# "We are the digital designers fighting information poverty"

*The Legatum Center at MIT has been conducting research on Innovation-driven enterprises (IDE) that are unlocking significant business and societal value by solving systemic problems that conventional business models have not been able to solve. In that research, Legatum Center included the Digital Empowerment Foundation as an example of IDE's. Following is a compilation from the interviews with Osama Manzar, founder and director of Digital Empowerment Foundation, by Valeria Budinich and Adeeb Qasem from LC on April 6, 2021 and April 16, 2021. How*

*How did DEF organise itself at the beginning and how the social enterprise drove the model of entrepreneurship through innovation?*

The first step for DEF was to create a solution-oriented enterprise and define whether it is a profit chain or any other surprise chain. The primary focus was to identify the issue, its extent, and work towards creating a resolution that employs resources in the surroundings as opposed to working based on a theory. Digital Empowerment Foundation's approach to innovation creates something transformational through common sense. The word common sense, in this regard, includes being sensible regarding the efficiency, economics and availability of resources. For example, To build a road for vehicles to operate at a faster speed does not enable a progressive method to commute. It is the consideration of factors such as sidewalks, lanes, cycle paths and more that results in holistic efficiency.

Twenty or twenty-five years ago, the internet enrolled into our everyday lives, and its primary objective was a tool to make communication more efficient and easy. While that was the primary objective, acknowledging it was not enough. It was important to realise the dependency of life on communication and information sharing rather than the transformation of technology. For example, it is not the food itself that has to travel to fill stomachs, but it is the information of availability of food that can be accessed with ease.

*The thought process of the organisation during the development of digital design, information design, internet design, considered empowering the have-nots with the similar democratic freedom of information and access available to the haves.* The people from impoverished communities do not have access to information on the availability of — food, water, electricity, shelter, roads, employment opportunities, health, and so on as the means of production of information are curated by the haves. To resolve the same, what should have been named "Information Empowerment Foundation" or "Access Empowerment Foundation," was named "Digital Empowerment Foundation" with the key focus on providing information access to the marginalised communities in India.

For instance, FabIndia is India's success story. However, FabIndia is the middleman to the producers since the producers cannot access the market directly due to their lack of information about the market, lack of information about the access capabilities to that market. The approach evaluated the reason for impoverishment and concluded it to be — the lack of information and lack of resources to produce information.

Hence, making the communities less informed as both, the consumer and producer. The same leads to the deprivation of exercising basic rights, opportunities, privileges, etc.These were foundational pillars of DEF and the rest, was 'Jugad,' or building blocks answering questions such as: "how to resolve "access" problem through frugal technology, how to resolve "information access" problem by purchasing mobiles and not big machines, how to enable the community to solve problems via the radio, or any other oral means of communication, how to be employed without being qualified while still achieving results, how to avail the rights without being literate to avail the entitlements and succeed, and similar more issues.

## *What were the initial steps of this journey and what followed? What would you consider the key moments that allowed you to gain traction?*

In the beginning, there was no particular plan or strategy to achieve what was the original concept. My first step was to talk to my wife, tell her I'm leaving my current job, this is what we need to pursue, and somehow she agreed to plunge into it while examining the logistics. Regardless, we did not have anything in hand to start with. "It was as if an infant took its first steps," and that was the first milestone solely based on the available knowledge and models.

The first bit of the milestone, the knowledge bit, was an offering from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology introducing the National Institute of Smart Governance and requesting us to do a series of case studies focusing on the technology being utilised to resolve developmental issues, specially governance. As for the second bit, I was personally determined to observe the successful models around the country utilising ICT (Informations and Communication Technology) to solve governance and citizen concerns. For this I travelled all over the country to see hands-on the prevailing digital projects or ICTD (Information Communication Technology for Development) projects.

At the same time, I had thankfully received an invitation to represent India for Digital Content Expert for the World Summit Awards formed under the WSIS (World Summit on the Information Society) framework of the United Nations. The process taught to create an award system and DEF was the first to institutionalise awards in South Asia and India by the name of Manthan Award, which is now more than 15 year old. Gradually the Manthan Award further institutionalised three more awards: the mBillionth Award, the Social Media for Empowerment Award, and the eNGO Challenge. All awards were to encourage digital innovations and put on a platter the knowledge bank for learning for all.

The second milestone was the execution through policy suggestion or prototyping of the knowledge bank. Thus, Digital Empowerment Foundation became the access point for National and International agencies to consult while solving issues through technology. For example, the National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM) was formed by DEF along with Nasscom Foundation and Intel. Luckily the government got involved and adopted the NDLM as a national program with dedicated budgets year after year. The idea was how to create a mass scale movement to make the whole country digitally literate.

The first two milestones were regarded as the key milestones when expanding the knowledge bank and its application to newer regions since the possibility of informing and educating every individual of their rights and entitlement is near impossible.

The third milestone consisted of applying various techniques which were rather commonsensical, yet needed to integrate frugality with the concept, the methodology, and the technology to bring access to information as a consumer and producer through new models. For instance, we initiated a Community Information Resource Centre which provided digital access to the community and compelled them to take accountability, interact with information, and produce information. Gradually, the technology was developed to be wireless-based, but the fundamental concept of establishing local wireless centres remained the same.

While access to information and technology was available to a certain extent, local ownership and entrepreneurship were lacking, and to rely on donors to ensure digital flourishing is not a sustainable model. Hence, the following steps worked on creating valuable human resources or owners with its integral part as entrepreneurship. The establishment of local entrepreneurs based on the values followed by the service oriented ecosystem allowed local entrepreneurs to inculcate the necessity and life-changing value of the information available at the Information Resource Centre.

This would be the fourth milestone — Digital Empowerment Foundation commoditised the information and subsequently included affordability to present the abstract as good as a necessity. In the past decade and more, DEF created a cadre of entrepreneurs, referred to as 'digital entrepreneurs' or 'Soochnapreneurs'.

*In the ecosystem that the organisation and you, personally are embedded in, how did the organisation operate while mediating its relationship with other entities and what were the key entities that contributed to the growth of the organisation?*

During the first ten years, the most enabling environment for the foundation was the global, national, and local urge for digital inclusion. At the time, the internet had not steered into a direction of misinformation and fake news, rather, every parent wanted their child to be digitally literate, every government worked on creating an e-governance system, and every international body was learning from other nations to learn and replicate a more localised model. In addition, India at the time was privileged to be the IT service provider to the world. And the third enabling environment was the UN requesting the world to be a part of the information society as the former Secretary-General of the United Nations — Kofi Annan, democratised the internet and encouraged effort to follow through.

These were the primary enabling environment, along with direct contact with the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, India. The organisation was consulted regularly to employ technology for development. Homogenising the former environment to solve problems arising from financial and information poverty. The fourth environment factored in the opportunity presented by the poverty-stricken communities situated all over the country. Thus, the bureaucracy was avoided amongst other third party interference since there were numerous other opportunities to help the people.

*How did the structure of the organisation grow and provide the necessary resources to operate at the current standard?*

It is the approach adopted internally by the organisation that values and identifies the passion and dedication to work towards the common objective of the Digital Empowerment Foundation. Integrally, the organisation lacks the medium or the abilities to articulate, however, that does not hamper making on-ground change. For instance, one of the best wireless engineer's of the organisation joined as a sweeper and over a period of time, became an important part of the organisation to build and maintain the wireless infrastructure.

The primary objective of the employees of the organisation is not to master the task at hand, but to get it done through the available resources including outsourcing, insourcing, or through peer to peer assistance.

It was our approach towards combating issues within communities without the requirement of tools to communicate while also incorporating the same values within the organisation to deliver results.

The secondary focus was accountability and the attitude of the organisation towards it. Since it is a social organisation, it was pivotal to take accountability for the tasks assigned. Factors such as documentation, accountability, and evidence are relevant because DEF's role is meant to not only do the work but also make them available for public access for larger implications.

The third aspect of the approach ensured sustainability for every expenditure. Therefore, demanding accountability and formulating a suitable system eliminates the need to ask for more resources. It is not relevant to be commercial to be sustainable, DEF founders assured through self-declaration to recirculate the profit into the organisation. Despite DEF being a social enterprise, it has a value system that upholds the social responsibilities with the accountability of an enterprise. For the same reason, the people document everything with some being qualitative, but only to confirm transparency.

### *What data points were referred to going forward with the organisation and what impact did they have in the decision-making process?*

The multi-dimensional approach to any project requirement is the first data-point driving the organisation. For example, the need of giving mobile phones to women exists with funding. However, we are driven by three more decisions at the same data point such as another potential establishment of entrepreneurship, mentorship, business value, etc. It is important to factor in the on-ground reality with all its characteristics and achieve the foremost objective. Therefore, DEF's system revolved around — how to create a local human infrastructure to utilise the digital as a tool to create a system where each individual can gain independence by applying the skill set.

For instance, the organisation received a donation of 3,000 tablets and 2,000 desktops for providing children access to online education. Since the approach of the organisation functions parallel to the on-ground reality, DEF divided the 5,000 devices amongst 500 locations with a mix of multiple devices in each location - call them access points. It is also designed that each of the access point centers would be run like an independent social enterprise by a local entrepreneur - preferably a woman and a physically disabled person.

The trained entrepreneur will be solely responsible for conducting the sessions with children to provide digital education and act as a digital access point for others. Additionally, due to a surplus of funding, the organisation was able to complete the value chain including factors such as entrepreneurship, business sustainability, education penetration, and use of digital services.

## What is the end game of Digital Empowerment Foundation?

I believe the end game for every human being is to get into the final world. Regardless, since there is time, the end game is intact as planned in the beginning. Digital as a medium, digital as a culture, digital as a mode of communication, digital as a tool, and digital as an infrastructure becomes an integral part of our lives and proposes the question — 'how do we manage it?' To say, the end game can be considered as bringing equanimity, social equity, creating a non-exploitative environment, better functioning of the democratic society, and including the voices of the people. However, each day a new challenge emerges and new interventions uniquely utilise existing digital resources.

For example, digital inclusion provided citizens with the agency to voice their opinions. Mediums such as Facebook and WhatsApp allowed individuals to express themselves while also creating a new challenge of commodifying individuals. Each individual is conceived as data and the product because its opinions, likes, dislikes, or simple conversation is a footprint waiting to be exploited.

Retreating the question, the end game currently seems like a mirage. Each solution triggers a new problem requiring an innovative intervention. For instance, the resolution of the connectivity issue transpired misinformation and fake news forcing users to engage with critical thinking. Perhaps our endgame is to create a digitally enabled critical thinking mass who must be a conscious digital citizen rather than a consumer or a data point.

## What metrics do you use to assess the level of impact of the system incorporated by the Digital Empowerment Foundation?

The impact is never balanced or predictable. It can create more impact, less impact or even no impact. In conclusion, the metrics of the organisation have been flexible while incorporating digital based on information access intervention and establishing other matrices around

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There is a fundamental understanding within the organisation while executing an activity forcing to not only achieve the established parameters but bring forth the doubts and personal achievements experienced through the process to influence others

For example, the project digital literacy of adolescents receives funding. The considered parameters of evaluation will include performance in state examinations, employment status, and more. Nevertheless, assuming there is the availability of an internet access point, the doubts and achievements experienced through the process of adapting to the device too will be considered as additional factors driving the result.

Moreover, another woman, first to graduate from her hometown seventy kilometres away from Delhi, was employed with the Soochnapreneur program and she ensured digital literacy amongst her family, eventually expanding within the community. Although the purpose was to equip her with the necessary digital skillset, the impact was far wider and deeper.

Digital could be anything and everything, it is the intelligence towards integration that impacts the lives of many in multiple ways. In the previous discussion and this, I believe the end game is the demolition of patriarchy.

### *Can the system incorporated by DEF become more centralised to advance digital literacy sustainably?*

Since the last conversation, DEF has encompassed media literary, information literacy and contextual literacy to acquaint its model with the evolving society, yet it lacks an institutional intervention.

### *Given the limited resource availability, what evidence is referred to for resource allocation and ensuring impact?*

As mentioned before, the organisation perceives each resource to its maximum potential for the given problem. Although the design of the program assesses the impact through basic parameters such as livelihood, education, access to rights and entitlements, finances, sustainability, and so on, the key indicators are access and appropriate usage to achieve the given hypothesis
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By combining and strategising solutions presented by numerous organisations, DEF proposed a plan to maximise the available resources to create a long-term and sustainable impact on the given parameters.

For example, Accenture donated 5,000 devices to be distributed for the purpose of providing education access. At the same time, another organisation donated funds for 250 new information centres with the intention to create 500 new information centres for empowering the disabled community. By combining the resources, Digital Empowerment Foundation enabled existing entrepreneurs to equip 500 new entrepreneurs with a similar skillset achieving the goal of both the organisations while also maximising the community impact.

## *What is the revenue model of the organisation and how do you ensure sustainability and scalability?*

The proven sustainable practices of the society such as charity, philanthropy, CSR, high net-worth funding, individual donations, etc. have been key to ensure scalability. Thus, relying on the embedded human values, the donation-based establishment is not a definite risk. There are possibilities of fluctuation within the system, however, the reliability of the institution pertains.

In terms of sustainability, our methodology enforces the beneficiary to be independent of the organisation and avoid recurring assistance. Each design curated by the organisation enforces a financial level of sustainability, although assisting with the information and other aspirational objectives. In addition, the USP of Digital Empowerment Foundation is its ability to create on-ground impact due to its access points, attracting a constant flow of investment. The unique digital infrastructure encapsulating digitally-enabled human infrastructure allows the organisation to disseminate information or provide access at the grassroots level. There are not many alternatives offering the indistinguishable service.

For instance, in a pre-covid world, DEF was proposed by Airbnb to train 15,000 women from rural India to become potential hosts. To train the hosts, Airbnb required development in the digital sphere and for the same, DEF was at a vantage point. Despite being able to contact a travel agency or the Ministry of Tourism and Travel to train local women hosts, Airbnb proposed the concept to Digital Empowerment Foundation.

*Is the Digital Empowerment Foundation considering the possibility of transforming into a Social Enterprise or would it remain with the non-profit approach?*

In theory, DEF is a social enterprise since the operations are similar to that of a social enterprise with an exception of sharing the surplus outside the foundation. The funds donated to the foundation, circulate within the foundation. However, DEF promotes the system of a social enterprise.

For example, one of DEF's not for profit organisations — DigiKargha integrates digital with craft and weaving and is established as a separate social enterprise. Similarly, since numerous remote areas lack network connectivity, DEF, through an internet service provider, sets up a community 'net-box'. Due to excess demand for network connectivity, there was another separate social enterprise setup called 'Villages of India Network Pvt. Ltd.' The third such example would be the opportunity provided to entrepreneurs achieving tremendous results to establish a local organisation. DEF's role with the organisation will be as a partner or a potential outsourcing client. Furthermore, the fourth instance is the eNGO program that operates as a separate entity, yet is not established as one. The program provides a digital medium, the tools, and the training to grassroots level organisations ensuring their digital footprint.

*Thus, the end game was to create an ecosystem to enable not for profit organisations to become a grassroots level entity and distribute the impact at a local level.*

*What innovations, ecosystems, support systems were critical for you, as an entrepreneur during your journey with Digital Empowerment Foundation?*

My initial thought process did not depend on the finances or funding. I believe that itself kills innovation. Until now, the majority of new entrepreneurs reach out for mentorship or discussion questions, "how do you raise funds? Share the process," since the approach circles around the product and its numbers, and that in itself — is an obstacle. Moreover, it lacks the initiative from the perspective of a systematic change maker.

Whether a businessman, or an entrepreneur or even an aspiring development professional, the question to be answered is — 'are you making an initiative because of the qualifications or is there a desire to introduce systematic change within the society?' I believe the desire to bring a solution should overpower the methodology and not vice versa.

According to my personal beliefs, I recommend reflecting upon the capabilities to question whether the task at hand can be accomplished alone. Involvement of any second entity will demand a certain level of persuasion of the concept and therefore, the first step will be to sell the identified issue. For instance, I aspire to clean society as a partnership. My first step would be to collect the disposed of plastic bags and later perhaps, more people will assist to achieve a common goal.

The fourth principle I believe in is — 'can you walk the talk?'. If a solution is presented, other entities can be involved in their capacity. It is the personal conviction, the vision and how you execute it. Finally, the fifth principle questions the ability to bring systematic change while telling a story.

## What would be an enabling ecosystem?

Creating an ecosystem to enable a sustainable thought process requires freedom of thinking and it happens to be a scarce resource in India. Culturally, the fear of failure in India overpowers the curiosity to innovate. Moreover, the accountability of such risks is regulated by the parents, public institutions, etc. Hence, without the potential threat of failure and educational tools create an ecosystem to enable innovation.

DEF MODELS

Education & Empowerment

College

Markets & Social Enterprises

Primary School

NGO

Digital Shop

Anganwadi Centre

Health Centre

Knowledge Hub & Network

Research & Advocacy

Block Office

Bank kiosks

Governance & Citizen Services

Access & Infrastructure

SHG

Comunity Centre

Panchayat Ghar

Students

Community Members

Teachers

Library

Banking Correspondents

Frontline Health Workers

Panchayat Members

Rural Entrepreneur

Self Help Group

Local NGOs