Recounting the Social Footprints of FIDR India

Charudutta Panigrahi*

ABSTRACT
This article is based on an interview with Charudutta Panigrahi, Founder-Mentor, Forum for Integrated Development & Research (FIDR India), a leading think tank of the country. In this interview, Charudutta passionately tells the story of the evolution of FIDR as also the challenges faced and the road ahead. Indian thinker, TED speaker and futurist, Charudutta has set up institutions (GLF & FIDR) which work with communities across India. Widely and diversely published, he is a prolific writer on trends, issues concerning the present and the future of our society: he may be googled. His present manifesto aims at enhancing the quality of community participation in governance –both in India and abroad. This interview has been conducted by Dr. Srirang K Jha, an academic, who is deeply interested in social change agenda.

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What triggered the formation of FIDR India?
NGOs constitute a middle space between the public sector on the one hand and the private sector on the other. In India, there are over 3.8 million NGOs, and by this reckoning, the number of NGOs is more than double the number of schools in the country, 250 times the number of government hospitals. There is almost 1 NGO for 400 people as against one policeman for 709 people. With this population of NGOs, we find a severe deficit in the measurement of the development work being undertaken by these NGOs. The social impact of their work is rarely documented or seen objectively. Innovations are not forthcoming. With technology, development work can be made more affordable, less complicated, and more accountable. But the infusion of technology in the sector is still less than desirable.

With FIDR, we wanted to form a group of professionals, who besides being altruistic should also be keen on the measurement of the good work, they do or spearhead. Hence our catchphrase is ‘reimagine development’. Development is dynamic, and the social change organisation (s) has to

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move with the changing landscape of socio-economic trends and indicators. FIDR was set up to innovate new ways of development and out-of-the-box implementation mechanics which would yield sustainable impact at the point of change.

Objectives of FIDR include the promotion of good governance processes through an appropriate platform for improved service delivery in education, health, civic services and economic development; resolution of social challenges through data and service design, promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship initiatives using appropriate platforms for sustainable economic development; improvement in education standards through advocacy using proper tools and infrastructure development support to achieve competitive human resource capacity; improvement in the health care system through advocacy using appropriate tools and infrastructure development support for better health care services and well-being; and capacity building among women and youth as a measure for sustainable development.

**What are the vision and mission of FIDR?**
The vision of FIDR is to change the way people take charge and look at their own lives and the lives of their society and their country. The mission of FIDR is to involve all, tailor-made change initiatives for differing situations and always help communities reinvent their approaches towards reforms in the areas necessary. The reforms are theme agnostic. It could be health, education, water, livelihoods, or disaster.

**What were the early constraints in converting the idea of social change organisation into reality?**
The predominance of individualism, short ear to the ground, a culture of non-measurement of social work and all of the traditional notions assuming the status of discarded totems resulting in inefficiencies posed the early constraints.

**In the current scenario, what are the problems faced by institutions like FIDR in India?**
I would not call them problems, but they are challenges. With the growing significance of CSR, there is a trust deficit between the corporates and the NGOs. Corporates still take the NGOs as ‘vendors’ which gives rise to a lot of other legal and financial complications. NGOs are non-profit making, but they still have to pay GST. This creates a contradictory situation. Many of the corporates have created their foundations. Instead of utilising the services of 3.8 million NGOs present in the country, is it required to have one more foundation and duplicate the efforts? Another challenge is the NGO participation in public programs. Public initiatives should proactively encourage greater involvement of NGOs in their programs. It would help get rid of the opacity that still exists.

**What are the thrust areas of FIDR?**
The thrust areas of FIDR are incredibly diverse. Reforms in agriculture, livelihoods, promotion of women artistry, utilisation of ‘technology for good’ or ICT for Development to implement reforms, tribal community development, health & education form our core portfolio.

**How do you look at the experiences of working with the communities in different states of the country?**
I consider myself and FIDR fortunate to have got the experiences in different states of India and amongst diverse communities. We have been experiencing the true diversity of India, the uniqueness of it. But my learning at the end of the day is that a human issue is more or less the same everywhere with slight variations due to the ecosystems in which we live.
How has FIDR changed itself over the years?
FIDR has been continuously changing its approaches, the tools for social change management and the HR deployment for specific thrust areas. I believe that an organisation is ‘living’ and any living organism has to be sensitive to the environment and adapt to the changing paradigms. Or else, the change agent itself becomes prey to the ‘fixated’ assumptions. These affect the quality of interventions badly, on-the-ground.

What are the significant accomplishments of FIDR?
There are quite a few accomplishments. Some of them are:

- Changing the lives of more than 5L people across India
- Developing robust data-centric, research and documentation skills in the sector
- Always emphasising on innovations and have designed each program differently and uniquely to deliver the necessary results.
- Providing technical support to the governments – in research, data analytics and public policy initiatives
- Shaping FIDR to be a think tank which implements. Bringing in the combination of thought leadership and last-mile ground implementation

Will you like to share some of the path-breaking interventions of FIDR India?
One of our unique programmes was a Citizen School at Konark in Odisha to train the local youth in robotics just after the disaster brought about by deadly cyclone last year better known as Fani. It was an excellent way to divert the minds of young people who needed some creative engagement so that they can come out of the trauma induced by unprecedented destruction in the aftermath of the cyclone. Another significant contribution was the publication of a whitepaper on Corporate Social Responsibility in Odisha, which was highly appreciated by the Government of Odisha. Besides, we are also involved in microcredit, employment-linked skill training, microenterprise development, and employment generation as part of the Livelihood and Poverty Alleviation Programme. FIDR is also engaged in strategic CSR in terms of developing CSR master plan with clearly defined indicators for output, outcome and impact; implementing CSR plan by placing our team of professionals at partner location; providing consultancy on specific needs/projects, and conducting impact assessment of ongoing CSR Programmes.

How do you see FIDR growing and contributing during the next ten years?
FIDR in the next ten years should be able to change lives exponentially. We are restless to achieve scale, speed, and impact in the primary touchpoints of the social sector like health, education and livelihood. We intend to slowly but surely incorporate measures to drive results that can be transformative.

FIDR would like to work with younger talents and encourage ‘disruptions’ to spread across several levels to address challenges of cost, hiring, the scale of operations. We believe that strategic cost management can help us access new sources of revenue, expand our service footprint dramatically, and reduce resource hurdles to growth. We aim to foster ‘development labs’ across India because for us, innovation is all about thinking outside the box to achieve what others in the sector, consider impossible. The most critical aspect in successful innovation would be to find a new axis amongst the civil society, the government, and the industry. We would plan to solve the social issues by looking at a different axis and trying to touch the lives of millions.