Russell Reynolds Associates

September 2021

What if they mean it?

Embracing the opportunity of corporate-social sector partnerships

Russell Reynolds Associates

Russell Reynolds Associates hosted a virtual roundtable discussion attended by senior board members and social impact leaders, where we discussed the importance of partnerships between the private and social sectors, which would enable achievement of the SDGs by 2030

Introduction

This was an engaging roundtable discussion, centered around the importance of partnerships between the social and private sectors – how these work, the barriers and opportunities. The four key questions below were further explored:

01 *Why are these partnerships important? What needs to change to make them more effective?*

02 *What are the barriers to such partnerships?*

03 *What roles do various parties play?*

04 *How can the social and private sectors capitalize on this moment? Should there be a different way to measure the effectiveness of these partnerships?*

Barriers

The barriers to effective partnerships are many with the key ones being i) a trust and credibility deficit between the private and social sector organizations, ii) a lack of recognition of the role the other party plays in achieving the SDGs, and iii) the speed with which cost of capital is moving.

Steps need to be taken to secure trust with a shared definition and passion for the SDGs.

Key takeaways

Community engagement:

- Community is central – in order to bring about change it is important to engage and empower communities that are targeted, and embed the belief of upliftment and change for better.

Healthy and open dialogue:

- Going beyond the donor – beneficiary relationship and bridging the "trust deficit" that exists between social impact and for-profit corporations.

Co-creation:

- It is imperative for private sector and social sector to work hand in hand and co-create the agenda of achievement of the SDGs.

Key takeaways

Community engagement:

- The social and private sectors are not just agents of funding, execution and delivery, but also key drivers of community engagement- due to linkages with and intelligence of who and what surrounds them.

Healthy and open dialogue:

- The social impact sector is there to keep capitalism in check but can also contribute immensely to transformation of businesses for the good of society.

Co-creation:

- This ensures buy-in from two very different stakeholders with a shared goal.

Top down approach:

- The importance of the board and shareholders in cultivating, expressing and driving a sustainable view of their business cannot be underestimated. Sustainable culture and business for the good of society, over super normal profits, have historically stemmed from leadership.
- Evolving business models are trendsetters- for e.g. sustainable packaging, nutrition products being reformulated.

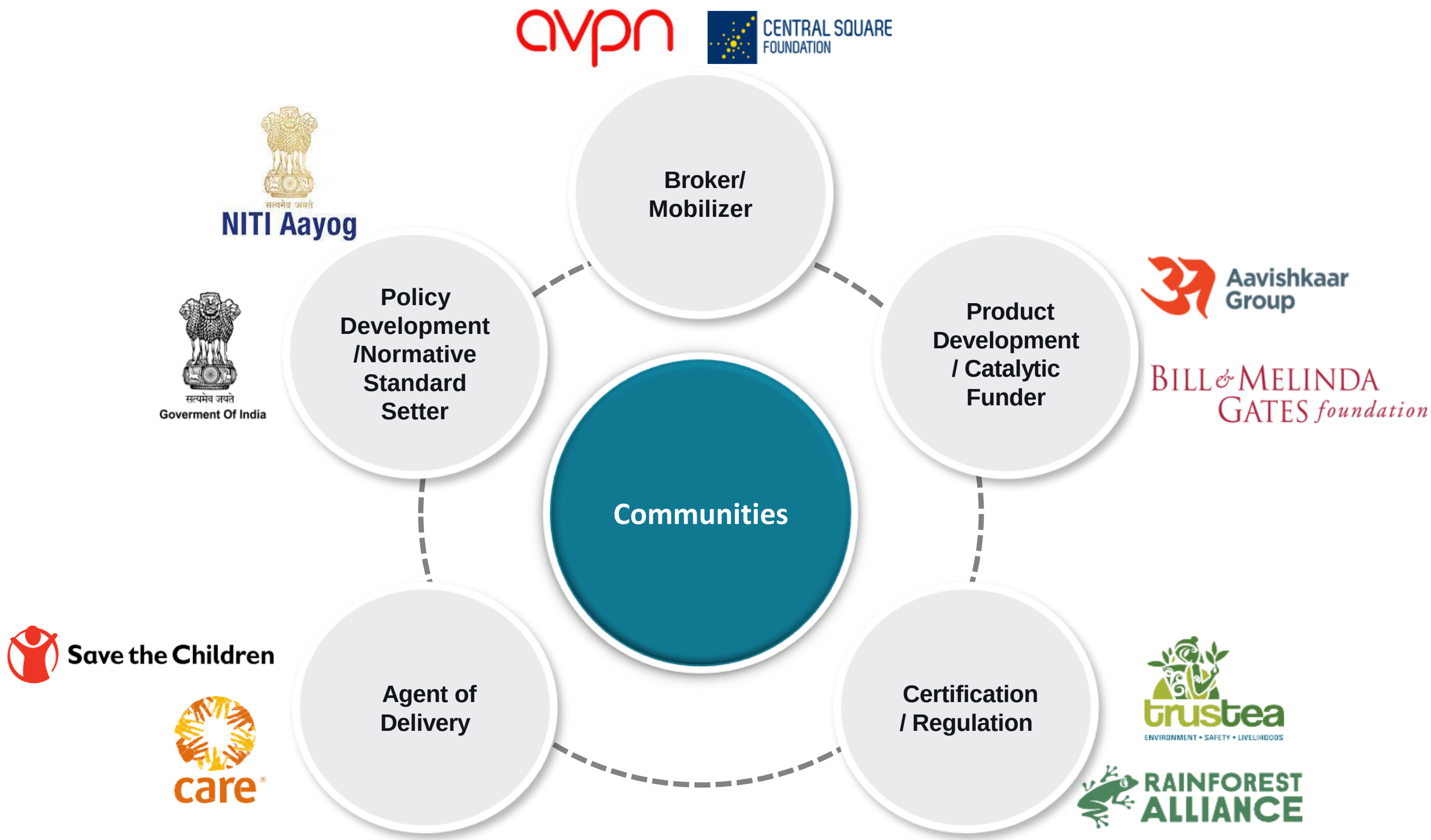
Flexibility of approach:

- Both social sector and private sector organisations need to approach collaborations with greater flexibility. There is a need to experiment with different impact models to understand what works, instead of focusing on ensuring success. Risk and failure will lead to innovation, across policy, strategy and delivery.
- A motto that has worked is spanning “Fixed, Flexible, Freestyle” approaches depending on the partner and the problem statement.
- Risk capital and flexible funding for social impact is serving the purpose of flexibility well and leading to innovation.

Accountability and the role of government:

- The world and governments have so far failed to meet the goals set with a sustainable future in mind. The role of each party needs to evolve – now becoming more demanding towards achievement of the SDGs.
- There should not be a divide between social impact and private sector organizations – every organization should have a “social impact agenda”. Corporates should have non-financial reporting standards.
- The government / regulators can play a key role in mandating some of this. While more regulation may not solve problems pressing society and corporates, it will offer increased guidance to the social sector and the private sector.

Once clear about the value they bring to the partnerships, organizations can play multiple roles across the spectrum during different moments of the partnerships cycle. **We need specificity of the partnership function and the right network / collaborative design to enable communities and achieve the SDGs**.



With thanks to the attendance and insightful contributions of (in alphabetical order):

- **Anita Ramachandran,** Founder Cerebrus Consultants, Independent Director Oxfam
- **Asheesh Advani,** President and CEO, Junior Achievement (JA) Worldwide
- **Geeta Mathur,** former CFO HelpAge, Independent Director HealthCare Global and others
- **Hari Menon,** Country Director, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- **M.S. Unnikrishnan,** CEO, IITB-Monash University, former CEO Thermax, Independent Director
- **Naghma Mulla,** CEO, EdelGive Foundation
- **Namrata Kaul,** Independent Director CARE, United Way Delhi
- **Pritha Venkatachalam,** Partner, Bridgespan
- **Sudha Pillai,** Retd. IAS officer & IAS former Member of Planning Commission
- **Sutapa Banerjee,** Independent Director Zomato, Godrej Properties & Others, Former Board Director Oxfam, and Nominee Director Women's World Banking
- **Tarun Vij,** Country Director India, GAIN
- **Vedika Bhandarkar,** Chief Operating Officer, Water.org
- **Vinita Bali,** former Chair GAIN and Independent Director
- **Zarina Screwvala,** Co-Founder, Swades Foundation

Authors

Rahul Thapar is a member of the Research team for Russell Reynolds Associates' Social Impact and Education practices. He is based in Mumbai.

Sanjay Kapoor leads Russell Reynolds Associates' India Industrial & Natural Resources Practice and is a member of the Board & CEO Practice. He is based in Delhi.

Simon Kingston co-leads Russell Reynolds Associates' Social Impact and Education Sector and is the founder of its Global Development Practice. He is based in London.

Vanessa Di Matteo is a member of the Knowledge team for Russell Reynolds Associates' Social Impact and Education. She is based in London.

Vinita Katara leads Russell Reynolds Associates' Social Impact and Education practice in India. She is based in Mumbai.