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India Blog Series: Kicking Away the Ladder: Indian Civil Society in Action ^[1]

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Mumbai --- In a country that is home to 55 of the world's billionaires, it is hard to imagine that India, like many other developing countries, faces great challenges when it comes to poverty, homelessness, and development-related issues. In a nation with an estimated population of 1.21 billion, how does one go about solving these problems? Many are tempted to point the finger at the government, and while they have a responsibility to provide basic necessities to their people, I am interested in the role of civil society in addressing development challenges.

As one official at the United States Embassy in Mumbai put it: “young Indians are acutely aware that India has become a world power, and they are also aware of its shortcomings.”

Previously, I had examined India through the United Nations lens, reading reports of UN data and looking at various UN-sponsored projects. However, through the India: Inside Out trip, I was able to see the impact ordinary people are making on international development issues on-the-ground. The government has caught on to this idea, too. Navdeep Suri, Head of the Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of External Affairs in India, expressed that: “one way of addressing India’s development is through creating smart partnerships between the



During our visit to Visakhapatnam, our group had the chance to meet and speak with graduate level students at Gitam University. Most of them were pursuing a Master’s degree in Business Administration or Management. All of them were involved in causes related to India’s development. Students spoke to us about topics ranging from reducing child beggars, to environmental conservation and working with the disabled. As one student put it: “every person is required to give back to India, in any way they can.”

Their latest project--working with a local orphanage, providing essential goods and financial

support through fundraising campaigns. As they spoke, I noticed a genuine commitment to working in underserved communities. These students are firm believers that every Indian citizen has a role and responsibility to give back to India. All their extracurricular activities are part of a personal initiative taken by the students, who are invested in tackling certain development related issues and promoting volunteerism as an essential role of civil society.

After speaking with this extraordinary group of individuals, I wondered about the rest of Indian civil society and how they felt about India's development. As our group continued to meet with government officials, professionals, and NGOs, it became clear that India's development issues was on everyone's mind, and they were all taking a proactive approach to being part of the solution.

One of my favorite meetings was with Harsh Mander, an Indian writer, social worker, and activist. He is the Director of the Centre for Equity Studies in New Delhi, and while he is involved in various causes, the one closest to his heart is working with homeless families, many of which lack access to food and basic nutrition. During our meeting, he stated that: "No child should have to sleep hungry...whatever the costs, we'll have to find resources to do it." Mr. Mander works with these kids to build trust and help them regain control of their lives, laborating with government officials to create laws that protect their



Mr. Mander's work is a perfect example of my core learning about development in India: Indians are hands-on when it comes to their own development. They are not waiting for the United Nations, or anyone else for that matter, to come in and solve their problems.

Indians are proud of their heritage, history, and democracy. As Mr. Mander put it: "In India, we don't have to make references that are international, because they are included in our constitution." Considering that human capital is a great asset in India, it makes sense to create partnerships between government agencies and civil society. Building these partnerships increases opportunity for the exchange of information, capacity building, and sustainable development between organizations, groups, individuals, and government officials. In that process, everyone is a winner.. Perhaps the most powerful statement made throughout this trip was by Mr. Harsh Mander, when he said that ordinary people have "exiled the poor from their conscious" and only when we are able to see them as people, can we start

to solve the problem of poverty.

India is unique in its problems, from its large population, colonial history, poverty levels, and ideological divisions. Therefore, the solutions must be as varied, and perhaps, must come from Indian people themselves. Strengthening partnerships between the government and civil society is essential because it creates a population that is engaged in its development and generates policies that promote democracy and equality. As the world's largest democracy, India has the power to set the standard for its own development through using its greatest asset: human capital. Through engaging civil society and governments in smart partnerships, great strides can be made in education, agriculture, technology, and industrial development that advance both the social and political divisions in the country. India can provide leadership and guidance to other developing countries by effectively addressing and managing its own development issues and creating a model for sharing information and its best practices. Ultimately, that has the potential to positively strengthen India's image and influence abroad, thereby, enhancing its nation brand and public diplomacy efforts.

Hend Alhinnawi is a graduate student working on her professional Master's of Public Diplomacy at USC. In the past, she worked with the United Nations and AMIDEAST in the Middle East and Africa on international development and resource mobilization related issues. She is also participating in the India:Inside Out Project.
