

Don't push NGOs to scale up the way businesses do

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Funders' requirements have eroded the authenticity and rigour of India's NGO sector, making them more 'fake and flaky.' I described this phenomenon in my last column; in this piece, I will explore one of its aspects in greater detail.

Which is the push for scale—the demand by funders for greater numbers, be it in terms of geographical coverage or the count of beneficiaries.

Everyone wants more people to benefit— not just funders, but also NGOs, other stakeholders involved and communities. But too often, these demands for scale are wildly unreal. Usually, this is because of underestimation or ignorance of the fact that social-human interventions do not scale in industrial mode.

They must be worked upon person-by-person, context-by-context. The demand for scale, however, tempts NGOs to do superficial (flaky) work or exaggerate (fake) what they are doing. If that's the game that will get them money, then they will play it.

Particularly because it is easier than doing rigorous work and being honest about the limitations. Let me emphasize that a significant proportion of NGOs and many funders are not afflicted by these maladies; however, since a large number of funders do act in this fashion, it has a cumulative effect on the NGO sector. In what ways, where, and how does this 'flake-fake' problem show up? Here are a few typical scenarios.

An NGO runs creches in villages. It provides very young children good nutrition, lets mothers go to work, most of whom work as labour in fields or at project sites, and ensures that older siblings do not have to skip school to take care of the children.

The funder wants more and more villages covered, which is what the NGO does. But they overlook the fact that many of these villages need more than one creche because they have many more children in that age-group than what one creche can serve.

Why push for such expansion? Because saying "We run creches in 100 villages" sounds better than "We run creches in 25 villages," and nobody outside those villages would know how many children are actually there in any village. This flaky approach creates many problems in its wake, not the least of which is the exclusion of many equally vulnerable children.

Citing larger numbers of a simply graspable geographical or institutional unit, such as '200 slums' or '300 panchayats,' is impressive, while it is not possible to ascertain from a distance if the coverage in a village or slum is adequate. This flakiness of coverage that enables high headline numbers is a comfortable equilibrium between the funder and the NGO.

A second category of such flaky pursuits of scale arises when claims are made about large territories. For example, "We work in five states on skilling" or "We work in 500 blocks on water management."

Checking a single level of detail could be enough to reveal that a claim of working on skilling in five states is actually based on working with the relevant department of the state to design a few training programmes. Which then may (or may not) get used in other parts of the state.

Such funders and NGOs are keen to add another state to their work-list in an identical manner, rather than get engaged at a deeper level on getting the said skilling programmes implemented. It is not difficult to design a programme sitting in the state capital.

The real challenges are in getting it implemented at high quality levels for the appropriate people. This requires building on-the-ground capacity—both institutional and in terms of staffing—and then managing engagement, community acceptance and more.

But all that is too complex and time-consuming, and requires building deep expertise within the NGO. It is far more convenient for both the NGO and the funder to stay with the easy work and claim large scale by touting large territories.

In brief, this kind of flakiness is about claiming scale based on work that is very distant, indirect and uncertain by the time it reaches those it is supposed to.

A third category is formed when the shallowness and low intensity of engagement is deliberately glossed over to establish scale. For example, a claim that "We work in 10,000 schools," when questioned, will often reveal superficial engagement.

In many cases, it is the kind where a 'learning kit' is given to schools, perhaps some brief training is also provided, and that's it. Barely two months after such an initiative, you will see the kits gathering dust.

Improving education in schools requires long-term deep engagement with teachers, principals and many other aspects of the overall system. Handing out learning kits is a near futile exercise, as it doesn't lead to improvement in education. But it does enable easy claims of large-scale work in schools.

Some of the best NGOs of the country are also the biggest in terms of real scale. They do not make such fake claims about scale and do not do flaky work. However, their scale may seem dwarfed by those that are indeed fake and flaky.

But the truth cannot be escaped if a critical eye is applied to completeness of coverage, how distant the work is from actual implementation, and the intensity and depth of engagement.

The chimera of scale is a pursuit that must be stopped. It diverts resources and attention. It offers a false sense of comfort that big things are happening when nothing much is changing for those who need change.

And it also weakens and erodes the credibility of the whole NGO sector. NGOs cannot drive this change, for it's the funders that must transform themselves.