

ROADMAP SERIES: EMERGING FROM QUARANTINE

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April 7, 2020

David Nash is the Senior Flood Resilience Alliance Manager of Z Zurich Foundation. Prior to this, he was the CEO of Banyan, a well-respected organisation in Chennai working in the mental health space. He is also a mentor at AuxoHub.

David Nash started the session by pointing out the effects of quarantine and lockdown around the world, touching upon how worries about income were becoming increasingly important to the general population. He flagged off the effect that this struggle would have on the social sector, recognising that the first impact would likely be on the inflow of donations. Given the reduction in disposable income amongst the generation population, charitable donations would likely see a fall.

According to Nash, social sector organisations would face several challenges due to the current situation:

- Drying up of resources

While many organisations have support from institutional donors and government funds, the reduction in individual supporters could lead to a drying up of resources.

- Lack of personal interaction with funders

Fundraising, particularly in the social sector, has always been rooted in inter-personal relationships. In these circumstances of lockdown, the modality of in-person meetings become impossible, forcing organisations to reimagine the ways in which they request funds. Until different paths are established, this could have a major impact on fundraising.

- Expectation Management

Nash believes that the world will not be the same after lockdown. The continued thread of the virus will remain. It is thus important to figure out ways to operate in this new world. Key to renegotiating this new world would be for organisations to communicate with multiple stakeholders, keeping them informed of the difficulties and hurdles in achieving the promised results given the current situation. He also explained the need to have conversations about fund utilisation. While traditionally, many funders are rigid with regard to how funds can be used (only project funding, etc.), the current scenario opens up possibilities to negotiate different utilisation plans. Thus, communication between donors and organisations is particularly relevant to manage expectations of both parties.

- Risk Management

The next subject that was addressed is the need for risk management, both in the face of extended lockdown as well as the possibility of being simultaneously faced with multiple risks. While some organisations, particularly in the education sector, are able to successfully utilise technology to deliver their services, not everyone has been able to adopt this path. Thus, it becomes important to think differently and come up with innovative approaches to tackle this situation. Organisations will need to understand the risks involved in different strategies and engage with what works best for their unique situation. He also addressed the need to be prepared for multiple risks at the same time, quoting the example of flood risk during lockdown and needing to build bunkers with allowances for social distancing, etc. The ways in which we think of categories such as risk, mitigation measures and innovations, therefore, will have to change.

In conclusion, this is the time for NGOs to come up with a plan for a new world. By innovating and being willing to move away from established patterns and structures, we will be more capable of building more robust relationships with funders, delivering promised outcomes and managing emerging risks at the same time.

Q&A session

- How does one factor staffing in dealing with this crisis? Given that the pandemic has an everyday impact on staff, how can an organisation run on limited staff?

There are several challenges in staffing. One of them is exposing staff to the danger of this pandemic. This is one of the reasons why it is important to consider ways to work remotely. However, there are many scenarios that require hands-on work and cannot be done remotely. In those situations, the question is how can we protect ourselves from the virus and reduce the risk? If it is risky to provide the service, perhaps now would be a good time to turn to reporting, documentation and recording impact stories, etc.

- At this stage, communities need support from health workers. How do we reach to these communities on the ground?

If you can't remove the risk, it is important to make sure that the service provided is safe. One can follow the protocols for safety mandated for healthcare workers, such as distancing and wearing masks. It would also be a good idea to invest in Personal Protection Equipment (PPEs) so that they can go and interact with the community.

- How does one structure impact assessment in a way that is still able to monitor outcomes rather than just outputs during the crisis?

Measuring outcomes as part of monitoring and evaluation during this time of crisis is difficult. One way would be to carry out longitudinal studies that allow you to see change overtime. However, this would involve gathering a large amount of data and studying the changing demographics, etc. The more data you have, the more you can infer from. In case you are not able to capture this level of data, the other option is to merely look at 'before' and 'after' level impact. If not, perhaps outputs are the best option at this moment in time.

- In places where online resources are not available, how can we tackle the situation in the education sector during a pandemic?

The whole learning process for children is difficult in this situation. In case you cannot mitigate the risk, you need to carry the risk or avoid the risk.

If the children are at home during lockdown, perhaps it is a great opportunity to engage with materials through parents. However, in cases where there is no technology to send the materials, like rural areas, the organisation can take up approaches where they can deploy staff in each household or community. It is mainly about how we can think differently to keep the students engaged in this situation while also considering the risk factor.

- How can an NGO build trust with corporates and/or donors?

Trust is a two-way street. It should come from both sides. There is a history of mistrust and weariness in both sectors, rooted in potential misuse of funds by NGOs and insufficient understanding of the true cause and nature of work by the corporates. Funding officers in the organisations are the key ally here. It is important to build a personal relationship with these individuals and understanding the objective behind the funding. These lockdowns are a great opportunity to connect with them, build the relationship and understand more about their objectives.
