

Taking Risks in the Face of a Pandemic

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Rohini Nilekani is the Founder-Chairperson of Arghyam, a foundation she set up for sustainable water and sanitation, which funds initiatives all across India. She was Founder-Chairperson and chief funder of Pratham Books, and the Co-founder and Director of EkStep, a non-profit education platform. In 2017, she was inducted as Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Rohini Nilekani is a committed philanthropist and in 2017, she, together with her husband Nandan, signed the Giving Pledge.

2020 has been a sobering year for the philanthropy sector, not just in India, but globally. We have witnessed rising inequality even in these past 6 months, with a few of the rich getting even richer while hundreds of millions of people fell behind in the ensuing economic slowdown. There are some who had just risen above the poverty trap, only to fall back in. This is only one of the many ethical issues that have surfaced during the pandemic. It calls for a humble reflection by philanthropists on the role and responsibility of wealth in society.

Philanthropists and philanthropic institutions were very quick to respond to the humanitarian crisis created by the pandemic.

Through their institutions, government channels, and social sector organisations, philanthropists have pumped out hundreds of millions of dollars in the past few months.

My husband Nandan and I, of course, also did what we could. We agreed to double our budgets this year.

Our focus was first on immediate humanitarian assistance, locally and across the country. It was next on bolstering all our partners and grantees to stay afloat to continue their critical work. Alongside, we helped create mental health training sessions for the social and healthcare sectors, because first responders can become very fragile themselves.

Our teams also began to quickly look at how we could further what we call Societal Platform Thinking (www.societalplatform.org) to respond at scale with speed.

Societal Platform Thinking is wrap-around thinking around an ecosystem of platforms designed to address complex societal problems. It aims to reduce the friction to collaborate between society, the state and markets.

As part of this on-going effort, our EkStep Foundation worked with the Union Government of India to make its national digital education platform Diksha respond more effectively during this time. Even as over 300 million children in India faced a loss of learning because of the school and college shutdown, Diksha saw a massive spike in participation from teachers, children and parents. In the past few months, over 175 million learning sessions have taken place on this government platform.

Nandan's teams are also collaborating with a host of experts from all sectors to think through several strategic issues. Coming out of their experience designing India's unique identity system, Aadhaar, one preoccupation is how the Covid vaccine, when it comes, can be effectively and equitably administered to 1.3 billion people in India.

We believe a triple approach may work well for philanthropy in the post-Covid world. First, make provisions for a rapid response to crises. This involves nurturing trust between various institutions of civil society and government before any calamity strikes. Second, give institutional, unconditional support to the partners who can deploy rapid responses so that they can continue to develop the leadership necessary in a crisis.

WHAT IS PHILANTHROPY'S ROLE IN TODAY'S WORLD?



Rohini Nilekani speaking at the CAPS Conference. 2019 (c) CAPS

Third, support the creation of better intellectual infrastructure. Invest in think tanks and academic institutions that are designing for long-term cooperation across sectors, using a robust system analytic. This may help converge on the framework of resilience needed globally.

After all, the pandemic has taught us several lessons, but perhaps the most valuable is that we need to focus sharply on communities and society. We don't know when this pandemic will end; we know this will not be the last pandemic. We know that climate change, for example, will continue to create devastating disruptions in people's everyday lives. So abnormal is the new normal. Volatility is the only constant. And the only way to face this new world is by building the societal muscle to adapt, to be flexible and to develop resilience. Linear responses will not work; top-down mandates will face resistance. Local efforts will remain local even when successful.

The need of the hour is for philanthropy to support a new imagination. A new imagination where communities can be the heroes of their own story. A new imagination that engages emerging technologies of this digital age to connect ideas, people and solutions in real-time.

We are not referring to market platforms that reduce users to consumers. We are not talking about governmental platforms that require obedient subjects to comply. Sure, state and market platforms play an important role. But if we want the world to recover and to remain resilient in the future, we must bring in societal entities to the front. Can we embrace a core value - to restore people's agency and choice? Can we, as philanthropists, unleash innovation and creativity? Can we help people to become part of the solution and not remain part of the problem? We can. We can do this by supporting local, contextual problem solving, allowing for a diversity of responses, at scale and with speed.

It is a tough time for philanthropy and the social sector. Many organisations have had to cut back their budgets because of the cascading economic impact of the pandemic.

But those of us who can should become more ambitious. We must double down on our philanthropy. We must get ever more compassionate, ever more trusting, ever smarter, and ever more strategic.

We are in a privileged position to help co-create a better future, post the Covid-19 pandemic. **Let's use that opportunity - with kindness and most importantly, with humility.**

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Bangalore Literature Festival. 2019. (c) RNP