

NGO'S IN INDIA AND THEIR IMPACT

By

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It was only in 1947 that India ceased to be a colony and became an independent country; therefore the actual government has only existed for 68 years. In that little amount of time it has accomplished substantial technological advances in civil nuclear power and in their space program with rocket launching. Many social problems still remain unsolved because of a lack of time and an even more important lack of funds. Despite the country's important growth rate, 30% of the population still lives under the poverty line. However this statistic is misleading, since in order to be considered above the line of extreme poverty by the Indian government you must be able to spend 0.53\$ a day whereas the line, according to the World bank, is 1.25\$ a day. In addition to extreme poverty, the lack of women's rights and the discrimination towards disabled people as well as scheduled castes, are other significant problems. It is with the goal to diminish these problems, which the government has been unable to resolve completely, that non-governmental organizations (NGO) exist and it is why they have such a great importance.

Rural Development Trust (RDT) is an example of a NGO that fights poverty and works with communities to better their socioeconomic conditions. Founded 46 years ago in 1969 by Father Ferrer who came from Spain, RDT now works with more than 3250 villages. Thanks to the astronomical amounts of donations collected by Vincent Ferrer, considered as godlike by certain beneficiaries, the organization was able to build hospitals, schools for the deaf, blind and handicapped, centers for women, help programs for farmers and sports programs for young people. I visited the Anantapur district where an important number of RDT's operations take place. It is a semi-arid region where the majority of the population, which still depends on agriculture to survive, has difficulties feeding themselves because of the rare rainfalls. Furthermore, the need for wood to cook their meals has severely decreased the region's vegetation cover, which greatly affects the retention of soil, the acceleration of its deterioration and makes it susceptible to desertification. That is why

RDT installs natural gas cooking stoves linked to outside systems which fabricate gas with manure and water wells activated by solar panel powered pumps and concrete reservoirs in order to retain the rare precipitation.

For women, there are workshops where they can work inside, in the shade, in a less physical way than in the fields. These women are trained before doing craft jobs such as clothes confection, block printing or paper recycling to provide the foundation's schools. Another advantage is that salaries go



directly to the women instead of to their spouses. Many have noticed that when it is the women that spend the money, they, unlike men, prioritize the needs of their children and their families. Change in poor communities is carried out much more often by the actions of women than by the actions of men.

I also visited a few primary and secondary level schools that offer specialized education to blind, deaf and disabled people. All of this with adapted staff and equipment. Also, all beneficiaries of all these programs are entitled to free treatment in the two foundation's hospitals; their families are entitled to special



rates and outsiders to treatments at the price required to cover the care provided. To provide such services they rely heavily on volunteer doctors from Spain.

Since there are too many aspects to the complex problems in India and not all NGOs have multimillion dollar budgets to the extent of being of equal or greater importance than the government, they must choose their causes. Pro Sport Development (PSD) decided to tackle a particular problem and with a different approach: sports. I had the chance to meet and

interview Suheil Tandon, director and founder of PSD. I learned how his passion for sports and his desire to help others were able to unite to create an organization. Suheil explained to me the importance and benefits of physical activity, especially sports, in the battle against poverty in three main areas: education, health and work.

In what way do sports help these communities?

- In the area of education

«Lots of drop-outs from school and most girls don't study beyond the secondary levels. Sports are something that keeps them in education, so that's very important.» Education is not always a priority, especially in families with financial difficulties in which the children, and in most cases the boys, are considered more useful to the survival of the family if they work or help in the fields. As women's rights are not as developed as here, girls' education is not always seen as something necessary or even important since in many cases, even today, they are married at a young age and depend on their spouse or family to live, while their role is to have children, raise them and take care of the house.

Sports can help with school perseverance by giving extra motivation and can push young people to want to continue their education. Also, many Indians, but specifically indigenous peoples are not used to stay seated all day in class, sports allow them to do something they like, and to move so that they can concentrate better in their courses. «Sports and physical activity help them get out of class. These tribal kids we worked with are used to being out in the openness in the wilderness, there not used to being cooked up in a class room 8 hours a day.»

- In the area of work

In India, reaching a higher level in sports allows some youth direct access to certain jobs, regardless of their caste, social status and where they come from. «In India lot of the government jobs have sports quotas so there are numbers of seats reserved for talented athletes. » Sports therefore allow these people to have jobs that would normally be inaccessible because of their social situation or of a lack of competence.

- In the area of health

Even more than education and work, sports help a lot to improve the health and the



immune system. «Things like the common cold, fevers, those kind of things went down, so at the basic level health and well-being became better.» also « Health is not just physical it's also mental.» Sports help the physical and mental health of people who live in difficult situations and often lead difficult lives. That's what Suheil observed «What we saw was that, for those who participated regularly in sports, their confidence grew massively, they started taking up more leadership roles within their groups and within their

Picture of a RDT foundation football player

communities as well, and also things like team work, motivation, dedication all came out or increased after they started participating in sports.» Sports can have a huge impact in struggling communities and can help the people of these communities to eventually improve their everyday life. It was to help others with a unique vision and approach that PSD was created.

There is no doubt that NGOs can have a significant impact on communities and can help the many people in them. But are they really the best approach? Do NGOs really make a difference with poverty issues on a large scale? It is certain that NGOs should not disappear, however, whether we should continue to increase their number to amplify their effects or rather look for new and even more effective approaches to solve the same problems, remains to be determined.