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IMAGO Global Grassroots, Our Story

By Isabel Guerrero

Zachary Green, Michael Walton and I had been working together inside the most established parts of the international development system. We realized that, while important, macro level projects and government programs could not always reach the poor. We learned that in order to transform their lives, the poor needed to become architects of their own destiny.

Our previous work allowed us to meet amazing grassroots organizations working with the poor around the world. They were innovating, working in areas which neither government nor donors could reach. Most importantly, they were working with the poor in a way that developed their leadership and made them agents of change in their communities. These organizations had created community based social enterprises to generate revenues to improve the well-being of their members-from forest based enterprises owned by the indigenous communities in Oaxaca, to very large social enterprises in Bangladesh.

These organizations had wonderful results, but most were not able to scale up. Something was missing! They needed help incubating the organizational preconditions for scaling up: a focused strategy, systems, data, and a scaling up plan that ensured the preservation of their original values. They also needed to find their own way to scale-up, either through the government, or through the private sector.

From this joint realization, we decided to create IMAGO in 2014. A non-profit that would work with these outstanding grassroots around the world to co-create the preconditions for scaling up; help community based social enterprises prepare to absorb...
... the resources needed to grow exponentially; and work with governments and donors to help them better reach the last mile. At IMAGO, we become the catalyst for global grassroots organizations to scale up to their unique potential, serving as “the missing middle” that is essential to development.

Why Imago?

In biology, imago is the stage when a caterpillar emerges from its chrysalis to become a butterfly. It is the decisive moment of growth to maturity, the imaginal metamorphosis of attaining inborn potential. IMAGO works with organizations that have achieved initial success in poverty reduction, and show readiness to scale up to the next level.
Scaling up is hard! There are amazing grassroots organizations around the world that have been able to activate the poor as agents of change and that are a source of innovation and inspiration. Yet, very few are at scale. The missing middle in development refers to the gap between large-scale government and private firm activity and small-scale, local enterprise and grassroots action. For grassroots organizations this is seen in the absence of social enterprise or public efforts that are able to scale their unique approach to development problems in order to have a larger impact. This is a result of barriers to scaling up for grassroots organizations and enterprises at the base of the pyramid. These barriers are due to the interaction between three factors: market failures, government failures and organizational failures.

Imago works with social entrepreneurs, research institutes and governments globally to tackle some of these failures. We work with organizations in the public sector to help them reach the last mile of service delivery, unpack the implementation challenges to reach scale and working with them in the complex or “wicked” development problems that require behavioral change. Imago also works with existing organizations to enhance their strengths, build their capacity, and scale up their impact in a way that respects their unique context, attributes and evolution.

Imago focuses on three areas of work: **Capacity building** through helping organizations going to scale identify the gaps between their current human resource practices and those needed to meet the demands of an expanded mission. **Systems assessment** advising organizations on technical innovations and the system design that will allow the organizations to scale in a sustainable way. **Strategy development** helping identify strategic tensions and accompany organizations through the process of formulating the scaling up vision and the strategy.

### A Sandwich Strategy for Poverty Reduction

*By Michael Walton*

Development problems are complex. While working with a top-down approach is necessary, it is insufficient. Evidence has shown that both governments and the private sector fail to reach the last mile. There is a need to create capacity from the bottom-up, to enable organizations in the base of the pyramid (BoP) to reach their potential, act as their own agent of change and have a stronger voice. However, while working from the bottom-up is necessary, but rarely sufficient.

A **sandwich strategy** is often necessary. On the one side a top-down approach that facilitates the conditions that are required for...
Scaling Up to their Unique Potential

scaling up successful interventions for the poor. Organizations need a combination of infrastructure and human capital programs, policies and regulations, and access to finance that are provided by the public and/or the private sector. On the other side, a bottom-up strategy would facilitate that organizations take advantage of the resources available with top-down policies. Training, building leadership and capacity, access to better information and networks, and connectivity to markets are some of the available resources.

Imago recognizes the importance of both approaches and acts as an intermediary agent to bridge the two types of interventions. We work with successful organizations in the BoP to strengthen their capacity and create the conditions to facilitate their growth. We complement this with a translation of top-down policies to help them unlock the required resources from the public and private sector, as paths for their growth.

Imago’s way is unique in combining three elements: High-touch relationships through ongoing engagement over the long term with the local community and organization leaders to co-create systems and strategies aligned with their core values. Multi-disciplinary expertise combining expertise in economic development, business models, organizational psychology with design-thinking methodologies to reveal the untapped potential of the organization. System Integration coordinating across sectors and levels to bridge high-potential grassroots organizations with the right resources found at the top of the international development system.

Voices from the Field

SEWA Bens: Personal and Economic Transformation
By Surili Sheth

At the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), what is widely recognized as just a form for greeting a woman in Gujarat - “ben,” which literally translates to “sister” in Gujarati - is actually the backbone of the entire organization - 1.7 million bens strong across India. The collective sisterhood that is SEWA - benhood, if you will - is not only a social network, nor only a labor movement, nor only a set of social enterprises, but actually a comprehensive economic concept that stresses the importance of female welfare and empowerment for economic gains for households, and indeed, for the country.

For the women’s liberation movement in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, “the personal is political” became a rallying cry. However, listening to the life transformations of bens who have been part of SEWA for decades (SEWA also started in the 1960s), it becomes obvious that one of the central ways in which being part of SEWA has taken hold of both their individual stories and the larger collective informal labor sector movement that they form is that “the personal is economic.” By being part of SEWA, the women build on each other’s support - leading to increased autonomy.

“...The personal is economic. By being part of SEWA, the women build on each other’s support”
in their homes and communities, economic resources to invest in their houses and families, and education to increase productivity and income and take care of their health.

The bens of SEWA are laborers, activists, entrepreneurs, cooperative members, and often, the main income earners in their households. This fully multidimensional conceptualization of welfare which is so embodied in an Indian woman’s very being - and indeed, the clarity that SEWA as an organization has about the linkages between the personal and the economic, the intersectionalities between health, education, empowerment, and income - is obvious when one takes a look at the eleven questions that SEWA seeks to address in each of its works, be it a union activity, a cooperative organization, a water and sanitation program, or a savings group.

These linkages between the personal and the economic - the nexus that SEWA forms in linking the informal and the formal, the household and the economic market - also become obvious when listening to the personal narratives of women who have been a part of the “banyan tree” of SEWA for decades.

Philanthropic Winds of Change
By Isabel Guerrero and Faizal Karmali

As the international development community continues to reorient its efforts toward the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, we’ve noticed a shift in the way that the philanthropic community talks about (and funds) efforts to achieve those goals in the next 12 years. Key among these shifts is the increased recognition that collaboration and intentional investment in strategic vision, leadership and management systems is essential to the systemic change and impact required to meet those goals.

In November, the Rockefeller Foundation announced the launch of Co-Impact, $500 million investment, in a collaborative systems change and scaling effort engaging large philanthropists around the world, including Gates, Skoll, Wadhwani, Chandler and Nilekani. Darren Walker announced a similar shift at The Ford Foundation. The BUILD program is a five-year, $1 billion investment in the long-term capacity of up to 300 social justice organizations around the world.

At IMAGO, where we focus on helping grassroots organizations scale by strengthening strategic vision, leadership and management, these types of reflections and the real dollars being applied to new efforts makes us feel optimistic about the role that philanthropy could play in development going forward. We see these efforts as indicative of a sector that is acting on some key lessons we have all learned through decades of engaging in social impact efforts.