BUILDING COMMUNITIES AND PARTNERSHIPS FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: CREATING TIME AND SPACE FOR LOCAL LEADERSHIP

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"The community's at the centre. It's our core. We are always connecting the dots, and then the actual value that Phandeeyar brings is through the work of the communities, not from ourselves." Research participant.

Key findings

Developing countries present particular challenges to social innovators. One of the main challenges is that marginal communities require a greater degree of caution when experimenting with new ventures, as the risk of harm is far greater. However, experimentation is a vital part of innovation. A solution to this can be to provide safe spaces for ideation and experimentation. A relatively risk-free environment, in which co-working, community-building and cross-sector collaboration enable extensive feedback at the ideation phase, can therefore prove even more valuable to innovators in the Global South. For these practices to be adopted, leadership, facilitation and organisational role-modelling are needed. This is especially true for developing regions, in which organisations are growing and constantly adapting, open to influence by successful or inspiring models.

Phandeeyar ("creation space" in Burmese), a civic tech hub in Myanmar, recognises this. It demonstrates how community-building principles can be applied to accelerate social change. In doing this, the hub acts as a role model, leading other organisations to adopt social values and creative practices.

Background

New responses are needed to accelerate social change and development in the Global South. Innovation is needed in such contexts where social issues are most 'wicked' (Rittel & Webber, 1973), intractable and caused by an entangled web of political and economic problems. Phandeeyar demonstrates the value of community-building approaches in a developing context. The founder describes the organisation as a "community tech hub". It has a clear mission to promote change and development in Myanmar through accelerating technological uptake and building a tech ecosystem for social change.

Phandeeyar was established by an Australian social entrepreneur in 2014, with funding from Omidyar Foundation and Open Society Foundation, and is based only in Myanmar. It is essentially an organisation of two halves: one half (#accelerateMM) is a support structure for start-up culture, expanding the country's pool of tech and creative talent; the other half (#socialImpactMM) helps "change agents – social & civic entrepreneurs & independent media – use technology to increase the impact of their work" (Phandeeyar website), and builds awareness around the use of technology for social good. A co-working space and maker-space are also run from the office.

The study used thirteen semi-structured interviews with key players involved in or close to Phandeeyar.

Emerging themes

Ideation: the overlooked instrument

Creative ideation is often an underplayed element in driving social change and development. Its value is overlooked in cross-sector partnership literature. In practice, ideation does happen in development work, but often in a cursory way. Many development organisations are inherently risk-averse, due to their responsibility for people's lives and wellbeing. They follow the golden rule of 'do no harm'. With that, organisational culture in most development organisations tends to avoid experimentation, which they perceive as high-risk. Phandeeyar demonstrates how a dedicated space for participatory ideation can actually reduce the risk of harm.

A stronger emphasis on ideation can help support locally designed solutions to locally understood problems. Phandeeyar's ideation process contributed to its development agenda in three ways. First, it allowed time and space for problems to be more deeply understood and for more creative solutions to be explored. Second, its inclusiveness enabled local stakeholders to take ownership of the agenda, defining the social problems and driving the solutions themselves. Third, the locally-driven scope capitalised local knowledge, enabling more workable, credible, appropriate and enduring solutions.

Adaptation: modelling and facilitating change across sectors

In developing regions, organisational adaptation is more fluid. In the absence of local models of best practice, organisations in 'developed' nations are often adopted as role models. However, these are not always appropriate for the specific culture and climate of the local context, particularly when considering the potential for social, as well as economic development. Organisational role-modelling is therefore an important component of the adaptation process - especially in the Global South - but this has been given little attention in research to date.

Phandeeyar is setting and promoting new standards in Myanmar on organisational structure, culture and process. It promotes transformative leadership, employee wellbeing, and environmental sustainability. It has a non-hierarchical internal culture which values and develops staff. Its multi-purpose, large, open-plan working space reflects this. Its events-driven approach helps showcase technology as a tool for social change. These features combine to create a model that attracts talent, and local and international organisations want to imitate. In these ways, Phandeeyar is influencing the approaches of organisations that follow in its wake.

Organisations can use cross-sector work to drive adaptation in complementary ways. Through 'intentional space-making' – a concept that echoes Bryson, Crosby and Stone's (2006) 'forums' and 'arenas' – Phandeeyar has enabled better interaction and facilitated new connections across sectors. This has led to organisations, such as local tech start-ups, having greater social impact.

Phandeeyar has given shape to a field of 'civic tech' in Myanmar which creates new coalitions of interest, leading to field-level adaptation. By showing that tech can be a tool for social change and development, and by building confidence in local actors, Phandeeyar's work has also led to 'value adaptation'. That is, it inspires people to have belief in themselves as change-makers and encourages the pursuit of social innovation.

Driving Phandeeyar's role-modelling success is the personal leadership of the organisation. It is clear that the founder's personal charisma was a crucial element in building Phandeeyar's legitimacy. This was an important factor in overcoming some of the specific challenges of promoting social change in this case.

Implications and future research

This research highlights the role that community-building can play in supporting the development of a region; the importance of dedicating time and space to collaborative ideation and creative experimentation, in the pursuit of enduring solutions to social problems; and the need for local leadership and role-modelling for establishing social value as a priority for organisations emerging in developing regions.

These considerations are important for those involved with regional development initiatives. Efforts to drive 'development' can risk watering-down local culture or create detrimental economic or social effects, due to misunderstood problems or mis-placed interventions that do not fully account for the complexity of the local context. Taking adequate time to deeply involve local actors in creative ideation is an essential ingredient of local economic development, especially when working with risk-averse, poor or marginal communities. Accelerating development through technology risks undermining community-led development, but this research indicates practical solutions to this issue.

It would be interesting for future research to consider in more detail the transferability of established processes for ideation and experimentation across cultures or develop new models for specific socio-cultural contexts. This could unlock a transformation in mainstream development approaches.

A second area for further research would be to better understand why efforts to accelerate social change often struggle at scale in developing contexts. In particular, understanding better whether amplification is achieved through the volume of actors engaged or through the quality of partnerships, and whether amplification happens best when there is a clear and common agenda or through multiple approaches in parallel.

Thirdly, understanding effective leadership and power dynamics in cross-sector partnerships would be useful for initiatives like Phandeeyar. As one interviewee said, "Organisations don't partner with organisations; individuals partner with individuals". In particular, how do organisations balance self-interest with social value creation, what is the role of individuals in achieving that, and how does it differ with scale.

References

Bryson, J., Crosby, B. and Stone, M. (2006). 'The design and implementation of cross-sector collaborations: propositions from the literature'. *Public Administration Review*, 66(1), pp. 44-55.

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About the project

The research is based on the analysis of Phandeeyar and some of its key partners, collaborators and funders. It was carried out with the support of The Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation. For Further information, contact rutheybj@gmail.com.

This research is carried out by the Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation. It was designed and conducted by graduates of the MSt Social Innovation, with the support of faculty and fellows of the programme. The Centre is committed to ensuring wide access to our research findings. We welcome your feedback and ongoing support. The views of the authors do not represent those of their employers or CJBS. If you wish to discuss this research or access the full report, please contact the Centre at: socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk.

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