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ENVIRONMENT OPINIONS

Stakeholder Engagement for Lasting Impact

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As individual philanthropy, policy backed-business responsibility and corporate commitment to society takes prominence in India, change agents find themselves constantly grappling with the issue of effectively navigating through a complex ecosystem to create lasting impact.

Stakeholder engagement lies at the heart of enabling change and achieving outcomes that are lasting and impactful. Change agents – whether it is corporates or communities or individuals – need to embrace organizations and people who are part of the ecosystem in which the desired change is intended.

Stakeholders need to be engaged in understanding the societal and environmental issues that matter most and how inclusive strategies can be crafted to address the same. Communities that are directly impacted by development work need to be consulted and involved at every stage of the process – right from concept articulation to approach formulation to execution and evaluation – because the affected are the ones who know the best about how their lives have changed as a result of any intervention.

At any given point of time, change agents will have to keep in sight several layers of the ecosystem – communities, corporates, policy bodies, local administration, NGOs, thought leaders, think-tanks, technical experts, the civil society, and also those harbouring resisting opinions.

Specifically talking about organizations working in complex development work, this kind of an approach is of utmost importance to consider. A successful stakeholder engagement strategy stands on a sound foundation of alignment with the organizational objectives, respect of mutual interests, and an atmosphere of trust and respect.

The “Faculty and Research” working paper brought out by INSEAD endorses this view and urges organizational managements to proactively understand the needs and interests of stakeholders for lasting impact. It also states that failure to understand this wider group of stakeholders creates “management blind spots” leading to risky consequences.

The study goes on to say that more recently, communication has evolved to be more dialogue and solution oriented. This new approach to dialogue requires careful listening, relationship building and can be time intensive.

As a concept, stakeholder engagement is catching on fast in India. From an earlier one-sided approach, where the objective was just to pass on information, organizations are today ‘talking’ to diverse stakeholder groups in order to achieve consensus and inclusiveness.

A case in point is the work undertaken by UTC (United Technologies Corporation) under its “Citizens for the City” initiative in Bengaluru to drive its agenda of sustainable urbanization. The initiative involved a successful implementation of the Neighbourhood Improvement Partnership challenge that encourages citizens to come together to resolve civic issues in the areas of mobility, public safety, public spaces, energy, waste-management and environment. It is a unique example of how UTC has engaged with various stakeholders to aid urban growth through action-based research, competitive grant-making and execution-driven partnerships. A team of experts, thought leaders and urban planners was formed to embark on a detailed research and planning exercise to identify opportunity areas in line with the long term agenda of Bengaluru as an urban centre. Communities in the city were involved first hand to appreciate needs and how they can work to resolve civic issues. Residents’ associations were invited to propose and submit civic improvement projects. The best have now been taken up for implementation in their respective neighbourhoods.

Spearheaded by UTC through United Way of Bengaluru, a non-profit organization, the initiative has proactively brought together the BBMP (Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike), the city’s municipal body and BPAC (Bengaluru Political Action Committee), a forum that has prominent citizen of the city working towards promoting and sustaining good governance. WRI (World Resources Institute), an organization that catalyses and helps implement environmentally, socially and financially sustainable urban mobility