

At The Same Table™ - Delhi, May 2018

On 18th May, 2018, EdelGive hosted its first ATST in Delhi on **Systemic Response for Women Empowerment**, at the University of Chicago Center, Connaught Place. The event was supported by the International Innovation Corps (IIC), University of Chicago and co-curated with Oxfam India. The meeting was tremendously interactive, with representatives from eminent Foundations, corporates, funding agencies, research organisations and academic institutions sharing perspectives on the relevance and efficacy of the systems approach in women empowerment initiatives.

Contextualising the need for systems thinking: An Oxfam and EdelGive perspective

After a formal welcome extended to the guests by the representatives from IIC, UChicago, the session commenced with Oxfam's presentation aimed at orienting the participants on the applicability of systems thinking in tackling real-world challenges to women empowerment. Oxfam India's CEO Amitabh Behar, emphasised on moving away from compartmentalised thinking and silo-ised way of working, towards a more comprehensive approach. By referring to Kudumbashree and Mahila Samakhya programs as examples of systemic approach driving large scale impact, the Oxfam team urged the group to reflect on how multiple initiatives on gender could similarly converge to empower women.

EdelGive's CEO Vidya Shah shared that Foundation had inadvertently embraced the systems approach by, "Being open to knowing we don't know, knowing that solutions may involve changes in beliefs and behavior, will need to be context-specific and cut across societal, political, market, governance and ecological systems, entail involvement of multiple stakeholders and accepting the lack of short term measurability". As a result, EdelGive's women empowerment portfolio has evolved from a purely economic or social focus to placing equitable emphasis on initiatives ensuring financial services (Mann Deshi) as well as those facilitating social capital and agency (CORO, Ibtada and Majlis).

Open discussion

The systems approach found favour with many participants voicing their support for 'returning to this approach' as it offers a means to understand and respond to the complex relationships between various aspects of women empowerment. However, participants also cautioned the group to consider the limitations of the approach by studying lessons learned from the women's movement in India, and be conscious of the hesitation by donors to invest in programs without a pre-defined theory of change.

Key takeaways from the discussion were:

- Systems thinking acknowledges the fluidity between the social, political and economic aspects of women empowerment, and facilitates collaborative programming. With convergence between multiple stakeholders ensured, solutions are more context-specific, intra and inter systemic and evaluated through reiterative experimentation and adaptation.
- To achieve a win-win, an organisation should ensure a balance between programs committed to definite outcomes, leadership-building and those which enable women to see and realise dreams thus, program funding should be accompanied by institutional capability and leadership funding.
- Buy-in from funders can be harnessed through effective messaging and communication which will articulate the benefits involved, and the risks absent in supporting women empowerment programs

Way forward

Towards the end of the session, participants conveyed that they had found the session "extremely rich and valuable" and lauded the diversity of conversations enabled. In the months to come, EdelGive will leverage the insights gained from the ATST and strengthen its engagement with different stakeholders who participated, to work collaboratively on the various aspects of women empowerment, including a gender coalition it is to initiate.