



Vishwa Yuvak Kendra
(A Unit of Indian Youth Centres Trust)

Report

#Aahvaan

NGO-CSR Conclave 2024

An Initiative by Vishwa Yuvak Kendra



6-7 February
2024



VYK Campus
New Delhi

Background

Vishwa Yuvak Kendra has actively been engaged in empowering youth and civil society representatives through scientifically designed training programs. Over the past six decades, it has successfully conducted numerous capacity-building training sessions, workshops, and seminars on diverse topics.

Nearly a decade has passed since Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become mandatory in India, highlighting the increasing importance of corporations in addressing social and environmental challenges. While CSR has evolved from mere philanthropy to a strategic initiative aiming for long-term value in both business and society, there is still ample opportunity for concentrated and coordinated efforts to enhance societal well-being.

Working alone as a single entity (either CSR or NGO) yields lesser benefits than when working together as a partner. This has proven to be true because the formation of partnerships has played a very significant role in development context. Such collaborations bring businesses, people and organization together and then pool their resources together in order to achieve the set goals of peace, prosperity and progress.

Corporations come with essential financial resources and technical expertise, while NGOs possess extensive community experience; together, they play a crucial role in addressing social issues. As a result of the focus that corporate organizations give to research, they are often at the forefront of innovation. By collaborating with them, NGOs can leverage corporates' innovative solutions to address social and environmental challenges more effectively. Working together with NGOs help corporates fulfil their CSR goals and enhance their reputation as socially responsible organizations. Collaboration between NGOs and corporates can also help both parties to better understand the needs and perspectives of different stakeholders, leading to an informed decision making and formulation of an effective action plan.

Summary

In the relentless pursuit of fostering positive change, Vishwa Yuvak Kendra acknowledges the vital role of creating a conducive platform that serves as a link for bringing together CSR professionals, NGO representatives, government officials, and other stakeholders. With this objective in mind, Vishwa Yuvak Kendra organized a two-day mega event on 6-7 February 2024, entitled Aahvaan: NGO-CSR Conclave 2024, where all stakeholders came together to explore and address the challenges inherent in collaborative efforts for noble causes. The main objective of the conclave was to facilitate open discussions and strengthen partnerships, amplifying the impact of collective endeavours in addressing societal issues.

Renowned CSR and NGO leaders from across the country were invited as speakers who spoke about the challenges, roadblocks, and learning outcomes based upon their experience and examined the best strategies that CSR and NGO leaders are embracing across the world.

A total of 125 participants attended the two-day event and got benefited from the same.

Objectives

- To enhance the knowledge and required skills among NGO functionaries regarding the implementation of CSR activities.
- To understand the role of CSOs and CSR in current scenario.
- To understand the importance of stakeholder's engagement.
- To explore the opportunities for collaboration between NGOs and corporations.

Event Proceedings

Inaugural Session

The inaugural ceremony of Aahvaan: NGO-CSR Conclave 2024 was facilitated by Mr. Manjunath K., Programme Officer, VYK. He welcomed the dignitaries to the dais and invited them to the lighting of the lamp, which marked the beginning of the conclave.



Mr. Haribhai Mori, Trustee, IYCT, and President-CSR, Bajaj Group, welcomed all the dignitaries, speakers, and participants with a warm welcome. He talked about Aahvaan being an opportunity for everyone in the development sector that can streamline concentrated and coordinated efforts to enhance societal well-being and expressed hope that the two-day event would be a rewarding and learning experience.

This was followed by the address of Mr. Uday Shankar Singh, CEO, VYK, who gave the program background and the objectives of the conclave. He described Aahvaan as an initiative that aimed to provide a platform where all stakeholders could come and work together. Thereafter, Mr. Bharat Lal, Secretary General, NHRC and the Chief Guest of the event, took stage.



Mr. Bharat Lal spoke about investing in women as a human rights imperative and cornerstone for building inclusive societies. He did so by highlighting the importance of progress of women for the progress of the society. He appreciated NGOs' efforts for acting as the voice of the marginalized. He advised that the NGOs and CSR should work collectively since collaboration between all stakeholders was a key ingredient of development. He suggested that NGOs should continuously work to develop their understanding of the social sector and communication skills and particularly have a clear vision and understanding of the needs of their target audience.



In her address, Guests of Honour Ms. Gayatri Subramaniam, Director, ICSRB, provided an overview of the CSR Act and briefly chronicled its journey from Companies Act, 1956 to being rewritten in 2013, which established CSR as a mandate in the country, making India the only country in the world where CSR is mandated by law. She set the context as to how the partnership between NGOs and CSR could materialize and shared that in the past decade, CSR spending had focussed on the sectors of education, health and rural development.



Guest of Honour Mr. Niraj Lal, Head-CSR, Arvind Ltd., called the conclave timely and apt, since it was coinciding with the mandatory CSR law completing a decade. He talked about adding a fourth 'C' – 'communication' – to the tagline of the conclave 'connect, create and collaborate,' since it was important to communicate about one's work to others. He posited various possibilities for CSR and NGO sector scenarios when India becomes the world's third-largest economy. He shared that as a result of the growth, companies' annual growth would increase by double digits, resulting in substantial enhancement of their net profit. This would result in an increased CSR spending, which in turn would result in more funding for NGOs. He additionally added that NGOs needed to act like businesses and could do so by following three things: adhering to the timeline, giving corporations unit costs in project proposals and ensuring quality delivery of services.



Panel Discussion 1: Stakeholders' engagement with reference to emergence of CSR

Mr. Ranvir Singh, Officer, Sustainability & Development, VYK, facilitated the first panel discussion. He introduced and welcomed the moderator and the speakers.



The discussion was moderated by Dr. Sujeet Rajan, Associate Director, Nutrition, TATA Trusts, who talked about the need for NGOs to understand the role of each stakeholder in the sector and develop an understanding of the needs and requirements of corporate organizations. He also added that partnership between NGO and CSR was must, and it required a communication partnership. He further said that compliances were a must for brand image, and one needed to work diligently to ensure all mandates were met.



Panelist Ms. Gayatri Subramaniam, Director, ICSRB, said that initially, when CSR law came into being, there were around 25000 companies and 33 lakh NGOs, so it was difficult to judge their legality and authenticity. A trust deficit was developed between NGOs and corporations due to the communication gap. She highlighted that each and every actor's role in the industry was significant, and so NGOs should learn to adapt themselves to corporate needs and possess the skills required to work with them.



Mr. Vivek Prakash, Vice President, CSR, Jubilant Bhartia Foundation, advised the NGOs to breakdown the project into timelines and then work to complete the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) mentioned to do work timely and efficiently. He suggested that the government was a significant stakeholder in the social sector, and hence there was a need to involve its representatives in such initiatives so that they can listen to all other stakeholders and convey their suggestions while framing policies. He also added that only corporates that do business with purpose have the same relevance today, despite being in the industry for so long, like TATAs.



The third panelist, Mr. Pradeep Singh, Head of Monitoring and Impact, HDFC Bank CSR, shared that NGOs still did not have a stronghold on data in terms of beneficiaries, parameters to improve their lives and the impact made on the ground, which led to a trust deficit between them and corporations. He conveyed that NGOs must learn about data management and should include data mechanisms in their projects, as it was a significant component that corporations looked for, in partners.



He gave the example of HDFC Bank, wherein they designed their theory of change and asked their NGO partners to do the same while ensuring that theirs aligns with that of the bank. He further shared that the bank also conducted capacity building training for its stakeholders.

Mr. Sushant Verma, Asia Regional Director, Trickle Up, spoke on the significance of making a checklist of compliances according to the timeline and making it an agenda item for every board meeting to help resolve the issue of compliance management. He expressed that even though grassroots NGOs were not fully aware of compliances, they still put in more efforts to fulfil them, as they could not be compromised upon and it was the responsibility of every organization to adhere to them.



Panel Discussion 2: Strategic CSR: Integrating SDGs

The second-panel discussion was facilitated by Ms. Mukta Bhardwaj, Programme Officer, VYK. She invited the moderator and speakers and gave their brief introductions.



The panel was moderated by Mr. Niraj Kumar Lal, Head-CSR, Arvind Ltd. He began the discussion by talking about the pros and cons of India being the only country where CSR was mandated by law. He described strategic CSR as either undertaking activities that no one had undertaken till now or as performing work that has been accepted in a distinguished way despite the work being quite common.



Mr. Vishal Bhardwaj, Group Head-CSR, Indorama Corporation, who joined the event virtually, gave the pre- and post-CSR context. He recounted that earlier CSR was more purpose-driven and was not strictly adherent to data, but stated that times now stood changed and data related to projects undertaken had to be provided in a more quantitative manner as it helped in conceptualizing the impact in a better manner. He explained that the approach to project management was either to align it with the SDGs or, after selecting the SDGs, chose the project. While speaking about Indorama Corporation's CSR projects, he mentioned that they always did projects by collaborating with numerous stakeholders.



Mr. Haribhai Mori, President-CSR, Bajaj Group, spoke about the significance of doing a need assessment, which helped the Bajaj Foundation become better acquainted with the actual needs of farmers, and in turn, helped them implement projects that aided in resolving water scarcity issues in Wardha and increasing farmers' income. He spoke in detail about their initiative Kisan Pathshala, where experienced farmers imparted knowledge to farmers, and recommended that the concept of training beneficiaries to become experts who can act as resource persons in trainings could be adopted by NGOs for their projects as well.



The last panellist, Ms. Anupam Nidhi, Group Head-CSR, Hindustan Zinc Ltd., talked about the shifting scenario from strategic CSR to systemic CSR (CSR 2.0) and ways to do it. She quoted her experience at Hindustan Zinc Ltd. on enhancing the local economy, end the vicious cycle of poverty and enhance living conditions of people by giving the example of their Sakhi program, which worked towards the empowerment of women by making them financially and individually independent through sustained grassroot institutions like federations, village organizations and SHGs, as well as individual microenterprises. The need to develop microenterprises of farmers, infuse the value of farmers' time in them, as well as the significance of circularity, scalability, and responsiveness for NGOs were stressed.



Panel Discussion 3: Strategic implementation of CSR Project: Role of NGOs

Mr. Ajit Kumar Rai, Sr. Officer Sustainability & Development, VYK, facilitated the third panel discussion, and he welcomed the moderator and the panellists.



Mr. Praveen Karn, Group Head-CSR, Spark Minda Group, moderated the third panel discussion. He explained the context of the NGO and how they sourced their funding. He narrated about the share of funding that NGOs get from CSR, how funds in the social sector were mainly limited to certain thematic areas, and the lower rank of India in the giving index, which provided an insight into the scope and nature of giving around the world. He also elucidated about NGO compliances from the corporate side that had to be followed and how most of the CSR-funded projects were ending in a year with no certainty regarding project extensions.



Panel speaker Ms. Charu Kapoor, Country Director, NIIT Foundation, said that NGOs were partners with whom corporations were co-creating a vision. She talked about NGOs being the best partners to collaborate to solve grass-roots issues since they had the passion, and only needed resources and expertise to execute their work. She gave an example of the NIIT Foundation, which had trained its partners by providing them with technology that has been integrated throughout project management – from planning and implementation to monitoring and evaluation – which, in turn, made them self-sufficient.



Mr. Joydeep Sen, Associate Director, PwC, explained that NGOs that knew ground realities and ways to address the issues continue to get funds from external sources. He recommended that NGOs should focus on a few thematic areas and build their expertise on them rather than being general in their work approach. He also advised that NGOs needed to set work boundaries and should inform corporations upfront about their work capacity to avoid inviting problems later on.



He suggested that NGOs working in areas where CSR penetration was less, like north-eastern states, should identify industries that were actively promoting their products and services there, like FMCG, banks, mining, etc., and try to approach them for funding.

The last panellist, Mr. Tara Chand, Head-CSR, OakNorth, elucidated that the transactional relationship between NGOs and corporations was gradually changing and that both stakeholders had now become complimentary to each other since each had their specialties. He iterated on the significance of submitting evidence-based proposals to corporations and identifying CSR partners in the same thematic areas where NGOs were working. He equated fund-raising with friend-raising. He also spoke about the trend of providing the facility of employee engagement programs offered by NGOs to corporations, wherein corporations' employees could engage with NGOs by contributing their time and skills, which could be considered by NGOs as it was a great way to build a relationship with corporations.



Panel Discussion 4: Stakeholders' engagement with reference to emergence of CSR

The second day of the conclave began with Mr. Anand Kumar, Programme Officer, VYK, facilitating the fourth panel discussion, wherein he welcomed the speakers and introduced them. The session was moderated by Mr. Harsh Jaitli, CEO, Voluntary Action Network India.



Mr. Harsh Jaitli gave a background on CSR after completing a decade in India. He said that NGOs provided services to those sections of society who could not afford the services given by the private sector, and the costs of these services were borne by different stakeholders like corporations, governments, PSUs, etc. He called the relationship between stakeholders within the social sector to be more transitional than transformational, which needed to be changed.



He further recommended developing a document containing successful CSR case studies from the perspective of NGOs, which should highlight the good work being done and the partnership formed among both stakeholders. He further suggested formation of a group consisting of NGO and CSR representatives, where CSR representatives can advise and guide NGOs on a biweekly or monthly basis.

Panel speaker Ms. Shilpa Jaiswal, Head-CSR, JKCement, stated that NGOs should thoroughly research the corporations that they were approaching for funding by doing their own due diligence so that their project proposal stood out among others. She said that CSR looked for experts while looking for partners, and NGOs needed to gear up with the information and expertise to become specialists in their own domains, since currently a number of NGOs were not well versed with ground realities and therefore were not able to meet the expectations of the corporates. She asked NGOs to start perceiving themselves as businesses and bring about changes accordingly in their innovation and upskill themselves, which will assist in negotiating with corporations. She also advised that NGOs should take up the initiative to build a collective platform for themselves as the sector was in dire need of organizing itself by setting up processes and mechanisms to make themselves more organized.



The second panelist, Mr. Prabhat Sinha, Director of Government and Public Affairs at Boehringer Ingelheim, shared the five rules to nurture an effective partnership between NGOs and CSR: acknowledging each other's values and principles; having belief in each other as this relationship often started with mistrust; how effectively both parties communicate; delivering services on the promise that was made both quantitatively and qualitatively; and the significance of managing ego in a relationship as it can be a deal-maker or a deal-breaker. He suggested that NGOs should put in more efforts to upskill themselves and there were abundant learning resources available.



Mr. Rajendran KP, CEO, SACH, discussed that NGOs needed to up their game by writing proposals that were smart enough, dividing project ideas into two pages of a project proposal, and acting as a service vendor to get CSR funding. He talked about the importance of retaining management talent by paying them instead of recruiting them on a voluntary basis as they had the capability to take the organization forward. He recommended that NGOs should be



prepared to deal with never-ending data and reports while implementing CSR projects. He spoke about the perception that small NGOs had regarding their capability, and the comparison they made with larger NGOs had to be discouraged. He also advised the NGOs that they needed to learn to be more management-oriented and excel in their negotiation skills to be able to hold their ground with CSR while building partnerships.

Valedictory Session

Mr. Rajat Thomas, Programme Officer, VYK, facilitated the valedictory session, and he welcomed all the dignitaries to the dais and introduced them.



Dr. Harish Vasishth, Executive Director, Credibility Alliance, shared the learnings and key findings of the conclave. He said that the issue of trust deficits between NGOs and CSR required more conversation around the subject to address it. The need to have government representation in such initiatives was highlighted. He encouraged Vishwa Yuvak Kendra to organize similar initiatives in future in order to capacitate the stakeholders. Taking Aahvaan to the regional level was also stressed. He concluded by sharing that NGOs at grass-roots levels can be reached through such regional initiatives and the importance of ensuring their equal participation of grass-roots NGOs is such forums.



The Chief Guest of the concluding ceremony, Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Founder President, PRIA, began by thanking Vishwa Yuvak Kendra for organizing a significant initiative like Aahvaan. He stated that change was inevitable and a constant truth. He suggested that one should adhere to one's core values and principles. He also said that first and foremost NGOs working for social development should have faith in themselves and should not



consider themselves inferior since they were involved in emancipation of the poor and

the disadvantaged sections of the society. He further shared that unless one learns to respect one's own work, they cannot expect such respect from others. He suggested that NGOs should update themselves with the happenings in the social sector over time so that they are fully prepared to answer CSR questions and meet their demands. He said that CSR was not much different from NGOs in basic nature; rather, their working style and requirements make them apart, which was why both stakeholders looked for partners. He said that Aahvaan was a call for all stakeholders to come together and work collaboratively for the larger society.

Mr. Haribhai Mori, Trustee, IYCT, and President-CSR, Bajaj Group, in his special address, narrated the inspiring journeys of a few personalities who achieved great things with very few resources available, like Shri Subhash Palekar, an agricultural scientist who pioneered the concept of natural farming in the country by drawing inspiration from ancient Indian farming techniques. He motivated the NGO fraternity to believe that their efforts, like those of these great personalities, would pay off and they would go on to achieve greater things.



This was followed by Mr. Uday Shankar Singh, CEO, Vishwa Yuvak Kendra, giving the concluding remarks and way forward. He thanked all the guests, speakers, and participants for making Aahvaan a memorable and successful event. He addressed Aahvaan as a clarion call to connect and collaborate for NGO, CSO, and CSR to learn and build partnerships. He reiterated Dr. Rajesh Tandon's words on side-lining one's limitations and working to focus on strengths, and extending arms to embrace the world and its opportunities. He said that Aahvaan was a beginning and talked about taking this initiative to the regional level as well. He said that NGOs have their own rich experience and CSR has the talent, and only after merging talent and experience can a tremendous impact be made.



Ms. Namrata Ajay, Programme Associate, VYK, gave the official vote of thanks and expressed her gratitude to all the guests and speakers for sharing their wisdom and knowledge and to the participants: NGOs, CSR, and academia, for their active participation and great enthusiasm throughout. She thanked the Chairman and Managing Trustee of IYCT, Mr. Shishir Bajaj, IYCT Trustee, Mr. Haribhai Mori, and Mr. Uday Shankar Singh, CEO, VYK,



for their leadership and starting this unique initiative. She also thanked Aahvaan's media partner, F5 Media, and the VYK team for pulling off an event of such grandeur. The two-day event concluded with a national anthem.

Key Takeaways

All the participants and the speakers unanimously appreciated VYK's unique initiative for bringing all the stakeholders together on to a common platform. Everyone opined that it was a very timely intervention on VYK's part and expressed hope and desire that the same would be taken forward during the coming years. The following were the key takeaways:

- The deliberations over the two day event help identify strategies to minimise trust deficit between various stakeholders.
- VYK should take initiative to organise more opportunities for different stakeholders (NGOs, CSR, Government) to interact with each other and understand respective ways of functioning.
- VYK should organize more capacity building for NGOs so that they are able to improve themselves and are able to match the guidelines established by CSRs. At the same time, VYK should organize perspective training for CSRs so that they can understand functioning of NGOs in a better manner.
- VYK should organize more initiatives like Aahvaan at Regional level, so that smaller NGOs which cannot afford a residential training in Delhi, can take benefit from the same.
- VYK should organize training on CSR and Social Stock Exchange to further strengthen the collaboration between NGO and CSR.
- VYK should take lead in forming a consortium at national and regional level, promoting NGO-CSR partnership.
- VYK should provide training to NGOs on due diligence, accountability, sustainability.
- Prepare documentation of good CSR practices for NGOs.

Conclusion

Aahvaan was Vishwa Yuvak Kendra's platform designed to foster collaboration among numerous stakeholders where collective efforts can be taken up to address societal issues, which unfolded during the two-day conclave. NGO and CSR thought leaders who bring a dearth of experience with them graced the event as speakers, engaged in conversations, and discussed the ground realities of the development sector. The conclave was successful in facilitating dialogue among various stakeholders and aimed to enhance the understanding of how corporations and non-governmental organizations can collaborate effectively to achieve a more significant developmental agenda.