

The Courage to Lead

The Bhavishya Alliance's journey in tackling undernutrition in Maharashtra, India



A case study by Andrea Rodericks for

INNER WORK *for*
SOCIAL CHANGE



Fetzer Institute



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The Inner Work for Social Change Project



Synergos and the Fetzer Institute began the project on Inner Work for Social Change in 2018 to demonstrate how Inner Work and Bridging Leadership can make social action towards a better world more effective. Through six commissioned case studies and in dialogue with thought leaders, development practitioners, and others, the project aims to spark a global conversation on how reflective practices can make social action more aware, more ethically attuned, and more sustainable.

Within the project, *inner work* is any form of reflective practice that increases awareness of self, others, and the systems in which complex social problems arise. Inner work is core to *bridging leadership*, which is the capacity and will to build trust and tap the fullest contributions of diverse stakeholders, helping them to come together across divides to work in concert for the common good.

About this case study

The case study portrays the Bhavishya Alliance, which operated in Maharashtra between 2006 and 2012 to reduce undernutrition among young children in the state. We built case content through a review of available literature on Bhavishya, the state nutrition mission, the challenge of undernutrition, and Inner Work; and interviews with a small selection of people from government, corporates, and the social sector who were intensively involved in the Alliance or related pilot projects.

Following action research principles, the interviews invited participants' reflective engagement, drawing on their practice and theory, encouraging multiple ways of knowing, and being mindful of power and privilege. The case study tells the story of their journeys through Bhavishya and their collaboration around the complex challenge of undernutrition. We focus on the ways in which Inner Work was embedded in the Alliance, how it influenced the nature of collaboration and leadership that laid the groundwork for change, and lessons about Inner Work that may be applied to other complex problems.



Photo: Joe McCarron

Prelude

In September 2001, the deaths of 14 young children from a nomadic Bhil tribal community in the Indian state of Maharashtra, apparently due to undernutrition, sparked anger in civil society, and grabbed government and media attention. The deaths occurred in a village called Bhadali, 70 kilometers from the historic city of Aurangabad, a six-hour drive from Mumbai. The tragedy was yet another reminder of the continuing shame of undernutrition among India's poorest families, despite the government's significant investments in child nutrition services. It painted a desolate picture of families steeped in poverty, with little support to protect and nurture their young children in one of India's most developed states.



Synergos photo

A day care center run by the Maharashtra government, that includes a feeding program

Maharashtra's Aurangabad division, also known as the Marathwada region, had over the years been a cauldron of difficult development challenges. It was a drought-prone pocket of deep poverty and had one of the highest incidences of farmer suicides and a recurring history of socio-political caste-based conflict. In 2001, Venkatesan Ramani, a seasoned Indian Administrative Services officer, was the divisional commissioner. Following the news of the undernutrition deaths, Ramani and his colleagues went to Bhadali where they launched emergency measures to support the affected families, but Ramani was determined to find a way to sustainably end the problem of severe undernutrition. He and his colleagues at the Divisional Commissionerate and district offices tried to understand the problem. None of the children who had died had ever been weighed or measured. Why were basic services not reaching these pockets of population just a short distance away from a major city? And why were services from India's flagship nutrition program (the Integrated Child Development Services) not working for those who needed them most? What would it take to overcome the geographic, social, political, and cultural barriers that perpetuated this situation generation after generation?

Drawing on recent efforts in the state of Odisha, Ramani convened some of the best thinkers including district and state-level health and nutrition staff, and specialists from organizations like UNICEF to work on the problem. This led to an intensive and dedicated body of pioneering work over two years, executed with almost missionary zeal, aimed at ending severe undernutrition among young children in the region. It came to be known as the Marathwada initiative, and it paved the way for the launch of a state-wide nutrition mission in Maharashtra in 2005, the first of its kind in India, supported by UNICEF.

The death of a child evokes powerful emotions in anyone who has an ounce of humanity. Yet, the world witnesses the unnecessary deaths of children every day. People become inured to this reality, even more so when the deaths are not in their immediate neighborhood, community, or country. Dutch-born Tex Gunning was not prepared to do this. As President of Unilever Bestfoods Asia, he was determined to

place the nutritional needs of children at the heart of Unilever's business mission. "I don't want to live a life creating an illusion of meaningfulness while deep in my heart I know that every five seconds there is a child dying," he said. "None of us can pretend any more. We cannot."

Gunning wanted to learn how to make a business grow while shaping the workplace to be a true human community. His experiments over a few years through a series of demanding off-site workshops for Unilever staff paved the way for an organizational culture in which trust and authenticity liberated a creativity that yielded one of the most dramatic business turnarounds on record. Following this success, Gunning took on building Unilever's Asian operation. In partnership with Generon Consulting, he led Unilever's commitment to a mission of significantly improving the nutrition and wellbeing of Asia's children. They decided to begin their work toward this mission in India, where the problem manifested at the largest scale in a very complex environment. Gunning believed that the paradigm that divided the world into social, private, and government sectors created artificial barriers. As all sectors played a part in the problem of child undernutrition, he believed that the combined forces and competencies of all sectors were required to solve it.

Similar thinking had been emerging in other places. The global nonprofit organization Synergos had spent close to a decade supporting the creation and strengthening of community foundations around the world and had come to realize the value of "bridging organizations." These were organizations strongly rooted in grassroots communities, bridging divides by reaching out to other segments of society. These organizations played a critical role in fostering the social glue and trust necessary to convene and sustain collaboration. Further, Synergos realized that leaders who gravitated toward these kinds of organization themselves demonstrated the ability to convene diverse people and to bridge divides. But it also became clear that most people faced internal obstacles that prevented them from realizing their full potential as bridging leaders. Many faced burnout and the increasing pace and complexity of development challenges left little room to reflect, nurture themselves, or work on overcoming these obstacles.

Peggy Dulany, the founder of Synergos, understood this dilemma well. In the fall of 1997, worn out and searching for a way to renew herself, she retreated to the mountains of Montana. In the quiet of her small cabin, away from the demands of a busy life, she could write and reflect. Dulany realized that she was missing a sense of connectedness to a larger whole (Earth, the Divine, God) that could sustain her in times of despair or disconnectedness. Through personal reflection, writing, and participation in wilderness retreats, she began to see how overcoming her own obstacles could be relevant to Synergos' larger mission of overcoming poverty through inclusive partnerships. Accordingly, Synergos committed itself to supporting bridging leaders around the world to overcome their inner obstacles to fulfilling their purpose, to bridge divides, and to collaborate with others to address complex problems. Generon Consulting was a helpful companion on this journey. Synergos was eager to apply what it had learned to a complex problem through a multi-stakeholder partnership, joining with Unilever and UNICEF to combat the problem of child undernutrition in India – the beginning of a Partnership for Child Nutrition.

In 2005, as the partnership was setting up in India, it searched for a suitable site for its work. The state of Maharashtra presented a promising context. Following his instrumental role in the Marathwada initiative, Ramani had been transferred as the Director General of the Maharashtra Rajmata Jijau Mother-Child Health and Nutrition Mission. He was eager to embrace the support and participation of all stakeholders in combating undernutrition. If a multi-stakeholder partnership was successful in this large and complex state, with a diverse population of more than 110 million people and its fair share of socioeconomic and political challenges, it would yield important lessons for solving intractable problems such as child undernutrition in other states and countries. Thus, UNICEF, Unilever, and Synergos planted the seed of the Bhavishya² Alliance in Maharashtra, which brought together government, corporate, and civil society actors between 2006 and 2012 to address the problem of undernutrition among young children.

Introduction

Between 2006 and 2012, Maharashtra's stunting rate among children under two years of age was reported to have declined by 15 percentage points (from 39% to 24%) – one of the fastest declines in stunting seen anywhere at any time. This decline is even more remarkable considering that the state's performance in reducing stunting between 1992 and 2006 was lower than the all-India average.³

Much has been published about the factors that may have led to this success. Researchers cite the favorable political, social, and economic environment that contributed to positive and sustained economic growth, the strong reduction in poverty, fair governance, and improvements in women's empowerment and health. While this environment certainly aided the decline in stunting, it was far from the perfect environment that could explain this level of success. Water and sanitation conditions remained relatively poor over this period and were not improving as fast as in some other Indian states and the food security situation still needed vast improvement.

Beyond the enabling environment, researchers note that this success may also have had its roots in work done by Ramani and his colleagues since the early 2000s as part of the Marathwada initiative, and later, the state-wide nutrition mission.⁴ These initiatives signaled that dedicated bureaucrats, members of civil society, and the media were coming together to reject the high level of undernutrition among young children as an acceptable norm. Researchers also highlight the influential role that leadership may have played in combating undernutrition, especially given the absence of a single institutional home for nutrition and the necessity of multi-sectoral action.

It is in this context that we tell the story of the Bhavishya Alliance, which operated in Maharashtra during the same period alongside the state nutrition mission. The Alliance brought together government, corporate, and civil society actors, with the sole purpose of accelerating the end of undernutrition among young children in the state. We do not dwell on the degree to which nutrition results may be traced

to the work of the Alliance, or to any other specific factor. It would be impossible to draw such attributions for a challenge as complex as undernutrition in an environment as diverse and complex as Maharashtra.

In building the Alliance, its founders (UNICEF, Unilever, and Synergos) wanted to help participants go beyond their habitual siloed ways of working that they believed were ineffective for combating such a complex problem as undernutrition in children. So, they drew on a promising social change approach called “presencing”⁵ and Synergos’ learning around Bridging Leadership⁶ to embed specific practices to help participants make connections between their inner selves and outer work. The purpose of these efforts was to help participants uncover and overcome individual and collective barriers and blind spots that prevented them from engaging in new forms of collaboration or that inhibited their openness to emerging solutions. We refer to this as “Inner Work.”

This case study contributes to the considerable documentation on efforts to reduce undernutrition in Maharashtra to tell a story that may not yet have been told. Through the journeys of a few participants in the Bhavishya Alliance, in this case study we attempt to uncover the influence this kind of Inner Work may have had on their collective efforts to accelerate the reduction in undernutrition among children in Maharashtra. We focus on the following central questions: In what ways did attention to “Inner Work” in the Bhavishya Alliance influence the nature of leadership and multi-sectoral collaboration for social action to reduce undernutrition among children in Maharashtra and beyond? Could lessons from Bhavishya be applied to other complex problems?



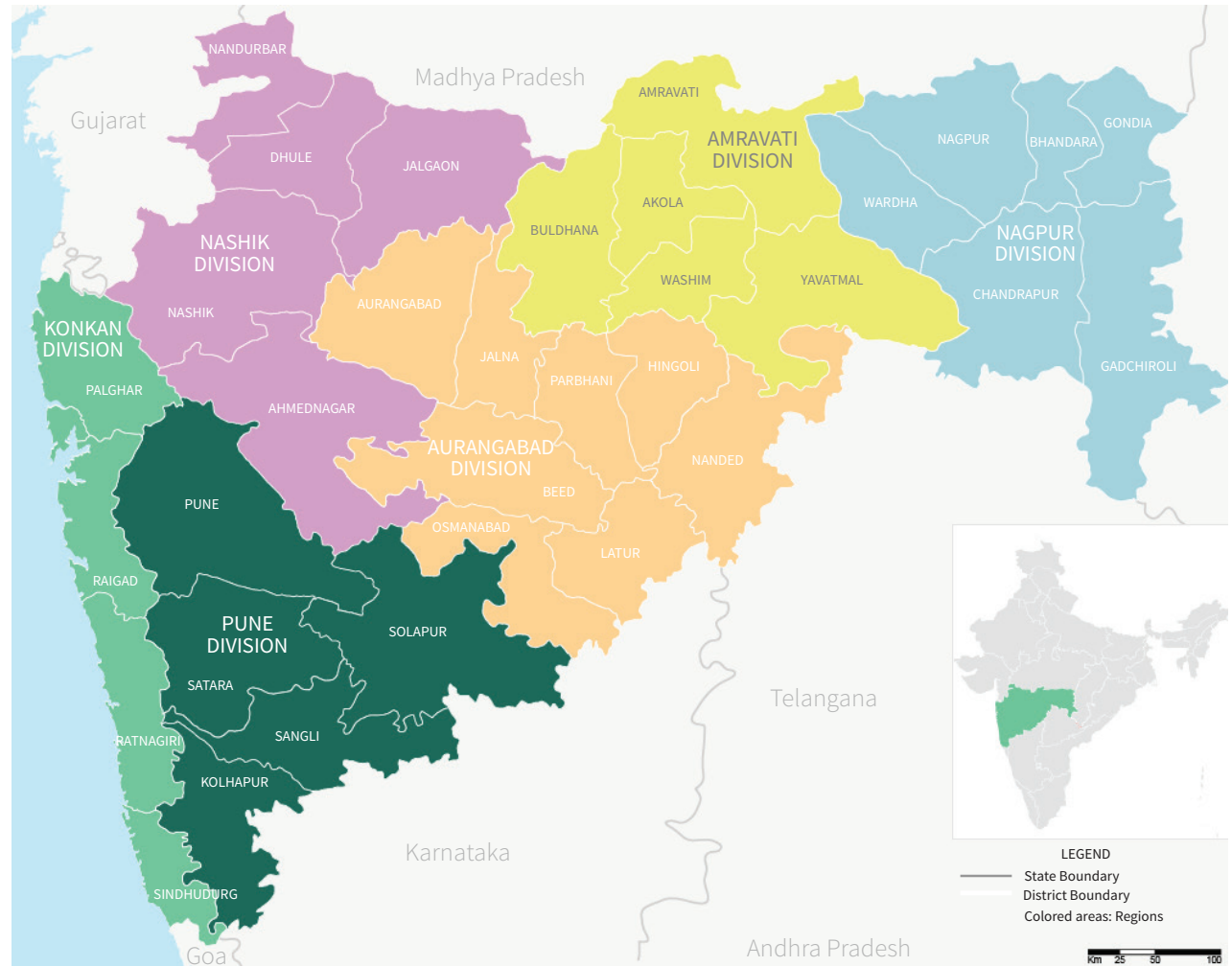
The context for this story

According to the 2018 Global Nutrition report, a third of the world's stunted⁷ children live in India – 46.6 million children whose parents or other caretakers cannot provide them with good nutrition over long periods of time, or cannot prevent them from repeatedly contracting infections. Further, half of the children wasted⁸ in the world live in India – 25.5 million children who are being acutely denied enough food to eat, or have suffered severe and likely recurrent illness. Wasting is a strong predictor of mortality.

These realities are a scourge for India and Indians, who imagine an impressive trajectory of growth and global leadership for the country. As many as 50 districts in India – some of them larger than many countries – are at the bottom of the ranking in international comparisons of stunting percentages of children under five. This India remains hidden from most of the country's middle and upper classes. In 2005–06, at the start of the Bhavishya Alliance, almost half of the children under five in Maharashtra were stunted.⁹

Who are these children with this grim destiny, who face persistent hunger, who can so easily succumb to illness and death? Why do we let them begin life with this indignity? Any answers you may find to these questions will lead you to a greater appreciation of the complexity of the challenge of undernutrition.

THE STATE OF MAHARASHTRA & ITS REGIONS



Undernutrition is a complex problem

Child undernutrition is not just a technical or biological challenge, but a complex social problem as well. There is no single cause for it, and it manifests in numerous ways, including some that are seemingly invisible. The nutrition of a child is influenced by factors that span generations and it has lifelong consequences. A large number of people, organizations, and factors can influence a child's nutritional status, including: human factors such as knowledge deficits or illiteracy; social issues such as child marriage, and gender, caste, and other forms of social inequality and apathy; economic issues such as poverty, unemployment, and itinerant work; and political factors such as poorly functioning or unaccountable government agencies or programs.

The size and diversity of India's population, geography, and social organization make the problem even more complex. In Maharashtra, malnourished children may be from rural villages, some of which are remote and face severe drought, from remote Adivasi (tribal) communities in the hilly Nandurbar forest, or from informal urban settlements. These children are spread across an area of 307,713 square kilometers. A single solution to addressing undernutrition – driven centrally and designed for homogeneity – cannot succeed. In a large, diverse state like Maharashtra, how do you address the numerous challenging situations? How do you decide at which point to intervene? And how do you do it at scale? The first step may be to accept that we don't yet have the solutions, and that a single organization or sector cannot succeed alone.

None of this analysis is new; existing technical frameworks show the intersectionality of these issues. More recently, however, there has been growing recognition around the world that there needs to be greater attention to and investment in understanding how change occurs, and how transformative change may be kindled around such a complex issue. The challenge in Maharashtra was not a shortfall in technical solutions and experts, or even a lack of infrastructure. Those who conceived of the Bhavishya Alliance believed that to achieve sustainable change in a reasonable time frame, they would need to influence the more subjective, underlying,

interpersonal dimensions, such as leadership that bridges divides; the quality of relationships and collaboration; the commitment, conviction and accountability of planners; and people's relationships and agency to claim their rights and entitlements. All this would require change from within – in people, organizations, and sectors.

One framework¹⁰ for learning about change distinguishes between change processes that involve improving the performance of an existing system (first order); change processes that involve addressing the shortcomings of a system (second order); and efforts that fundamentally rethink how an issue is conceptualized and the roles and relationships of all parties in addressing it (third order). Third-order changes are



Mothers bring young children to a government run center for integrated child development services.

most effective at tackling complex problems such as child undernutrition because they address underlying systemic issues. But this kind of change is hard because it demands letting go of cherished arrangements, roles, rules, and hierarchies. It calls for the transformation of individuals, relationships, and systemic patterns." This framework may help us understand the role that Inner Work may play in combating undernutrition. But first, let us look at the systems that were already in place to tackle the problem.



The government's efforts to address undernutrition

Launched in 1975 on the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth, the Government of India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program is a veteran of social service programs. Run by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, it serves children under six years of age, pregnant women, and lactating mothers. At the core of the program is a childcare center called the anganwadi that helps to link these clients to a range of government social service programs and infrastructure, most importantly those of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. In addition to the anganwadi services, in its latest iteration the umbrella ICDS encompasses a range of sub-schemes such as one for adolescent girls and a new, centrally managed, National Nutrition Mission (Poshan Abhiyan) that takes a life-cycle approach to nutrition and focuses on a set of aspirational districts most in need of nutritional improvement.

The scale of the ICDS program is vast. With each anganwadi serving a population of approximately 800 people, there are now 1.36 million anganwadis in India with 2.8 million frontline personnel. In 2018, the ICDS program budget was \$1.2 billion. In Maharashtra, there are currently about 108,000 anganwadis serving a population of 121 million people. Most development organizations that work on nutrition, health, or early childhood education interface with the ICDS program.

A child is weighed at an Anganwadi center in Maharashtra.

The anganwadi in the memories of a child in rural India

If you were born and raised in rural India, chances are your earliest memories of life and play would be from an anganwadi – a childcare center run by the government's Integrated Child Development Services program. Anganwadi means courtyard shelter. Like courtyards in so many traditional Indian homes, the anganwadi may have been the heart of your small village, and the anganwadi worker who ran the center, your first teacher outside your home.

When you were just a baby, the local auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM) or accredited social health activist (ASHA) aunties from the health department may have encouraged your mother to take you to the anganwadi for vaccinations and health check-ups, to get advice on feeding, to collect supplementary food, or to meet other mothers with new babies. When you turned three, you may have been sent there every day to play and learn with other preschoolers from your village. Once you got used to it, perhaps you looked forward to going there, wondering what you would get to eat for your hot meal or dry snack that day. You would think about the games you would play, and hope that your best friend would come too.

You remember the mud plastered walls covered in pictures and charts, and some of the drawings you and your friends made, the toys and nap mats hanging in a corner, many of them made by neighbors and your parents' friends. You remember the bend in the road and the trees along the shady walk through the village to the anganwadi each day. On days you were ill or couldn't go, your parents may have gone there to pick up a take-home snack.

You may remember some of the first songs, poems, dances, and games that anganwadi aunty and helper aunty taught you – songs about the animals and plants in your village, or how to wash your hands. Sometimes if you and your friends were good, anganwadi aunty may have taken you out to collect twigs, stones, and other objects, and you would all sit under a shady tree playing counting games. On special occasions or when aunty was expecting visitors you would watch her make a rangoli.¹² You may have even made your own first rangoli at the anganwadi entrance and for days after watched everyone carefully step around it. You did not know it at the time, but these activities drew their imaginative power from the pioneering work of Gandhian educators Tarabai Modak and Anutai Wagh in the coastal Thane area of Maharashtra, based on the educational philosophies of Maria Montessori, Gandhi, Tagore, and J. Krishnamurti.

As a young child, the anganwadi was the center of life in your village. You looked forward to visitors to the anganwadi. Sometimes they would be neighbors bringing coconuts or

fruit from their trees, or your mother's group of friends preparing the meal for the day or sweet treats for you and your friends. The ASHA aunty from the health department would sometimes stop by and take medicines out of the locked box for a sick child or mother somewhere in your village. Every year there was a big celebration at the anganwadi for your village health and nutrition day, and you and your friends would practice a special song for all the guests. You may remember the time a group of older children from the village came by and helped paint the walls of the anganwadi, Maybe they painted your favorite story characters. And sometimes if your parents left you at the anganwadi for the afternoon, you and your friends would silently eavesdrop on the meeting that the teenagers had out in the compound. You might have watched them, deep in conversation, laughing and planning, and wondered when you would be old enough to join them.

Every month another aunty (the mukhiya sevika, or anganwadi worker supervisor) would come by to work with anganwadi aunty. Together they would pore over the big registers and talk about you and your friends, and how you were growing. They would measure your arm circumference and weigh you. They were sometimes joined by the ASHA and ANM aunties. You may have been curious about the charts and tables, and wanted to help them. Sometimes when your mother came to pick you up, anganwadi aunty would show her these charts and they would talk about them.

You may think back longingly to these happy days – your first school, your first friends, and many other happy and memorable firsts. Or would you?

Were you lucky enough to have memories such as these? If you came from a Dalit (low caste) family, or lived in the poorest areas of your district, like Bhadali village, would your neighborhood anganwadi have been as inviting? Would your parents have been encouraged to send you there? Could they afford to take you? If you were from a tribal family, would they have wanted you to go? Were there times when you came to the anganwadi excited for your morning snack just to be disappointed because they had run out of food, or the food stock was infested? Was there water at the center to wash your hands before you ate? Was there a bathroom and were you taught to use it?

Of the 1.36 million anganwadis in India, were you lucky enough to have attended one that made beautiful early memories?

Building an alliance

As it launched the partnership with UNICEF and Unilever, Synergos knew they would need a bridging leader who could reach out and bring a wide range of diverse actors and organizations to the table, many of whom had never considered working together. They found such a leader in Surita Sandosham. A lawyer by training, Surita had a strong interest in human rights and diversity and had been leading the Rockefeller Foundation's Next Generation Leadership program. The program was built on an audacious idea – to trigger conversations that bridge divides and contribute to revitalizing democracy in the United States. Building on this experience, Surita was convinced of the power of multi-sectoral collaboration to address complex problems. The possibility of trying to do this around a complex problem like undernutrition in a challenging and high-stakes environment drew her in. She joined Synergos and led efforts to initiate the work of the Partnership for Child Nutrition and, along with UNICEF and Hindustan Unilever, co-created the Indian entity Bhavishya Alliance.

How do you pull together an alliance of people not accustomed to working together? Beginning with the strongest political support from their organizations, Surita and colleagues at UNICEF, Hindustan Unilever, and Generon Consulting dedicated themselves to understanding and engaging actors from across the ecosystem. They searched for organizations and people who played (or potentially could play) important roles in the system surrounding the nutrition of children and who were interested in a multisectoral approach. Beyond particular organizational affiliations, they searched for champions who could be bridging leaders – who could look at problems in systemic ways and observe themselves as part of the system; who could step into the shoes of others and see themselves in those they served; who could take the risks needed to bridge divides and bring others along with them.

They found an ally in Ramani. Through their work in the Marathwada initiative, Ramani and his team had realized that undernutrition was one area where they could not have the government acting in isolation. As they launched the state-wide

nutrition mission, they knew it was important to innovate with others on solutions that could work for families in the most disadvantaged pockets of the state.

When Bhavishya Alliance came on board, we realized there could be a lot of synergy involving other sections of civil society, corporations, NGOs and CBOs,¹³ and communities. It offered a platform to take off on a larger scale, engaging many more actors.

Ramani



Alliance participants discuss at a Change Lab meeting in 2006.



Multi-sector groups engage in a systems mapping exercise at a Bhavishya meeting.

Some organizations and people were reluctant to engage, especially those with more strident positions critical of government or the private sector. They feared being seen by their peers as compromising on their values and positions. Others simply did not have the bandwidth to engage. All the organizations and people that joined the Alliance made a commitment to work in more holistic ways with the entire system.

One of these, Dr. Armida Fernandez, had worked all her life to improve the health of newborn children and mothers in the informal settlements of Mumbai. She had founded an organization called the Society for Nutrition, Education, and Health Action (SNEHA) and, at the time, was its CEO. When Surita approached her to join the Alliance, Dr. Fernandez instinctively knew this was something out of the ordinary,

a different approach to tackling the problem of undernutrition. SNEHA joined the Alliance and Dr. Fernandez herself played an important role over the years in the Governing Council, representing the voice of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations, and the mothers and children that Bhavishya sought to serve.

Dr. Fernandez reflected on the start of SNEHA and how she joined Bhavishya:

Whatever I do in my life, it's because something happens to my heart. I see a situation and I feel that I need to reach out. I think whatever I have done so far is because of this inner call...

I started with trying to save the baby. And I thought if I have to save the baby, I would have to look at the mother. If I look at the mother, I have to look at the adolescent girl. Our understanding grew from there. This is also why I started working on violence against women. When you really want to make change, you have to look at the whole system...

I love Surita. When she came and met me, it touched me. I knew we had to bring about a change, and we had to have a sustainable way of doing it. She explained the Bhavishya Alliance's focus on nutrition, and immediately my heart leapt because I know that nutrition is so important for every aspect – for survival of the newborn, the neonatal period, infancy, childhood, and across a person's life. I had always worked with the government system because I came from that sector. All the work that SNEHA does is with the community and with the existing government programs and systems. When Surita approached me, I thought this work could make a true difference to babies, infants, children – and across their lives. I said, "of course I will be part of the Bhavishya Alliance."⁷¹⁴

As the team reached out to organizations across the system, they encountered a range of preconceptions, especially about organizations in other sectors. Many people from both government and NGOs had never interacted with the private sector

and were distrustful of their motives, what they might bring to the table, and what they might take or claim. There were some strong partnerships between NGOs and government departments at various levels, but their collaboration often focused on technical solutions to address a very particular part of the problem. It was hard to find more systemic processes that could potentially spark third-order change. More than ever, the team was convinced of the need for practices that challenged existing biases and roles, and that opened people's minds and hearts to listening and engaging each other with authenticity and love.

Ramani describes how he saw this challenge:

The major challenge was how to get mutually suspicious bodies together – the government, private sector, and NGOs. Probably everywhere in the world, these sectors are deeply suspicious of the motives of each other and disparaging about the capabilities of the other sectors. Getting them to sit together itself was a great challenge.

After two years of reaching out to organizations across India, the Bhavishya Alliance finally gathered a network of champions from various government departments, NGOs, and corporations who committed to a regenerated fight against child undernutrition. With Hindustan Unilever, the TATA Group, Housing Development Finance Corporation Bank (HDFC) and Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation of India Bank (ICICI) serving as trustees, Bhavishya was registered as a charitable trust. A governing council was set up comprised of individuals from these organizations, as well as various government departments, UNICEF, Synergos, SNEHA, and a few others, to provide policy and programmatic direction. Everyone agreed that it was a rare accomplishment to bring the sectors together to solve problems.

Synergos didn't have an answer. We had an intention and a set of values that we were working towards. In representing Synergos, I tried to demonstrate those values in the way we facilitated and brought different sectors together (Surita).

The Change Lab lays the foundation for Inner Work

As development practitioners we inhabit a world of plans, targets, and reports, juggling them amid heavy workloads and stretched resources. Our attention is drawn to an outer world of deliverables and pressure to attribute the solving of solvable problems to our work. We are encouraged to focus and excel, to fashion ourselves as experts. It is easy to become blinkered, laboring in a share of the turf that we understand well and guard as ours, and focusing our best energies on shaping it to perfection as we imagine it, accountable to those that fund our work.

No matter the complexity of the problems we encounter, our systems and organizational cultures and partnerships tend to be geared to first- and second-order changes and solutions that we can orchestrate within our realm of control. These solutions often focus on fixing inefficiencies in an existing system, or applying highly skilled technical expertise to a problem as we perceive it. These approaches are useful for some kinds of problem but are not usually effective at addressing complex problems such as undernutrition across diverse contexts.

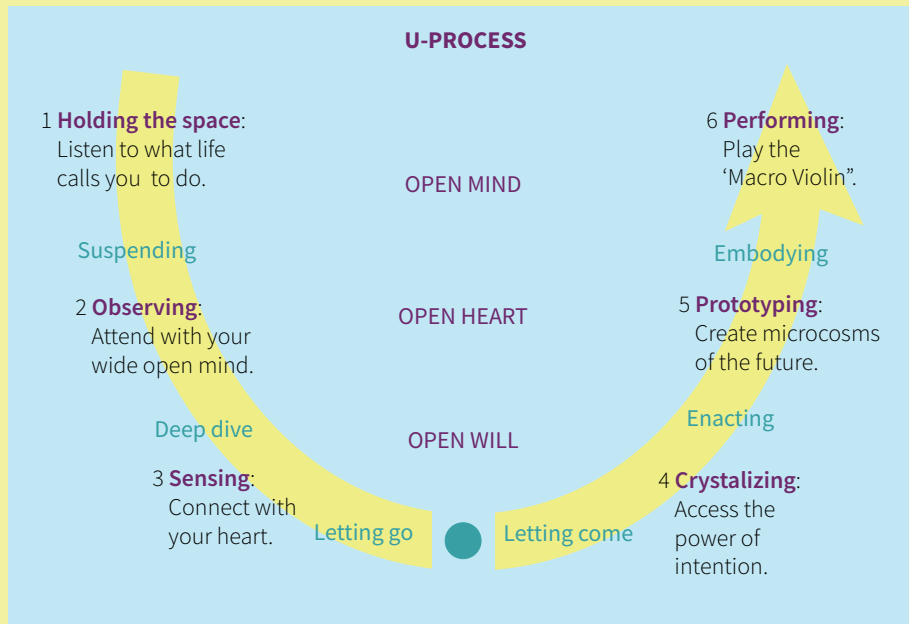
As the Alliance came together, the founding partners of Bhavishya knew that they would need to do something to lay the ground for systemic, creative, and participatory approaches more suited to the complexity of the undernutrition challenge. With support and facilitation assistance from Generon Consulting, they designed a Change Lab to launch the work of the Alliance. The purpose of the lab was to build the foundations of collaborative practice and leadership that would nurture trust and enable participants to draw from a deeper source of personal purpose, building an outer and inner awareness to overcome barriers and fears.

Presencing and the U-process

The design of the Change Lab was based on a guiding framework called Theory U that grew out of work by Otto Scharmer and others on presencing (“becoming totally present – to the larger space or field around us, to an expanded sense of self, and ultimately to what is emerging through us”).¹⁵ Theory U offers a way to build high-trust relationships among leaders across a system, enabling us to tap into our collective capacities in an intentional way. It helps us illuminate and overcome our individual and collective blind spots that may get in the way of addressing the complex challenges we face in a deeper, more thoughtful, regenerative way. It helps us open ourselves to embracing ways of doing things that we do not yet know.

There is an underlying belief here: it is not only what leaders do and how they do it that influences the success of our actions. It is also our “interior condition” – the inner place from which we operate, the source and quality of our attention – that matters.

In a typical process guided by Theory U, participants journey together through three phases or movements: sensing, presencing, and realizing.¹⁶



Twelve weeks in the Change Lab

You need to have a group of people who are highly committed to the issue because otherwise egos and institutions get in the way. So, you have to bring them together in a space where they form a community with each other, not only intellectually but also emotionally and socially.¹⁷

Tex Gunning

Each organization in the alliance sent one or two people to participate in the 12-week Change Lab. There were two levels of participation: Change Lab members (eight from the corporate sector, 11 from civil society, and 10 from government) who were actively involved in the day-to-day work of the alliance for a three-month period and seconded from their organizations; and champions, senior-level decision makers and leaders from organizations that had committed to the goals of the alliance and were to share their experience and participate in decision making, as needed. There were 36 champions at the start. In addition, the alliance invited guests – nutrition and management experts from different sectors – for sessions with lab participants. Change Lab members were to co-create and propose to the champions a set of collaborative breakthrough initiatives to address child undernutrition in Maharashtra.

The lab generally followed the three phases of the U-process:

Sensing

The sensing phase helped participants connect to the world outside of themselves and their institutional bubble, listening with their minds and hearts wide open. Participants formed groups drawn from all parts of the system. They went on learning journeys to communities coping with undernutrition to understand the context of undernutrition in Maharashtra. They later went on learning journeys in other states to get a sense of patterns across the larger system. At this stage, they were encouraged to witness, observe, and absorb the reality, rather than think about solutions. They were introduced to techniques to help them listen without judgement, reflecting on their own and other people's perspectives, to examine different dimensions to the problem and to look for solutions that may already exist. The process gave them a better understanding of the wider system and helped them see that alternative or new interpretations could be valid. This experience made them more aware of their own power to shift the system.

After the learning journeys, participants came together to share what they saw, felt, and learned. As people with different perspectives made deeper connections of the heart, they began to see through each other's eyes. Informed by their diverse perspectives, they created verbal or visual models of the larger system, not just the immediate problem. They generated promising ideas to address the problems they

“I could feel his struggle as mine..”

In 2006, Manish Srivastava was Hindustan Unilever's learning manager responsible for learning and development. He was seconded to Bhavishya as one of Unilever's Change Lab members and as a consultant to harvest learning from the U-process for the organization. This dual role made the lab process extremely intense for him. But he was eager and ready for the challenge, and immersed himself deeply in the learning journeys as part of a seven-member team.

It was as if I visited another time zone in [the] same geographical space. It was shocking to see that just few kilometers away from the financial capital of India, there exists another India 100 years behind... Living with [the people] in the moment, I felt that we are still not independent... Reading about it in The Economic Times editorial and living it firsthand are two different things.²⁰

The learning journeys had a deep impact on Manish. On the second day, his group visited a farmer and his family in their small thatched hut. The farmer was close in age to Manish. The family had almost nothing, and the farmer's wife and three daughters were skinny and barely dressed. Manish listened to the farmer, and later shared his lunch of half a chapati, some lentils, and a glass of water. This experience shifted something in him – he later wrote a poem about it, excerpted here:

He was a proud man. Shy to share his misery

But his struggles and failures were seeping through the thatch roof,

Like the sun rays on the floor between us.

We both kept looking at little sun patches.

We couldn't communicate much. Our dialects were too different.

Then there was a silence. A sort of numbness.

Sun rays were on me, sinking through.

I could feel his struggles as mine –

Lost farm, heavy loans, fear, doubt... losing pride!

Manish's participation in the Change Lab launched him on a transformative journey that changed his life.

observed. At the end of this period they presented their observations and preliminary ideas to the group of champions.

Presencing

In the presencing phase, participants retreated from the problem and context to a place of quiet, letting go what was not essential and their attachment to habitual ways of seeing, so that a deeper knowing could emerge. For this phase, they went for a retreat to the Himalayas. The central part of the retreat was a solo visit in nature, with three days and nights completely alone in the mountains with only water and minimal food – no books, phones, media, or writing material.

The unbounded outer spaces, the natural lines, cycles, rhythms and movements of nature call us back to ourselves, to those unbounded and infinite inner spaces, to a less rational consciousness. The outer wilderness reflects and enables us to reach into our inner wilderness – into those spaces which are normally unconscious, which are often repressed and unknown.¹⁸

This kind of process is designed to help people return to themselves and slowly become aware of what is holding them back. It was a difficult experience for many – alone, confronting their fears and barriers, some of which may have originated early in life. The shared experience of the solo retreat kindled trust and brought the group closer together. They began to evolve into a team, excited to change things together.

Realizing

In the realizing phase, the learning, sharing, and reflecting together coalesced to help participants leave the security of known solutions and embrace more emergent ways of working. Lab facilitators invited participants to translate their understanding of the system and ideas for change into prototype projects that they could test quickly. Through this process participants clarified their ideas, letting go of some of them – learning, unlearning, challenging each other and their own assumptions. But even if people are able to open their minds and see things differently through the learning journeys, and open their hearts to take a deeper, more personal interest in the issue,

they still need to be able to act in new, often untried ways. Prototypes¹⁹ offer an important way to embark on this journey. In Bhavishya, Change Lab participants laid the ground for the pilot projects that became the main channel for Bhavishya's work in the years that followed.

Insights and reflections from the Change Lab

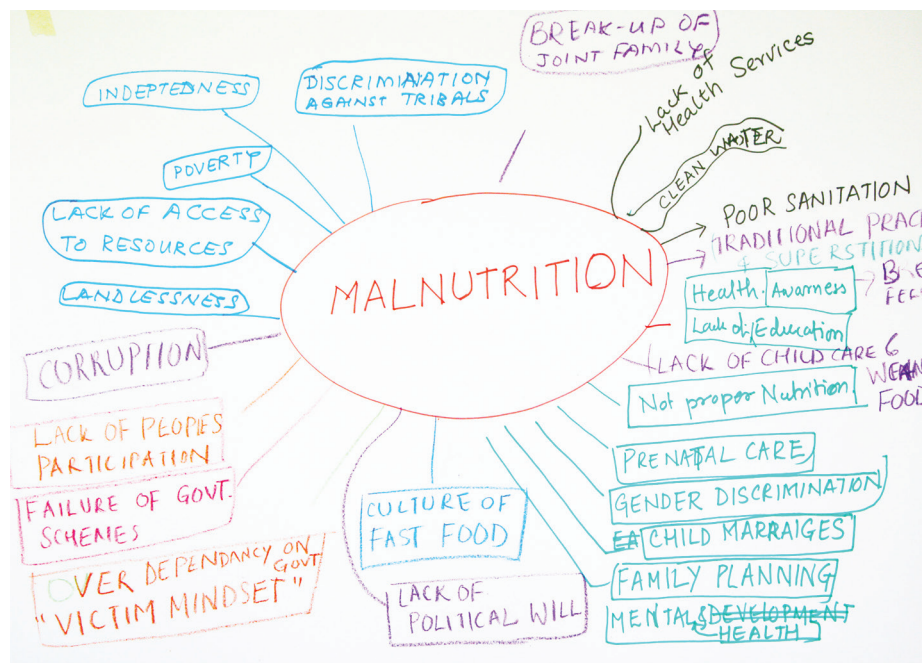
The challenge of bringing together people from across the system – with different perspectives on the problem and several harboring significant mistrust of others – cannot be overstated.



Participants at the nature retreat during the Change Lab's Presencing stage.

Power, vulnerability, and the change within

As may be expected, the Change Lab held within it not just diverse perspectives, but complex relationships and power differences – between government offices and small community-based organizations, nutrition experts and generalists, women and men, international and Indian facilitators, champions and Change Lab members, and so on. Added to this were the high expectations that the champions had of the lab's experiments with the U-process. Champions were eager to see their organization's investment yield strong returns. This combination of factors led to a high-stakes environment for the lab that Adam Kahane, the lead facilitator from Generon Consulting, described as a pressure cooker.



Synergos photo

A snapshot of one group's exercise in visually mapping the complex causes of malnutrition.

Through the three phases of the Change Lab, participants entered a more self-reflective space, observing their own contributions to the problem and beginning to imagine how things could be different. But some were easily pulled back from this vulnerable place, overcome by the pressure to meet high expectations within a short time frame. This pressure distracted them from their inner selves and from the work they were doing to overcome their own barriers and build trust. Some participants began to revert to their place in the established hierarchy and their cherished identities – as nutrition specialists, NGO managers, influential donors, and so on. This led them to become more entrenched in their own positions and views, and preoccupied with how others needed to change. And people had different mental models of how to effect social change.

It was very painful because everybody likes to stay in their comfort zone. If we were challenged it was not easy to accept because we had been working on this issue for so many years.

Rajlakshmi Nair, UNICEF

This led to several areas of disagreement and conflict in the lab. Some conflicts were aired but not resolved, and they gradually became undiscussable, left to the mercy of the power hierarchy in which those with less power grew silent. It was a challenging environment in which to work. Some participants gave up, unable to voice their perspective or navigate a path for themselves. Others became more skilled at the inner-outer movement, drawing from their internal strength to help move the group forward.

The Change Lab participants persevered through these challenges, united by their common purpose and interpersonal bonds and the trust that had begun to grow. They began to explore different forms of power, such as the power to bring about change as a collective. They grew into a creative collaboration of people willing to challenge and listen to each other, suspend judgement, and trust in what emerged. In the end, they produced designs for four innovative initiatives that they tested with actors across the system. They were proud of their work, and on the last day of the lab presented their proposals to the group of champions. Some of the

champions, however, doubted the viability of the proposals. As the champions (a much more senior and powerful group) had not been engaged intensively in the lab, the larger group (Change Lab participants and champions) was not well equipped to handle this difference in opinion. The meeting ended without approval for any of the initiatives, and with a confused and distressed lab team, and a disappointed facilitation team.

Does this mean the lab failed? Perhaps this is not the most useful question to consider and certainly far too black and white to suit our reality. Our story goes on to show that the Bhavishya Alliance ran for another five years focused on a set of innovative and collaborative pilot projects. The work done in the Change Lab and the challenges encountered produced powerful lessons and sowed the seeds for the work of the Alliance.

A safe container for presencing and building trust

The organizers of the Change Lab attempted to design the lab as a safe space – a container where participants could be vulnerable as they looked inward. Several lab participants reflected that they were able to take bigger risks, abandon self-doubt, and draw from within to contribute to the work. Others reminisced about the lab as a place where they were able to express opinions and surface issues and disagreements in a way that was impossible to do elsewhere. In the process they learned how working on yourself opens possibilities for emergent change. Problems that seemed intractable at first became less so when they shed their inhibitions, opened themselves to uncertainty, and became present to what was emerging. Despite its many challenges, the lab offered space for those who were ready to let themselves be vulnerable. It allowed them to draw from within to overcome the usual rules of hierarchy and inter-sectoral dynamics to intervene in powerful ways. Manish later reflected on one such example in an article he wrote:²¹

Shabri (not her real name), a community health worker and a nurse, shifted the group's attention from a prolonged egotistical conflict between government officers and staff, to make them aware of their collective purpose. In a plenary (session) the conflict rose to a level that senior

government officers stood up and threatened to quit the group. Shabri and some other group members requested the officers to sit down and join them in the circle. After some time, she started singing a folk song:

Garaj baras pyasi dharti par phir pani de maula, Chiriyon ko dana, bacchon ko Gudadhaani de Maula (O Lord, Give this dry land some water; Give its birds and children some food).

It reminded all of us of hungry children, and our collective purpose of eradicating child malnutrition. While singing, she held hands of those sitting next to her. Soon, the entire group was sitting in a circle, holding hands, and singing the song with her.

It took courage for Shabri and her colleagues to lead this intervention in the presence of senior government officers who were clearly upset and ready to shut things down. Shabri was present to the larger field of emerging possibilities and was able to overcome any hesitation she may have had to create a safe holding space, successfully taking the group back to their individual and collective purpose.

But the lab was not always a safe space, and anyone who tries to facilitate such spaces will testify that creating a safe container requires skills that are learned and practiced over time. It takes personal courage, trust, and genuine openness to what may emerge, from both facilitators and participants. For Bhavishya the Change Lab was a start. It presented many challenges, but it was these precise challenges, difficult questions, and paradoxes that held deep learning for those who stuck with it.

The seeds of change

While it was not clear to many at the time, in hindsight the Change Lab clearly planted the seeds of change. The work that people did on themselves enabled them to come together to build a culture that valued reflection, allowed disagreements to surface, encouraged listening, and gave them the courage to face their own imperfections and mistakes, stepping outside their professional roles and organizational identities.

*Do we really make a difference in the community? Because I am also a person with a development background, and I've seen that we have done harm. Let me tell you it's all driven! It's NGO-driven, it's government-driven, it's UNICEF-driven, it's World Bank-driven!*²²

Rajlakshmi

All records of the Change Lab experience speak to the friendships and bonds that grew between participants during this period, many of them still strong. They have continued to draw on each other's insights, support, and critique over the years. The powerful insights that emerged during this time are still bright 13 years later.

Collaboration in the years that followed

The Bhavishya organization

When the Change Lab ended and the facilitator team from Generon Consulting left, Surita and a small group of champions understood that the work needed to continue in order to refine the pilot programs, get them funded, and build the Bhavishya Alliance team. It was important to have a way to keep the alliance together and to support and help manage the pilots. The alliance was entering another phase of work that required a more formal structure. In 2007, after a period of transition, the formalized Governing Council hired an Indian CEO, K. S. Murthy. Surita joined the Governing Council as a representative of Synergos. Rajlakshmi from UNICEF remained heavily involved in the work of the alliance and UNICEF also contributed two additional consultants.

Other Change Lab members tried to continue to support the work of Bhavishya. But for most of them, it was not formally built into their roles or deliverables, and they were not management decision makers in their organizations. They contributed to Bhavishya alongside very busy jobs, which made their participation challenging. Nevertheless, a link to people who had been a part of the Change Lab was critical for the Bhavishya team. Surita, Rajlakshmi, and Manish helped lab participants engage in different ways. They worked hard to bring the energy, ideas, and ways of working that



A young girl and her younger sibling at an Anganwadi center in Maharashtra.

had germinated in the lab into the work of the new team. Later, this became easier when Manish was able to negotiate a secondment to the Bhavishya Alliance as an organizational development and partnership consultant.

Manish recalls:

After three months sabbatical, I was back in Unilever in a bigger role as Corporate Learning Manager. However, leaving Bhavishya work incomplete felt terrible within. I somehow kept my spirit going by working for Bhavishya in the evenings and on weekends. It felt as if I was living two lives and it was driving me mad. I had dreams of a dying



Synergos photo

A multi-sector team engaged in analysis around the problem of under nutrition among young children.

malnourished child... I was writing poems... And I was looking for a way to do more.

One evening in office I received a video about the start of Bhavishya. A big function was going on in Unilever, and I was alone in the office watching the video. I saw myself on the screen.

In the film there was a scene about the lab team returning from the Himalayas after the nature solo... The filmmaker was interviewing me sitting on the banks of the Ganges. She asked me, “What happens

now? The lab is getting over, you will go home and get back to life as usual...” The interview was about to end, and something suddenly triggered me. I told her, “I didn’t visit these farmers as development tourism ... knowingly or unknowingly, I made a promise – and I won’t run away from that.” And, as I watched the film, a light went on. I could clearly see the poor farmer I had visited. I was no different from him. Yet, economically we were 100 years apart.

My response to the filmmaker’s question reminded me of the promise I had made. And here I was with my dream job. It was as if my heart had found a deeper calling just before I reached my aspirations. I didn’t know what to do. I wrote an email to our CEO Doug Bailey, sharing what I felt about Bhavishya as an unkept promise. I wondered that, someday, we both would succeed in the business world, but I did not want to regret missing an opportunity to make a difference to the world when we could have. Sending this email was an emotional, impulsive and non-businesslike act. After a while I tried to recall the email, but it was gone!

The weeks that followed my email were intense. At one end I had a demanding and rewarding corporate career, and at the other my heart was calling to serve the communities. I wanted to leave my job but had less courage to be on my own. There was no guarantee that leaving my job would allow me to engage with Bhavishya. My business colleagues were not able to understand my dilemma. They wondered why I was prepared to let go of such a prime position.

Surita supported me as a friend and guide. She helped me realize that the best way I could serve Bhavishya and my inner calling was by being a bridge. I recalled a compliment I had received at the end of the lab by a government officer: “You have intellect of business, heart of an NGO and courage of a government servant.” I decided to stay on and hold the paradox within my heart. At this stage my mentor, A. Vasudevan (from the Organization Development Certification Program) helped me to

After a month or so, Doug called me again and said, “I will second you full time for whatever time it takes to make the money sweat.” By then Unilever had already committed \$1 million, but it wasn’t about the money. We all genuinely wanted malnutrition to go down. Doug told me, “In my role as CEO, I am accountable to shareholders. But we also have accountability to reducing malnutrition. I am putting you on this job and we have to balance both.”

Doug asked me to report to him monthly on what we were doing. He said, “Never say that businesspeople don’t have a heart.” Ever since then I started working on the Bhavishya project.

With a dedicated team in place, a working Governing Council, and a group of champions, the Bhavishya Alliance tested more than 11 pilots and initiatives, focused on a specific problem, in the years that followed, most of them through collaboration between the government, NGOs, and the private sector. A few of these pilots were scaled by implementing organizations or lessons from them applied in the ICDS program. Some initiatives were serendipitous, emerging directly from the ability of team members to be fully present – to listen better, understand the value of different perspectives and competencies, and apply their agency to making these initiatives a reality. In one such initiative, with support from a colleague, Manish was able to leverage Hindustan Unilever’s cohort of management trainees and supply chain leaders to work closely with district health officers and NGOs in Nasik. Together, they studied procurement patterns in a limited area to inform improvements to the public health system medicine supply chain.

The practice of Inner Work

Following the Change Lab, Bhavishya’s Inner Work practice was opportunistic and adaptive in nature. Surita and Manish attempted to infuse in the work a culture that valued a balance between inner and outer selves and that supported people to practice being true bridging leaders. They found that they were able to create safe spaces in regular work routines to engage participants in cultivating an open heart

and reflecting on their experiences. These practices helped people embrace a radical acceptance of whomever they encountered in these spaces.

Creating learning journeys

Learning journeys with a diverse group of people became a regular part of Bhavishya’s pilot projects. Manish described an example of one such experience he organized with the help of a local NGO when a group of German business executives came to visit.

Before the learning journey, I facilitated a session to help them surface their assumptions, what they knew, and what they did not know. We left their output on the wall. When they returned from the site visit, we revisited this output. While business executives had transformative insights, our NGO colleagues were also surprised by what they had learned. They had been to this village many times before, but had never seen parts of the village in which business leaders were interested. In our line of work, we can become quite pathology-focused, looking for problems, and getting answers about these problems. But there is beauty, and that can heal you. These learning journeys created mindfulness moments.

When people report back from learning journeys, I like to ask them, “What patterns did you notice? What touched you? What shocked you? What was not expected? What does it tell you about your own assumptions? Where are you stuck as an organization? Do you see your own patriarchy?” That’s when people break down. If we create an inclusive and safe space, the masks come off.

Cultivating moments of contemplative practice

The team also drew on people’s own experiences of contemplative practice such as meditation, encouraging them to share these practices with their colleagues. This kind of sharing became a part of Bhavishya’s culture. Facilitators intentionally made space at meetings to connect to their inner selves and be mindful of keeping an open

heart. Meetings would routinely open with silent personal introspection, followed by each person checking in, sharing how they were feeling, not just the challenges or accomplishments that they brought to the meeting. Participants were encouraged to listen in generative ways, trying not to judge or interpret with their preconceived lenses. This kind of check-in and listening would form the basis of a safe container.

Using theatre and art

The Bhavishya team experimented with the use of theatre and art to unleash creativity, and to encourage people to venture beyond their professional roles and bring their whole selves to the work. In 2007, the Alliance faced some critical challenges and a fair amount of blame was being thrown around. With encouragement from his mentor, Manish opened a meeting of 60 stakeholders by asking everyone to paint their mood. They used their creations to spark the conversation from a deeper, more personal place. The mood of the group shifted significantly after that, with some participants making heartfelt pleas to place the child at the center of their deliberations. The team used moments like this to free people from the confines of rational thinking, organizational identities, worry, fear, or shame, allowing the light of creativity, imagination, and love to emerge.

Theatre and art were also used to deal with difficult issues. Once, while facilitating a partners' meeting with the Girls Gaining Ground pilot,²³ Manish began to mirror the group, reflecting back to them their behavior and interaction with each other. This simple act surfaced issues about inter-organizational relationships that would have been very challenging to talk about. Mirroring back behaviors was a gentle but powerful way to surface the problem.

Attention to sparking dialogue

Meetings that bring partners together are valuable for surfacing ideas and perspectives, but the way they are set up often does not allow the time to harness their potential to engage in deep dialog. In Bhavishya, they found that even when time was not an issue, people's conditioning in formal meetings inhibited this kind of interaction. When offered informal, less structured space, participants would seek out

those with whom they wanted to engage on a particular issue and allow themselves to dialog deeply, really trying to understand and get to know each other. The Bhavishya team encouraged such informal interaction in the way the room was set up for partner meetings, allowing for quiet spaces for conversation or self-reflection, and sufficient time for breaks in nature, when possible.

We bring raw material to the table. And sometimes there is a crack. Attending to that bit in you is a very important aspect of the work. When your inner child is speaking to you, don't shut it down. Be authentic to all the parts of yourself. That is where the vulnerability comes in. It takes courage to be vulnerable, to look within... What is calling me?... What is



Alliance participants engage in an exercise illustrating the value of collaboration.

disturbing me?... That is a very important aspect of this work. Learning, spirituality comes from here. Opening the heart is key, and leaders who are able to do this, start to work in very different ways.

Manish

These practices were like mini U-processes that helped nurture Bridging Leadership, laid the ground for relationships of trust to grow, and kept the inner-outer connection alive.

Embedding Inner Work in pilots

Attention to the inner-outer connection may also have influenced the strategies pursued in some of the pilots.

Sunita Bhise, a facilitator in the Girls Gaining Ground pilot project implemented by SNEHA, recalls the work she did. She had been a grade 5 teacher, but wanted to make a bigger difference, and wanted very much to work with young girls. Right from her orientation in SNEHA she was convinced of the power of this work. SNEHA used an appreciative inquiry approach that Sunita found gentle and uplifting. She gained vital knowledge on issues related to nutrition and the sexual and reproductive health of young women that, even as a mother of two girls, she had not known. But most important, she says learning to look within herself gave her immense strength. Sunita continues to work in SNEHA's adolescent girls' program, and has made appreciative inquiry one way she engages with the world.



Anushka's Story

Sunita arranged a meeting with a young woman, Anushka, who had participated in the Girls Gaining Ground pilot in 2008. As a ten-year old in Ghatkopar settlement in Mumbai, Anushka heard of the Gheu Barrari program from Minakshi didi,²⁴ an older girl who encouraged her to participate. Now a confident college student, Anushka reflects with remarkable clarity on her participation in the program, what she learned, and her dreams for the future.



Minakshi didi told me that I was growing up fast... She said I would learn important things like keeping my surroundings and myself clean, and other things that would be important for my life. I got interested in this and decided to go and listen [...]

I learned how to manage my periods and about nutrition for ourselves and children in the future. We also did some community work to reach out to pregnant women and help with anganwadi duties. A lot of time has passed, and I don't remember everything I did or learned. But most important, I learned that girls need to be physically and mentally strong. Girls are generally mentally strong, but I learned to be aware of my emotions and work on myself. This is very important. When things go very wrong and you get angry, and you think you just can't tolerate it, you need to find the strength to overcome that feeling. Think for example about the daughter of a poor farmer. She may think that they have no money and her parents will not be able to get her married. This causes a lot of stress. Sometimes a parent may even commit suicide. They need the mental strength to handle these kinds of pressures, and also support others [...]

I have learned to meditate, and I try to do yoga to build this kind of physical and mental strength. To me, meditation is a powerful source of emotional support. They inspire me. (pointing to framed pictures of Gautama Buddha and B.R. Ambedkar on her wall) [...]

Now I tell other girls a little about these things and about my experience. If they get curious, I tell them more – about the modules we were taught, how I became confident, about being aware of our emotions, about how to manage them. Then that girl may have a best friend and she spreads it to her... and these girls may tell their mothers, who tell other mothers... and so it spreads. Then others will be talking about these things. They will feel more confident... They will not be afraid by what is happening to them or around them... They will reach out to others [...]

In these times, education is very important. Not just learning to read and write, but learning that caste and religion does not make a difference, your humanity does. We should learn these things just as we learn the alphabet or numbers [...]

I want to become a district collector²⁵ or enter politics. Our village is left behind. I want to work for the development of my village and other villages. I want to work for society. In our village (Hanuvat Khed) even today girls are married off when they are 12 or 13 years old. Our village is so far inside – there isn't even a proper road. You leave here at 4 in the morning, travel all day and walk for hours in the dark at the other end, struggling to even see the path. It's so scary. How can girls get educated in this place? How can they dream? They stop going to school after grade 5. Pregnant women have no way to get to a hospital. They are taken in a bullock cart or put on the back of a bike when they are about to give birth. There isn't even a place to get basic medicines. The village needs trees and shade. There's such a severe water problem in summer, and the temperature is rising higher every year, recently reaching 47 degrees [Celsius]. With such a scarcity of water, there are going to be a lot of conflicts even for a few drops. First some basic things have to be fixed... and we need to involve people in solving some of these hard problems together. Maybe first I will become a deputy collector, and then one day perhaps I will be collector.

Reflections in hindsight

I thought it was hard throughout... and I got a lot of joy out of it. Ultimately, I wasn't doing it alone. I never felt alone.

Surita

The role of the champions

One of the most heartening and enduring memories Surita carries from Bhavishya is the experience of working with the small group of Bhavishya champions – a subset of the original group of champions from the Change Lab. These were people who stayed on the journey and were all deeply invested. They inspired each other with their commitment and contributions. This commitment helped nurture trust while navigating uncertainty. When there were problems, this group of champions came together, supporting and complementing each other and, when necessary, negotiating for or drawing on their organizations' resources.

Beyond contributing space and dedicating resources, they wanted to make sure this was part of their core business. The CEO of Hindustan Unilever, Doug Bailey, was himself deeply invested. It was the same with Ramani, Dr. Fernandez, Nachiket Mor, Raji Nair, Werner Schultink, and several others.²⁶

It is rare that you would find the kinds of conversations we were having about a mother, a child, and her family in the board room of these major Indian corporations. And they were being held and led by the leaders in those corporations. I think that says something about how important it was for them. It was really quite inspiring. You realized that people were not just ticking the box... they were actually thinking about how to make this happen.

Surita

Ramani reflected on the role of a Champion:

How do you create a sense of shared purpose in a group of people? Everyone likes to belong. I don't just want to do a 9-to-5 job. I like to think I am linked to a higher cause, a higher purpose. I think that higher purpose is something that can be developed. I think that's where a role of a Champion is quite important – to be able to enthuse people to get them to participate.

Inner and outer work within sectors

The conveners of the Alliance paid a lot of attention to how various players from the different sectors came together to design the interventions, implement the pilots, serve on the Governing Council, and collectively draw on resources to address bottlenecks. But it was not until later, while dealing with critical challenges, that the team realized that reflection and learning within each sector was just as important. Reflecting on this, Surita said,

We learned later that you couldn't just focus on bringing the sectors together... you had to actually facilitate separate conversations within sectors, so that they could, in a safe space, reflect on what was holding them back, what value they added, and how they wanted to participate within the partnership. Having good intentions is not enough. Each sector had to understand where their internal barriers were, and what was preventing them from fulfilling these intentions.

This was a powerful lesson from a meeting led by the corporates involved and facilitated by a member of the Governing Council, Arun Maira. He invited government members to interact with the specific issues raised by the corporates, to share their ideas on how to utilize the knowledge base of corporate partners, and to agree on how to address gaps. The chance for the corporates to be able to reflect among themselves on their own was immensely valuable. It gave them a chance to understand where they were at themselves and how they wanted to move forward. It



Synergos photo

Change lab participants inaugurating the start of a meeting.

opened up space for more adaptive ways of working and, in Surita's words, "served as a touch point for moving to the next level."

We learn from Bhavishya that how you show up to work in collaboration with others is intrinsically linked to understanding your own sector and the barriers within it. This connection between our inner selves and our work in the world plays out at many levels. It applies not only at an individual level but also at the level of a sector – between the world within a sector and outer multisectoral space. This holds an

important lesson about Inner Work and leadership in multisectoral collaborations to which we will return later.

Changing personnel

One of the most significant challenges that Bhavishya faced was change in personnel at senior levels. Every time there was turnover in senior staff, especially in government or the corporates, it had a big impact on the Alliance and the progress being made.

The successor did not always understand the philosophy that motivated their predecessor. You have to motivate them from scratch and convince them of the collective purpose. How do you mobilize and sustain the commitment?

Ramani

Dr. Fernandez believes that ultimately trust was not sustained in the Governing Council as they would have liked. She says that some people have a call from within, they work from their heart and are prepared to do what it takes to achieve the desired result. Others may not be able to operate beyond the strict confines of the identity of their organization and role as they perceive it. The Alliance has to cultivate their attention to collective purpose. But when senior people from key partners leave their posts, there is always the risk of a setback if their replacements approach the work with a different orientation or mindset. This is a reality with which we must be prepared to work, as we do not get to choose decision makers in other organizations.

Bhavishya did not offer an answer to this challenge, but perhaps this too is a lesson about the role that a bridging leader may play within their own organization, sector, or identity group to overcome their internal barriers and to institutionalize change over time.

The close of Bhavishya

In 2011, five years after its inception, the Governing Council believed that the Bhavishya Alliance had achieved its objective of applying a multisectoral partnership approach to accelerate the reduction in undernutrition among young children in Maharashtra and thus the work of the Alliance came to a close. The pilots ended as planned, and four of them were seen to be reasonably successful (and scaled to some extent). Several of the organizations involved, such as SNEHA and Mumbai Mobile Crèches, scaled elements of these strategies.

When the Alliance closed, the Bhavishya organization was taken over by Unilever as the Bhavishya Alliance Child Nutrition Initiatives, a not-for-profit company. This company focuses on hand washing behavior change and has not retained its purpose of serving as a platform for multi-stakeholder collaboration. The Maharashtra nutrition mission continued to work closely with ICDS to innovate around key bottlenecks and problems identified in each district. In its second phase, the focus shifted to addressing undernutrition in the first thousand days of a child's life.

Without doubt, Bhavishya explored a very different way of engaging diverse stakeholders across the system at different levels. Government, corporates, and civil society organizations had never before come together to work on this kind of partnership, problem solving and co-creating solutions together. Through the successes and disappointments, most of those involved were deeply influenced in a very personal way – in the skills they honed, in the nature of leadership the alliance evoked, and in the nature of the relationships they cultivated. Many of them adopted this way of working.

I personally built up knowledge and skills around looking at myself to understand the problems that were external. If you don't look into yourself and identify your barriers, you are not going to be able to bring people along. It's not only a facilitative role. It's a deep understanding of what is holding you back as a person. Why is it that this work is important? Why is it important to sit in front of the CEO of a major

corporation and tell them what the moral imperative is of ensuring that children born into this world are healthy and get to go to school? If you are not examining your motives, it is very hard to have these conversations.

Surita

The lessons from Bhavishya strongly informed Synergos' framing of Bridging Leadership and its work on multisectoral collaboration to address complex problems around the world. The approach evolved as it was applied in Ethiopia in creating the Agriculture Transformation Agency, in Namibia working with the public health system on maternal health, and in Nigeria working with the agricultural system.²⁷ Manish was an important part of these efforts. His work in Bhavishya was a turning point in his life. Today he is a social presencing theatre facilitator with the Presencing Institute. He pursues his quest to cultivate open-heart practices with everyone he encounters.

Ramani retired in 2010 and continues to be passionately interested in eliminating severe malnutrition in India. He writes a blog and actively contributes to policy discussion in this area. He offered parting words at the end of the series of interviews for this case:

Ultimately you have a passion to the cause... you believe this is something that just has to be resolved. I felt that many actors in the Bhavishya Alliance were motivated to a large extent. People really wanted it to work... It was not financial motivation. They had a desire to do something good. These people made a big difference.

After years in Synergos working on multi-stakeholder partnerships and building on the lessons from Bhavishya, Surita is currently executive director at Heartland Alliance International (HAI). She believes that her work in Synergos and previously with the Rockefeller Next Generation Leadership Program prepared her well to return to the human rights field where her passion lies, working on diversity and

collaboration. She continues a regular practice of meditation and reflective practice with her team at HAI.

Rajlakshmi Nair still works at UNICEF Maharashtra from where she has supported several state nutrition missions. She believes that the Bhavishya approach was ahead of its time, and its lessons are valid and even more needed today. During an interview in May 2019, at the mention of Bhavishya, it took her a minute to pull up on her computer screen the initiative designs that emerged from the Change Lab in 2006, and she began to talk excitedly about the beauty of those ideas.

Dr. Fernandez also believes that the lessons from Bhavishya are especially relevant today, given recent government policies mandating corporate social responsibility contributions. After handing over the reins of SNEHA to a new CEO, Dr. Fernandez now focuses her attention on bringing palliative care to those who can least afford it. She continues to respond to her inner calling. She closed a recent interview with the India Development Review saying:

*Ultimately, I think that everything in life is about love, Love is an echo. I got a lot of love, so I love a lot of people. If you love, you care. And if you care, you'll do what you have to do.*²⁸



Participants unpack their vehicle as they begin the first day of their wilderness retreat.

What have we learned?

Where does our story leave us? What do we learn from the extraordinary vision and journey of the Bhavishya Alliance?

We know clearly that diverse actors from across the system worked together to end child undernutrition as they had not done before. They learned together, looked within themselves, and opened their minds and hearts to listen to others. They overcame mistrust and allowed new kinds of solutions and collaboration to emerge. These efforts more than likely contributed to the positive factors surrounding nutrition success during this period when stunting among children under two years declined by 15 percentage points.

For our final discussion we return to our central question about the ways in which attention to Inner Work in the Bhavishya Alliance influenced the nature of leadership and multisectoral collaboration to reduce undernutrition among children in Maharashtra. We draw lessons from Bhavishya that may be applied to other multisectoral efforts to address complex problems, and we imagine the relevance these lessons have for the kinds of existential crisis the world faces today.

Three main areas of learning emerge: about the nature of Inner Work; about the inner-outer dance of bridging leaders and multi-stakeholder partnerships; and about Inner Work and complex problems.

The nature of Inner Work

The Bhavishya story is rich in learning about the nature of Inner Work and the value it generates. We learned that:

Inner Work demands and sparks courage

We see time and again the courage several people demonstrated in going beyond their comfort zone and taking personal risks to pursue the purpose of the alliance. We saw it as Manish negotiated his role in Bhavishya; as Rajlakshmi passionately made her case, to the group of senior development professionals in the Change

Lab, that development is driven from the top without enough consideration of the voices of those it seeks to serve; when Shabri sang a song from her childhood in a room full senior government officials, taking the group back to their purpose and their inner selves; in the boldness of Ramani's actions following the deaths of tribal children in Bhadali and the hills of Nandurbar, which then led to India's first state nutrition mission; in Anushka's attempts to talk about menstrual management and the importance of mental strength in her community, and in her audacious dream to become collector of her home district; in Surita's unrelenting work to challenge the status quo at so many points, while building a safe container to process difficult conversations. All of them drew from their inner strength, overcoming whatever obstacles they faced within. They acted with courage and with love to bridge divides. This is the essence of Bridging Leadership.

Inner Work can be frightening

When you look into yourself and face your fears, it may scare you. And seeing your purpose with greater clarity may lead you to take risks for which you may not yet be prepared. The journeys of our colleagues in Bhavishya show us the value of having a coach, mentor, friend, or small community of non-judgmental people to accompany you and to challenge you gently when you are shying away from bold action. Manish had this kind of accompaniment from his mentor, from Surita, and from a colleague at Unilever. He also had strong support and encouragement from his wife. Likewise, Surita drew on Peggy Dulany and colleagues at Synergos and Bhavishya, and relied heavily on the group of champions for backup, personal support, and to help push the boundaries of change. Anushka mentions her Minakshi didi often, drawing inspiration from her example, but also continuing to reach out to her as she navigates challenges.

They helped me listen to my heart... to have the courage to do what I had to do. My mentor asked me one day, "What is your need to solve malnutrition in your lifetime? Why do you want to solve it?... it has been there for a long time." That pained me. I just could not let it go

Manish.

Inner Work cannot be forced

Each individual is on a journey. You look within because you have an inner calling and, as Dr. Fernandez points out, it helps you overcome whatever may be in your way. If that is not the case – if you are not ready to move out of the frame you inhabit – no one can make you do it.

Often those people who show up for change work have come on a journey, and are there because they are seeking it. You will have your own story. Some people dropped away – they could not make sense of the alliance, and they were frustrated by its complexity. For me, it touched something in my heart... I wanted to do whatever it took to make a difference. There was a latent spark that was lit. There was something in me that moved me to engage the way that I did.

Manish

Inner Work nurtures deep and sometimes unlikely relationships

The experience of Bhavishya teaches us about the extraordinary power of relationships in social action. As we piece together this story in 2019, many people who met and worked together closely in the early years of the alliance continue to be friends. As interviews for this case study progressed, the love and respect with which people spoke of their colleagues was palpable – a little smile as they reminisced, the way they leaned forward, their change in tone, the nuance and detail of their stories. It was palpable too in the way they related to me, the interviewer, as I called forth these memories. These relationships were fundamental to the quality of their leadership in Bhavishya and the qualities they, as leaders, took forward in their work and lives.

I developed strong relationships with people in the NGO and CBO sector. A number of them are still good friends, and we occasionally speak... These are people with whom normally, as someone in government, I would not have had any linkage.

Ramani



Participants co-create a detailed supply chain map to identify bottlenecks.

Inner Work shapes the way you are in the world

Inner Work is not a set of activities or methods that magically transform us into bridging leaders. It is a way of seeing or being in the world – facing our fears and barriers within; opening ourselves to new perspectives; seeing ourselves in others, including those who are different from us; reaching out and taking risks to bridge divides; cultivating authentic relationships; not being afraid to love; creating safe spaces that allow us to be vulnerable with others; and building strength in the face of uncertainty. It requires ongoing effort and practice, and influences who we are in the world. The journey of Bhavishya shows us a spectrum of practices that we may embed in our regular work and life to help us break out of the narrow confines of our professional positions, and connect with ourselves and others in more authentic and holistic ways.



Synergos photo

Participants compare their thoughts after a reflective journaling exercise.

The inner–outer dance of multi-stakeholder partnerships

The experience of the Bhavishya Alliance shows us the power of Inner Work to overcome our internal barriers in pursuit of our personal or collective purpose in the world. But we also learn about the importance of this inner–outer link at other levels inside ourselves and outside in the organizations or teams we develop or inhabit.

Surita reflects on yet another level – the inner world within a sector (or identity group) and the outer multisectoral space with diverse actors. Even if bridging leaders are able to effect change within their organizations, a layer out there is the wider sector that they may represent and in which they compete. This field too is part of their identity and strongly influences how they show up and the relationships they cultivate. Just as we have barriers within ourselves that may come in the way of fulfilling our purpose or contributing to social change, groups or sectors too have inherent barriers. Mistrust harbored by a group or sector about another does not automatically fall away when a few individuals overcome their prejudices, or get past what is holding them back. Perhaps a greater focus on enabling bridging leaders to be more effective and influential within their sectors might have helped institutionalize more of a Bridging Leadership culture. Perhaps this is an area that deserves more attention of bridging leaders.

If I had to do it over again, I would have done things differently... actually focusing on each sector more, rather than always trying to put them together in one room.

Surita

Many layers of the inner and outer are at play as systems intersect. In a competitive environment, as we strive to cultivate a niche for our organizations or ourselves, our work practices and culture may perpetuate blind spots and misconceptions about others. In the course of our frantic day-to-day business, we may not have the space or practice that allows us to reflect within our own organization, sectors, or identity groups. But a bridging leader who has realized the value of Inner Work in their own journey may build a collective practice in their organizations or even reach beyond their organization, cultivating safe reflective spaces and relationships in the wider sector or identity group. These spaces may be ones in which they are able to deal

with questions such as: What is holding us back as a group from truly pursuing our purpose? What fears do we have about this collaboration? What may we need to give up to build more authentic relationships with other groups? Where are we reluctant to give up power, and why?

Perhaps what we learn here is the vital value of this inner–outer dance at multiple levels, rippling out through bridging leaders in short and long cycles, helping us navigate our fears and build relationships that keep us true to our purpose. Perhaps embedding the inner–outer dance at different levels can sow the seeds of deeper, wider systemic change that begins to take root in people and institutions across sectors, breaking down the fear we feel of what we may have to give up when we collaborate with those who are different from ourselves.

The power of Inner Work in navigating complex problems

Earlier we reflected on what made a problem like undernutrition complex and in need of “third-order change”. What does Bhavishya’s experience show us about the power of Inner Work to address complex problems or kindle this kind of change?

Undernutrition is a classic complex problem for all of the reasons we mentioned: the cause and effect are far apart in space and time (even spanning generations); solutions are not really known, or known solutions are not working well for the most marginalized families; and some of the hardest problems are driven by socio-political factors. This means little agreement and interpretation among stakeholders on the problem and on how to solve it. The founders of Bhavishya were intentional in addressing this complexity, avoiding centrally driven stock solutions. They wanted to draw together actors from across the system to understand the system as a whole and grow their individual and collective capability to allow creative, collaborative solutions to emerge.

Bhavishya shows us the power of Inner Work, multisectoral collaboration, and Bridging Leadership in addressing complex problems. From learning journeys, we see how participants became more open to learning from unexpected sources and to valuing different forms and sources of knowledge from across the system. From contemplative practice, we see their courage to look within and to support others in this journey. From work done to cultivate safe spaces, we see participants take risks

and allow themselves to be vulnerable. In doing so, they built trust and authentic relationships that helped them work through different perspectives and realities. This transformation of individuals, relationships and ways of working across the system is the substance of third-order change.

Bhavishya did not always provide the perfect environment to engage in this kind of change. Sometimes trust broke down. Sometimes the power differences and hierarchies overwhelmed participants. But, people and organizations from across the system bucked the trend of applying simple known solutions to which they were habituated and truly applied themselves to the complexity of the issue. In the process they learned to question themselves, to listen deeply to different opinions even when it was uncomfortable, and to value authentic solutions over quick fixes. That is a remarkable feat. Even today, it is rare to see such intelligence in working with complexity.

If I reflect now on the Bhavishya Alliance, I see that approach as being relevant now. Perhaps it was too futuristic then – a visionary idea ahead of its time.

Rajlakshmi

When the alliance closed, everyone who had participated was changed within. But, while individuals were transformed, this way of working was not institutionalized among actors working on undernutrition in Maharashtra. Nor was it scaled to other Indian states, as some had hoped. Rajlakshmi reminds us that the opportunity and need still exist. It may not have been obvious at the time, but now with the benefit of hindsight, data, and the experience of adapting this approach in multiple contexts across a range of countries, we see its tremendous value for social action to address complex problems such as undernutrition.

On their journey, people get into their costumes of whatever their role is. When space is created to step back, for example, in nature... all this falls away. You open your heart. That is what we created, and that led to many, many things. That was the power of Bhavishya

Manish



Coda

As we return from this journey, what can we learn from the Bhavishya Alliance for our present times? Times in which social injustice is widespread, institutionalized, and even flaunted; when families fleeing war and terror are met with suspicion and prejudice in the places where they seek refuge; when children around the world believe they need to skip school to protest on the streets and demand leadership to save the planet they will inherit; when the impending risk of the collapse of civilization is not science fiction. But these are also times in which there is an appreciation for Inner Work and mindfulness; when more and more individuals around the world show steadfast strength and courage to stand up for truth, dignity, and kindness; when social movements are beginning to combine collective resistance with individual transformation.

Above all, we learn from Bhavishya the power and beauty of the inner–outer dance. Individual focused Inner Work is always valuable, but it is the movement between the inner and outer realms at different levels that really opens our hearts and anchors authentic, trustful, loving relationships and collective social action. It is a dance well worth practicing in these times.

“It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”²⁹

Notes

¹“An Interview with Tex Gunning,” *Enlighten Next* magazine, Issue 28, March – May, 2005. https://www.margaretevandenbrink.nl/index_uk.php?m=m70&p=17. Accessed on July 20, 2019.

²“Bhavishya” is a Sanskrit word meaning future.

³L. Haddad et al., *Maharashtra’s Child Stunting Declines: What is Driving Them? Findings of a Multidisciplinary Analysis* (Brighton: IDS, 2014), 1.

⁴*Ibid.*, 5.

⁵Becoming totally present to the larger space or field around us, to an expanded sense of self, and ultimately to what is emerging through us. As described in P. Senge et al., *Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organization, and Society* (London: Nicholas Brealy, 2005).

⁶Bridging Leadership may be described as the capacity to build trust and tap the fullest contributions of diverse stakeholders, helping them come together across divides and work as partners.

⁷Stunting measures low height for age. It is generally applied to children under five years of age.

⁸Wasting measures low weight for age. It is generally applied to children under five years of age.

⁹National Family Health Survey-3 (2005-06). Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Government of India.

¹⁰This framework originates in the cognitive sciences but has increasingly been applied to addressing complex problems. See for example M. McLachlan (Full Circle Consulting) and James Garrett (IFPRI), “Nutrition Change Strategies: The New Frontier,” *Public Health Nutrition* 11, no. 10 (January 2008): 1063–1075.

¹¹ McLachlan and Garrett, “Nutrition Change Strategies: The New Frontier”.

¹² A traditional Indian decoration where patterns are made on the floor, usually with materials such as rice flour, sand and petals.

¹³ Non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations.

¹⁴ An excerpt from a conversation with the author in May 2019.

¹⁵ P. Senge et al., *Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organization, and Society*.

¹⁶ The U-process has since evolved into five movements: Co-initiating, Co-sensing, Presencing, Co-creating, Co-evolving.

¹⁷ “Interview with Tex Gunning,” *Alliance Magazine*, September, 2005.

¹⁸ Sue Davidoff, “Inner and outer wilderness,” September 2007.

¹⁹ Prototypes can be seen as smaller versions of how participants imagine the future. They model a new reality on a small scale.

²⁰ Manish Srivastava, “Presencing: A journey of individual and collective transformation”. *Here & Now*, Quarterly Publication of the Indian Society for Applied Behavioural Science, Volume 23, Issue 3

²¹ Manish Srivastava, “Presencing: A journey of individual and collective transformation”. *Here & Now*, Quarterly Publication of the Indian Society for Applied Behavioural Science, Volume 23, Issue 3

²² As spoken in the Bhavishya Lab video: “Bhavishya Alliance – 2006 – Getting Started,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2JMV_owNJM, accessed on July 20, 2019.

²³ Also known as Gheu Bharari (which means, “let’s take off”), this pilot implemented by SNEHA, ICDS and the Health and Tribal Development departments focused on building knowledge, awareness, life skills and self-confidence of tribal adolescent girls to break the inter-generational transfer of undernutrition and build the

conditions to be empowered future mothers. It later grew into a major program for SNEHA.

²⁴ Big sister – not necessarily a relative, but an older girl in the community

²⁵ District collectors are members of the Indian government civil service. They are charged with supervising the general administration of a district. The population of Anushka’s district, Jalna, is around 2 million people. Forty-seven percent of children under 6 (over 135,000 children) are stunted. As we developed this case study, there were projections that the area was approaching one of the most severe droughts in history.

²⁶ Nachiket Mor was the Chair of the Bhavishya Alliance’s Governing Council at the time and Executive Director of ICICI Bank Ltd, a corporate member of the Bhavishya Alliance. Werner Schultink was UNICEF’s Associate Director, Chief of Nutrition.

²⁷ Case studies from these countries are also available as part of the Inner Work for Social Change project, launched by Synergos and the Fetzer Institute in 2020.

²⁸ “Interview with Dr. Armida Fernandez,” *India Development Review* (September 2018), accessed on July 20, 2019.

²⁹ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (New York: Renal and Hitchcock, 1943).

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Acknowledgments

Synergos expresses deep gratitude to the case writer, Andrea Rodericks, for her diligent work in conducting the research, interviews, and writing to produce this case study. We are especially grateful to the individuals and organizations who contributed the stories and insights that form the basis of the case study: Surita Sandosham, Venkatesan Ramani, Rajlakshmi Nair, Dr. Armida Fernandez, Manish Srivastava, K.S. Murthy, Rama Shyam, Neeta Karandikar, Sunita Bhise, Anushka Bhart Kharat, and Pallvi Rajesh Sate. Their stories and examples are what give this case study its meaning and practical application.

Vanessa D'souza, the CEO of SNEHA, was very supportive and her team helped set up interviews with participants from one of Bhavishya's pilot projects that SNEHA had implemented. Special thanks to team members Rama Shyam, Neeta Karandikar, and Sunita Bhise.

At Synergos, Chong-Lim Lee was very helpful in providing access to historical project documents, in fact checking, and reading an initial draft. Thanks to Peggy Dulany for several conversations about the start of Bhavishya.

The Inner Work for Social Change project would not have been possible without the vision and support of the Fetzer Institute. Synergos is immensely grateful for their partnership in making this project a reality, even and especially as the world navigates tumultuous times. A special thanks to Bob Boisture, Kurian Thomas, Gillian Gonda, Amy Ferguson, and Jenny Smith.

We would also like to thank the core team of the Inner Work for Social Change Project, including Len le Roux, Kathryn Uhl, Shirley Pendlebury, Derek Schwabe, Swati Chaudhary, Constance Monatla, and Marina Poudret.

Sue Davidoff and Shirley Pendlebury ran a three-day writing workshop for the case writers. Andrea Rodericks recalls the writing workshop as a turning point; it inspired her confidence to experiment with multiple voices to tell the story of Bhavishya.

This project has been powered by the combined brilliance of its advisory team, including Bruno Vercken, Daniel Groody, Emmanuel Garza, Ernesto Garilola, Gretchen

Ki Steidle, Mark Gerzon, Sue Davidoff, and Vijay Shankar Kathan. The advisory team enriched and invigorated the dialogue on inner work for social change. Team members gave helpful feedback on the case studies in progress.

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Working on persistent development challenges around the world, Andrea Rodericks has been increasingly drawn to exploring their complexity and the social and political forces that shape them. Her interest lies in understanding and telling the story of people's inner and outer journeys through these challenges. Andrea's current work focuses on multidisciplinary learning and collaboration, organizational transitions, and intergenerational equity. Andrea grew up in New Delhi. She has a Masters degree in Public Policy from the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs.

Synergos is a global organization helping solve complex issues around the world by advancing bridging leadership, which builds trust and collective action.

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