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Teaching Case

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Introduction

Arbind Singh flipped on the air conditioning unit in his office, and breathed a sigh of relief as the cool air began to circulate through the room. It was a hot and humid summer day in 2016 in the Nidan head offices in Patna, the capital city of the Indian state of Bihar. Singh had just reached the office after a 15-hour train ride from Jabalpur, a city which was being developed as a Smart City in the state of Madhya Pradesh.

The Smart City initiative was a key agenda item for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, however it was also a highly controversial move in a country where more than 60% of the population still lived in rural areas. India's independence had been won through strong support from the rural population, and Mahatma Gandhi – the martyred father of India's independence and still a revered and unifying figure in India – had favoured a village-centric model of economic development for the country. Singh also had reservations about the Smart City model, but for reasons different than those who opposed urbanization. Rather, Singh was worried that the current initiative did not have a strategy for inclusivity, ensuring that the poor and marginalized were included in economic growth plans for the country.

As the Founder and Executive Director of Nidan, an organization which promoted the interests of informal workers throughout the country, Singh was critically aware of the issues which poor workers faced when arriving in cities from rural areas looking for work. As he described, "Cities are new to India. Most Indians who live in cities are first and second generation urbanites. I myself am a third generation city-dweller, but I am very much in the minority."

Urbanization was both a blessing and a curse to India. While dramatic growth in cities had allowed more opportunities for people, as well as the ability for state and municipal governments to more easily deliver services and benefits, it also brought a host of other issues, including joblessness, vast inequality, and exploitation of workers. Migration to cities also created different expectations: city dwellers expected better education for their children, health services for their families, and assistance from government when times were difficult.

Singh believed that smart growth and development could only be achieved if citizens were given a chance to participate: "Cities require citizen participation. When you are in the speed of things, you don't always bring people along. It is important to bring people along." This philosophy of participation and inclusion had led Singh to develop Nidan as an incubator of "people's institutions". Rather than deliver charitable services to the poor, Nidan was structured to organize communities of informal workers around issues and demand the creation or change of policies that would impact their circumstances. Once workers were mobilized, Nidan then assisted informal workers' groups to create sustainable institutions that would support their livelihoods "in perpetuity".

With this model, Nidan had initiated and established 22 independent, self-sustaining organizations ("offshoots") that had brought together and empowered more than 700,000 workers and their families across nine states of India. These organizations were registered as a range of legal entities, including nonprofits, for-profit companies and co-operatives. However, they all shared the same philosophy of including informal workers in board and leadership positions, and as shareholders. Nidan "incubated" these organizations by identifying common needs across informal worker groups, developing a sustainable business model, and identifying potential leaders. Once the organizations were functioning from an operational perspective, Nidan then provided support services to each of the offshoots, including financial reporting and audits, training and development for board governance, and ongoing access to the broader network that Nidan had built.

Singh sipped a cup of hot tea as he reviewed his notes from the conference. He knew that he needed to follow up quickly from the conference, providing his input on how inclusive strategies could be incorporated in the Smart City initiative. Singh felt that Nidan's experience with mobilizing informal workers to advocate for their rights could be successfully embodied in the initiative. However, the organization was still in the process of codifying their model. Singh knew that he needed to identify and articulate the Nidan model so that state-level and city governments could incorporate these principles into their planning.

Urban Realities, Informal Myths

Officially, India's urban population percentage was 32%¹; however, an alternative method of measuring urbanization, which included areas of the country with "urban-like" features estimated that the figure was closer to 55%.² The difference between the official statistics and the unofficial reality was only one of the hindrances to fostering policies for urban development. Indians still saw themselves as an essentially rural and agrarian society. Many Indians still had a strong attachment to the rural areas, and much of the development of the country continued to be focused on rural areas. As a result, cities had grown with relatively little planning at a central level.

Rapid urbanization put pressure on key services, such as water, transportation, sewer treatment, and low-income housing.³ While most benchmarks recommended cities spend USD 100 per capita, per year on urban infrastructure, India spent, on average, just USD 17 per capita.⁴ The result was that urbanization in India – as in many other countries experiencing rapid urbanization – was "messy and hidden"⁵, with almost 65.5 million Indians living in urban slums and nearly 14% of the urban population living below the national poverty line.

Poorly implemented urban planning and inadequate governance had resulted in a high disparity between rich and poor. This, in turn, precipitated a high level of activity in the informal sector, as formal routes to housing and employment were nearly impossible to access:

Informality is now the only path to affordable housing for the bulk of the population in India's cities. But informality implies illegality and therefore vulnerability. While lower income groups pay dearly for shelter and services – they are bereft of normal property rights protections and their investments are thus far riskier than those of the well off. They must instead depend on the good will of bureaucrats and politicians – to safeguard their homes and places of business. These barriers to healthy urbanization come not only at a high human cost, but take a toll on productivity. Chronic informality discourages the very investments in education, health and housing improvements the lower classes need to improve their own lot and contribute more to the national economy.⁶

Informal workers were the lifeblood of the Indian economy. More than 90% of India's workforce was comprised of self-employed and casual workers, generating more than 50% of the national income.⁷ While rural agriculture was still the primary contributor of employment, comprising nearly 50% of the workforce, construction and other services were of growing importance to the urban economy. Informal workers, once considered to be a transitory phenomenon in developing economies, had proven to be a lasting and growing issue for the country. In fact, informality had increased in the previous decade, creating political debates about the source of the problem: some blamed globalization and the decline of state-run industries, while others pointed to labour market rigidities and mismatches between skills and employment opportunities.⁸

Informality had serious repercussions for workers. Casual workers were subject to irregular and insecure income, unable to access standard labour protections, such as social security, and vulnerable to exploitation by employers. Self-employed informal workers had similar issues, combined with lower access to finance, as well as markets and government incentives for micro- and small businesses.

The converging forces of urbanization and globalization had created a serious issue for India's labour force, one which pitted the rich and formal minority of India's economy against the poor and informal sector. At the same time, India's rich elites were interested in capitalizing on the economic growth of their country to build "world class cities" that would live up to India's growing global prominence. In their plans to modernize and move cities forward, informal workers were often seen as a hindrance, more a problem for cities to remove, rather than an instrumental part of urban life. Harassment of informal workers – and most prominently, the large number of street vendors – had increased, with many cities engaging in massive encroachment drives to evict informal vendors from urban centres.

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1. The World Bank 2015b.
 2. The World Bank 2015a.
 3. Planning Commission Government of India 2013.
 4. Chakrabarti 2014.
 5. The World Bank 2015a.
 6. Sharma 2014.
 7. Srijia & Shirke 2014.
 8. Ibid.

Arbind Singh

In 1996, Singh returned to his home town of Patna. After studying sociology and law in Delhi, and becoming actively involved with relief work during his studies, Singh had turned his attention to the injustices in his country. The son of a businessman, Singh recognized that he had led a privileged life, and felt a responsibility to return to Bihar to try to rectify some of the injustices that he had witnessed in his youth. Bihar had lagged behind other Indian states in terms of socio-economic development and lacked a strong state nationalism which drove development politics in other states. The state, therefore, was significantly in need of leaders who could speak on behalf of marginalized communities.

When Singh arrived in Patna, he sought out a mentor to help him navigate the unfamiliar terrain of the non-governmental organization (NGO) community. Through his inquiries, Singh was introduced to Viji Srinivasan, a woman from the south of India who had been working in Bihar to enable and empower poor women in India through an organization called ADITHI. Over monthly meals at her house, Singh expressed his interest in doing something to help bring greater justice for the poor in Bihar. Srinivasan had worked closely with the indomitable Ela Bhatt, an Indian activist of international renown, who had mobilized worker movements through her organization, the Self-Employed Women's Association of India (SEWA). Bhatt had recently become involved in mobilizing street vendors worldwide, organizing a global meeting of street vendors in Bellagio, Italy, and Srinivasan was encouraged by Bhatt to begin the process of street vendor outreach in Bihar through ADITHI. It was an opportune time for Singh to offer his help.

By this time, the increasing harassment of street vendors in India had reached a crisis point, with vendors across the country experiencing widespread exploitation and harassment from the police and government authorities. In Bihar, the state government had embarked on a widespread encroachment drive, clearing the streets of vendors under a High Court order. Vendors in various cities, including Patna, had started to form small groups to protest at the local level, targeting authorities with decision-making power over the use of public land for vending. At the same time, during the Bellagio conference, Bhatt had proposed the need for a nationwide network for street vending associations across India.

Srinivasan was motivated to join Bhatt's movement for street vendors, but it came at a difficult time for ADITHI. The Board of Directors was in the process of restructuring and they weren't in a position to expand the remit of the organization. Srinivasan invited Singh over for dinner and laid out her position. She knew that the street vendors in Bihar were in need of help, but ADITHI would not be able to take the project on. Would he be interested in setting up a new organization to begin the process of organizing the sector in Patna?

Singh spent a sleepless night, restless with the decision that Srinivasan had asked him to consider, but emerged the next morning with his mission clear. As he wrote twenty years later:

With a clear vision in my mind, I started on a traverse less taken for changing the lives of the informal sector in Patna 20 years ago. From ignominy to dignity, from instability to steadiness, from no access and opportunity to rights; for a section of society which is so organized that it would disrupt each of our lives if they stop functioning but is still clustered as the unorganized and informal workers was a dream that pushed me into starting Nidan.⁹

Nidan and NASVI

Singh selected the name "Nidan" for his organization, the Hindi word for "solution". He was largely inspired by Srinivasan's approach at ADITHI, which was in turn inspired by SEWA, and firmly believed that the poor and marginalized were fully capable of organizing themselves, given the tools and the mechanisms to do so. The initial aim of Nidan was to mobilize the street vendors of Patna, and to help them build the means to fight for their livelihoods.

The plight of the street vendors of India had been building since the early 1990s. A 1991 study by the Indian statistics agency estimated that there were approximately 3.6 million street vendors in India.¹⁰ These vendors operated out of small carts and makeshift stalls, sometimes simply laying their wares on a blanket on a busy thoroughfare or carrying their products in baskets along highways. Despite their informality, these vendors were a vibrant and essential part of the Indian economy. Street food vendors in urban centres provided inexpensive meals to rich and poor alike, while market vendors selling clothes and household goods were frequented by Indians across the country. With shopping malls and centres still a relatively new addition to the Indian economy, street vendors were a common provider of products and services.

9. Nidan. Annual Report. 2015-2016.

10. National Association of Street Vendors of India – NASVI 2015.

While street vendors were a daily feature in the lives of most Indians, they were invisible in other ways. Indian society was still a highly stratified society, in practice if no longer in law, with a scheduled caste system that relegated segments of society to “less dignified” roles. Street vending was one of these perceived roles. Many of the vendors lived in abject poverty, earning on average less than USD 1 per day,¹¹ living at the mercy of government officials and “middlemen” who promised protection in return for an extortionary percentage of their income. Street vendors were subject to confiscation of goods, relocations, warrants and convictions, and demands for “unofficial payments” by those in authority. The encroachment drive by the Bihar government was just the most recent in a long history of arbitrary policies toward the street vendors.

Singh’s first foray into the street vendor sector was to attend a meeting of street vendors at one of the local markets in Patna. This first meeting gave Singh a chance to connect them to the broader picture of their organizing activities, explaining that similar associations were developing across the country. He also introduced the idea of a national network of street vending associations, bringing greater numbers in support of their demands. As he explained, “We do big organizing, creating force in membership. We try to work in large numbers because there is strength in numbers – this gives them confidence and a sense of belonging to a larger family.”

The most pressing need at both the local and national level was data. The numbers and circumstances of street vendors in India had never been documented at a significant level, and therefore, politicians and organizers alike were operating with incomplete information. As a first step, Singh brought together a group of community organizers to assist him in mapping the landscape of the vendors in the Patna municipality. This involved a systematic process of visiting 6000 street vendors across the city, mapping their physical locations and conducting in-depth interviews, collecting data that would assist in their purpose and understanding critical issues.

The data-gathering exercise in Patna was instrumental in painting an accurate picture of the state of street vending throughout the city, while similar processes were being undertaken by other civil society organizations throughout the country. The process revealed systematic exploitation of the vendors, enabled by a lack of legitimate routes to registration or identity for the vendors, making them vulnerable to harassment. Vendors were also hindered in growing their businesses by a lack of formal zoning or land allocation for their stalls and carts. Finally, street vendors had no formal representation in town planning and committee decision-making processes, and therefore were unable to access the formal channels of power which could improve their situation.

The data gathering phase was also essential in identifying the people who would be interested and able to carry the process forward. As Nidan and other civil society organizations facilitated the data gathering across the country, they were able to meet community leaders who had respect and authority in the street vending communities, as well as in the slum settlements where many of the vendors lived. These leaders would become the backbone of the network going forward.

Nidan’s progress in Bihar did not go unnoticed by Bhatt and the other organizers working on behalf of street vendors in other geographies of India. While city-level organizing progressed, Bhatt had continued to advocate for an organization that would bring together all of the street vendor associations at the national level. Singh similarly became a strong advocate for a national organization, recognizing the bigger picture and the importance of pressing for national policies that would improve the plight of the street vendors. In 1998, Bhatt, Singh and other leaders called a meeting of street vendor associations from all over the country and, through this meeting, the National Association of Street Vendors of India was born. Singh, who had been instrumental to organizing the meeting, was elected as the National Coordinator of the network, and Nidan was recognized as the driving force behind the national network. Within five years, this network formally registered as a federation of street vendor organizations under the Societies Registration Act of 1860.

The National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI)

NASVI brought together, for the first time, hundreds of street vendor associations, including community based groups, trade unions and independent professionals. With Nidan’s support, NASVI began to conduct training and information sessions, equipping members with the information and education to build an advocacy platform. NASVI also supported the local associations by commissioning further studies that provided essential data for their advocacy efforts. These studies were brought together in a comprehensive report, authored by a respected researcher from the Tata Institute for Social Sciences,¹² examining the street vendor situation in seven major cities across the country.

11. National Association of Street Vendors of India – NASVI 2015.

12. Bhowmik 2001.

This report was instrumental for NASVI, providing solid data and positing concrete policy recommendations, while also giving an important context to street vendors that policymakers could not ignore:

[The study] was unique in that its focus was not street vendors in isolation, but rather street vendors as an integral part of the broader urban context. The study outlined municipal laws and police acts, urban planning, socio-economic conditions of vendors, and perceptions of consumers in each of the seven selected cities. It concluded that street vendors exist because of the high demand for their services, and that urban planners and legal environments should accommodate accordingly. In presenting concrete data on street vendors in the context of their urban environment, the study provided a baseline for developing long-term solutions to common problems associated with street trade. This enabled NASVI and its affiliates to shift their attention from short-term responses to threats, toward longer-term strategies for securing vendors' livelihoods.¹³

With the release of the study in May 2001, NASVI now had a platform on which to advocate for a national policy for street vendors. The Government of India responded by creating a task force which was mandated to include consultation with street vendors as part of creating a national policy. The entire process was aided by two Supreme Court judgements from 1985 and 1987 which had separately supported street vending as a Constitutionally-protected process. During this time, NASVI worked at both the grassroots and organizational level to place increasing pressure on the national government.

As described later by NASVI:

In order to develop a sense of solidarity and urgency and to ensure that members become willing to come and act together, significant time and energy were invested in training, capacity building and development of information, education and communication tools. Internal cohesion was ensured by bringing members aboard emphasizing common concerns. A series of studies commissioned by NASVI followed by multi-stakeholder consultations helped frame issues, energize public debates and became the bases for dialogue and interventions.

During this time, vendor organizations were mobilized to put pressure on the local courts to claim rights and entitlements, and many of these judicial verdicts were in favour of the street vendors. Under mounting pressure and after extensive consultation, the government released the National Policy for Street Vendors in 2004.

The National Policy was adopted by 11 states, and, in its various stages of implementation, provided an opportunity to collect numerous examples and ideas of street vendor strategies from state-level actors. The policy also provided much-needed support for NASVI to advocate for reforms at the state and municipal levels. However, while policies were important tools to influence government decision-making, they did not have the force of law. Without a legal mandate, the impact of the policy was necessarily limited. Furthermore, India's federal system gave substantial power to state and local governments, particularly related to issues of urban planning. As it became clear that the national policy would need further enforcement, NASVI began to agitate for a national act, which would provide legal force for states to enact policies in support of street vending. The national government responded negatively, arguing that street vending was a purely urban policy and was therefore a matter of strict state autonomy. NASVI, with Singh at its helm, fought back, arguing that street vending was a matter of livelihoods, not just of urban policy, and therefore squarely an issue to be addressed by national government.

In 2010, NASVI was given a boost by a Supreme Court ruling stating that if the government was serious about protecting the rights of street vendors, then it must enact a law. This ruling was critical, but it stopped short of stating explicitly which level of government should enact the law. NASVI and its member organizations moved into high gear, lobbying extensively, conducting meetings with "political parties of all hues", government ministries, the National Advisory Council and others. During this time, NASVI also tracked the progress of the National Policy, documenting state- and municipal-level activities that, although implemented sporadically, were working to improve circumstances for street vendors. Through a series of postcard campaigns, conventions and protests, NASVI finally managed to get a bill introduced to the Upper House, which it then passed in 2013. However, with the 2014 Parliamentary election looming, the Upper House decided to delay its vote as a political manoeuvre. NASVI realized that without significant mobilization, the proposed legislation would lapse in a matter of months.

NASVI's membership base rose to the challenge. As one street vendor leader from the Meena Bazaar in Delhi recalled, it was "do or die".¹⁴ Protests were stepped up, with street vendors arriving from all parts of India to congregate outside of Parliament. Nidan helped NASVI organizers to confront a particularly influential politician at his home, "celebrating" his support of the Act even though he was known to be delaying the vote behind the scenes – the politician received the message clearly, and removed his opposition. Throughout, a NASVI public relations expert leaned heavily on the press to continue its coverage of the street vendors' protests.

13. Sinha & Roever 2011.

14. Khan, Imran and Bachan Mishra. Meena Bazaar Street Vendors Association. Interview with the author. 13 June 2016.

In a final push, nearly 500 street vendors joined together in a mass hunger strike outside of Parliament. The media covered the hunger strike with sympathy for the striking workers, so much so that one of Singh's friends commented to him, "You would think that street vending was the only issue in India!" Public sentiment swayed enormously in favour of the legislation and, with just five days before lapse, the Upper House of Parliament was forced into action. It passed the Act, the "Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014," as the first comprehensive legislation for street vendors in the world.

The Act's primary mechanism was the mandate of a multistakeholder committee for each town called the Town Vending Committee (TVC). Each TVC was required to include street vendors in the committee, as a means of ensuring that street vendors were consulted on all matters of vending regulation and rights for vendors. Specifically, the TVC would work to identify street vending zones and approve licensing for vendors. Furthermore, the Act was given an exclusive source of funding, with 5% of the newly announced National Urban Livelihood Funds earmarked for state-level implementation of the law. It was a huge victory for the street vendors, and gave them the recognition that they had long sought.

Key Learnings

The experience of building NASVI was pivotal for Nidan. By creating a model for mobilizing a nationwide network of organizations, and building an independent support structure to sustain it, Nidan was able to conceptualize the way it could work with informal workers across many sectors. While NASVI was advocating on behalf of street vendors, Nidan had been steadily growing its work with other groups of informal workers. Through NASVI, Singh was able to identify many key learnings which were now being applied to other offshoots that the organization was building.

These key learnings included:

- **Building the Evidence Base:** The first stage of building NASVI had emphasized the importance of gathering data and understanding the current situation for street vendors. The data gathering, however, had important benefits beyond analysis of the situation. It was through this process that Nidan was able to demonstrate the importance of collective action, with the street vendors finding that they had a voice and that there were those who would listen to their grievances. The data gathering was also an important step in identifying leaders who would emerge to carry forward each institution in a sustainable way.
- **Organizing for Power:** Singh believed that numbers of people constituted power, particularly in the face of well-resourced, entrenched forces. As he explained, "The core of everything is organizing from the households on up; even children, we organize; this is important because we take on very hard forces and we have to be strong. Even when we fear the mafias the most, this is when we have to organize the most decisively."
- **Cultivating Leadership and Governance:** Nidan had also learned the importance of capacity building for members, so that they could step into positions of leadership and governance in each of the offshoots. In each of these institutions, they invested heavily in identifying leaders and training them to take over the governance and operations. This process was time-consuming and costly, but Singh believed that it was the only way to sustainably provide for informal workers' futures. In every institution that Nidan founded, informal workers took on board membership and executive leadership roles. Nidan meticulously trained these emerging leaders in the tools of leadership, including democratic process, agenda setting, transparency and community engagement.

Finally, a critical and cross-cutting learning was the importance of providing social services alongside organizing activities. For street vendors, living on the precipice of economic livelihood, even a single day removed from their vending operation could make or break their ability to put food on the table or pay for their children's school fees. Singh and his colleagues realized that organizing street vendors would also require sustainably providing access to health, nutrition and education for informal workers and their families, so that vendors would be able to focus some of their efforts on organizing.

Singh was also aware that by mobilizing social services alongside organizing activities, Nidan would gain trust from the informal workers he was trying to reach. Civil society organizations had a fine line to walk in India, where politicians and their constituencies would make promises during election years, only to disappear after the election was over. Nidan needed to ensure that the street vendors, and the other informal worker groups who would learn from their experience, trusted that they had their best interests at heart.

Empowerment and Livelihoods

As Nidan built its organizing activities with groups of informal workers, they also began to experiment with providing essential social services for their growing constituency base. Nidan's approach to social services followed a similar model to its organizing activities: rather than provide charitable services, Nidan sought out ways to institutionalize the services, ensuring that there was a sustainable model for provision of the services beyond Nidan.

Financial Services

One of the persistent and recurring themes in their surveying of informal workers, and in particular groups of female workers, was the lack of access to financial services. The process for opening a bank account in India was onerous, requiring significant paperwork and a verifiable identity with proof of residence. For informal workers without documentation, opening a bank account could prove virtually impossible. Lack of access to a bank account denied informal workers the ability to accumulate savings and access credit to expand their businesses.

During this time, microfinance was growing in popularity in India, with the rapid expansion of micro-savings and microcredit programmes within the country. Nidan took advantage of this momentum, organizing groups of female informal workers into self-help groups (SHGs) and developing a model of savings that was customized to the specific needs of informal workers. These SHGs were integrated into a member-owned, district-level cooperative model called Sanchay Credit and Thrift, providing savings, recurring, and fixed deposit savings products for members. By 2015, for example, Sanchay in Patna consisted of 4428 members in 347 SHGs, with nearly INR 10.5 million in savings. Sanchay also provided small loans to members, primarily used for small business development or household needs, such as school fees and dowry payments.

Nidan also experimented with different models for micro-insurance and social security, realizing that informal workers and their families were at great risk if their livelihoods were to be hindered by death or disability.

Education

Another persistent problem for informal workers was accessing quality education for their children. India had only recently formalized its national policy for free, universal primary education under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. While government schools were generally accessible to urban dwellers, the quality of schools was poor. India had a large private school system which paralleled the public system, however this was generally unaffordable for the poorest families of informal workers. Furthermore, the children of informal workers living in slum areas had few opportunities for early childhood education (ECE), which was widely recognized as critical for primary school success. With the assistance of the American India Foundation (AIF), Nidan identified a promising model of low-cost, early childhood education in Rajasthan¹⁵, and recruited a group of community women to be trained in the model and methods of the programme. Through an intensive training programme of two months, these initial teachers were trained to set up ECE programmes in the slums surrounding Patna. By 2016, Nidan was running 40 ECE centres throughout Patna, serving informal workers both within the Nidan network and beyond.

Importantly, these programmes were supplementary to the public school system, acting as a feeder programme into government schools. While Nidan had struggled to identify a means of creating a self-sustaining model for its ECE initiative, Nidan's goal was that the ECE centres would serve as a means of creating awareness and mobilizing informal worker families to advocate for improved education in their communities.

Nutrition & Health

Nidan also recognized the importance of quality nutrition and healthcare for informal workers and their families. Amongst informal workers, one of the most prevalent health issues was child malnutrition. In this regard, the Indian government was actively engaged, operating one of the largest integrated welfare schemes in the world, called the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Every child in India under six years of age had access to services through ICDS centres that were situated in communities across the country. In impoverished communities, state governments subsidized nutrition with "take home rations" that were provided through the centres.

15. Bodh Shiksha Samiti 2016.

In an innovative programme funded by the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), Nidan was piloting production of a fortified food supplement called “Wheatamix” through co-operative-run facilities owned and staffed by local SHGs. SHGs selected approximately 20 women from their groups to be trained as employees for the facilities, focusing on families where women were the sole breadwinners. These facilities procured local ingredients and produced the fortified grain cereal, selling them through government contracts to local ICDS centres. The initial results were encouraging, with production facilities operating profitably within just a few months of opening. The only hurdle was that staff at the ICDS centres were used to keeping back a portion of the take-home rations to sell at the local markets, a corrupt “perk” of the job that was circumvented by the new, locally-run Wheatamix project. Nidan had supported the SHG employees in vigorous “customer relations” with local leaders and village mothers, revealing the corruption and growing their business at the same time.

“Offshoots”

From inception, Singh realized that organizations come and go, and he was worried about what would happen if Nidan were to close its doors. He was interested in finding a way to ensure sustainability, building institutions “in perpetuity” to empower and provide livelihoods for the poor and the marginalized. Nidan’s experience with the street vendors, as well as the growing work with other groups, had crystalized in his mind that informal workers would be best served by their own institutions, fully governed and sustained by the workers’ themselves.

Singh felt that it was Nidan’s role to identify innovative models for livelihoods and social services, proving their effectiveness and operability. Once the models were proven effective, the aim was to create a sustainable institution to run the model in perpetuity. Most importantly, the key to long-term sustainability was bringing beneficiaries along in the process, ensuring that rather than being “recipients” of services, they were the primary leaders and managers of the institution. The process of creating independent entities, governed and operated by the people they were designed to protect, was not a quick or easy task. Each entity required building structures of leadership, operations and governance alongside the core activities of advocacy and service delivery.

Singh described the process:

We try to take on innovative projects, build a sustainable model and then we build an institution. In order to do this, we have to develop local leadership, with trained coordinators so that they can take on the role themselves. This process is long, sometimes seven years or more.

By 2016, Nidan was effectively operating a network of these offshoots, or sustainable entities that provided a combination of livelihoods and advocacy for informal workers and their families. The experience of the street vendors had proved replicable, and Nidan had continued its process of surveying and organizing with multiple groups of informal workers, including construction workers, wastepickers (garbage and refuse collectors), domestic workers, rickshaw pullers and agricultural workers. While the issues faced among each of these groups differed, the experience of organizing and mobilizing was similar across the sectors.

Some of the offshoots were similar to NASVI, acting as trade unions and associations for informal workers to advocate for their rights through government policies and legal frameworks. In 2013, Nidan helped set up the National Union for Informal Workers (NUIW), which had organized several groups of informal workers, most prominently informal construction workers. NUIW had recently won a seat on the board of the Construction Workers Welfare Board, providing a platform to advocate for construction workers to receive benefits such as formal identification cards, recourse for nonpayment by contractors, dignified zones where prospective employers could hire them for construction projects, and social security for work-related injuries. NUIW was considering opportunities for replicating this success for other groups of informal workers.

Several offshoots were organized as co-operatives, with informal workers joining as members and sharing in the overall profits of the entity. The Wheatamix venture was one such co-operative, while another offshoot, Angana, was a co-operative of home-based artisans which created market opportunities for women selling handicrafts. Founded in 2000, Angana participated in local and national trade fairs, negotiated government contracts and operated a showroom in downtown Patna, with the purpose of creating opportunities to sell locally-produced handicrafts. Angana’s membership base had also successfully advocated for identity cards for artisans, giving registered members the ability to access social benefits, financial services and trade benefits. By 2016, Angana had 1400 members generating INR 20 million in revenue annually.

Other offshoots were set up as for-profit companies, providing secure employment and benefits to workers within their trade and expertise. For example, Nidan Swachh Dhara Pvt Ltd (NSPL) was a for-profit company organized in 2008 for the benefit of informal waste pickers with Nidan’s support. The company provided contract garbage removal and cleaning services to private residences, apartment buildings, hospitality companies and corporates. By 2016, the company served 18,500

residences and 200 institutions, employing more than 400 waste pickers, who also shared an equity stake in the company and elected their own members to the Board of Directors.

Not all of Nidan's ventures succeeded. For example in 2011, Nidan partnered with D-Light, and later Selco, both providers of off-grid solar systems for home energy needs. The aim was to create a for-profit company through the sale and financing of systems for urban and rural households. However, Nidan discovered that the systems required a level of technical expertise and assistance that they did not have the capacity to build. After three years of experimenting with the business and operational model for the company, Nidan decided to abandon the joint venture and concentrate its efforts elsewhere.

Two decades later, with nearly two dozen entities, Singh felt that the Nidan model was succeeding in combining advocacy, provision of livelihoods and social services for the poor and marginalized. However, he now felt that the process of creating these institutions needed to be codified so that other organizations, and government, could build off the principles, ultimately creating more inclusive ways to grow urban economies.

Supporting the Offshoots

While each of the offshoots was self-sustaining in that they each had independent governance, management and financials, Nidan provided important services to the offshoots, supporting them on their path to sustainability. Ultimately, Nidan's goal was to "initiate, establish and consolidate people's institutions, processes and, programmes aimed for socio-economic development of poor."

By 2016, Nidan had grown to employ 530 people in 15 offices in nine states of India, operating on a budget of over INR 148 million annually. These employees were organized across issue areas – Health, Education, Livelihoods and Financial Inclusion – with responsibilities for supporting the topical areas across multiple institutions. Nidan employees were semi-autonomous, operating several "P&Ls" for various entities and funders, and having a large remit for making decisions and coordinating with stakeholders. This entrepreneurial spirit had served the organization well, as most employees stayed with the organization for more than five years – and some as long as 14 years or more. Unlike many nonprofit organizations, Nidan had a deep well of organizational knowledge that it could draw on as it built new programmes and institutions.

Importantly, Nidan provided a platform for government partnership which benefited its entire portfolio of offshoots. As Singh pointed out:

Reaching scale is easiest when you work with government. While many nonprofits fear to tread this path, speed and documentation is very important while working on government contracts. Payments are an issue, but it is a myth that bribes are always a precondition. A lot depends on how you deal and what level you deal with.

Nidan also supported the "eco-system" within which its institutions operated, both with government partnerships and beyond. For example, one of the recent initiatives supporting NASVI an effort towards making street food hygienic and professionalizing street food vendors. A separate company called NASVI Street Food Pvt Ltd was set up to organize street food festivals, which provided a platform for government advocacy and engagement. Through the development of state chapters and a partnership with the Ministry for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, the festivals were developed as a hands-on training opportunity in entrepreneurship for street vendors. The National Street Food Festival of 2014 also garnered the attention of the Ministry of Tourism which provided subsidized food vendor training through its 55 Hotel Management Institutes.

Nidan also provided back-end support to the institutions, providing technical assistance for financial reporting and legal needs. Institutions were responsible for submitting regular management and financial reports to Nidan, who then conducted the annual financial reporting, audit management and donor reporting requirements.

Nidan also took its impact measurement very seriously, and had recently gone through a process of identifying eleven key indicators that it could measure across all of its institutions. These indicators had been selected carefully, with the unique circumstances of informal workers guiding the process. The organization was in the process of rolling out measurement of these indicators across the network of institutions.

Finally, Nidan's "family" of offshoots created opportunities across the network, as learnings were shared and services were "cross-marketed". For example, Sanchay Credit & Thrift provided bank accounts to female workers across the network of institutions, while many members of the trade union organizations became shareholders or employees of the cooperative and for-profit companies. Nidan's capacity building and technical assistance efforts, therefore, had compound benefits, as community leaders became involved across the network of institutions.

The Way Forward

As Singh contemplated the next steps for Nidan, he reflected on the personal journey that he had taken to reach this point. The experience of acting as National Coordinator for NASVI throughout the fight for the Street Vendors Act had been an exciting, but exhausting stage of his life. To his friends and family, as well as in the public eye, Singh was singularly associated with the street vendor movement. Growing Nidan and NASVI had felt like raising a child – and he even felt that at times he had sacrificed watching his own daughter grow up while fighting on behalf of the street vendors.

Despite these personal sacrifices, Singh knew that the informal workers’ movement in India, and indeed around the world, was only just beginning. Continued globalization, coupled with rising inequality and economic slowdown, was making the plight of informal workers even more precarious, and it was vitally important that the institutions supporting both the livelihoods and the political inclusion of these workers be sustained.

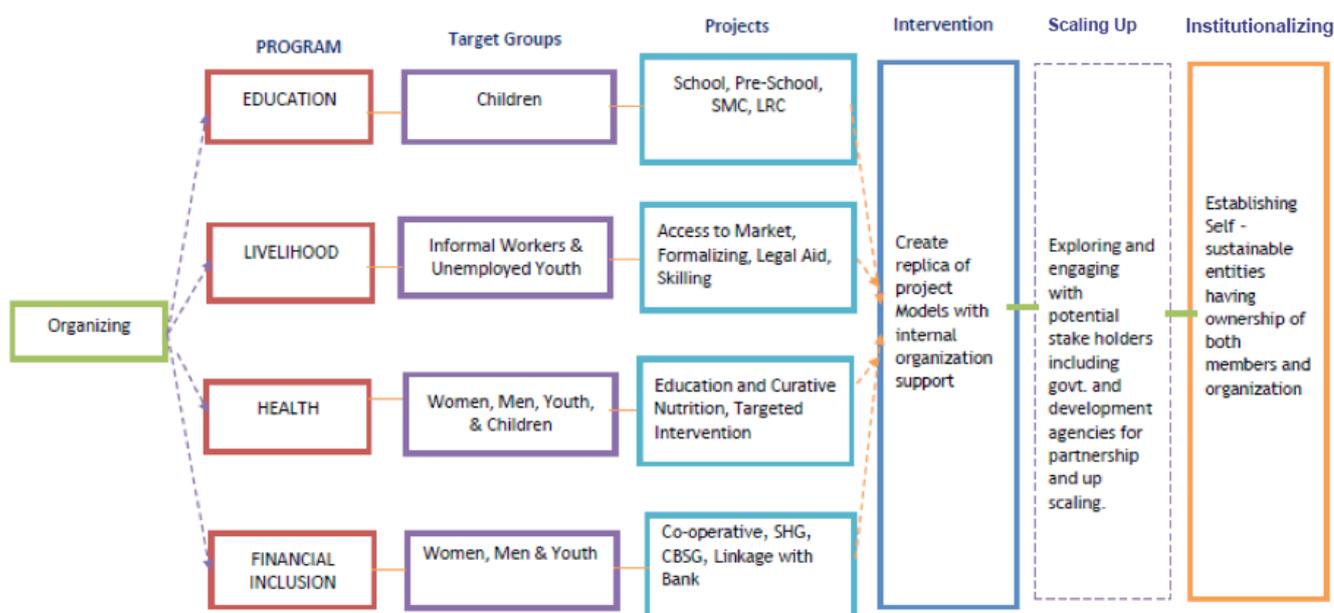
Singh turned back to the email that he was writing to his colleagues at the Smart Cities initiative, and contemplated how to convey Nidan’s principles for inclusive strategies for urban planning.

Assignment Questions:

- How does Nidan’s model support “systems change”, moving beyond service delivery to influence the overall social system within which urban informal workers operate?
- What are the principles supporting Nidan’s process for creating the “offshoots”?
- How could these principles be incorporated into urban planning and legislation?
- What are the implications of beneficiaries as actors and leaders? How can this be applied in other contexts?

Appendices

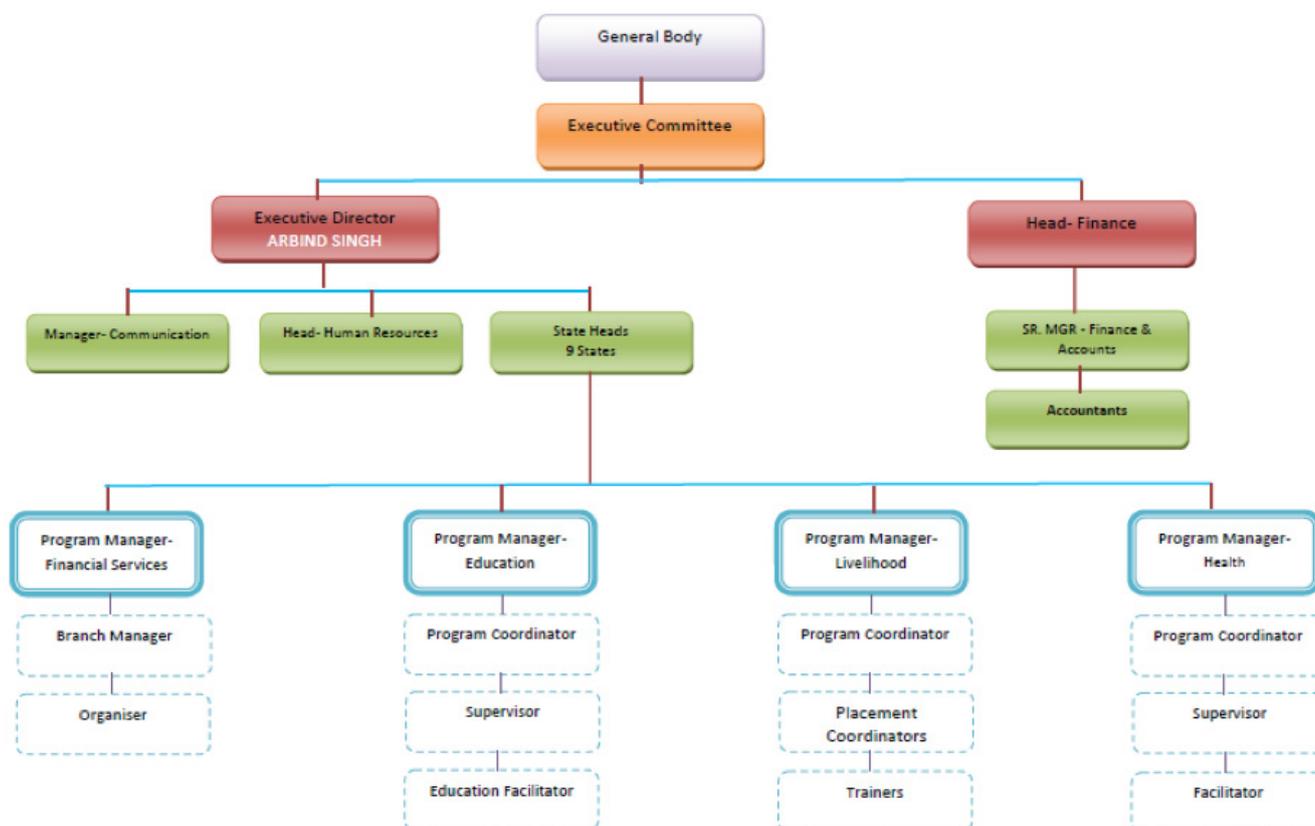
Appendix 1: The Nidan Operating Model



Appendix 2: Nidan Reach (2015 Actuals and Projections)

Location	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Bihar	502,372	527,491	553,865	581,558	610,636	641,168
Delhi	405,000	425,250	446,513	468,838	492,280	516,894
UP	135,000	141,750	148,838	156,279	164,093	172,298
Chandigarh & Punjab	106,740	112,077	117,681	123,565	129,743	136,230
Uttarakhand	130,320	136,836	143,678	150,862	158,405	166,325
Madhya Pradesh	117,000	122,850	128,993	135,442	142,214	149,325
Rajasthan	45,000	47,250	49,613	52,093	54,698	57,433
Jharkhand	22,500	23,625	24,806	26,047	27,349	28,716
Haryana	5000	5250	5513	5788	6078	6381
Karnataka		2000	2100	2205	2315	2431
Andhra Pradesh		3000	3150	3308	3473	3647
Total Outreach	1,468,932	1,547,379	1,624,748	1,705,985	1,791,284	1,880,848

Appendix 3: Nidan Organogram



Appendix 4: Offshoots

Offshoot	Legal Entity	Description
Angana	Society (Registered under Act 1860)	Training and capacity building to the members of Angana Craft Pvt Ltd to produce handmade crafts.
Angana Craft Pvt Ltd	For Profit Company	Creating market opportunities for female artisans through exhibitions and trade fairs where they can sell their goods, reaching customers in and around India.
Bihar Forces	Society (Registered under Act 1860)	Network of organizations raising the issues of crèche and childcare workers.
Centre for Skill Development & Training	Society (Registered under Act 1860)	Training and capacity building support to organizations, focusing on skills development, research and management services.
Footpath Ki Aawaz Trust	Trust (Registered under the Trust Act)	Publication and newsletter series for NASVI.
NASVI Street Food Pvt Ltd (previously known as Hari Bhari Agro Pvt. Ltd)	Private Company	A social enterprise of food vendors who organize street food festivals, skills development training and the supply of raw materials.
Hariyali	Co-operative	Promoting vegetable farmers to market their produce directly to the markets as well as providing training and capacity building to small and marginalized vegetable farmers.
Labour Co-operative	Co-operative	Established for MGNREGA (rural workers under the Mahatma Ghandi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) but also available to others who work without any institutional support.
National Alliance of Street Vendors of India (NASVI)	Nonprofit Organization	National coalition of trade unions and voluntary organizations working for street vendor rights.
National Union of Informal Workers (NUIW)	Trade Union (Registered at National level under Act 1926)	National level trade union bringing together informal workers across multiple sectors in India to advocate for their rights and entitlements, and engage national and state government to adequately frame policy for the betterment of the informal sector workers.
Nidan India Trust	Trust (Registered under the Trust Act)	Collectivizing workers to assist in creating social enterprises. By working closely with government at a national and state level they are able to leverage schemes to access funding for social enterprises.
Nidan Microfinance Foundation	For Profit Company	Microfinance institution providing savings and credit from Pvt and National banks to create small and micro loans for informal workers.
Nidan Swachdhara Pvt Ltd. (NSPL)	For Profit Company	Company providing waste management services to residential and commercial customers. They work with local municipal bodies to apply for contracts and tenders.
Nidan Worker Welfare Organization	Society (Registered under Act 1860)	Promoting and facilitating society security schemes for informal workers.
Niramaya	Co-operative	Partnership with VisionSpring to support “vision entrepreneurs” who sell affordable eyeglasses.

<p>Sanchay Thrift and Credit Cooperative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Patna - Muzaffarpur - Hazipur - Mahua - Samastipur - Delhi 	Co-operative	Co-operative providing savings and loan products to female informal workers.
Sangam	Co-operative	Co-operative to support production and marketing of handmade jute products, as well as providing training and capacity building to the members new to jute products.
WAMA (The Women Artisans' Marketing Agency)	Co-operative	Co-operative to support production and marketing of handmade applique products to the Vaishali district, supplying handmade products to Angana and ensuring traditional embroidery as an art form does not become extinct.

Appendix 5: Nidan's Geographical Reach



Appendix 6: Sample of Nidan's 11 Impact Indicators for Bihar

S. No	Indicators	Total
1	Organizing	133,377
2	Access to financial services	32,750
3	Government notified identity proof	6194
4	Encourage gainful economic activity	8362
5	Linkage with any social security scheme	29,891
6	Children aged 6-14 in school	7072
7	Access to pre-school (ECD)	715
8	No cases of malnourishment	756
9	Access to safe water	4104
10	No cases of open defecation	7265
11	Renewal energy to those houses using kerosene or diesel or any other sources for light	0
Total		230,486

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