



# Spotlighting Community-Driven Narratives and Evidence for Impact



This essay spotlights the role of non-profits in leveraging community-driven narratives and evidence to contribute towards transformative development. It is based on preliminary research and provides a glimpse of good practices from India's non-profit landscape. The objective of this paper is to highlight novel approaches that are using information and communication. The essay presents an opportunity for philanthropy to strengthen more inclusive and people-centric models.

### What are community-driven narratives and evidence?

In the context of this essay, community-driven narratives and evidence include stories, perspectives, and information focused on ground-up realities. These narratives and evidence are shaped by the oral histories, voices, and lived experiences of diverse identities. We have considered the perspectives of historically marginalized identities as community-driven narratives and evidence. Such narratives bring forth an authentic portrayal of the interplay between social, cultural, economic, historical, and political dynamics in people's lives.

## Setting the Context

In India, mainstream news media, which accounts for a significant proportion of public dissemination, has historically been dominated by privileged voices. The lack of representation from marginalized communities, including women, gender-diverse individuals, Dalits, and Adivasis, in these newsrooms, is well-documented.

- **106 out of 121 news agencies analyzed had dominant caste leadership. For over 70% flagship debate shows, most panelists were from dominant castes.**<sup>1</sup>
- **Only one in five panelists on key prime time TV shows were women. One out of four articles written in English dailies were by women.**<sup>2</sup>

Increasing community representation and ownership over mainstream narratives can benefit both society and the bottom-line.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, community-driven narratives and evidence can bring to light the root causes of development challenges. Leveraging media and communications as a tool presents an opportunity to spotlight lived experiences from the grassroots and bolster vulnerable voices that may have been sidelined by mainstream media. Greater visibility for such narratives and evidence contributes to widening the public's consciousness. This traction can potentially shape the development paradigm towards inclusion, by sparking dialogue among critical stakeholders and lending a platform to diverse voices.

## Then & Now

In the early phases of development communication, mass media was viewed as a tool to influence people at the grassroots as passive audiences. This perspective was based on the Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver (SMCR) model.<sup>4</sup> However, such an approach has been widely critiqued in recent decades for its inability to account for how social, historical, economic, and cultural factors play out within communities. The proposition that effective information dissemination could lead to behavior change has evolved to recognize the critical role of cross-learning. This has led to a discursive turn, with increasing cognizance of lived realities shaping communication ecosystems, and the prioritization of participatory models of information dissemination.<sup>5</sup> Among non-profit organizations, there is a greater focus on actively engaging with the community, as owners and co-creators of knowledge. The shift away from one-sided dissemination towards participatory models acknowledges the limitations of the traditional approaches in capturing the complexities and dynamics of development.

This sets the stage for amplifying diverse narratives and evidence in mainstream media, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how socio-cultural and economic dynamics influence development.

## The Opportunity

The growth of digital infrastructure in India, hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic, has widened the scope of innovation and opportunities linked to amplification tools.<sup>6</sup> India is projected to have 900 million active internet users by 2025, with 56% new users being added from rural regions.<sup>7</sup> However, the continued lack of representation for marginalized voices in the mainstream reflects the limitations of traditional models of dissemination. With the proliferation of digital technologies and access to dissemination tools, we are at a crossroads. Empowering community voices to bring their own stories into the public imagination is an imminent opportunity. It can allow for challenging prevalent norms around media representation.

India's non-profit sector is vast and heterogenous. It has played a critical role in bringing communities and their knowledge to the forefront, through innovative programs that seed awareness programs and information campaigns. A recent survey exercise revealed that a substantial 29% of non-profits surveyed were engaged in activities that promote cultural and creative expression.<sup>8</sup> For example, the introduction of community radio stations in 2002, as platforms where communities could broadcast local concerns, was the result of a civil society movements.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in the present day, digital platforms have revolutionized storytelling, especially through narratives that drive research, policy, and empowerment - creating opportunities for diverse voices to be heard.

## The Action Landscape

Based on our initial research, the objectives for nonprofits to bolster community-driven narratives include:

- Empowering underrepresented individuals to shape mainstream narratives and become active participants in the information and knowledge economy
- Challenging and solving for linguistic, socioeconomic, and cultural barriers that gate-keep access to public platforms and media tools
- Generating people-centric evidence that illustrates the complex relationships between overlapping layers linked to identities and lived realities
- Reorienting discourses by questioning dominant ideas of who they should focus on, and defining development priorities based on the needs of grassroots communities

**The amplification and mainstreaming of community-driven narratives is often carried out through interventions that prioritize long-term outcomes. This is difficult to measure in terms of quantitative outcomes. Such models are difficult to communicate to actors whose funding strategies are focused on maximizing quantitatively measurable impact. There is increasingly a need for private philanthropy to come forward and bridge this gap by providing long-term support to innovative models in this space that are trying to move the needle on behavioral change gradually through their interventions.**

## Empowering Changemakers in the Digital Age

Non-profit interventions in this landscape are unlocking digital tools and platforms for social impact in the digital age. Two outcomes transforming contemporary India's approach to narratives are -

**Data-driven storytelling:** Non-profits use innovative data-led and fact-based storytelling practices to build evidence on underserved causes, sectors, and geographies. These efforts help simplify technical evidence, such as government data and legislation, to make it accessible and useful for the public.

**Bolstering digital capacities:** From mobile phones to the internet, digital technologies are becoming accessible to more Indians. Non-profits are at the forefront of equipping communities with digital skills and capacities. This creates a ripple effect, helping communities use digital platforms for advancing development outcomes.

Preliminary analysis based on our conversations with 12 Indian non-profits leveraging digital technology for community driven narratives and evidence reveals four key intervention areas.

*\*Organizations in this landscape often work across multiple intervention archetypes. The mapping of undertaken below is indicative and intended to be an illustration.*

#### **Catalyzing development-focused niche media:**

Entailing development-focused content, there is an emphasis on exploring themes illuminating economic, political, and social obstacles. This involves delving into the evidence and narrating stories about the challenges and barriers inherent in these critical facets of societal progress. The key challenge these interventions address is linked to representing information in a holistic manner that accounts for the depth and breadth of experiences and perspectives.

**Strengthening the media action ecosystem:** Efforts encompass influencing and shaping policies that govern digital integration and media practices, as well as engaging with institutional levers to bring about comprehensive systems-level change. They entail strategic involvement in policy discourse, participating in shaping reforms, and collaborating with institutions to ensure the protection and promotion of digitization. The objective is to create an environment that not only upholds the principles of freedom of expression, but also catalyzes broader structural transformations within the landscape. This is carried out through a focus on navigating the dynamics and challenges around public engagement, changes in law, and adaptation to new technologies and media platforms.

**Building public dissemination capacities:** Such interventions provide stakeholder groups and organizations with the skills necessary to utilize media tools for dissemination, amplification, and storytelling. Such practices empower these entities with the proficiency to effectively leverage various communication channels and equip them with the specialized know-how to navigate new technological tools. The objective is to empower vulnerable, under-represented individuals, and groups with limited resource-access to become changemakers through media dissemination. This also equips organizations with the capacity required to stay up-to-date and relevant in an age of rapid technological advancement.

**Mobilizing media tools for social change:** This involves leveraging digital media tools for community engagement, by employing various communication platforms to interact with communities, facilitating mobilization efforts, and fostering awareness-building initiatives. The strategic deployment of multimedia resources to effectively connect with and empower local populations is central to these interventions, ultimately promoting participation and enhancing awareness on pertinent issues. Such interventions focus on ensuring last-mile digital access and digital literacy to tackle exclusion of vulnerable stakeholders from accessing media and communication platforms.

#### **Examples of non-profit organizations**

- People's Archive of Rural India (PARI),
- IndiaSpend
- The Third Eye and Nirantar Trust
- Point of View
- India Development Review (idr),
- Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF)
- Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF),
- IT for Change

## Breakpoints and Opportunities for Philanthropy

The above solutions are at an important juncture. While they have transformed communication towards reaching wider audiences and fostered diverse narratives, there are critical challenges that impede progress. Non-profits focussing on community-driven narratives and evidence face an uphill battle against resource limitations.

These shortfalls hamper their ability to adopt new technologies, train employees, and create diverse content. This hinders long-term planning, and prevents non-profits from seeding new and innovative models. By addressing the breakpoints, funders can help create deeper impact.

Breakpoints	Opportunities for philanthropy
<p><b>The immediate results of such interventions are difficult to see, since the impact is long-term, diffused, and behavioral</b></p>	<p>Adopting trust-based grantmaking practices that embrace patience and flexibility, and are geared at long-term impact</p>
	<p>Prioritizing marginalized voices and narratives that are rarely featured in mainstream media, lending them visibility and access to platforms</p>
<p><b>Non-profit organizations often have limited access to data, tools, and technology because of being under-resourced</b></p>	<p>Investing in training and capacity-building to harness innovative new media technologies and set organizations up for scale</p>
	<p>Supporting ecosystem-building efforts aimed at widening large-scale evidence-building and public dissemination</p>
<p><b>Language heterogeneities and barriers hamper the production of accessible content in regional and local languages</b></p>	<p>Cultivating an inclusive and diverse workforce, through fellowships, funding, and other support mechanisms for vulnerable individuals</p>
	<p>Strengthening programs aimed at widening digital literacy and access, to reach new target audiences</p>
<p><b>Non-profit organizations have a limited ability to compete with big media and digital channels for traction, credibility, and funding in the long run</b></p>	<p>Mainstreaming and publicizing media and digital tools by non-profits through offering sustained funding and amplification</p>
	<p>Bolstering the credibility of organizations in this landscape by supporting collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and field-building</p>

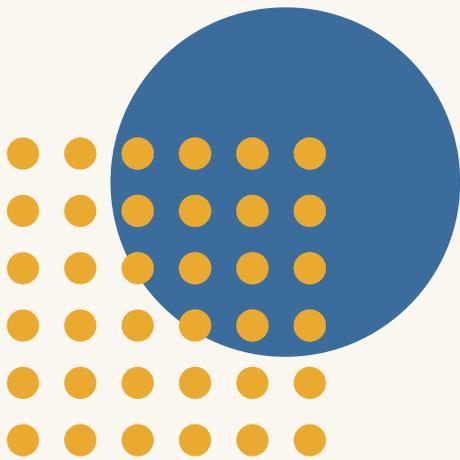
## Conclusion

Powerful evidence and stories from communities, championed by non-profits, often lack resources. This leaves a critical gap in understanding and representing diverse voices in our rapidly changing world. Due to its flexibility and risk appetite, philanthropy is uniquely placed to support, sustain, and strengthen this landscape. Patient capital can help sustain these interventions amidst changing dynamics of commercial interests. Even if few funders begin to invest in such solutions, a replicable blueprint can be available that champions community driven narratives and evidence as a field. This will also help challenge the perceptions of risks or lack of impact in the funders' circles of influence.

Field-building efforts for these solutions can promote innovation and creativity by enabling the transfer of new technologies and skills to both non-profit organizations and affected communities.

Community-driven narratives and evidence can help strengthen India's development story. By integrating lived experiences, oral histories, and diverse voices into public discourse - philanthropy can support information ecosystems that are more responsive and have a deeper understanding of complex challenges. This enriched knowledge has the potential to transform the discourse for individuals and communities, to collectively build a resilient future for all.





## Note on Methodology

The essay is informed by preliminary advisory research conducted by Dasra. Our methodology encompasses primary research through conversations with 15 sector experts and non-profit organizations. Additionally, we have also undertaken a review of pertinent secondary sources. We recognize the inherent limitations within this research process, including the gaps in data, and therefore, articulation on the subject. The archetypes and examples of non-profits practices shared above are non-exhaustive. We also acknowledge the scope for bias based on our intermediary role. These constraints underscore the necessity for further research, dedicated to the comprehensive exploration of this subject.

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## Footnotes

1. [https://www.oxfamindia.org/sites/default/files/201908/Oxfam%20NewsLaundry%20Report\\_For%20Media%20use.pdf](https://www.oxfamindia.org/sites/default/files/201908/Oxfam%20NewsLaundry%20Report_For%20Media%20use.pdf)
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