

“What is Community Philanthropy?” Podcast Series



Transcript of Episode 1

Terry: Hello and welcome to this podcast series: “What is community philanthropy?” My name is Terry Gibson. Like me, you might have come to the idea of community philanthropy, wondering what it was all about. What does it mean? How does it work? What are its unique benefits and value? In what ways can it strengthen communities? In what ways can it complement or maybe challenge other approaches to development?

These are quite complicated questions, and the series is going to look at them from different perspectives. But in this episode we’re going to start with a very particular case study. The Dalit Community Foundation emerged from a process taking nearly ten years. As one of the co-leaders, Renji Joseph, describes the twists and turns, the struggles that took place in the development and emergence of this foundation. I think you, like me, will start to understand in practical terms the building blocks of community philanthropy, community foundations, and why these ideas are so powerful.

It took me a while to catch up with Renji. We had technical problems connecting, quite difficult in rural India. Eventually we connected while he was in Patna one Sunday evening, and I started by asking him to describe the situation of the Dalit communities he works with.

Renji: Dalit are the lowermost strata in the caste structure. So economically, socially and in all parameters, they stand at the lowest. Socially, also they are discriminated highly. Economically, they are highly resourceless, poor. They are mostly manual labourers, cleaners, sweepers. Then all kinds of physical jobs that have been listed down in the Indian system of occupation.

As a group, ‘Dalit’, the word, the meaning of the word Dalit itself is ‘broken’ and they are a broken community in all the senses: it means they are a broken community which means they cannot be called as one single community.

Terry: So here’s a challenge in working with the Dalit community, which is as Renji says – that the community itself is broken. The Dalits are separated into many separate groups. So how could these people start to work together and tackle some of the challenges they faced? One challenge was maternal health where there was assistance available, but the assistance came after a birth, which wasn’t much use in helping a mother who was preparing for childbirth. Renji explains:

Renji: It meant a woman could get registered under the scheme. This was mostly for promoting institutional delivery, because delivery used to be happening in the house, so in an insecure situation. So the mothers there were to be entitled to 1,400 Rupees. So this 1,400 Rupees would come when they have an institutional delivery.

So after the delivery they will receive a cheque. There’s a time when they need this money: that is during their pregnancy. So during their pregnancy, they needed the money. Maybe during the pregnancy, they could have bought some nutritional food. They could have been compensated for their medicinal needs or their supplementary needs. They were losing their jobs and food in a condition where people are hand-to-mouth. They’re losing their job because of pregnancy and this money could have helped them for their food and so many things.

Terry: As with many external initiatives the idea was good, but there hadn't been much time taken to match it to the actual situation of the people. So giving the money to women after the child was born, which was certainly an incentive to go into hospital for a birth, left them exposed to the fact that they were out of jobs. They were needing nutrition. They were needing health care before the birth, and that's when they needed the money. Renji explained that the already existing self-help groups in the area started to work out a way to address this problem:

Renji: So the Dalit community group don't cut the responsibility of providing means, so they had an agreement amongst the community members: who ever is a pregnant lady in this village, once she is getting registered with the [government scheme], she will also get registered with the Dalit community group. And as soon as she gets registered with the Dalit community group, so they had a little pool of resources that could be rotated among the community. So what they would do is they divided this money into three or four parts and the first tranche is given to her in the month she gets registered – say it is the second one or the third one. In the sixth month she again gets another tranche of that money. By the time she has to be ready to move to the hospital she may have to keep contact with the work. She may have to pay some advance money or somebody has to be there. She has to be completely away from the job. So the major tranche is released at that time. So she has this support and once she has the institutional delivery done, or home-based delivery done and once the cheque gets released she could – without interest – she could repay this amount to the community groups so that it could be rotated. It is seemingly a very small initiative but it was so innovative.

Terry: Very innovative as Renji said. The community group took the government scheme and turned it into something through the revolving fund that gave help to pregnant women when they actually needed it – and he gives another example: support is available for educating the children, but only if they get to the schools in the first place. And that was the problem.

Renji: If a parent is living day and night in physical labour somewhere else and earning a very little amount time for his children. We can't expect that children will go regularly to school, attend the school, because children are not the people who can actually think about "I should learn, I should go to the school, I should get educated." Dalit children; these many schemes, everything have been given to them and everything is free for them and we are expecting them at a school, but they don't turn up. They don't go to the school. But we never think why the child doesn't turn up to the school. The child does not have a parent at home to send them to school.

We have to get deep into why after all these things, in this community the children can't go to the school. Why don't they go? So a particular kind of help from the community member who was a little bit educated and could take a parentage of the community as such: so they put one person in charge. So that every child in the family in the community is looked after; monitoring that the child goes to the school and they ensure that, because the schools had the money for uniform; schools had the money for books; schools had the money for food, for all of these things. So whatever scholarships the schools had, the same scholarship when at a time the child needs it this community gets it. It's coming to the group again. And when the child was entitled to it and getting the scholarship the community got it back. So these two systems, schooling – primary schooling of course – and the socially pregnant woman's security: so these two things have been very well taken care of by the groups that have been functioning in Malinda under this particular area.

Terry: What I'm struck by in Renji's story so far is how it illustrates the power of supposedly powerless communities to analyze their situations, work out what's wrong with institutional responses, and solve problems themselves in ways that fit with the community's needs – in this case in maternal health and in education. There are resources there hidden but revealed and this is the first building block of community philanthropy. Inspired by what they'd done the community group started looking around for ways to expand their activities.

Renji: So we started looking for means of expansion. Of course the community could manage certain things, but for expanding some capacity development had to take place. So these things actually needed some kind of resources to come from outside and somebody had to take care of those things. Since I had some relationship with DFID I had some communication with DFID later, but unfortunately DFID could not help with the NGO groups at that time, or community groups, because they had to work with – their policy was for working with the governments directly. Again, we went around many donors and so we wrote to many donors, we expanded on this kind of capacity development this kind of consultations and this kind of certain systems to be created and some explanation be made at some meetings for making a kind of an internal binding among these people (so some cultural activities and so on). These are the things that is needed to make the system work. But it was difficult for people to understand because it did not look like a "project."

Terry: In looking for external donor support Renji experienced some of the classic push backs: their work didn't fit with institutional policy and it didn't look like a project. He was forced to look back inside their own community for resources.

Renji: There are many Dalit community members who are good business people, who are professionals, maybe doctors, engineers and there are many Dalit who are working as good administrative positions in the governments and so on. So there were some good, highly economically well-off people among the Dalit. So we decided to approach those people also; can we make a kind of arrangement whereby we could expand this kind of process? We could give you exposure there and you understand first if this kind of thing could work, and slowly you also take a kind of initiative – you take an ownership in expanding this. You will have to spend your resources for that, or you would like to put your monetary resources for that. So it was a little difficult for them because they're closed. As I told you already, there is a lack of trust among the communities, and trust among the families – due to the social situation and culturally it's a long time they have been living in such a way – actually, the people do not have trust in each other.

In two years of time, we were able to get the consent from around 60 people. 60 people was a good number. So but two or three things had to happen. One is that they actually are all individuals, some maybe a hundred kilometres away from each other. Some are a thousand kilometres away from each other! In order to make them sit together and make an arrangement where they could take the ownership and monitor. So an institutional form had to come in, where they could be part of that form. Then again, we came into the same situation; to bring about that institution, we needed to bring these people together, give them space to get to know each other and make some governance systems and so on; all of this needed resources! So again, we had to run around, so we ran into the same kind of difficulty.

Terry: Renji had identified a second building block of community philanthropy; support from the wealthier members of the community, but he came back around the circle to find they needed resources in order to build the structure and to create the meeting space to bring these people together in this broken community. And that took him back to where he started, looking for resources.

Renji: So then the Dalit based group, they came across GFCF, the Global Fund for Community Foundations. They had a Nepal meeting. So maybe these people can understand what you are saying? This is a group which is a "community foundation" group. And fortunately I'm good in communicating in English, so I could go to Nepal and talk to them.

During those times I met with a very huge accident and I had my left leg completely broken with three or four fractures; I couldn't move anywhere. So I was not able to go to Nepal. But we did not lose hope. What we did was, two of our members, they thought they did not speak much in English, but they could talk broken and so they went there and they had a discussion with them. But mainly, completely the communication was not successful. But one thing we won was the GFCF, especially Jenny. She understood that there's something these people are doing which is interesting.

Terry: Renji had sensed light at the end of the tunnel in his search for resources to help to unlock the resources within his own community. He'd come across GFCF, who seemed to have a particular focus on supporting in the kind of thing they wanted to do but then there was a further barrier; an unfortunate and serious accident barred him from traveling to Nepal to the workshop. He had to send colleagues who struggled to share their ideas in English and the barrier of language stopped them being able to explain their needs and their goals.

We've reached a bit of a cliff hanger really. What's going to happen next? If you want to find out listen to the next episode!