SOCIETAL PLATFORM

A Systemic Method to Resolve

Complex Societal Challenges

Background

Our efforts to find solutions to deep-rooted and fundamental societal issues such as education, healthcare, financial inclusion, water, sanitation and sustainable livelihoods seem to follow a pattern. We identify problems, develop solutions, run pilots, measure impact, and then muster resources to replicate and scale. We also carry a deep realization that our societal challenges are very large, very complex and tend to grow much faster than our individual ability to solve them.

The traditional way of doing things have their own pace and are resource intensive. They involve numerous iterations and often face resistance when trying to make them work for diverse local contexts. This way of solving societal challenges does benefit local communities but runs the risk of losing relevance with rapid changes in context. The collective impact of such projects often falls short on delivering outcomes at scale.

Efforts at breaking away from the existing equilibrium, one project at a time, seem to deliver limited success. Challenged by the diversity and scale of issues, we often wonder...

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How do we match the simultaneous need for speed, scale and sustainability? How do we solve complex issues in a dynamic environment? How do we solve specific problems yet respond to diversity?

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We must urgently recognise that such societal problems affect millions of people, and the real underlying challenge is in scaling up innovative solutions to serve them all. Faced with the enormity of the challenge, our current paradigm of working holds us back rather than propelling us to new ways of doing things, of reaching a better, more desirable equilibrium. These challenges are society's challenges, and all of us - samaaj (society), sarkaar (state) and bazaar (market) must get involved in developing the solutions.

Meanwhile, organisations working on our most complex problems still suffer from limited access to scarce, but critical, resources such as expertise, data and technology, forcing them to adopt narrow pathways for progress that often fail. The social sector also tends to work in silos, with their own policies, systems and objectives making it difficult for samaaj, sarkaar and bazaar to work collectively. It's hard to scale such incremental approaches, given the incredible diversity in the socio-political and economic contexts, not to mention the diverse environmental and local demographic conditions. As a result, society is served by a limited, predetermined set of solutions, not always appropriate for the context.

Today, undoubtedly, we are experiencing a digital dividend across the world. This presents a unique opportunity to build digital platforms that support open, inclusive and contextual innovation, that focus on hard developmental problems and address traditional hierarchies and information imbalances. How do we, therefore, use this capability to create spaces for relevant, timely and scalable solutions? How can these spaces help citizens engage and exercise their choices relevantly and efficiently? Rather than reinventing the wheel a million times, how can we co-create, customize and scale the wheels over and over?

Platform Thinking

A look at the evolution of commercial platforms offers an emerging sense of possibility. The internet has enabled scores of digital innovations that have improved our everyday lives. The most effective are those that use a digital infrastructure based on the idea of an interaction platform. Here a multitude of social information from networked interactions and variety of other sources are channelled through a platform, and then offered through a set of applications to the user.

How does this happen? Have platforms been as useful as we imagine them to be? Think of, for example, something we take for granted today: accurate and real time location anywhere in the world. Prior to the advent of a public Global Positioning System (GPS), this was a scarce and expensive resource. When it was dedicated as a public good in the 1980s, it instantly provided an inexpensive, easy, accurate, context-agnostic and real-time geo-location to anyone with a receiver.

This foundation enabled what eventually became platforms like Google Maps; and the two together gave us ubiquitous GPS based navigation. This has unlocked applications such as Ola, AirBnB, Swiggy and Dunzo creating new opportunities and choice for us as consumers. They are classic disruptive innovations, that improve the way we navigate, the way we commute, how we choose where to stay and what to eat. They make our lives more efficient, help us make better informed choices, while creating spaces that engage us, improve our relevance and reinforce consumer agency. And before we know it, we can't do without any of these applications. They have seamlessly integrated into our behaviour.

An example of such a platform based model in the societal context is Aadhaar, which is built on a minimalist technical architecture. Aadhaar was built with a belief that breakthrough technology can solve the societal problem of establishing unique identity for a billion people in a developing nation. Aadhaar, adopted by 1.18 Billion individuals, has now scaled to be an innovation platform for public, private and social enterprises. It has fostered many new solutions to diverse societal problems and is the foundational ID for multiple initiatives across different sectors spanning India. The learnings from this journey have been curated so that they can be applied in the context of various development sectors.

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Taking inspiration from the sheer potential that digital platforms offer, are there societal parallels that can use these very innovations to create spaces for citizens to bring about societal change?

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Societal Platforms

Societal Platforms are one of many ways forward. They are imagined as a public good aimed at extending citizen services across our demographics and facilitating meaningful collaboration, amplified by technology.

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Societal Platforms are built on elegant yet light digital infrastructure, they create spaces for co-creation and participation by all entities with a stake in positive change – from state institutions and entrepreneurs to non-profits or individual citizens.

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Developed with the right design principles and methods, Societal Platforms present a significant opportunity to reimagine societal transformation. The aim is to answer, for a specific mission: How might we design and develop Societal Platforms, as public goods, that enable open innovation for societal development? How can such a societal infrastructure amplify the benefits of societal initiatives across all segments of our society? How can a digital infrastructure support rapid evolution and adoption of innovations in multiple sectors such as education, healthcare, and financial inclusion? How can Societal Platforms help the network of societal actors move

from their existing ineffective equilibrium to the desired one?

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While Societal Platforms are not an answer to every challenge, they may induce a shift from the existing equilibrium by significantly improving access, relevance and affordability of diverse solutions.

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They leverage a shared digital infrastructure, that enables open and affordable access to scarce resources as public goods. They enable co-creation spaces, so that innovators leverage these scarce resources and develop context specific solutions. They engage an open network of execution partners (public, private, social) that can deliver these solutions viably.

Unlike a commercial platform that is a private venture, a Societal Platform is built as a public good. Instead of delivering returns to its owners and promoters, it builds value for society as a whole. A Societal Platform is not built to capture the market by securing scarce resources for private profit, but, in fact, opens them up to all, as a public good. Rather than creating dependency, it encourages everyone to participate, share, co-create, transform, and iterate.

Ekstep: An Illustration

EkStep (community.ekstep.in) is such a Societal Platform to address educational challenges in India. A not-for-profit initiative, EkStep has created a learner centric, technology based Societal Platform to improve applied literacy and numeracy for 200 million+ children in five years.

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EkStep connects various innovations isolated in siloes and engages all the key actors in the education ecosystem (public, private or social) through collaboration, innovation co-creation and network effects.

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EkStep has developed the digital infrastructure which enables the creation of multiple open learning platforms for diverse use cases. This open and free infrastructure is enabling education ecosystems to create solutions ranging from in-class resources, learning and training content, assessment aids, profile of teachers and learners, rewards and recognition, interactions and community management among others.

Education content and solutions are being developed in a wide range of formats from static documents and presentations to videos and interactive lessons. EkStep is being used to build contextualised solutions

for under-resourced communities as it also supports offline use cases across a large variety of languages. These solutions enable anytime, anywhere learning for teachers and learners, across age and proficiency in classrooms, homes, and communities.

EkStep's efforts are creating a network effect that is amplifying the education ecosystem in India and increasing the agency for teachers and learners. Leveraging Sunbird, an open source platform (sunbird.org) abstracted from the EkStep digital infrastructure, Government of India recently launched Diksha (diksha.gov.in), a central digital infrastructure, for training more than 10 million teachers in India. More than 30 public and private organizations have come together to co-create solutions with this national effort.

The Critical Mindsets

The central idea of Societal Platforms is to design, in today's well-connected world, a societal infrastructure that enables everyone to do what he or she does best, in a unified, but not uniform, way.

A platform, where everyone can discover other peoples' innovations, where everyone can add to the value chain based on what is needed in the sector. Where everyone gets to do what they want. An approach to explore the various development sectors, unpack the true problems that are context independent and build a shared digital infrastructure using which anyone can create context specific solutions. This allows diverse stakeholders to discover each other and collaborate seamlessly.

Through the illustration of EkStep, it is evident that resolving large scale complex problems needs different mindsets rather than one of gradual evolution.

It is not about solving one problem at a time, rather we need to create a shared infrastructure that can support 100s of solutions for 100s of problems in a connected network.

It is not about creating more and better siloes, rather we need to create nimble and open environments that foster innovation co-creation and collaboration. It is not about creating the perfect comprehensive monolithic solutions, rather we need to develop minimalistic responses and bundle them with context and complexity closer to implementation. It is not about capturing all the data in the platform and using it to our advantage, rather we need to use the data in the platform to build better solutions, provide more choice, and empower the people it aims to serve.

Role of System Leaders

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Considering the scope and scale of societal challenges that we need to address, building a Societal Platform needs deep talent and systems oriented leaders who can patiently orchestrate the transformation over a long period of time.

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Playing the role of a System Leader is difficult but necessary for the success of the mission.

At the onset, System Leaders needs to proactively infuse extreme risk capital. Given the innovation start-up and emergent nature of the programme, it is evident and only philanthropists or development partners, with patient capital, who are willing to take the risks and allow for pivots, can stay the course. As the transformation is systemic, any one individual cannot control and drive the ecosystem. System Leaders have to inspire distributed leadership, enable a wide array of leaders from diverse backgrounds (state, market and social), align diverse objectives and incentives and facilitate complex interactions.

Most importantly, the System Leader has to ensure that the entire program is ideology agnostic. The data and evidence of success has to be generated from the platform and analysed to decide what is working and what is not to make course corrections. This approach is highly evidence based rather than the opinion of a few.

Developing such a scalable and state-of-the art infrastructure requires deep technology and design skills. Typically, such skills are assimilated into commercial ventures. It is difficult to develop the incentive structures and other motivational factors required to unlock the talent locked up in the private sector.

Finally, the most complex task is that of managing sustained ownership of the entire program, across the years, and as the key leaders in the ecosystem transition from their roles. Stage by stage, as the program evolves, the System Leader needs to understand the most suitable form of ownership and ensure that the transitions are smooth while retaining the intent and mission of the program.

It is important for us to reflect how we can play a pivotal role in enabling such large scale societal transformations. Such platforms require the support of visionary zeal, which, once sparked, may improve lives at population scale.

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