology, perception, or the optics of how

development should take place, has been by the person (namely, the Programme Officer) at the funder's office who was willing to nurture creativity and innovation. This willingness to nurture was not just liberating for us but it enabled us to undertake innovations fearlessly. No matter how great the intention of the philanthropic agency is, it's the vision, flexibility, and ability of the Programme Officer that makes a big difference.

“the willingness to nurture creativity enables innovation”

Speaking of the [#ShiftThePower](#) campaign, **Dr. Barry Knight**, Executive Director, Centre for Research and Innovation in Social Policy Ltd (CENTRIS) reiterated the importance of the participation of people. He said that communities should be in charge of the ideas that drive the funders because the funders and the highly skilled professional would not know the realities on the ground. As a result of the campaign, a family of CSOs – community philanthropy, are working together to build the power of civil society from the ground up and funders are beginning to respond to it. This campaign was one way of organising and forcing funding organisations to do things differently. We need a holistic picture to come together to build a new narrative without the involvement of the government as they lack innovative thinking. We need different ways of promoting this so that people can connect and begin to do things differently. He concluded, *“The funding world has its own way and has been uncriticised for too long. Hence we need to do some advocacy around this”*.

“we need a holistic picture if we want to do things differently”

Meet our panellists...



[From top left to right: Dr. Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay, Ms. Sudha Srinivasan, Dr. Barry Knight, Mr. Martin O'Brien, Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Ms. Ingrid Srinath, Dr. Samar Varma, and D. Ashok Khosla]

Furthering the discussion, **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** requested the panellists to share their thoughts on what needs to change in the current funding practices of resource providers to foster development innovations by civil society.

“We need to shift the norms”, said **Ms. Srinath**. Producing evidence on what was funded and what was not; what worked and what did not, is crucial. Indian philanthropies need to become more transparent. We are dealing with a complete stonewall when it comes to their willingness to share data. We need a small group of progressive Indian philanthropies as it is the last sector in India that should be opaque and unaccountable. They must own up to their mistakes. There is a need for a safer space where funders can have conversations with each other and

reflect on their actions. The infrastructure intermediaries have a disproportionate influence on the norms. We need to collaborate to maximise that influence. We must make loose coalitions of ecosystem organisations so that we can all advocate together with the philanthropies that we work with. If our organisations are bastions of patriarchy, castes, class, and so on, then there is no possibility of success at convincing funders to shift their norms. Most importantly, it is imperative that we stop and reflect on our actions before we lobby with the funders.

Furthering **Ms. Srinath's** comment on 'pilotitis', **Ms. Srinivasan** urged that we need to assess the funding of CSOs in today's context because the ideas that are just taking shape require an entire continuum of funding – seed funding, growth-stage funding, and scale-up stage funding. The sector and the funding ecosystem need to ensure this continuum of funding from the seed funding to the scale of funding. There is also an opportunity to blur the divide between the donor and the grantee. Civil society is both sides together – philanthropists are as much a part of civil society as the non-profits that are doing the work. For the non-profit sector to be able to attract talent, capital, political will, and public attention, ancillary services are needed alongside a robust body of knowledge that must be shared openly. This will further the narrative and shape it in the right direction. It also serves to spotlight problems that inspire entrepreneurs to jump in and bring in innovation to solve the problems of scale. She concluded, "*We are already witnessing a transformation there is just so much more to do*".

"*I am hopeful that change is possible*", said **Dr. Varma**, reflecting on his experience. There is a belief that change is round the corner. The reason is the presence of robust evidence. However, one needs to ask what constitutes evidence and whose evidence matters? These are not political questions but are situated in dominating contexts. The peer review mechanism is the litmus test for testing the validity of the hypothesis and the result. From the Global South experience, we know that these reviews are critical to understanding what constitutes good quality evidence. He endorsed **Ms. Srinath's** comment on creating a safer space for funders sector wide. We need to create such institutions that produce not only knowledge regularly but also help improve the credibility and increase the visibility of the sector, as a whole. A sector-wide knowledge platform which, over a period, with contributions from the donor community, begins to act as a mirror for us to reflect on our actions and learn from the same.

Dr. Khosla said, "*The environment has massively deteriorated from what it was 20 years ago, in terms of ownership of the problems and attitude towards solutions*". What could be done effectively earlier in terms of innovation, creative thinking, producing results on the ground in villages and households in the lives of women, we have not been able to do that today. It hasn't been easy to retain the level of momentum. The world has rejected the notion of inclusivity. The idea that it's the responsibility of society as a whole and civil society, in particular, has been lost. It is imperative to revive it. Nobody has ever recognised that CSOs/ NGOs are subsidising society by cutting their overhead costs. The costing is so distorted now that one cannot evaluate the monetary value of what civil society does for society. The virus of authoritarianism and the virus of being inimical to independent voices and thinking have crippled the world. Civil society is the only voice at the moment that is questioning the way things are going and philanthropy has a way to support that. The philanthropic world has not realised that nurturing dissent, independent voices, and thinking are just as important as it is to nurture innovations.

Mr. O'Brien stressed on the importance of re-imagining and re-examining how we think change happens. On the importance of evidence, he said that he is a fan of evidence. Even

though the evidence is a necessary element, but it is often not sufficient. It's mainly because there isn't a political will to implement the changes we work to see. The evidence is often a part of making the political will. However, it is also important to note that sometimes there may be political will, but the system may lack the capacity, the ability, the skill set to mainstream the change. We need to also pay enough attention to the implementation of ideas. He agreed with **Ms. Srinath's** comment on the need to create a space for the ecosystems to come together because it is very easy to fall into silos.

He resonated with **Dr. Khosla's** comment on the deterioration of the spaces that we inhabit. He said that this is chronic and is speeding. He recalled his time in the PRIA library where he learnt so much that changed his mind-set about the participatory approach to knowledge. He suggested that one of the things that we could do collectively is to think about the narrative that the civil society wants to build. At this moment, it is disconnected from each other. In this context, he reiterated **Ms. Srinath's** comment on bringing together various ecosystems to build our common narrative and principles. We expect to be understood but we are not good at communication. We need to organise the narrative, face the reality of the political situation and learn to communicate. We must work in solidarity rather than people who compete over a small amount of money.

"It is all about putting people and their needs, aspirations, hopes, fears and knowledge in the centre", said **Dr. Rajesh Tandon**, Founder- President, PRIA. To do so, those of us who are creating that space may have to stay out of that space. Independent thinking civil society needs to take responsibility for its own agency. We are busy building people's agencies, and, in the process, we are losing our own agency. That is possible only in a collective agency and not in individual actions. Reaching out to others requires a shared understanding of the purpose i.e., to change the relations of power. Transformative change will require coming to terms with changing relations of power, therefore, it is important to organise, mobilise, advocate with selective links inside the system while putting pressure from outside. We are living in a global world and therefore conversations about partnerships should be anchored in a global framework because many of our philanthropists including many in the public sector are making profits in a global market space not just in the domestic circuit. And they must be held accountable to their global peers as well. He concluded by saying, *"Having a mechanism where different stakeholders can have conversations with each other on the way forward, without bothering about giving money to each other, is imperative"*.

"partnerships must be anchored in a global framework"

The conversation (samvad) ended with a vote of thanks by **Dr. Bandyopadhyay**.

4.00 pm to 4.15 pm

Welcome and Introduction to PRIA@40 Programmes and Conversation

Moderator: Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, Director, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India

4.15 pm to 4.30 pm

Setting the Stage

- Ms. Ingrid Srinath, Director, Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy, Ashoka University, India
- Mr. Martin O'Brien, Founder and Executive Director, Social Change Initiative, Ireland

4.30 pm to 5.00 pm

Deep Dive Conversation (opening round)

- Ms. Sudha Srinivasan, Chief Executive Officer, The/Nudge Centre for Social Innovation, India
- Dr. Samar Varma, Programme Officer, Ford Foundation, India
- Dr. Ashok Khosla, Founder Chairperson, Development Alternatives Group, India
- Dr. Barry Knight, Executive Director, Centre for Research and Innovation in Social Policy Ltd(CENTRIS), UK and Independent Researcher with WINGS, UK

5.00 pm to 5.20 pm

Open Discussion

5.20 pm to 5.50 pm

Deep Dive Conversation (closing round)

5.50 pm to 5.58 pm

Key Takeaways

Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Founder-President, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India

5.58 pm to 6.00 pm

Vote of Thanks and Closure

Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, Director, PRIA, India

PRIA@40 EVENTS

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
15 September 2021	Redesigning Civil Society Ecosystem: From Local to Global	Empowering Civil Society
28 September 2021	Unlearning Patriarchy: Expanding Impacts of Gender Training	Making the Gender Leap
30 September 2021	Investing in Civil Society Innovations	Empowering Civil Society