

The Bhavishya Alliance: A Multisectoral Initiative to Address Undernutrition in Maharashtra

BACKGROUND

In 2006, India had still not been able to significantly reduce the incidence of child malnutrition for the last 25 years. Data from the same year showed that almost half of children under the age of 5 years (48 percent) were chronically malnourished (IIPS and Macro International 2007).

It was against this backdrop in 2006 that the idea of a strategic, multistakeholder alliance among Hindustan Unilever, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the Synergos Institute was conceived and formalized as the Bhavishya Alliance to address malnutrition.

After an initial assessment of the nutrition situation in several Indian states, the alliance chose to focus its work in the state of Maharashtra. The state possessed critical prerequisites for the project: the existence of a state-level Nutrition Mission (the Rajmata Jijau Mother-Child Health and Nutrition Mission) and a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) that were already addressing child malnutrition in rural and urban areas. Partners from various sectors joined the alliance the first and second years (Exhibit 1).

Between 2006 and 2012, the Bhavishya Alliance served as a way for those in corporate, government, and civil society sectors committed to reducing undernutrition to plan and implement a series of innovative pilot projects in target areas of Maharashtra.

APPROACHES AND METHODS FOR COLLABORATION

With Hindustan Unilever, the Tata group, Housing Development Finance Corporation (HDFC), and ICICI Bank serving as trustees, Bhavishya was registered as a charitable trust in 2006. A governing council comprised of several individuals who provided policy and programmatic direction guided the Bhavishya Alliance. Synergos, UNICEF, and Hindustan Unilever initially seconded key staff. Hindustan Unilever provided office space, equipment, and amenities, and ICICI Bank, Hindustan Unilever, and HDFC contributed to the salaries and operational costs of the alliance. Many partners, such as the Tata group companies and the ICICI Foundation, made valuable in-kind contributions, including

EXHIBIT 1 Partners in the Bhavishya Alliance

Aroehan (Nirmala Niketan School of Social Work)
ASHRAY Sevabhavi Society
B.G. Shirke Constructions
BAIF
BMC
Department of Health and Family Welfare, Maharashtra
Department of Tribal Welfare, Maharashtra
Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition
Green Kettle Consulting
Hindustan Unilever Ltd.
Housing Development Finance Corporation Ltd. (HDFC)
ICICI Bank Limited
ICICI Center for Child Health & Nutrition
ICICI Foundation
Indian Hotels Company Ltd. (Taj Group of Hotels)
Institute of Health Management, Pachod
Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Maharashtra
International Center for Research on Women
KHOJ India TV
Media Matters
Mumbai Mobile Crèches
Nehru Yuva Kendra
Nike Foundation
Nirman
Ogilvy Action
Rajmata Jijau Mother and Child Health & Nutrition Mission
Shell Consultancy
Shriram Ahirrao Memorial Trust
Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey University
Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action
Synergos Institute
Tata Consultancy Services
Tata Industries Limited
Tata Institute of Social Sciences
UNICEF, Maharashtra
Voluntary Association for Community Health & Nurture
Zilla Parishads

staff expertise and involvement in program implementation. A Hindustan Unilever grant of US\$1 million enabled the alliance to then appoint its own staff and become operationally and financially independent from October 2008 onward.

The work of the Bhavishya Alliance began with the Change Lab, where staff and senior leadership at the alliance's partner organizations were supported by Generon Consulting to build a common understanding and shared approach based on the guiding framework of an innovative social technology called the U-Process.¹

The Change Lab culminated with the group identifying and implementing a series of rapid prototype projects, which were then adapted and developed into the larger innovation initiatives (pilot projects). Recognizing that child malnutrition has an inter-generational context, the pilot interventions targeted the entire period from adolescence, marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth, to the subsequent health and nutrition of mothers and infants.

During its existence, Bhavishya tested, refined, and implemented more than 11 significant innovative pilot projects in Maharashtra on issues ranging from food diversification, empowering adolescent girls, behavior change in infant and young children feeding practices, and health systems strengthening.

In 2012, the alliance ended when the trustees identified government programs that could integrate some of the best practices from the alliance's pilot programs. For example, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and the Department of Women and Child Development integrated the Girls Gaining Ground work into the national SABLA program for empowering adolescent girls.

KEY FINDINGS

During the six years of its existence, the Bhavishya Alliance documented a series of notable accomplishments. Of the 11 pilots, the following 4 projects are being scaled up in their current context or are being replicated in other parts of India:

- ▶ The **Food Diversification project**, which aimed to improve the quality and variety of supplementary nutritional food provided at *anganwadi* centres (AWCs) by creating diverse and nutritious recipes, building the capacity of self-help groups, and training mothers in cooking and good nutrition. This pilot project was implemented in Nandurbar district as a multistakeholder initiative of the Taj Group of Hotels, ICDS, and local NGOs. Taj Hotels and ICDS plan to scale the project across Maharashtra and possibly replicate it in other states.
- ▶ The **Girls Gaining Ground initiative**, which worked to build the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence of adolescent girls, considered key change agents for influencing child malnutrition. Funded by the Nike Foundation through Synergos, Girls Gaining Ground was implemented through a partnership of local NGOs, ICDS, and government departments on a pilot basis in eight tribal blocks in Thane, Nasik, Amravati, and Gadchiroli districts and in Ghatkopar ward in Mumbai City. Results showed significant improvement in the girls' awareness of good nutritional practices, health, and hygiene, and in their levels of self-confidence (Baker et al. 2009). As noted, the project model is being integrated into the national SABLA program for the empowerment of adolescent girls.
- ▶ In the **Day Care Centers project**, AWCs were expanded to provide daylong care to children of working mothers in two slums and at three construction sites in Mumbai and Navi, where migrant worker families often lack access to services for their children. The AWCs also provided improved nutritional supplements to children and closely monitored their nutritional status. The project is being taken up beyond the pilot phase by the NGOs Mobile Crèche and the Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action, together with ICDS.
- ▶ The **Computer-Aided Literacy, Health, and Nutrition Awareness Programme** worked at the community level to provide training in literacy, health, and nutrition to local women. This initiative was characterized by excellent cooperation among Bhavishya, government agencies, the NGO Voluntary Association for Community Health & Nurture, and corporate partners (Tata Consultancy Services). Local women facilitators trained 1,260 participants at 30 centers. Of those trained, 815 women (63 percent) achieved functional literacy, and 291 (55 percent) successfully completed the health and nutrition training.

Though not externally evaluated, overall, the work resulted in a body of learning that has been captured and documented to guide the scale-up and replication of successful innovations and to share insights with other stakeholders who are planning similar work. (To learn more, see <http://www.synergos.org/partnerships/pcnindia.htm>.)

The alliance also immensely benefitted partners. The U-Process provided a safe, creative space for the partners to deeply explore projects' contexts, issues, and possible solutions. By working together, the alliance's partners and staff were exposed to new approaches, knowledge areas, and skill sets that built their capacity and led to innovative solutions that greatly enhanced project outcomes.

The Bhavishya Alliance's approach has been successfully adopted by some partners, who have established new and more effective ways of working directly with government and other stakeholders in initiatives beyond the alliance. For example, Hindustan Unilever collaborated with the Government of Bihar on a hand-washing campaign. Partners like the Nutrition Mission and UNICEF continued their relationship, and used the model of the Bhavishya Alliance to form the Maharashtra Nutrition Alliance. The experience also gave the Government of Maharashtra confidence to engage with private-sector partners in furthering the agenda of reducing malnutrition.

However, partners in the Bhavishya Alliance faced some challenges in working together. Developing an alliance among constituents from different sectors who traditionally nursed strong suspicions about each other's motives was difficult. Though leaders from within the alliance were used to building or mending relationships, some partners were unable to surmount their mutual suspicions. Additionally, some partners did not meaningfully engage with each other to move the projects beyond the pilot stage. They left it to the professional managers of the alliance to do this, who lacked the necessary manpower to do so.

Lack of continuity of key personnel in government agencies and at participating companies was also a major challenge

that had an impact on planning and implementing the pilot initiatives, as well as on developing scaling-up strategies.

The corporate sector also limited itself to responding to government requests for assistance in ongoing government programs, and rarely took up initiatives on their own that could have been linked to their core business practices or even corporate social responsibility.

LESSONS LEARNED AND CONCLUSION

The following are some of the key lessons learned from the implementation of the pilot projects and from the insights shared by the partners in the alliance:

- ▶ **Invest time and trust to establish strong multistakeholder partnerships.** In the alliance's experience, opportunities to negotiate and reach a shared understanding were provided by regular convening project partners, governing council meetings, and other day-to-day interactions.
- ▶ **Seek an enabling environment and ensure conditions are favorable before establishing projects.** Clear government commitment to the issue, active and interested corporations, and the presence of strong and capable NGOs and CBOs were all in place in Maharashtra and thus enabled success.
- ▶ **Prototype the viability of interventions to gain insights into the challenges of implementation.** The alliance's pilot projects made it possible to test a prototype solution that provided insights into the implementation challenges. The process allowed modifications to be made, early and often, resulting in interventions that were better suited to field conditions. Pilots were executed as action-research opportunities to test for success.
- ▶ **Maintain continuity of key personnel and contributing team members.** The Bhavishya Alliance engaged with stakeholders at multiple levels to reduce the risk of overinvesting in key personnel whose departure or transfer could end a valuable and important relationship. This risk also can be minimized by building and maintaining networks with key individuals in peer organizations who can provide entry points to influencers.
- ▶ **Identify and foster government commitment on the importance of child malnutrition and the need for programs to address it.** A major factor in the Bhavishya Alliance's success was the recognition, at the highest levels of government, of the importance of child malnutrition and the need for programs to address the issue. Relationships were often formalized in memorandums of understanding. While the existence of the State Nutrition and Health Mission provided a single contact point, the Bhavishya Alliance's experience showed there was still a need to interact with various departments of the state government to enlist their support in deploying personnel and financial resources to implement pilot projects.
- ▶ **Ensure authentic involvement of community and non-governmental organizations.** The most successful pilot projects were those that had meaningful interaction with community members, through CBOs and NGOs, particularly those with the greatest stake in successful outcomes. NGOs

and CBOs with a significant international or national presence can also help to raise funds for pilot initiatives and scale-ups.

- ▶ **Identify and tap the diverse resources of the corporate-sector partner, to ensure its meaningful participation and maximize its contribution beyond traditional corporate social responsibility engagements.** Corporate-sector partners provided the Bhavishya Alliance invaluable skills, perspectives, and knowledge, in addition to financial resources and staffing. Both ICICI Bank and Hindustan Unilever provided resources and staff to support the alliance institutionally. At the project level, the corporate partners made significant and often unique contributions. For example, one partner provided staff to conduct internal staff management training for peers in government. It is important to identify and formalize the role of corporate-sector partners and ensure that they are not viewed in a limited fashion, for example, only in terms of donations.
- ▶ **Rather than taking on the role of government, model the potential for its role.** The Bhavishya Alliance did not, nor did it intend to, assume the role of government. Instead, it provided a space for demonstrating what could be achieved through cross-sectoral, multistakeholder partnerships, while laying the groundwork for government to eventually take up initiatives.
- ▶ **Engage and involve partners in meaningful ways for resourcing efforts.** While Bhavishya needed funds to operate at the institutional level, at the pilot project level, partners often freely offered a variety of in-kind inputs to sustain and boost the work in the field.

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NOTE

1. The U-Process is a methodology for addressing highly complex challenges—for solving complex problems or realizing complex opportunities. The U-Process comes from the seminal text: Scharmer, O., P. M. Senge, and B. S. Flower. 2005. *Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organizations and Society*. New York: Random House.

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ABOUT POSHAN

Partnerships and Opportunities to Strengthen and Harmonize Actions for Nutrition in India (POSHAN) is a 4-year initiative that aims to build evidence on effective actions for nutrition and support the use of evidence in decisionmaking. It is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and led by IFPRI in India.

ABOUT IMPLEMENTATION NOTES

Implementation Notes summarize experiences related to how specific interventions or programs are delivered. They are intended to share information on innovations in delivery and are not research products.

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About Transform Nutrition

Transform Nutrition is a consortium of five international research and development partners funded by the UK government. Over 5 years, from 2012-2017, Transform Nutrition aims to transform thinking and action on nutrition and strengthen nutrition-relevant evidence in order to accelerate undernutrition reduction in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. For more information, please visit www.transformnutrition.org.

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