



Interview with Shama Karkal and Shrirupa Sengupta (Swasti)

Priyanka Shankar

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Priyanka Shankar: Could you please introduce yourself, what you do, and what problem you are addressing in the organization?

Shama Karkal: My day job is chief executive of Swasti, we're a public health organization. This particular solution that we submitted as an opportunity for the Skoll World Forum was about an SDG [Sustainable Development Goal] conclave that is being put together by a collaborative of organizations in India. I am on the executive board of that collaborative chapter.

Catalyst 2030 is a global movement to accelerate progress on the SDGs and we have an India chapter and I'm part of the executive group of the India chapter. That's primarily the hat I'm going to wear today. As we are members of Catalyst 2030, that is how I'm also on the executive group. I've been with Swasti for about 16 plus years, I have been in the social impact space for, gosh, 26 years now. And the collaborative space is increasingly where I do a lot of my work.

Shrirupa Sengupta: My name is Shrirupa, please call me Shri. I serve as director of strategic communications at Swasti, and I'm here to support the work that Shama and the Catalyst 2030 is doing in terms of the SDG conclave. As we proceed in the conversation, I think it would be interesting for us to also talk about why the SDG conclave is important in India at this point in time, what we hope to get out of it, who are the people that we want to reach through it, and what is the final impact that we want to have.

So Priyanka, if you have any questions around these points, I'm happy to step in and talk about it, but I'm going to let Shama lead the conversation. She's been anchoring this work, not just as the CEO of Swasti, but also in terms of the larger SDG pieces. That is very important at this point of time, given the larger role that India is playing, not just in the region, but also in the world.



Priyanka Shankar: Could you tell me a little bit about the exact problem or problems that you are addressing, and maybe you could explain it to me through examples or cases in India?

Shama Karkal: The SDGs were the world's way to actually look at the next level of transformation or change that we want in the world, that we could all hold ourselves accountable for. It has been a while since we moved from the MDGs to the SDGs. Globally, we agreed to some standards and some results that we all need to accomplish for the world. The previous version of these goals was called the Millennium Development Goals [MDGs]. The Millennium Development Goals came to an end in 2015 and then post that, we all agreed to the Sustainable Development Goals. In the next two years, it'll be nearly 10 years since we started talking about the Sustainable Development Goals. We know that even prior to the pandemic, the progress on those goals across the world was not uniform, it was not great. I think after the pandemic, there is more and more evidence to say that we have actually gone backwards when it comes to the Sustainable Development Goals.

The problem was that prior to the pandemic, the Sustainable Development Goals were likely to be achieved by 2062, [not] 2030, which is our timeline. When I say ours, it's globally everyone's, but post pandemic, that timeline is now looking more like 2092. It's only getting pushed out [further]. What we thought was possible in a 20 or 25 year timeframe is now taking way more than what we had originally planned, which means the progress is really slow. Everybody agrees that achievement, while we've created these 17 goals and various indicators, they're all very interlinked. It's not like you can achieve one and not achieve the other. They're all inter-meshed in a way. But unfortunately that's not necessarily how action has taken place.

The last goal, which is partnership for the goals, is actually something that is extremely critical, but is not happening in a way that's going to allow us to accelerate achievement. What all of us have a focus on is actually vulnerable populations. The most marginalized in our countries are the worst off when it's a pandemic or any other kind of crisis. They are going to be the worst off if we don't achieve these goals, it's not people with privilege.

That is the problem that we are looking at. In the pandemic when we had a crisis, we definitely agreed that multi-sectoral collaboration was essential, it needed to be action focused. But again, it happens during crises, whether it was a pandemic or now the disaster in Turkey and Syria, action happens but then the energy just dissipates after that. We are not able to sustain it and that is really a challenge.

We have a very short timeline to reverse many things that we have collectively as a global society done for people and the planet. Now is the time, how do we get that action going? I think for us, bringing different sectors together and identifying where things have worked, we can forge those



partnerships and collaborate. So as this Skoll World Forum convenes, we also have to convene in a way that allows us to not just talk, but walk the talk and get action going after this to allow for acceleration of these SDGs.

Priyanka Shankar: In your approach of addressing the problems, what has been distinctive to find a solution to ensuring that the community or the people are closer to achieving that SDG or the Millennium Development Goals?

Shama Karkal: I'm going to give you two or three examples. Oftentimes when we are talking about finding a solution, we leave out the people whom it affects the most. Because it's the rest of us who know more and know better and can actually come up with solutions, or so we think. **We are strong believers that the people who are most affected must be at the table more so than anyone else, and that actually allows us to create change.** And we have our own experience to that effect here in India, where we've worked with very marginalized communities and seen them actually grow over a period of time to solve problems for themselves, co-create solutions and solve them.

The example that I can give you is that women in sex work, transgender people, people living with HIV, let's say 30 or 40 years ago, would've been seen just as people who received services or certain benefits from a government or some other program that was being run. A philanthropic or government program. But today in India or globally, if you look at what work is done, they're not seen as beneficiaries, they're seen as stakeholders and they're represented very strongly within the larger programs, national programs, they're involved in various stages and they have a seat at the table. That's the accepted practice today in certain spaces or certain programs, but not necessarily uniformly or globally across the board.

We've done that ourselves in terms of talking about how we co-create programs with some of these vulnerable populations, walk the talk with them and see the change. That's one example of an approach that we know works and can get scaled. Giving you another example, typically primary healthcare is seen as healthcare service delivery. Somebody has to come, you have to be seen, and that's all it is. Again, the WHO talks about social participation. When you look at the Alma-Ata Declaration, for 40 plus years now we've said people need to take charge of their health, but where do we move from just service delivery to actually saying, how do we empower communities to take charge of their health while you do provide services? You need providers and you need services to be in place, but it's not just about services, it is being able to take charge of your health.



We've worked on models to say, yes, it's possible to do it with people and this is an opportunity. We've done collaborative work, for example, in response to COVID, where we worked with about 300 partners to actually look at COVID responses. It was not just about COVID services, because during COVID we had mental health issues, we had gender-related issues, there were any number of things that came up during that time. Working with large scale collaboratives, which are action oriented and wanting to work together and willing to work together even beyond a crisis. We had about 354 organizations who worked together as a local - local being India - response to COVID. Those partners are still together saying, "It was a great start, that response to COVID. But we are now looking to actually say, how do we work to build resilience in these vulnerable populations across the country?"

We need to continue doing this. There's no way people should be allowed to slip back into where they were before and not be able to deal with the next pandemic and us having to reinvent this wheel all over again. How do we make people more resilient to shocks, which we know are going to come? These are different examples of how we've approached this in our past work and how we want to bring it to this particular issue of accelerating the SDGs.

Priyanka Shankar: How have you been measuring your impact in all of these different cases?

Shama Karkal: I think for different programs we've had different ways of measuring impact. The easiest thing to measure is how many people we've reached or the number of services we've delivered. What we've tried to do in the case of the HIV example was to say, have we actually been able to reduce vulnerability and come up with metrics to measure vulnerability and look at which one of the levers that we were using actually reduces the most vulnerability. To give you an example, you would not think that anything related to sexual behavior would be connected. Most people think, oh, people don't use condoms, they don't have safe sex. Tell them more about it, give them awareness.

I think many of us are tired of giving them awareness [approach] because it's not just about awareness. Awareness does not lead to practice. There are other things that are preventing people from changing the way they behave. What we found is that [it is] actually reducing vulnerability. We measured this to say that when you provide a financial safety net or people become more financially secure. And how do people become financially secure? They have more formalized savings, they have diversified options, they have a social security net, they actually have a sense of community. They are working with collectives, they're not single. They associate themselves with an organization and feel like we belong to something and we have the backing of others. These are the kinds of things that actually change their behavior with regards to health. \



We do look at output level and reach level and we can say, we enable so much savings or we enable so many people to access so many kinds of services. But actually measuring that impact a little bit more deeply, we've used things like social return on investments to say if somebody put a dollar into a kind of work, how much money actually gets translated into the hands of the people that you were trying to support? What we saw is that some of our programs can deliver about 30 times, which is about 2900% really in terms of what benefits can accrue to people that we're trying to serve.

When it comes to healthcare, for example, what we're trying to do is preventive health. You want people not just to be illness free, but to actually feel that they're doing well, their overall wellbeing is better. How do you measure that? Finding globally accepted matrices and being able to bring them down to something that we can calculate and show. We have a metrics called healthy days, and we look at how many healthy days we are improving or giving back to the community.

In the Indian context for example, we talk about the fact that people on an average may be losing nearly one month every year either to illness or for carrying for somebody who's ill. In some regions and in some communities that goes up even more, so it can be two months, sometimes three months. That's a significant amount if you're talking about the bottom of the pyramid populations or if you're talking about people who are just above the poverty line. Giving them back those additional days of health often means that they're more productive, actually able to earn more and will probably be resilient.

How are we measuring resilience? That's a little bit more complicated, but we are looking at multiple things. We're looking at health, we are looking at social protection, we are looking at livelihood and having composite indicators under each to say, have we actually been able to look at it? Not just creating the indicators, but also being able to evaluate this. How do you look at collaborative working, measure that and contribute to it? We bring different agencies together to work with us to be able to do some of these kinds of measurements.

Shrirupa Sengupta: There is a lot of qualitative content as well, which does not really go into the quantitative piece but gives us an idea of where we are on the journey towards realizing the goals. These are lived experiences of communities who we have worked with directly and indirectly across different places in India and they give us insight about what the community really needs in terms of systems, structures, and the breakdown of stratification systems to be able to get to where their individual experience of the goal accomplished would be.

It's a mix of both very robust evidence that has surfaced at the community as well as their own stories and lived experiences that they share in different ways. It helps us map where we are in



terms of the SDG. and we are able to help our partner organizations with the same information and same insights in different ways.

Priyanka Shankar: Do you directly interact with communities? For example, going into a village in India and explaining what a sustainable development goal is and how it's going to benefit them in the future. If that's the case, what are the kinds of conversations you have and challenges you face?

Shrirupa Sengupta: SDGs are very commonly understood and also misunderstood in many ways by community members in India. I think the fact that SDGs have driven a lot of community institution funding, makes community members aware but they've not become very familiar with it. In terms of going down to the grassroots, yes, we work directly and indirectly with different communities.

In terms of the conversations, when a community member is amidst the life of absolute marginalization, a larger country or regional goal - or a Sustainable Development Goal - makes no sense to them. But they can experience the difference it makes as the nation [moves] towards the realization of the SDGs. A major insight that has come from our own field experiences is that almost all organizations are trying to understand how community members realizing the goals and a country realizing the goal is so intrinsically connected and one can't happen without the other. If that happens then you're just creating more and more divide.

Shama Karkal: Thanks very much Shri. The SDGs are not going to be achieved because all of us are in silos, data pieces, and then somehow magically these goals are going to be achieved. We need people who are front and center, experiencing the challenges, the struggles, the structural issues to be as much part of these conversations, the planning, the solutioning, as much as we need others, including the private sector, the government, media, social impact organization, entrepreneurs to be looking at how do we work together and work differently because what has got us here is not going to get us to where we want to be.

The idea of the conclave is to look at how we can do something very different from the typical collaboration or partnership that we've talked about. It needs to be at scale, it needs to be deep and we have to be willing to let go and do things very differently if we truly want to solve this. Being honest, being authentic, being able to engage with as collaborators and partners and live that on a daily basis.

Otherwise we can say collaboration, we can say partnership and just go back to doing what we've always done and that's not going to cut it. We have an element of trying to do the inner



development goals while we try to solve and accelerate towards the Sustainable Development Goals. At the same time make sure that we are bringing in the lived experience of people and saying, hey, this doesn't work, this is always what ends up happening and this doesn't work for us.

We've tried to do something called the People's Report because, as Shri was saying, an SDG goal can seem so abstract for somebody who's struggling to make ends meet on a daily basis. But if you could frame that from something they understand, are you able to eat three meals a day? Do you go to bed hungry? Do you have a roof over your head? What you get is incredible. Have people in the room with others, not just the private sector in their own bubble or just the government saying that we know everything. Everybody in the same room looking at information differently saying, "Honestly, this is what we think we should be doing or not doing anymore because it's not solving or not accelerating this enough."

Priyanka Shankar: How do you see your organization evolving in the next couple of years? What do those future plans look like?

Shama Karkal: I'm going to talk about the Catalyst 2030 collaborative that is bringing this event together later this year. We are looking to at least bring the social impact sector together in a more cohesive way in India because we really think the narrative around the social impact sector has to change. It's seen in a very step-brotherly way or not fully understood for the skill sets it has or what it actually delivers. Around the narrative itself, which does mean bringing a lot more organizations together in India. Funding for sure. **It's not that funds are not available, but they're deployed in ways that don't actually address the challenges.**

Oftentimes it's the mental models and the mindsets. I often joke with the team that very risky ideas in a startup world will get funding but something that will solve the problem for the poor somehow doesn't or it seems even more risky. Whereas it's probably been proven in some other part of the world. If it can actually create change for vulnerable populations, it's probably worth taking the risk. **I think for us, a lot more partnerships, large scale collaborations, bringing in the funding to make that happen, looking at this in a more integrated manner because I think again, from a user or a people perspective, it's not about whether I have food or health or decent employment, it needs to be everything.**

That is where, for us, the interconnection of the SDGs happens. It all has to come together for people and communities in a way that makes sense for them. How do we start to look at that integration and joint working and then hopefully transformation is really something that we're looking forward to. At a global level, this is supposed to be a movement and I think the movement



is about breaking those silos and not saying this that or the other, but to focus on those results and actually working with anyone and everyone that it takes to make that happen.

Priyanka Shankar: Is there anything else that you'd like to add that I haven't asked you already?

Shama Karkal: The only thing I will add is that we are really looking forward to the kind of people who want to engage in it. Anyone who's really interested in the impact for vulnerable populations wants to engage, find solutions, actually try and make them work and co-create if we need to. Finding those action pathways to address challenges and look at intersectional partnerships [is exciting]. I think that is very important for scale. We can all do something for some people, but I think it's time to solve it significantly in a large way so that we actually see some of these wicked problems that we've talked about forever actually getting addressed. That's what we'd love to see happen in the next, let's say seven years or so, and the SDG conclave is trying to make that acceleration possible.

Priyanka Shankar is an independent journalist currently based in Brussels. She mainly covers stories about human rights, migration and Europe's relations with Asia. Outside a newsroom you can find her rambling along mountains or scuba diving.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*