

## A Case Study of Learning in a Community-Based Organization in Rural Bihar | Text Transcript | CIRCLE

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This is the text transcript for the recorded webinar “A case study of learning in a community-based organization in rural Bihar” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. The guest speaker was Elisa Cooper. The webinar was recorded on October 13, 2021.

Transcript:

**Ashutosh Singh:**

Okay, good morning everyone, this is Ashutosh Singh. I'm an associate professor in the School of Engineering at University of Guelph and also an Indo-Canadian, so you can call me that.

I will be sharing the session today. I'm so sorry, this is the first time that I'm chairing a session virtually - not a very good chair till now, but, what I will have to do today is chair this session, allow Elisa to give a presentation, and then everybody will be asking questions to her and then we will have a very nice discussion on the topic that we are going to have today.

First of all, I need to introduce you all to CIRCLE, which is the Canada India Research Center for Learning and- oh wait I made a mistake. I'm actually nervous, I'm so sorry. There's so many pop-ups on my computer. Okay. So, what is CIRCLE? CIRCLE is the Canada India Research Center for Learning and Engagement. When it was established, it was established a couple of years back - I think in 2020, in February 2020, at University of Guelph.

CIRCLE aims to be an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting-edge research on India or Indian diaspora to showcase, advocate, catalyze, and foster an equitable, respectful, and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on complex and emerging, specifically, unexplored topics related to sustainability and social and economic well-being.

You can go to the CIRCLE webpage, which I would definitely insist that you should. It is an amazing consortium of people working together on a lot of other topics which are relevant to our day-to-day life. So, without any delay, I would like to introduce our speaker today who is going to give us a beautiful presentation on a case study of learning in community-based organization rural Bihar.

Her name is Elisa - Elisa Cooper. She has been working with the community-based organizations in various roles for over a decade. For the past eight years, she has been supporting a network of organizations in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific that carry out capacity development programs for youth.

Elisa is a recent graduate of the M.Sc. – or, sorry, M.Sc. Capacity Development and Extension program at the University of Guelph. She's also a research assistant with the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement. Her thesis research work was focused on dynamics of learning within a community-based organization in Bihar in India.

The format for the today's presentation - and what I'm going to ask Elisa to do – will be she's going to give a presentation for 20 to 30 minutes, and then all the participants will have an opportunity to ask questions for 20 to 30 minutes. I would like the participants to be muted when Elisa is giving her presentation, and if you have any questions, let's say during the questionnaire after her presentation ends. If you're able to ask her directly, you can do so. If not, you can put it in the chat; I will ask it on your behalf. Perfect! Elisa, you can take over.

### Elisa Cooper:

Thank you very much. Okay, hello everybody and welcome! So, as Ashutosh mentioned, today I'm going to present a case study based on research that I carried out for my M.Sc. thesis in which I examined the dynamics of learning within a community-based organization in rural Bihar. I just want to mention that the study was funded by the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute.

So, I'll start with describing the research background. I'll then present the findings from the two phases of my study, and I'll briefly discuss how my findings relate to concepts from the literature on complex systems and organizational learning. I'll share some final conclusions and present a framework for organizational learning that emerged from the study and offer a few recommendations for further research and for policy.

The goal of this study was to understand the dynamics of learning processes pursued by an organization operating in a rural resource constraint setting in India. Specifically, I wanted to describe tools, strategies, and approaches already being used by the organization to advance its own processes of learning, to support the participating organization in selecting tools and applying them in the context of one or more of its processes of learning, and to design a framework for making decisions about the use of learning tools within an organization.

The idea for this study came about initially as a result of reflections on my experience working with community-based organizations in various parts of the world including India. I had observed that many small organizations had a lot of potential to contribute to addressing particular needs of communities, but also faced a lot of obstacles, such as limited human and financial resources.

I had seen the importance of learning for these small organizations to be able to operate effectively in resource constrained settings, and wanted to understand better what approaches characteristics and conditions are associated with learning in these types of organizations. I decided to focus my research on India because of my personal and professional connections to the country, as well as India's rich history with community development and its large number of NGOs.

India has been called a shining star because of the rapid economic growth it has experienced in recent decades along with the associated increase in the standard of living in the country. Between 1992 and 2019, India experienced an average rate of economic growth of 6.9 percent per year. Between 2004 and 2011, its national poverty rate dropped from 40% to 23%.

However, in spite of this economic progress persistent disparities remain. There are significant differences that still exist in levels of poverty in different regions throughout the country. For instance, Bihar's overall poverty ratio remained at 34 percent up until 2020. There are also differences between urban and rural areas. Entrenched, real poverty has been identified as a major factor in the ongoing agrarian crisis facing India's farmers.

Now, in relation to this study specifically, the role of community in India's overall development has been a particular interest in examining the country's progress as well as the setbacks and obstacles it has faced. India has a really rich history of community development that has taken various forms at different stages in the country's history.

Village councils, agricultural cooperatives, Gandhi's satyagraha movement, microfinance institutions, resource management committees; there are various structures that have emerged around community development. Community development in India has been supported by the state, the private sector, and civil society.

The state has promoted community development largely through the strengthening of the Panchayati Raj institutions, through the promotion of village cooperatives, and more recently with a focus on centralized schemes and campaigns that address one or another social or economic issue.

The private sector has primarily supported community development through corporate social responsibility. Perhaps one of the earliest and most well-known examples of corporate social responsibility in India is the Tata group of companies, which have been adopting policies and practices aimed at the well-being of workers and communities since the establishment of the company. They continue to channel a significant portion of their funds towards efforts aimed at India's social and economic development.

CSR has become more prominent in India since 2013, when the ministry of corporate affairs mandated that all corporations of a certain size in India contribute at least a portion of their profits to corporate social responsibility activities. Now, where this study particularly focuses is on civil society organizations.

There are there are estimated to be more than three million registered non-governmental organizations in India, and over 70 percent of them have one or fewer paid staff. They play a variety of roles: watchdog, expert, capacity builder, service provider, amongst many others. Although small community-based organizations are often overlooked in the literature on organizational learning, they represent a huge source of knowledge capacity and potential in India.

For this study, I worked with one organization in particular: Society of the Universal Learner, or SOUL for short. SOUL is a Baha'i inspired community-based organization in Bihar, India that promotes the strengthening of rural education systems. Baha'i inspired means that the organization's work is guided by principles from the Baha'i faith, such as the oneness of humanity and coherence between the spiritual and material dimensions of life, and that its programs and activities are open to people of all backgrounds.

I chose to work with SOUL because of its prior experience with intentionally fostering learning processes, its desire and readiness to engage in a process of capacity building using participatory action research, the availability of the members of the organization to participate in the study, and because of my existing relationship with the organization which goes back to 2013. All of the seven full and part-time staff of the organization participated in the study. They're all males aged 22 to 52 years old and have educational backgrounds ranging from 10th standard to master's level.

As I mentioned, SOUL is based in Bihar, and this state presents a complex set of social and economic conditions. Bihar is the third largest state in India with a population of 104 million people. A significant percentage of this population is young people, with 50 percent of the population being under the age of 20.

Now, this represents a huge reservoir of potential for the state. However, young people face a lot of difficulties in achieving stable, secure employment. In spite of rapid economic growth, there are persistently high rates of poverty in the state and many young people are having difficulty finding jobs. The youth unemployment rate in the state remains at 41 to 50.

Close to the majority of people are still employed in the primary sector in agriculture, fishing, and forestry. One factor that contributes to challenges with employment is limited access to quality education. In Bihar, like in other parts of India, access to education has actually significantly increased since the introduction of the Indian government's Right to Education Act in 2009.

Across the country, as enrollment in schools increased in the initial years following the introduction of the RTE, measurable academic performance actually declined since many children who had never before gone to school were entering the education system with little foundation, and the number of teachers was hastily multiplied with limited mechanisms for training and ongoing support.

By 2018, however, academic performance across India was starting to show some signs of improvement. But in Bihar, learning outcomes have remained poor and haven't shown the same recovery as other parts of India. Nearly 40 percent of the population is still unable to read and write.

Now, SOUL was founded in Bihar at a time when access to education in rural parts of the state was very limited. The organization began by offering training to teachers who would work

alongside community members to establish community schools. Over the years, it has added other lines of action that are all aimed at strengthening village level education systems both in terms of access to education and also the quality of education available.

They support tutorial class teachers and trained teachers from government and private schools to improve the quality of elementary education. They also implement a capacity development program for youth. SOUL is now working in 15 communities throughout Bihar as shown on this map.

In order to do its work, SOUL is continuously learning from experience and adapting in a complex set of conditions. This study sheds light on how this learning process takes place. I'll share the findings from the first phase of my research now. The purpose of this phase was to understand how the study participants conceptualized organizational learning and how the organization engaged in learning and practice.

I conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant, during which I presented 15 concepts related to organizational learning and asked them to share the meaning of the word, other words that came to mind when they saw this word, images that came to mind, and experiences with the concept in SOUL. I also carried out one focus group discussion during which I explored experiences of learning and change within SOUL with the participants all together.

This map is an illustration of the connections that the participants made between different concepts. Each of the dots or nodes is one concept. The arrows show the associations that the participants made between concepts. The words or concepts that I presented are the ends of the arrows, and the words that the participants associated with the given words are the tips of the arrows. The size of the circles indicates how many connections were made to the concept, and the thickness of the arrows indicates how many participants made that particular association.

In analyzing this map, I identified seven clusters of concepts that make up the framework for how SOUL conceptualizes learning. I'll highlight two of these to illustrate. So this is the learning/knowledge/experience cluster. In addition to these three central concepts, the study participants associated 15 other concepts with this cluster. Some of these concepts include practice, intelligence, insights, competency, knowing, awareness.

Another cluster is the adaptation cluster. This has adaptation at the center, connected to five other concepts, including correspondence, preparation, according, coherence and equality. It's interesting to note that this cluster isn't actually connected to any of the other clusters in the network. This indicates that perhaps the concept of adaptation is not very significant in the way the study participants conceptualized organizational learning. In fact, four out of the seven participants indicated that they weren't aware of the meaning of the word "adaptation."

Now, in looking at the various clusters of concepts and the relationships between them, as well as the experiences that SOUL shared with applying these concepts in practice, I identified four themes that summarize the way that SOUL conceptualizes organizational learning.

These themes are that development is a process of individual and collective transformation, that organizations and institutions are structures that can contribute to transformation, that learning is a continuous process of acquiring, applying, and generating material and spiritual knowledge in order to foster individual and collective transformation, and that SOUL is striving to develop its capacity to carry out its work with excellence and wisdom through an ongoing process of learning characterized by action, reflection, and consultation.

Now, in addition to this theory of learning, I identified 26 strategies, tools, and approaches shared by participants in the interviews and focus group discussions that are used by SOUL as it engages in learning in practice.

Five of these had to do with the process of learning, five of them had to do with how SOUL frames and clarifies its thinking about its learning, two of them had to do with its conceptualization of its work, nine had to do with how SOUL gathers knowledge and takes action in order to generate new knowledge, and five had to do with how SOUL distills and disseminates insights that it gains.

Throughout the interviews and the focus group discussion, the participants shared many examples of how learning and change have taken place within SOUL. I'll share two of these just to illustrate. One participant shared that there were many places where community schools had started and then had to be closed, often because teachers left and there was no one to replace them.

SOUL realized that it had to strengthen its ability to have conversations that would help it to understand the communities and their needs, and that would help the communities understand the concept of a community school. As the staff of SOUL took action and gained experience, they developed capacity to have these types of conversations and to foster greater ownership for community schools.

In another example, a participant explained how relationships of support and encouragement enable SOUL staff to persevere and to learn how to overcome obstacles. This participant shared that "When the participants of our youth group stopped coming, when the continuity stopped, even then they encouraged the tutors by studying certain documents with them, because they knew that if the tutors will remain strong the program will be strengthened. They helped us not to get discouraged if the participants do not come, but rather told us to focus on the nature of our relationship with them and how we could carry out a conversation to establish a strong bond."

From this phase of the study, I found that there's a high degree of consistency amongst participants in the way that they conceptualize organizational learning and the value that they place on it.

I also saw that SOUL uses a wide range of strategies, tools, and approaches in order to advance processes of learning, and I found that SOUL's practice of organizational learning has a relatively high degree of consistency with how it thinks about learning and the values it associates with learning.

In the second phase of the study, we carried out a participatory action research process in relation to a question that was facing SOUL at the time of the study. I'll describe this process in the next few slides.

We began with identifying possible questions that SOUL could think about, that the study participants could learn about, that were important to SOUL at the time. They identified seven possible questions they felt were important. They selected one based on the one that they felt was most important, as well as most feasible to learn about during the course of the study.

They decided to learn about how a community education center can be established in a community in an organic way. They clarified that by "in an organic way" they meant with community ownership and participation. They decided to learn about this question in two villages where they had recently established teams of youth to assist the organization to learn about strengthening local level education systems.

They were going to start by having conversations with these teams of youth. To make a more detailed plan for the learning intervention, they started with examining a list of 24 strategies, tools, and approaches that came from their own experiences that they shared during the interviews and focus group discussions, as well as some that were drawn from literature.

They identified two that they wanted to learn more about: the Socratic Wheel and semi-structured interviews, and I prepared workshops and delivered them to introduce them to these two tools. They reflected on their previous experience with the emergence of a community education center in another village.

They identified three broad learning objectives to guide their learning process. These were: to understand the existing education facilities in the selected villages, to gain insight into the attitudes, expectations, and understanding of community members in relation to education, and to identify the topics of conversation that the teams in the villages could discuss with different groups of people in relation to the community education centers.

They decided to use semi-structured interviews because this would allow them to collect specific information about the existing educational facilities, while also gaining insight into the perspectives and attitudes of those that they were interviewing. In the end, they decided to carry out the interviews in groups, so I'll refer to them as focus group meetings from now on.

The participants decided to carry out the focus group meetings in two teams, with each team focused on one of the two villages. The two teams carried out a total of five focus group meetings between January 27th and February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021. With the permission of the interviewees, the teams recorded each of the focus group meetings for later analysis.

Reflection on action was embedded throughout the participatory action research process. During the initial stages of planning, the participants reflected on their previous experiences with learning about the question. After they took initial steps, they met together and those that had already conducted focus group meetings shared their reflections on the experience.

This assisted the other team to prepare, and also allowed the first team to consider what adjustments to make in future. After completing the focus group meetings and again, after carrying out some of the analysis, we all reflected together on how the process was unfolding and how the insights being gained could inform future steps in this process of learning.

The participants decided to use an approach to analysis that combined both grounded and emergent methods. They initially identified three themes that they wanted to look for in the data they had collected. These included patterns of study amongst youth, culture of cooperation and collaboration and mutual assistance, and the educational environment in the village.

They listened to the recordings of the focus group meetings and identified statements that reflected the themes they had selected. They also identified statements that suggested other themes that were significant in relation to understanding existing education systems and the perspectives of the interviewees.

The process of analysis was impacted by the second wave of COVID 19 that had a devastating impact on people throughout the country; the participants weren't able to complete their analysis according to their plans, but they're continuing to reflect on this experience and take steps. One of the steps that they've considered taking is to continue to have these conversations with more community members about education.

So, from this phase of the study, I saw that the participatory action research process contributed to generating insight for SOUL, and also fostered the development of its capacity. The study participants felt that this process strengthened their capacity to gain more in-depth perspectives from different people and to analyze the input of community members in a systematic way. They felt the tool of semi-structured interviews could be used in other areas of learning.

I also saw that the participants had a strong degree of ownership for the process of learning, while appreciating the external support that the PAR process gave to them. They shared that they appreciated the way in which this process was structured and felt it was more organized than how they often approach learning. Although they had been the ones to make all of the decisions along the way, the structure of the research required them to articulate the logic

underlying their decisions at each step and created more space for reflection. They felt this brought strength to the learning process.

The way in which SOUL approaches its work demonstrates certain characteristics of complex systems that the literature indicates are conducive to learning, adaptation and innovation. These include cycles of adaptation, feedback loops and leverage points, system goals, and implicit boundaries. I'll touch on each of these very briefly in the next few slides.

Gunderson and Holling have explained that as complex systems adapt to changes in a dynamic environment, they move through four phases: reorganization, in which they're trying out different arrangements for resources, exploitation, in which they're making use of one or more of these arrangements, conservation, in which arrangements have become well established, and release, in which resources are freed from the existing structures.

When an organization, which is considered a complex system, moves through these phases intentionally and adapts at each point along the way, it fosters resilience within the system. In SOUL, the organization started out in the reorganization phase when it was an informal group of friends with lots of questions and ideas, but not yet any formal programs or structures.

It then entered the exploitation phase as it began offering a training program for teachers of community schools, which it continued to refine as it gained experience. The organization entered the conservation phase as its structures became formalized and its pattern of activity became well-established.

By 2018, the number of schools in rural Bihar had significantly increased and SOUL realized that it was no longer necessary to focus as much attention on promoting the establishment of new community schools. This pushed the organization into the release phase as it freed up resources in order to be able to start searching for new ways to contribute to village education systems in Bihar.

As SOUL has moved through these phases of the adaptive cycle, its work has been influenced by the interactions of many different factors in patterns that are called feedback loops. This figure shows some of the main feedback loops related to SOUL's work and how they are connected to one another.

The text indicates the factors involved in the feedback loops, and the green arrows show the direction of the influence of factors on one another. We'll look at just a couple of these feedback loops as an example. When the founders of SOUL began thinking about forming an organization in 2007, they perceived a lack of schools and teachers in rural areas of Bihar. The lack of schools in rural areas resulted in a high level of demand for schools and prompted SOUL to initiate efforts to promote the establishment of community schools.

Around the same time, the government of India took steps to achieve universal access to primary education in India and began establishing schools throughout the country, including in rural Bihar. As the number of schools in villages in Bihar increased, the demand for the

establishment of schools decreased. This relationship can be seen in the balancing loops of B1 and B2.

So, when SOUL realized that the demand for schools was decreasing, it shifted its focus from the leverage point of efforts to promote community schools, to looking at the quality of education available instead. It started partnering with private and government schools in order to train teachers to improve the quality of education available. Now since the interactions of feedback loops are complex, the goals of a system, or the overall direction in which it tends, do not always reflect the goals of individual elements of the system.

Manohar and Pandit have found that organizations that are strong in achieving their goals of learning and innovation tend to have a high degree of consistency between beliefs, values, and practices, at both the individual and organizational levels. The four themes mentioned in relation to phase one of the study reflect some of the values and beliefs that underlie SOUL's approach to learning. This study demonstrated that there is a high degree of consistency among study participants with regard to these beliefs.

The study also showed that SOUL's procedures and practices reflect these beliefs, and that the organization continues to strive to achieve greater alignment between its central beliefs and its practices. Now, as SOUL has engaged in learning and adaptation, working towards its goals, its knowledge of both the local community, as well as its knowledge about education more broadly, has expanded.

Organizations are typically defined by their structures, which are delineated according to formal roles that exist within them. Tandon and Nair, however, have explained that in addition to structural boundaries, organizations have implicit boundaries that delineate the limits of certain intangible resources such as social connections or knowledge. These boundaries don't necessarily align with structural boundaries.

SOUL provides a clear example of how the boundaries of its knowledge are not confined to the boundaries of its organizational structure. As it has engaged with community members, its local knowledge boundaries have expanded outwards, and as it has connected with other organizations with relevant experience and expertise, its external knowledge boundary has extended outwards.

As members of the community have joined SOUL in informal roles, the local knowledge boundary, has extended inwards, and as members of SOUL have become more knowledgeable about the field of education, its external knowledge boundary has also extended inwards.

So, all of these characteristics show that SOUL is applying systems thinking in its work, even though it may not be conscious of the specific language and concepts that are found in the literature.

This framework brings together SOUL's learning experience with concepts from systems theory. The purpose is to support organizations such as SOUL, with limited resources, to apply a

systems thinking lens to their own learning processes without requiring that they have access to particular language or theories or complicated techniques or tools.

The outer circle in the framework identifies stages in a learning process that's grounded in systems thinking, defining the system and leverage points, designing the intervention, and extending the knowledge boundaries. The inner circle shows decisions that need to be made throughout a learning process. In between are questions that an organization can reflect on to connect its decision-making process to systems level thinking.

Throughout the process of learning, reflection is taking place in response to both internal and external feedback, and the organization can decide as a result of this reflection when it is timely to move to the next stage in the process or when it may be necessary to return to a previous stage.

Now, the scope of the study was restricted by a number of factors, including the short time frame, restrictions on travel due to the pandemic, and the ongoing stress placed on the participants as they adapted to ever-changing circumstances in the face of the pandemic. Further research should be done to build on the insights gained in this study. More studies should be done on organizational learning within small community-based organizations in India to address the gap that exists in the literature.

Longitudinal studies on organizational learning in an Indian context should be done to show how approaches to learning evolve over time, and action research that makes use of the framework that came from this study would help to test its robustness and to further refine it. At the level of policy and practice, Government agencies and large NGOs that support networks of community-based organizations can apply the framework to strengthening learning processes within the organizations and their networks.

Thank you very much for your time and I look forward to your questions. These are references used throughout my presentation.

**Ashutosh Singh:**

Thank you Elisa, beautiful presentation, actually. So, I will open the floor for the other guests to ask her the questions, but before that, I do need to explain all over again: you have 20 to 30 minutes for questioning. I would like everyone to be muted. In case you do have a question, you can use the- I think there is a "wave hand" tab or a sort of button which you can use, and that way you can ask the question. Or, if you can, if you want, you can type it and then I can ask the question on your behalf. But we have to follow a timeline: 20 to 30 minutes. I'll open the floor for others. Meenal has a question for you.

**Meenal Shrivastava:**

Yes, thank you Ashutosh and thank you Elisa for a wonderful presentation. It was really fascinating - it's one of those areas of India where so little field work gets done or gets shared across the world, so I was very interested to see what you had to say. Thank you for doing this work and sharing it with us. I just had a question, and maybe I missed it—

**Sharada Srinivasan:**

Meenal, before you go on with the question could you please introduce yourself? I would request all those who want to ask questions, you are welcome, just introduce yourself so we can contextualize your questions.

**Meenal Shrivastava:**

Okay, yes, thank you. That absolutely makes sense. I'm a professor of Political Economy and Global Studies at Athabasca University and I am originally from India. A lot of my research has overlaps, or rather uses a lot of case studies from India, but I have a political economy lens, so this is slightly different for me.

But in terms of your presentation, my question was, this is obviously a very rich analysis of what's happening on the ground, but what I didn't quite get was if the study also engages with some of the existing knowledge systems, some of the traditional knowledge systems, within that area. Bihar has a very long history of educational systems. I mean, we know the present reality, but there's also a long tradition that is part of that region.

Also, in terms of Nai Talim, I felt that there are clearly some interesting overlaps with Nai Talim and what is happening in Bihar, what could potentially happen in Bihar. So, I was just wondering if your study also engaged with some of those systems, because how the presentation appeared to me was really a look from the outside in. That is why I was wondering if there was also some analysis or engagement with what exists, which is indigenous to that region as well. I hope my question makes sense.

**Elisa Cooper:**

Yeah, it makes a lot of sense, I think it's an excellent question. So for this study specifically, the scope was actually really focused on the organization itself, so I looked very briefly at some contextual information that sort of situated the role of the organization, but my study was focused on what was happening with the organization, so I had to actually cut off my investigation at a certain point.

As I started, as the participants were engaging in these conversations within their own communities about education and the aspirations of the people for the education of their children and what they envisioned, I realized I had to be very clear on where this study ended and where their learning process continued beyond the study.

So, I think these questions about traditional education and other forms of education and systems of knowledge are questions that the organization is thinking about itself and trying to see how can every child have access to an education that allows them to remain connected to their community and contribute to their community in the long term so it's not a form of education that actually drives people away from their communities.

These are questions that the organization is thinking a lot about, and that I'm very interested in, but then I had to limit the scope of this study. So I was focused on how the organization itself was learning to be more effective at working towards those goals of promoting local level education.

**Meenal Shrivastava:**

Can I do a quick follow-up to that, please? So I think that that is totally understandable and very reasonable, but at the same time I feel that if you were to publish this and if you were to take this forward, it would be really useful to think about this also in terms of decolonization that we talk about, right?

This is an opportunity to practice it as well, in some ways to actually engage with existing systems, not in terms of what they are doing, but also in terms of how we are framing our own study to say, "Well this is what we're bringing in, but this is what potentially could also be paid attention to," I suppose. Sorry and I'll shut up now. Thank you.

**Elisa Cooper:**

That's very helpful, thank you so much for that thought.

**Ashutosh Singh:**

Thank you so much for asking the question. Any other question- oh, Caroline, please go ahead, Caroline.

**Caroline Fazli:**

Yeah, hi, I'm Caroline, I live in Indore, Madhya Pradesh and I'm currently a doctoral researcher looking at agroecology movements in India. I was actually wondering, I think related to the previous question, I was wondering, I mean, I think an interesting part of this also would be, Elisa, if you reflect on these theories about complex adaptive systems or complexity theory systems.

Now that you've sort of applied these to analyzing a case from an organization in Bihar, what are your reflections now on those theories. Now, you've sort of applied those theories and analyzing the organization, but an added layer would be reflecting on the theories themselves and seeing like what are sort of some of the blind spots or maybe some of the other dimensions maybe that could be added, or maybe sort of are not appropriate to the this context, or you

know things like that would be interesting. I was just wondering if you had any thoughts on that already.

**Elisa Cooper:**

Yeah, so at different stages in the process, I brought in different concepts and discarded different concepts and so in the end, I think these four characteristics that I shared were characteristics of complex systems that I had seen in the literature that seemed to really be reflected in SOUL's work.

So the idea of implicit boundaries is based on a study carried out by Tandon and Nair in India, but looking at social enterprises, so it's a little bit of a different organizational context, but a somewhat similar cultural context. And then there's a lot of a lot of literature on complex systems that's based on large organizations, usually private or public in a western context, and I found some of those concepts assume certain relationships of hierarchy and a certain structure of an organization and a certain mode of functioning that really didn't seem very relevant to SOUL.

I can't really say whether they would be relevant to other Indian organizations. I'm sure there would be some Indian organizations that would find some ideas to be relevant, but these four were ones that, just as we were engaging in these conversations together and SOUL was sharing its own reflections and its own ideas about knowledge and about learning and about adaptation, these ideas were ones that that I just felt resonated a lot.

But then the extent to which they would be helpful for an organization to draw in explicitly, I'm not so sure, because I saw that SOUL was actually very systematic in the way it was approaching learning without necessarily drawing on the idea of adaptive cycles. But I feel like these concepts maybe can assist us in describing what is already happening in organizations that do have strong processes of learning in place.

And I think the hope of the framework was that these concepts could be captured implicitly in a way that's accessible to a range of organizations with a range of human and financial resources without necessarily having to do specific training, provide access to specific techniques or tools or concepts.

**Ashutosh Singh:**

Thank you, Elisa. Dr. Sharada, you have a question?

**Sharada Srinivasan:**

Thanks, Ashutosh. Elisa, wonderful presentation and I think I heard you speak at your defence, and then now. I think it's a very good piece of research and I echo Meenal's comment that we need to hear a lot more of this rich research that's being done in states like Bihar, so thank you.

Now one of the questions that often comes up when you're looking at a little tiny piece in this cosmos of NGOs or community-based organizations in Bihar, India, education is the question of scaling up and generalizing your findings, right? I want you to reflect and talk a little bit around what your study means for other NGOs, community-based organization in Bihar itself.

So we are not even changing the context right? In rural Bihar, who are involved in similar work service providing education and so on and so forth. So what are the findings or what is the main takeaway for them beyond SOUL. I mean, we can clearly see what the follow-up is and what they will do with your findings, but what is it that you are going to say to other NGOs in rural Bihar who are involved in similar work? Thanks.

**Elisa Cooper:**

So, I think there's two things that come to mind. One is just the approach that SOUL takes to learning I think was really interesting to observe where it's not focused on necessarily delivering a program in a particular form, but it has clarity about a long-term vision for contributing to the intellectual, social, and spiritual development of young people in Bihar and fostering the development of education systems that do that.

And it sees itself as one player in a large ecosystem of organizations, individuals, communities that are contributing to this. So it, in its approach, it's not attached to achieving something particular on its own, but it's focused on how it can work towards these goals in a complex setting and that allows it to evolve and adapt its approach over time.

I think just the approach that it takes to learning the way it thinks about, the way it conceptualizes knowledge as being. It talked a lot, or the study participants talked a lot about the community being a source of knowledge and the relationships that it builds with the community informing its practice. I think some of those particular characteristics and approaches can be helpful for an organization in any setting that especially working with long-term complex processes.

But I think something else that that stood out to me that I didn't actually address in my study that I'd be interested in looking into more is the relationship between networks of organizations. So something that was really apparent was that part of the strength of SOUL's efforts is because it's connected to other organizations throughout India and actually in other parts of the world that are trying to learn about these same questions or similar questions.

Sharing knowledge within that network and sharing experience has actually enabled it to maybe accelerate its process of learning and identify possibilities and also share its knowledge more broadly. So I think beyond the efforts of particular organizations—and I think this is very relevant in India and in Bihar because there's so many organizations that are so small and each one is going to have very limited resources and will maybe have a very profound knowledge of the local context in which it's working, but then have limited scope to go far beyond that—but I think as organizations strengthen relationships with one another and as networks of

organizations are fostered, then it allows for scaling up insights and knowledge in a way that other organizations can channel them and apply those insights in a way that's locally relevant and as needed, rather than just scaling up in a way that replicates exactly the same thing from one community to the next.

But that's something I want to look into more and I've actually thought about that for potential further studies. Looking at sort of networks of organizations and how scale can be achieved without compromising the integrity and the local responsiveness of programs and efforts.

**Sharada Srinivasan:**

Thanks. A follow-up question, or a related question: what would you say are your findings in terms of the sort of research that universities and researchers in India are working on, similar issues they need to be focusing on?

**Elisa Cooper:**

I think actually the role of community-based organizations has often been overlooked, especially these small organizations, it's often been overlooked in scholarship. So in the context of organizational learning in India and outside of India, most of it, as I mentioned earlier, seems to be in the public and private sectors and with relatively large organizations, although there's an emerging body of literature in India based on social enterprises which tend to be smaller, so that's encouraging to see.

But I still found not very much about community-based organizations, especially very small ones, so I think that's one area to look at is what role these organizations are already playing in the education field and how do we understand that and how do we tap into that.

And I think there's been a lot of research done that shows very clearly the challenges with learning outcomes in the prevalent education system, so I think there's been interesting insights gained into how to address those challenges and interesting thoughts shared about what's needed and what problems and barriers exist.

But then I think there's a lot of scope for searching for alternative systems of education that can be built up to complement or reinforce the more prevalent education systems and, perhaps as Meenal was mentioning, tapping into some historical education systems that have existed as well.

**Sharada Srinivasan:**

Thanks Elisa.

**Ashutosh Singh:**

Thank you Sharada for asking the question. Deep Jyoti you can ask a question now.

## Deep Jyoti Sonu Brahma:

Yeah, hi Elisa, I'm Deep Jyoti. I'm based out of the northeast of India, I am founder of an organization called Farm to Food Foundation. We are into farming education in schools, we have been working with government of Assam as well as government of India on implementing farm education inside school spaces.

So my question arises from my own experience. I'm not so much of an academic person, I'm more of, you know, a grassroot practitioner, so my question arises from the fact that what I have seen in the northeast, particularly in the state of Assam we have seen many schools which were set up by community members themselves has survived this pandemic time because the teachers are from the community, and it's the community people who initiated that school.

So there is a lot of relationship and strong bonding with the community, and therefore the children are also now, when the school lockdown has finally gone and the school has opened up, the children are coming back into the school. These schools are finding children back in the school, but many of the government-run schools and many of these community schools which were now adopted by the government, and now they have all the government paid staffs, they are losing out on students.

The challenge is that, what started off as a social institute has remained an institute rather than being a social institute so much. I am still surprised to see that schools are not called community-based institute. In fact, there should be community-based institute.

Now, you mentioned that SOUL started off in that part where they explored the idea of community-based institutes, community-based schools, and then slowly when government started opening up more schools, they shifted their attention on to the other government established schools.

I'm sure since you have spent so much time with SOUL on understanding this system, and a wonderful presentation by the way, it really opened my mind as well on the systems and approaches. So my question is that, Elisa, what has been their experience from supporting some the community-based institutes, to now supporting some of the government-run schools? What is the difference they see? Is it better? It of course it has better resources, but does it actually work? That's my question. I mean, what has been the experience of SOUL?

## Elisa Cooper:

It's a very interesting question. I think Sandeep could speak to this more than me as he works with SOUL, but I'll just share what I understand and if Sandeep wants to jump in later then he can feel free. But yeah, so just on the first point about the pandemic, SOUL found exactly the same thing.

Actually, right when schools were locking down initially in 2020 SOUL came together with the teachers of the community schools and asked, "What can we do? Children need education, so what do we do?" And the teachers said, "Okay, there are these few children that live near me," and another teacher said, "These children live near me," and they organized themselves to provide education.

Of course it was a in a bit more of an informal way than what they had been providing before, but they organized themselves to provide classes for children in their localities at a hyper local level. They were already offering at a community level but, then it became at the level of a compound or a street. So that was something that I think shows the agility of community-based efforts when you're from the community. You can just respond very quickly based on your understanding of the local reality.

In addition to that there were a number of youth who were out of school who had achieved a certain level of education, and SOUL started working with them to offer informal tutorial classes for children and their families and nearby, so they were working with a handful of community schools in the state before.

But during the pandemic, this expanded to 150 informal classes and tutorial classes, which of course were not as structured and systematic as the community schools were, but were offering some form of education and the number of children they were connecting with actually grew during the pandemic, because there was so much demand. So that that's one piece of what you shared, a response to one piece of what you shared.

But then in terms of working with government and private schools, I think what SOUL has tried to do is to look at the community as a whole and try to see how every institution, individual, and the community as a body can collaborate together to contribute to advances in education at the community level. Seeing every teacher, whether they work in a private school, a government school, or a community school as a potential protagonist of the development of education within the community and to learn how to build relationships that help them see possibilities.

One thing that they shared was, in the beginning, when they started working with private and government schools, teachers thought it was impossible, for instance, to maintain discipline without yelling at children or without hitting them. Or there were certain things they felt like children just couldn't learn, like it was too hard for them to learn certain things.

But then, through seeing examples of some teachers who were very open and made efforts and were accompanied by SOUL to put in place different practices, more and more teachers started seeing possibilities, and it's something I didn't have a chance to highlight on the diagram of the feedback loops, but this actually enhanced the vision of the teachers of what education could provide and changed the vision of the parents as well, as to what education could provide and led to an increase in demand for these capacity development programs for teachers in the community and strengthened community support.

So I think, like SOUL's experience of course is small, it's a small organization, but I think the experience it has had demonstrates that any, at the local level, any organization or institution can become, really, a protagonist of social transformation through these collaborations and conversations that take place, that help to build vision, and help to build this sense of a community working together for the progress of the children and the younger generations.

Ashutosh Singh:

Thank you, Elisa. Now, as a Bihari, I have a question for you. With respect to when I was going through your presentation, when you were doing this, the villages that were selected were selected by you or the institution, those were selected by SOUL?

Elisa Cooper:

Those were selected by SOUL.

Ashutosh Singh:

And what was the criteria for them to choose those villages?

Elisa Cooper:

So these were two villages where SOUL had been working with the community for several years and where each of them had established a community school that had been sustained for some time and there was ongoing conversation about community schools. SOUL had also recently formed these teams of youth in these two villages in order to support the process of learning about local level education at the grassroots. Because they already had these sort of informal structures in place to strengthen processes of learning they felt it was natural - these were natural villages to start with.

Ashutosh Singh:

Okay because what I found interesting was that they all belonged to one specific district – Khagaria.

Elisa Cooper:

No, not all of them are in Khagaria.

Ashutosh Singh:

Yeah, but the majority of them were.

Elisa Cooper:

Some also in the Bihar Sharif area, and some closer to Patna.

## Ashutosh Singh:

The reason I'm asking this question is because the social fabric of Bihar is very dynamic and it's very different. I have lived there almost the better part of my life, and being from a village myself, I do know that whenever these types of institutions pop up, let's say if an NGO comes in and then they're trying to set up a community-based education system sustainability becomes a very important factor; not all of them survive.

I, myself, as an engineer, have been involved in a lot of capacity building projects in the past during my PhD and afterwards also. Even from here, I've been trying to do a lot of those work. But my capacity development, or my capacity building, is more about developing the community cooperative systems where they can actually process their food crops or things like that, so that they can earn more money, their livelihood improves.

And the idea is that when once their livelihood improves, more and more opportunity pops up for the students to go to school because now they can afford the schools. The thing that I didn't understand, and if you may help me understand that, would be when you're using the system dynamic model to explain all of those relations between the key points, I'm going back to the slide that you used where you had the Parivartan the Siksha and all of them were the ones which were being more focused.

How does this community, the work that is being done by SOUL, and the work that you did with them, how is it letting the community build the education at different levels? What I'm trying to say is, at the primary, the secondary, and then the later.

## Elisa Cooper:

SOUL works with youth within communities. And I should say the staff of SOUL actually are from these communities as well, SOUL has an office based in Patna, but only two of its staff actually live in Patna, the rest of the staff live in villages where it's carrying out its work, and they work there, so they're members of the communities as well.

But SOUL's focused on engaging youth in in programs to learn about strengthening education and part of their role that they play is to help youth envision a path for themselves where they could work towards a sustainable livelihood that's based in their community and allows them to contribute to the development of education in their community.

So they provide support for these youth in developing capacity to start and sustain schools or to establish or strengthen the quality of tutorial classes that they're offering. They've also recently, and over the past year and a half or so, started carrying out a program, a capacity development program, for youth that helps them think about various processes of community life such as education, health, agriculture, environmental conservation, and to think about how they can contribute to strengthening these processes of community life regardless of what particular career they're pursuing.

So the question about sustainability, I think is just this long-term commitment to being in the communities where it's working, rather than a commitment to a particular form of effort being committed to this goal is what contributes to sustainability of efforts over time. There have been many experiences, as I mentioned, with schools starting and stopping and SOUL having to learn about how to approach its work in a way that does become more and more sustainable. I think that's why learning is so crucial in this context.

But in terms of the different levels of education, I think that SOUL's strategically focused on working with youth as resources who have the potential to contribute to education over the long term at multiple levels.

### Ashutosh Singh:

Okay, perfect, just a very quick follow-up question. My own experience, the way the fabric of the social system is interwoven Bihar is based on the caste system, villages are divided on the caste system. My own village, I know that there is one pocket where all the Rajputs would be staying, and then there is one pocket all the Dalits would be staying and there is one pocket where other people would be staying.

As an engineer when I, or my family for example, pretty much everybody was in education and has a professional background. We tried to, let's say, establish a biogas current. I'm just giving a little bit of a background, and when we asked the community, "Is there feed for the biogas plant? We would need the raw materials," and everybody has cattles and organics which they can throw in.

The issue was that a person who had four cows, he said, "I need two pipelines because I am providing for four cows," and one guy who had one cow, he was like, "Okay I can only get one pack," and those who didn't have any cow, they were providing the organics, they will not get it. They were trying to divide the system in the terms of how much they were putting in into the system.

What I'm trying to state here, is that the whole system works on a very divisive deficit. Whatever way you can, it's divided in one way or another. How does this community-based learning system work then? Because the communities are different, they're divided. How is it sustainable? How is it even successful? How will it even be successful?

### Elisa Cooper:

I think that's a really important question. I think that relates to one point I just mentioned very briefly at the beginning about how SOUL is a Baha'i inspired organization, and really at the heart of that, that means that SOUL believes in the principle of the oneness of humanity and that principle guides its work.

I think something that came out of the interviews in the focus group discussion is the idea of the coherence between the spiritual and material dimensions of progress, and I think the way that's reflected in SOUL's work is that it engages actively in these conversations about these spiritual principles of the oneness of humanity and the harmony of people from all backgrounds and promoting unity.

And it's as these conversations advance and barriers start to come down between people that then the potential for them to work together to do something like establish a school becomes greater, and so SOUL gives a lot of attention to fostering the spiritual harmony of people within the community while also identifying opportunities to contribute to social progress and seeing those as actually inextricably bound to one another.

**Ashutosh Singh:**

Okay. I wish them all the best for the future, actually. Thank you, Elisa. Anybody else has a question, we still have maybe a question. We can take one question three minutes long if somebody has a question. If not, I'm not seeing anyone asking, what I would like to do is thank you, Elisa for giving the presentation. It was an amazing presentation, and I hope that you succeed in whatever you're doing right now.

I would like to invite all the audience to visit our CIRCLE website, I have put up the link in the chat, and also to sign up for the CIRCLE email list by sending an email, I provided that email also. The next presentation will be, or the next event is on November 3rd at 11 a.m. EST, and that will be documenting the stories of young girls in poverty, Bangla Surf Girls, and conversation with Lalita Krishna, who is also the producer of the documentary film Bangla Surf Girls. So, I hope to see you all on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. Again, thank you Elisa, and thank you everyone.

[End of transcript]