Context to the nugget

Neera talks about how Dasra has evolved into an organization that works in three broad areas (Research, Building Organizations and Giving Strategically). She also talks about the way Dasra has made choices as it has grown as an organization and how it plans to measure impact and success as it grows into the future.

Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I understand you focus on the three pillars of impact one is Research second is Building organizations and third is about giving strategically talk to us a little bit about how you got here.

Neera Nundy (NN): It's a great question so I actually romanticized about being in the field and I am and was always motivated by sort of rural women, and women's empowerment and how much of the family unit depends on their strength and everything that they do and I was like I want to be able to mobilize women in their community and that's actually went in my summer at HBS I went to SEVA and with the fine arts background, Micro finance was very hard at that time and had just started to pick up and I had read this book by David Bomstein called Price of a dream, and it was like all about micro finance and access to finance was empowering for women and the self-help groups and really strengthening their agency in their communities and I was like I want to be a part of that and so I went to Seva and Seva was like OK fine come hang out with us we are trying to create a pension product for these women and I think while I was in the field for lack of the better word I think it occurred to me there are people who are much better at mobilising communities A I wasn't from here, B I have an accent it's not like my Hindi is that great? Really was I using my skills well and there were people who were far better at bringing these communities and really helping educate these women on sort of what's needed and I think that's where took a step back and I thought to myself what are the skills that I actually have and although I may not be so close to lives that were trying to change is there a role to play as in between of sorts and having been on the side of where there is the private sector and kinds of people who don't understand what's actually happening or the challenges on the ground I found myself starting to be that bridge actually so more between these two being able to speak the language of the funder and on the other hand also be able to relate and understand more to the NGOs than to the communities, and so long story short we realized that what could really potentially happen, Impact was can we strengthen the NGOs themselves, that are working with the community.

DJ: And this was the Seva experience was in parallel with Deval starting Dasra?

NN: Yes having already started Dasra actually, so I spent time both here with Dasra as well as with Seva so I split my summer into two and when we started we did a lot more their bunch of Venture philanthropy had just started to emerge so basically it was taking venture capital and applying the same principals but with Philanthropy. So, we started with earlier stage organizations like Magic Bus when I had just started ANJALI a mental health program Akshaya Patra which is now big Mid-day Meal Program, when these were very small emerging organizations we started with them.

DJ: So you raised the fund and you deployed it, I mean the reason I mention is the last conversation I had was with Roopa Kudva at Omidyar Network and I guess they are one of those people that sort of do a combination of writing cheques to NGOs and investing so you sort of almost set up a fund.

NN: So we set up a fund but it only to give grants it was not to do equity or debt or actually do any investing but it was early stage non-profits, so NGOs that were just starting and we realized very quickly that if you are very early in that stage it's a lot of not drain but there's a lot to do with these organizations that Dasra is an organization couldn't help that many NGOs on our portfolio if we were going to be that early stage but we started with the whole premise of if we will support Non Profits to scale when their impact will scale and they have more potentially solved problems and we came from an angle of can we build management capacity? So how do you build institutions? How do you have then think about business management kind of stuff because ultimately if you strengthen that then their programs will also strengthen, and then there wasn't enough investment in building organizations and that the funding out there was typically just going to program rather than really investing in people and systems and things that make the corporate sector flourish, are similar to what's needed into the in the non-profit sector we felt that we should place ourselves there and make a case for help that ultimately scales impact and so we started with the promise of how do you help NGOs grow but then to help NGOs grow you have to influence the funding because they cost money and if the funding's only really wanting to go to program we needed to start educate funders on how this actually makes more of a difference, it can be transformational in terms of scale for these organizations and that's really where our work around influencing philanthropy started and to influence philanthropy you need the research base so that you can help them understand, where is the gap what's the sector and for us to start to really connect with; see there is always this research out there, what's actually happening on the ground? What are the interventions what are the NGOs actually doing? Is what really research tries to do is to look at what's the reality of what's happening? What is second year research actually say? Where is that gap and there for work influence?

DJ: Given these three pillars how do you think about success at Dasra?

NN: One way obvious way is how much money you have raised? Other one is how many organizations do we support? And what's the growth of those organizations? Typically looking at team size and budget but now we have also add a place after 18 years asking ourselves, great so these are output numbers but also if we are changing lives and I think it's a difficult question to answer and it's not, the sectors are not set up to easily answer that and so what our next phase for Dasra is how do we hold ourselves more accountable like are we prioritising lives? Our lives even changing with what we are trying to do? And that's going to required us to change again how funders work and how NGOs work?

DJ: Give me an example what do you mean measuring change in lives?

NN: So outcomes, right? Are kids actually learning in school are we really improving nutrition? Are we delaying the age of marriage for young girls? So there are certain outcomes that all of these activities and everything is ultimately trying to address that are we really moving on that? And I think

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as a world we are trying to hold ourselves accountable and sustainable to the development goals? But if you really look at those goals and you see what's happening on the ground we are not really measuring any movement on those goals and the country like India where we have the highest privilege of probably everything if you move the needle in India you move the needle globally on the sustainable development goals and we have to be able to start to measure that and part of measurement will also allow us to think about what's working? What's not working? So having this kind of learning feedback loops, so systems don't exist with these organizations because funders often don't fund it and that capability doesn't exist and so I think this sector is becoming more sophisticated and more complex and so I think it is important for us to think about how we measure our impact and that's what I mean like impact on lives.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: What Neera says about Dasra as an organization figuring out the key axis of impact is as relevant for leaders making choices during transitions, I guess.

One of my earlier guests Roopa Kudva (RK) of Omidyar Network spoke about how she thought about this when she decided to move on from CRISIL to do something else.

RK: *"because in Crisil, I was just fortunate to have a set of clients who were all either policy makers or regulators or CEOs of company and I had the platform to interact with them and everyone knew that I was going to leave so they all called up and said lets chat etc. and so I would go and have a cup of tea with and I did this with about 45 people and over the 9 months and it was just amazing as my friend have told me the insight that I got and I think the first clarity what I got was what I did not want to do and I think that itself become clear to me through these conversations where people said why don't you do this or we think why don't you join us? And that gave me clarity on what I did that helped in the elimination process in my mind"*

DJ: It is key to note that there is a spread of options that are available (Impact Investing, Impact Investment Banking, Impact Research, Leadership Development, Building a Platform or creating an organization). The key is to give yourself the time to discover the "product-market fit" if you will and ensure that you transition thoughtfully than jump into the first option that comes your way.

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End of nugget transcription

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Nugget from Roopa Kudva that is referenced: [Flexing leadership style at Omidyar Network](#).

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Neera Nundy - Nuggets

- 31.00 Neera Nundy - The Full Conversation
- 31.01 Neera Nundy - Early formative years
- 31.02 Neera Nundy - Changing orbit - HBS, Wall-Street and Dasra
- 31.03 Neera Nundy - Thinking about levers of Impact
- 31.04 Neera Nundy - Role clarity with co-founders
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- 31.09 Neera Nundy - Distinctive leaders in the Social Impact space
- 31.10 Neera Nundy - In summary - Playing to Potential

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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