LEADERSHIP INSPIRED

Social Impactors for India

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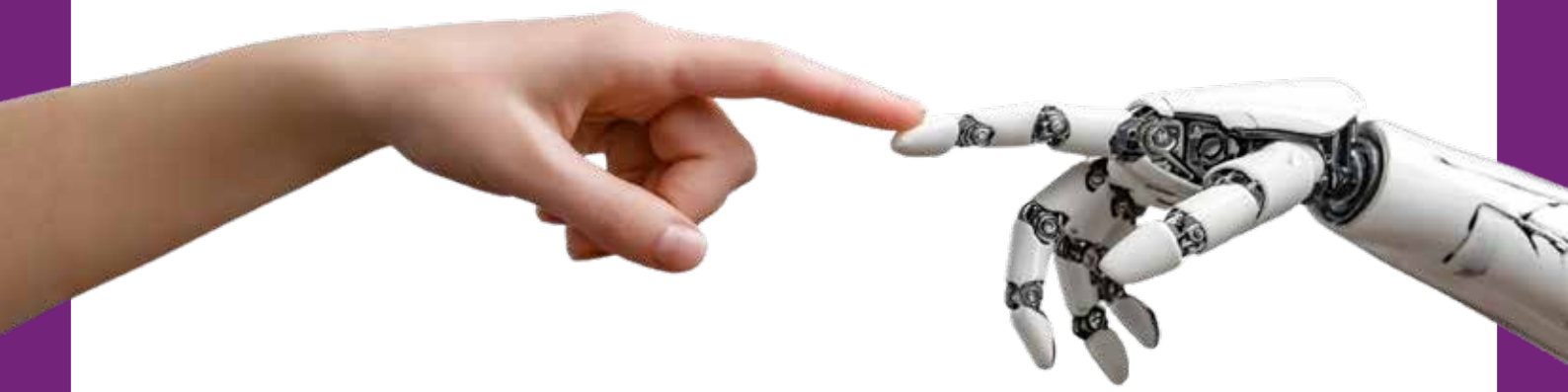

COVER STORY

Reimagining Value and Impact in the Social Sector

A Digital Shift

Shankar Maruwada & Rekha Koita

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Foreword

Anu Prasad
Founder-CEO, ILSS

This edition of *Leadership Inspired* invites reflection on how the social sector is rethinking not just its strategies, but its ways of working. Across organisations, digital tools are now deeply embedded in everyday operations. From data systems and dashboards to communication platforms, workflow systems and AI tools, digital has become inseparable from how work gets done. Yet for many leaders, digital still sits at the periphery of leadership conversations, viewed as a technical or operational concern rather than a core organisational responsibility.

Over the years, my own learning has been shaped by close engagement with social sector leaders navigating scale, complexity, and constant change. What has become increasingly clear is that digital transformation is rarely about technology alone. It is about people, decision-making, organisational culture, and the ability to adapt with intention. Technology can enable change, but leadership determines whether that change is meaningful and sustainable. As the sector grows in ambition and reach, the challenges leaders face have also evolved. Distributed teams, heightened accountability, data-driven decision-making, and increasing expectations from funders and communities demand new capabilities. In this context, digital systems are no longer optional enablers. They are essential to building resilience, strengthening trust, and supporting learning across organisations.

At the same time, transformation can feel unsettling. It challenges long-held ways of working and exposes capacity gaps that leaders may not always feel equipped to address. This is why safe spaces for reflection, experimentation, and shared learning matter deeply. When leaders are able to engage with digital questions without fear of judgement, they are more willing to rethink systems, test new approaches, and course-correct along the way.

This edition encourages leaders to view digital transformation not as a one-time initiative, but as an ongoing leadership practice. One rooted in curiosity, humility, and long-term responsibility. Strengthening the social sector for the future will require us to place digital squarely where it belongs: within the everyday work of leadership. LI

The Editorial

Anirban Chaudhury,
Head, Koita Centre for Digital Transformation, ILSS

As the social sector navigates growing complexity in an era shaped by digital technologies and AI, one reality is increasingly clear: today's challenges cannot be solved by technology alone. They demand a fundamental rethinking of leadership — how strategy is shaped, evidence embedded in decisions, and organisations built to continuously learn and adapt.

Digital transformation in nonprofits is often approached as an operational upgrade. Platforms are introduced, data systems implemented, processes digitised. Yet, underlying ways of working often remain unchanged. The result: underutilised and costly systems, frustrated teams, and leadership disconnected from the very tools meant to empower them.

At ILSS, we have repeatedly witnessed that transformation — digital or otherwise — is fundamentally a leadership journey. Technology enables efficiency, but sustained change takes root only when leaders make strategy inclusive, democratise learning and distribute authority with intention. As nonprofits scale, leaders navigate distributed teams, linguistic diversity, uneven digital literacy, evolving regulations, and rising accountability expectations. Systems that enable shared ownership, visible decision-making, and responsible data use become essential.

This edition examines how leadership intent shapes digital transformation in practice. The cover story challenges organisations to reimagine value chains rather than simply digitise existing practices. The featured case studies span diverse contexts and show us how impact is amplified when leaders stay rooted in purpose, rethink roles, workflows, and accountability and not treat technology as a standalone solution.

We also explore how data, when thoughtfully integrated, moves beyond compliance reporting to actively inform strategy and program design. As organisations grow, ethical decision-making becomes critical, requiring leaders to balance innovation with responsibility. We further look at how patient capital helps unlock value, drive innovation with confidence and clarity and the roles individual and institutional philanthropy can play in driving greater collaboration across the sector.

Change of this nature brings discomfort. It challenges entrenched assumptions and exposes gaps in skills and confidence. This discomfort is not failure; it signals an organisation encountering the limits of older models and finding opportunity to evolve.

This edition invites leaders across organisations, philanthropy, CSR, and technology to reflect on what the evolving digital and AI landscape demands and why digital transformation should be inclusive, responsible, and firmly centred on beneficiaries. Sustainable social impact emerges not from isolated digital interventions, but from institutionalised systems designed to learn, adapt, and remain anchored to purpose. LI

COVER STORY

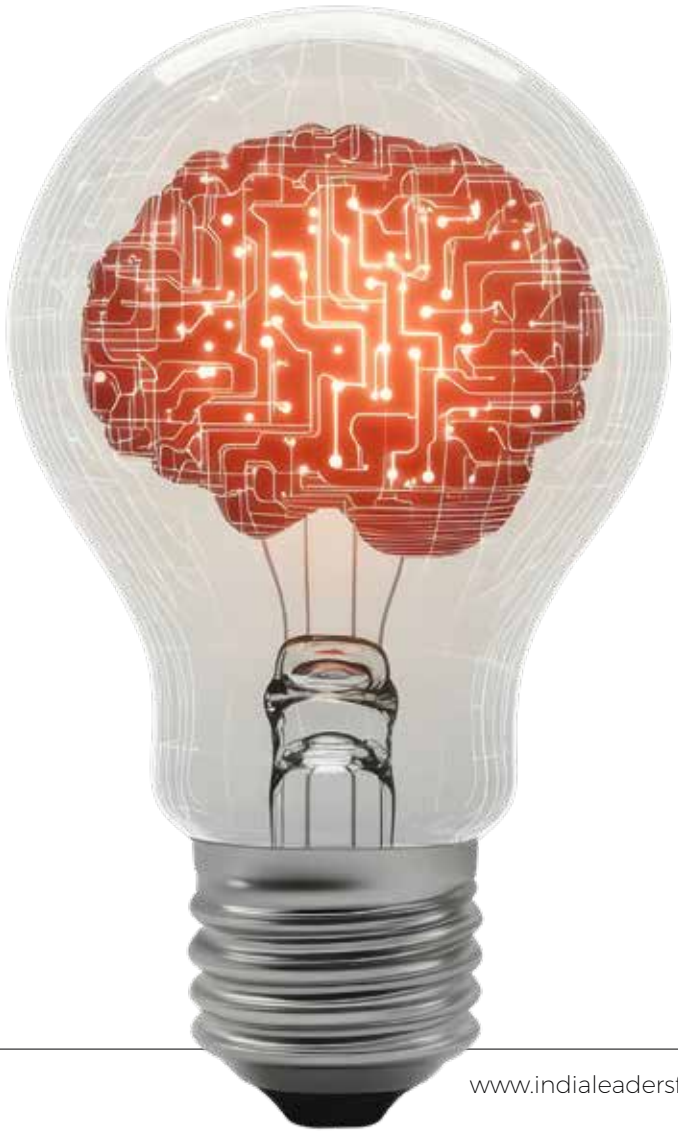
Reimagining Value and Impact in the Social Sector

A Digital Shift

Shankar Maruwada & Rekha Koita

In 1879, when the electric light bulb was first demonstrated by the prolific and evolutionary inventor Thomas Edison, the world did not immediately grasp the magnitude of the shift. It was not merely a better candle or just another tool for brighter illumination, but it was the introduction of the transformative power of electricity that would eventually reorganise society, industry, and daily life.

Today, the social impact sector stands at a similar juncture. We often view technology as a 'better candle' and think of it as a way to digitise a paper register or automate a manual report. However, genuine Digital Transformation (DT) is not fundamentally about tools, software, or automation. It is a profound shift in how organisations reimagine value, reorganise their models, and align their processes with their purpose.



Drawing on our experiences with population-scale platforms like Aadhaar and UPI, as well as deep implementation work with nonprofits, this article outlines why the sector must move beyond 'tech-first' thinking and adopt an unlearning-and-relearning mindset.

The Difficulty of Transformation: A Mindset of Vulnerability

Before diving into frameworks, we must address the hardest part of this journey: the shift in mindset. Transformation is not just a technical upgrade; it is a psychological one. As leaders, we often cling to what made us successful. Real transformation requires unlearning old habits, which is fundamentally an act of vulnerability. It involves being comfortable with discomfort. Leaders must accept that the way they have delivered impact for decades might need to be dismantled to remain relevant in a digital age.

Cover Story

Rekha Koita,
Co-founder & Director,
Koita Foundation

Shankar Maruwada,
Co-Founder & CEO,
EkStep Foundation

Beyond the Tools: The Intellectual Structure of Transformation
To navigate this shift, we must first dismantle the terminology that often confuses the sector. There is a distinct hierarchy in how we engage with technology, and understanding this is crucial for leadership.

Defining the Shift: The Bread Analogy
Consider the simple act of buying bread to understand the three layers of digital change:

- **Digitisation:** This is converting the physical to the digital. If a shopkeeper scans a barcode instead of writing the price in a ledger, that is digitisation. It converts atoms to bits, but the process remains largely the same.

- **Digitalisation:** This involves improving existing processes using digital tools. If you order bread via an app instead of walking to the shop, you have digitalised the purchase. It offers convenience and efficiency, but the fundamental value proposition, that of selling a loaf of bread, has not changed.

- **Digital Transformation:** This is where reimagination occurs. If the bakery uses data to understand your consumption patterns and offers a bread subscription service and delivers fresh loaves to your doorstep, the business model has transformed. Or, perhaps they launch online baking classes to engage a community of home bakers. Here, the organisation is no longer just selling a product; it is selling an experience and a service model that was previously impossible.

The Framework: Purpose—Organisation—Technology
The most common error social purpose organisations (SPOs) make is starting with the tool. Leaders often ask, 'How can we use AI?' or 'Which software should we buy?'

A different approach is what is needed: The Purpose—Organisation—Technology triangle.

Purpose: The journey must begin here. What is the specific capability we are trying to improve?
Organisation: How are we organised to deliver that purpose? Do we have the capabilities, beyond just the

positions or hierarchy, to execute this vision?
Technology: Only once the purpose and organisational capabilities are defined should technology enter the conversation as an enabler.

Rethinking the Value Chain

Transformation requires us to analyse our value chain, which is the set of activities that deliver value to the beneficiary.

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Consider the evolution of Aadhaar. When the project began, initial proposals suggested replicating the Election Commission model: thousands of staff and offices across India. This would have been a linear scaling of an existing model. Instead, the leadership reimagined the value chain. They separated the question 'Who are you?' (Identity) from 'Do you deserve this benefit?' (Entitlement).

By focusing solely on creating a unique digital identity that other institutions could build upon, Aadhaar became a foundation for transformation, enabling everything from Direct Benefit Transfers to the UPI ecosystem. This was not a 'better identity' document; it was a fundamental reimagining of how a state interacts with its citizens.

How Reimagining Value Can Help SPOs
Why go through this difficult process of reimagining the value chain? Because the opportunities for SPOs go far beyond simple efficiency. There are three specific areas where digital shifts the paradigm.

- **Early Warning Systems:** Instead of waiting for an annual report to find out a program failed, digital systems provide real-time alerts. If a child's weight drops, the system flags it immediately, allowing for course correction before it's too late.
- **Accountability and Governance:** Technology improves transparency. The system, for example, can reveal whether the field coordinators are actually visiting the field. This transparency ensures resources actually reach beneficiaries.
- **Ease of Telling the Story:** Donors need more than anecdotes; they need hard facts. Data allows you to tell a convincing story of impact and efficacy, which is critical for fundraising.

From Theory to Practice: The Five Pillars of Execution
While the strategic mindset is vital, the 'how' of transformation is where the rubber hits the road. For many SPOs, the reality is messy. Field workers are often burdened with data entry rather than counselling, teams plan visits based on intuition rather than insight, and programs struggle to scale because information is trapped in spreadsheets and notebooks.

To bridge the gap between high-level strategy and on-ground reality, the following five pillars of the digital transformation journey are to be considered:

- **Designing for DT:** Defining the problem with a magnifying glass.
- **Systems and Processes:** Re-engineering workflows rather than automating inefficiencies.
- **Applications and Building:** Selecting the right partners and building modular solutions.
- **Implementation and Rollout:** Managing the 'go-live' and ensuring stability.
- **Capacity Building:** Training and driving adoption.

The FMCH Experience: A Case in Point
The experience of the Foundation for Mother and Child Health (FMCH) offers a powerful illustration of these pillars in action.
FMCH works to combat malnutrition and improve maternal health. Their model relies on field workers visiting families to provide counselling. Initially, the problem appeared to be data management. Workers were spending too much time filling out physical registers or Excel sheets.

However, a deeper diagnostic revealed that the core challenge was not just data entry; indeed, it was decision-making.

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EkStep Foundation

Image source: FMCH Website

The Planning Problem: A field worker manages 200 families. How do they decide whom to visit today? Often, they would visit those geographically closest, potentially missing a high-risk mother or a malnourished child.

A critical lesson as much from the FMCH case as from many others is that technology must be designed for the user on the ground, not just for the dashboard in the head office.

The Consistency Problem: How do they ensure that every worker provides the correct, medically accurate advice during a visit?
The Solution: FMCH did not just digitise their registers. They built an app called Nutri that fundamentally altered the workflow.

Decision Support: The app included a decision tree. Based on the data entered (e.g., child's weight, age), the app guided the worker on exactly what questions to ask and what counsel to provide.

Smart Scheduling: The system automatically prioritised visits. Workers could see a list of due and overdue visits, ensuring that high-risk cases were never missed.

The Impact: The results were transformative. Planning time for field workers dropped from one hour to five minutes. Missed visits plummeted. Most importantly, field workers could now handle 350–400 families instead of 200, effectively doubling their capacity without doubling the stress.

Design Principles: Build for Users, Not Dashboards
A critical lesson as much from the FMCH case as from many others is that technology must be designed for the user on the ground, not just for the dashboard in the head office.

There is often a disconnect between the 'backend' (finance, HR, donor reporting) and the 'frontend' (program delivery).

While backend efficiency is important for compliance, the frontend is where the impact multiplier lies. A finance system helps you report better; a program system helps you serve better.

When designing these systems, we must resist the allure of the 'Super App'. There is no single software that can handle payroll, fundraising, and field operations for every nonprofit. The diversity of programs, from education to healthcare to livelihoods, requires modular, adaptable solutions.

Adoption, Culture, and the Joy of Implementation
Finally, we must recognise that digital transformation is, at its heart, a people project. Technology fails when it is imposed; it succeeds when it is embraced.

This requires a cultural shift in how we view implementation.

The Joy of Rollout: Launching a new system should not be a mundane administrative update. It should be celebratory, like a formal launch event with virtual ribbons, cakes at field offices, and videos from leadership.

This signals to the team that the new tool is an investment in their success, designed to make their lives easier and their work more impactful.

Data Empowerment: In the traditional model, data flows upward to satisfy donors. In a transformed organisation, data flows downward to empower workers. When a field officer can look at an app and say, 'I know I have achieved 60% of my targets and need to focus on the remaining 40%,' they move from being data-entry operators to decision-makers.

The Path Forward

Digital transformation is not a destination; it is a journey of milestones. It requires the courage to unlearn old ways of working and the patience to build capacity, step by step.

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The ultimate measure of this transformation is leverage. Leaders should ask themselves: For every unit of change in digital capability, what is the change in organisational capability? If we are merely buying tools, the leverage is low. But if we are reimagining how we identify a beneficiary, how we deliver training, or how we monitor outcomes, the leverage can be exponential.

As we look to the future, let us not settle for a 'better candle'. Let us have the ambition to flip the switch, for the needs of the millions we serve are too urgent and too vast for incremental fixes. The moment calls not for small improvements, but for bold, systemic transformation. LI

Rekha Koita
Co-founder & Director,
Koita Foundation

Rekha Koita is the director and co-founder of the Koita Foundation which focuses on two key areas: digital health adoption in India and the transformation of social purpose organisations (SPOs). With consulting experience at Accenture and a corporate training background at Mind Matters, Rekha spearheads the SPO transformation efforts. The foundation works with SPOs to optimise processes and implement technology to enhance program scale and outcomes.

Shankar Maruwada
Co-Founder & CEO,
EkStep Foundation

Shankar Maruwada, CEO and co-founder of EkStep Foundation, combines his passion for solving large-scale social challenges with the power of technology. An accomplished entrepreneur and marketing leader, he brings deep expertise across domains and has played a key role in transformative initiatives such as Aadhaar—India's national identification program—where he led demand generation and marketing. Previously, Shankar co-founded Marketics, one of India's pioneering data analytics firms. He continues to support the startup ecosystem as an investor and mentor.

CATALYSTS OF CHANGE

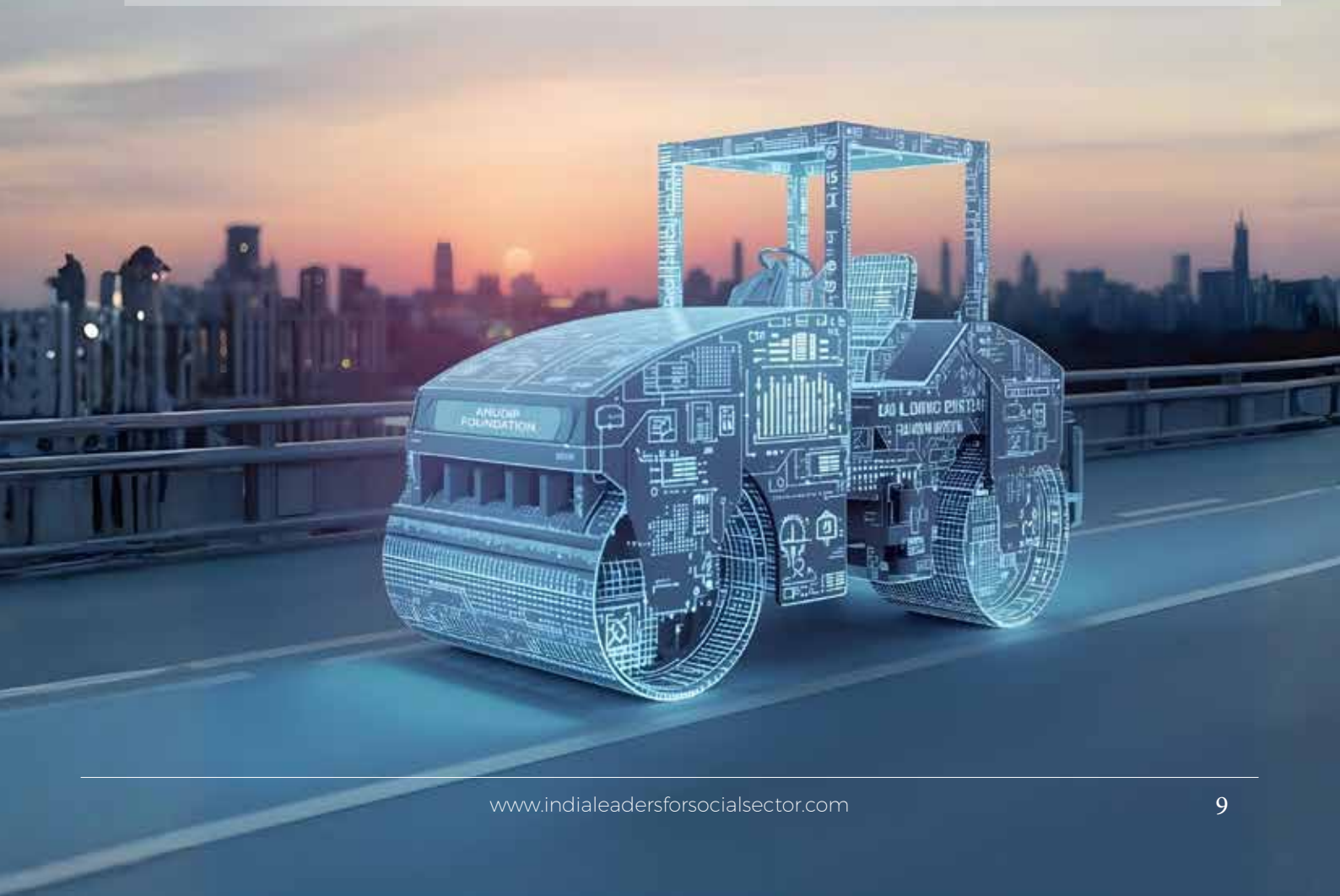
Building Digital Pathways to Employability at Scale

Anudip Foundation

As India's labour market rapidly shifts towards digital and AI-enabled roles, preparing underserved communities for meaningful employment has become urgent. For organisations working in digital skilling and livelihoods, scale alone is no longer sufficient. What matters equally is relevance, quality, and the ability to guide learners from enrolment to employment with consistency and care. Anudip's digital transformation journey offers a compelling example of how technology can be strategically deployed to meet this challenge at scale.

The Organisation and Its Mission

Founded in 2007, Anudip works to create sustainable digital livelihoods for individuals from underserved communities by equipping them with market-aligned digital skills. Operating across 22 states in India, the organisation has reached more than 500,000 learners over time, with a strong emphasis on employability outcomes rather than training in isolation. As Anudip expanded its geographic footprint and diversified its program offerings, it became clear that existing systems and manual processes were no longer adequate. Scaling impact now required a digital framework capable of managing complexity without diluting quality.



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Anudip Foundation

Tapoja Mukherji,
Senior Manager, ILSS

The Challenge of Scale and Fragmentation

Anudip's operations span the entire learner lifecycle from mobilisation, enrolment, training delivery, mentoring, assessments, and job placement. Over time, these functions came to be managed through disconnected tools and manual workflows. Learner data was fragmented across systems, real-time visibility was limited, and actionable insights were often delayed.

This fragmentation affected both learner experience and organisational efficiency. Trainers lacked timely data to personalise support, managers struggled with central oversight, and job matching could not keep pace with market demand. To scale responsibly, Anudip needed an integrated, learner-centric digital ecosystem.

Image source: Anudip Foundation/CSRBox Website

Building a Hybrid Digital Ecosystem

Rather than adopting a single off-the-shelf solution, Anudip embarked on a structured digital transformation grounded in its programmatic needs. The organisation built a hybrid digital ecosystem combining centralised systems, learning platforms, and AI-enabled tools.

A Computerised Management Information System (CMIS) was introduced to streamline enrolment, documentation, and learner records, creating a single source of data across centres. This was complemented by a Learning Management System (LMS) that standardised content delivery, tracked learner progress, and ensured consistent training quality.

To strengthen the critical transition from training to employment, Anudip developed JD–CV Match, a tool that significantly accelerated the matching of trained candidates with suitable job opportunities. Virtual interview modules and AI-enabled assessment and support tools further enhanced employability readiness. Real-time dashboards provided trainers and managers with actionable insights, enabling faster decisions and more responsive learner support.

Managing Change and Driving Adoption

A defining feature of Anudip's approach was its focus on change management. Technology adoption was not treated as a top-down mandate. Trainers, centre heads, and operational teams were actively involved in design, testing, and rollout to ensure tools aligned with on-the-ground realities.

Image source: Anudip Foundation/CSRBox Website

Implementation followed a phased approach, allowing teams to adapt gradually and provide feedback. Anudip also made deliberate 'build vs buy' decisions, developing tools in-house where domain expertise was strong, and partnering externally where specialised capabilities were required. Funders were engaged as long-term partners, with several supporting multi-year

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investments in digital infrastructure.

Outcomes that Strengthened Employability

The results of the transformation were substantial. Anudip achieved placement rates of over 70% percent for eligible learners, while JD–CV Match reduced job-matching timelines by nearly twenty times. More than 90 centres were digitised, enabling central visibility without undermining local engagement.

Content creation cycles shortened, learner feedback participation increased, and data-driven decision-making became easier across teams. Crucially, technology enhanced rather than replaced human interaction, allowing trainers and mentors to focus on personalised guidance where it mattered most.

Key Lessons

The Anudip case highlights several lessons for organisations working in skilling and employability in the social sector. Integrated digital systems are essential for managing complexity at scale. AI and automation deliver the greatest value when applied to clearly defined bottlenecks such as job matching.

The Anudip case highlights several lessons for organisations working in skilling and employability in the social sector.

Sustained adoption depends on staff buy-in and thoughtful change management. Above all, technology is most powerful when it personalises learning while preserving human engagement, ensuring that scale does not come at the cost of care. LI

Scan to know more about Anudip Foundation

Image source: Anudip Foundation/CSRBox Website

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Building Climate Impact Through Digital Transformation

Farmer For Forests

Restoring degraded land at scale is complex work. It involves farmers spread across geographies, ecosystems that change over time, and outcomes that must be measured with rigour. For Farmers For Forests (F4F), an organisation working at the intersection of agroforestry, livelihoods, and climate resilience, digital transformation became a critical enabler of both credibility and scale. The F4F case offers a grounded example of how technology, when thoughtfully applied, can strengthen environmental action without distancing organisations from the communities they serve.

The Organisation and Its Mission

Founded in December 2019, Farmers For Forests works with smallholder farmers to promote agroforestry as a pathway to restoring degraded land, enhancing biodiversity, and building climate-resilient livelihoods. Its work spans several regions in India, including Maharashtra,

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Gujarat, Karnataka, Jharkhand, and Chennai, and reaches tens of thousands of farmers.
At the heart of F4F's approach is the belief that ecological restoration and farmer prosperity must go hand in hand. To make this viable at scale, the organisation recognised that strong data systems and reliable monitoring would be essential.

The Challenge: Monitoring at Scale
As F4F expanded its work, it encountered many challenges. Tree monitoring and landscape assessments were largely manual, time-consuming, and vulnerable to inconsistencies. Data lived in multiple spreadsheets and tools, making it difficult to build a consolidated picture of progress across projects. This fragmentation posed more than operational inconvenience. It limited F4F's ability to demonstrate impact convincingly to funders, partners, and certification bodies, particularly in contexts such as carbon reporting, where accuracy and verification are non-negotiable.

A Phased Digital Solution

Rather than adopting a single, sweeping technology fix, F4F took a phased and pragmatic approach to digital transformation.

Rather than adopting a single, sweeping technology fix, F4F took a phased and pragmatic approach to digital transformation. The focus was clear: strengthen monitoring, centralise data, and build systems that could grow with the organisation.

The solution combined open-source tools, off-the-shelf platforms, and custom-built systems. Geographic Information System tools such as QGIS and Google Earth Engine were used for spatial mapping and analysis. Drone imagery, combined with artificial intelligence models including DeepForest and Detectron2, enabled automated tree detection with high levels of accuracy.

Field data collection was streamlined using KoBo Toolbox, while internal coordination and relationship management were supported through Zoho CRM and Google Workspace. These elements were brought together through a custom dashboard built on React, PHP, and MySQL, creating a centralised view of projects, landscapes, and outcomes.

What Changed on the Ground

Image source: Farmer For Forests Website

The results of this technological pivot were immediate and transformative. By replacing manual counts with AI-driven monitoring, F4F achieved a data accuracy rate of over 90%. Furthermore, the speed of monitoring increased tenfold, allowing the team to cover more ground with fewer resources. Centralised systems improved decision-making. Teams could access real-time information, reduce duplication, and respond more quickly to emerging issues.

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Farmer For Forests

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F4F successfully scaled to over 160 projects, serving 25,000 beneficiaries across five states.

This efficiency allowed the organisation to expand its footprint significantly. F4F successfully scaled to over 160 projects, serving 25,000 beneficiaries across five states. The robust digital infrastructure meant they could now provide the verifiable evidence required by rigorous carbon credit markets and institutional funders. What began as a logistical struggle transformed into a competitive advantage, positioning F4F as a leader in evidence-based climate action.

Technology as an Enabler, Not the Centrepiece

One of the most striking aspects of the F4F story is that technology is never treated as an end in itself. Digital tools are positioned as enablers that support farmers, field teams, and environmental outcomes, rather than replacing human judgement or local knowledge.

By investing in internal technical capacity and rolling out tools in stages, F4F ensured that systems were adopted meaningfully rather than imposed. This approach helped embed a culture of data integrity across the organisation.

Image source: Farmer For Forests Website

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Farmer For Forests

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Senior Manager, ILSS

Image source: Farmer For Forests Website

Key Lessons

The Farmers For Forests case highlights several lessons relevant to organisations working in complex, field-driven contexts. Digital transformation is most effective when it addresses real bottlenecks, such as monitoring and data credibility. Building internal capacity and ownership matters as much as selecting the right tools. Finally, phased adoption allows systems to evolve alongside organisational growth, ensuring that technology strengthens impact rather than complicating it. LI

Scan to know more about Farmer For Forests

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Using Predictive Analytics to Accelerate Girls' Enrolment

Educate Girls

As social programs scale, one challenge becomes increasingly pronounced: how to deploy limited resources where they will have the greatest impact. For organisations working in education, this challenge is especially acute, as out-of-school children are often concentrated in hard-to-reach geographies and shaped by multiple, overlapping vulnerabilities.

For Educate Girls, a nonprofit organisation founded in 2007, the mission has always been clear: to ensure that every girl in the most marginalised communities is enrolled in school, stays there, and learns effectively. However, as the organisation looked to scale its impact beyond its initial success, it realised that its traditional methods were reaching a point of diminishing returns. The solution lay not just in more boots on the ground, but in the intelligent application of data science.

CATALYSTS OF CHANGE

Educate Girls

Tapoja Mukherji,
Senior Manager, ILSS

Educate Girls went ahead with adopting predictive targeting powered by machine learning, transforming how it identified and reached out-of-school girls, significantly accelerating enrolment outcomes while optimising operational effort.

The Organisational Context

Educate Girls works in rural and educationally backward areas of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh, focusing on enrolling out-of-school girls, retaining them in school, and improving learning outcomes. Its approach relies heavily on community mobilisation and collaboration with government systems, delivered at scale through large field teams.

In its early years, the organisation followed a saturation-based model. Field staff worked uniformly across all villages in a project area, ensuring coverage but not necessarily efficiency. As the organisation expanded, this approach became increasingly resource-intensive, prompting a critical question: could data be used to focus efforts where the need was greatest?

The Problem with Uniform Coverage

While saturation ensured no village was overlooked, it also meant that time and effort were spread evenly across locations with very different levels of need. Some villages had high concentrations of out-of-school girls, while others had relatively few. The absence of a prioritisation mechanism limited the speed at which enrolments could be achieved and constrained scalability. Recognising this, Educate Girls sought a more precise way to identify high-need areas without increasing operational complexity for field teams.

Building a Predictive Targeting Model

Educate Girls partnered with IDinsight to develop a predictive targeting model using machine learning.

To address this challenge, Educate Girls partnered with IDinsight to develop a predictive targeting model using machine learning. The model developed using Python and the Random Forest algorithm, drew upon large-scale datasets, such as the Census of India, the District Information System for Education (DISE), and the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and others. The model could identify geographic clusters where girls were most likely to be out of school. Villages were then categorised into priority plans based on both the expected number of out-of-school girls and the feasibility of intervention. This allowed the organisation to rank villages and focus field efforts where impact potential was highest.

CATALYSTS OF CHANGE

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The shift to predictive targeting produced striking results. The model achieved close to 90% accuracy in identifying high-need villages, enabling Educate Girls to deploy its teams far more effectively.

Crucially, the model was not deployed in isolation. Predictions were validated through field checks, refined iteratively, and simplified into actionable outputs that frontline teams could use with confidence.

Results That Changed the Trajectory

The shift to predictive targeting produced striking results. The model achieved close to 90% accuracy in identifying high-need villages, enabling Educate Girls to deploy its teams far more effectively. Enrolment efficiency increased sevenfold, dramatically reducing the time and cost required to reach each out-of-school girl.

Over six years, the organisation enrolled approximately 1.56 million out-of-school girls. To put this in perspective, achieving this level of impact under the old saturation model would have taken an estimated 45 years. Importantly, these gains

were realised without proportionately expanding the operational footprint, demonstrating the power of data-driven decision-making.

Democratising Data for the Frontline

A critical component of this digital transformation was ensuring that sophisticated technology did not remain trapped in a central office. Educate Girls focused on democratising the data, translating complex algorithmic outputs into simple, actionable village lists for field staff. This allowed leadership to allocate resources with surgical precision. Field teams could now focus their intensive door-to-door surveys and community mobilisation efforts where they would yield the highest results. By simplifying the technology for non-technical users, the organisation ensured that data-driven decision-making became part of its cultural fabric.

Key Lessons from this Case

For social purpose organisation leaders, the case demonstrates that advanced analytics need not remain confined to research teams or pilots. When thoughtfully designed and operationalised, predictive models can directly inform frontline action and resource allocation.

Precision targeting can significantly outperform uniform coverage when resources are constrained. Machine learning models must be paired with field validation to ensure trust and usability.

In a landscape marked by growing interest in artificial intelligence and analytics, the Educate Girls case study offers a grounded, practical example of how predictive tools can accelerate social programs. Its reliance on public datasets makes the approach portable across states and adaptable for other organisations facing similar challenges. LI

Scan to know more about Educate Girls

ILSS CONVERSATION

Funding Digital Transformation in Nonprofits

A Conversation with Chetan Kapoor and Ashwin Iyer

As nonprofits grapple with growing complexity, constrained resources, and rising expectations of impact, digital transformation has emerged as both an opportunity and a challenge. In this conversation, ***Chetan Kapoor of Tech Mahindra Foundation*** *and* ***Ashwin Iyer from the Gates Foundation*** *reflect on what meaningful digitisation looks like in the social sector — beyond tools, platforms, or buzzwords. Drawing from decades of experience as a practitioner and a funder, they explore how data, mindset shifts, funder–nonprofit partnerships, and a focus on depth over scale can shape more resilient organisations and solutions. Together, they unpack when technology adds value, how innovation should evolve, and why collaboration, intent, and problem-first thinking are central to sustaining social impact in a rapidly changing world.*

Q/ At Tech Mahindra Foundation, you have prioritised your workforce's digital capabilities to enhance skills and employability, making digital a key pillar of your strategy. Can you explain its importance and how it supports your broader mission?

A/ **Chetan:** Despite having 'tech' in our name, technology wasn't always central to our work. When we started in 2006, we were very non-digital. Around 2012, we realised that scaling any program requires data-driven decisions. We implemented an MIS, initially just Google Sheets and then an online automated system. Now we have 10+ years of longitudinal data from our skill development program, enabling us to draw meaningful inferences about which courses have the greatest impact.

In fact, COVID clarified what tech can and can't do. Since then, it has transformed how we approach scale.

Q/ How do you, as funders, determine what to support and what qualifies as fundable?

A/ **Chetan:** Our approach has been to look at smaller organisations and build partnerships over several years as we look at nonprofits using the IAAP framework. Through that lens we look for:
Intent - The purity of intent is critical. Talking about your work has become more important than doing it. Intent can be a deal breaker.

Alignment - Organisations must align with our vision around education and

Ashwin Iyer, Senior Manager - Philanthropic Partnerships at the Gates Foundation, leads partnership efforts across Asia and the Middle East, helping mobilise philanthropic capital, forge collaborations with like-minded foundations, family offices, and nonprofit partners, and shape innovative approaches to support global health, development, and social impact. He has also played strategy roles at the Gates Foundation, leading program portfolios in health systems strengthening and health service delivery. He has also supported projects in the Gates Foundation's Africa offices.

Chetan Kapoor, Chief Executive Officer, Tech Mahindra Foundation (TMF), has been instrumental in shaping the Foundation's flagship SMART program - one of India's largest urban skill development initiatives. A strong advocate for scaling deep before scaling wide, Chetan brings a collaborative approach to solving complex social challenges. A seasoned development sector leader with over two decades of experience across rural and urban India, he led Edulever and held leadership roles at Pratham, Bharti Foundation, and AIF in the past. He also co-founded Agrasar, focused on skills and education. Chetan has contributed to national education and skilling agendas, including through FICCI and the Delhi Government's Curriculum Reform Committee.

ASHWIN IYER,
Senior Manager - Philanthropic Partnerships.
Gates Foundation, India

CHETAN KAPOOR,
Chief Executive Officer,
Tech Mahindra Foundation

ILSS Conversation

employability, with persons with disabilities and women as cross-cutting themes.

Attitude - True partnership is rare. We should learn from the nonprofits we work with — it's symbiotic. Relationships break down when organisations see us only as a funding agency.

Processes - This is where we invest heavily. Building processes takes years and isn't intuitive. When utilisation certificates get delayed, and reports don't come on time, that becomes untenable.

A/ Ashwin: For us, here are three ways we look at a nonprofit's digital initiatives as we try to support them.

First, if they are going to embark on a digitisation journey, it should be something that lasts in the long term, not just for the project duration. So that way, there is enough flexibility in the indirect cost, assuming it's at a reasonable price point.

The second is, especially for organisations with whom we have had a relationship over several years, a focus on building specific capabilities that the organisation genuinely needs. There too, I think what we look for has been clarity in the problem statement, and whether there's enough homework being done to assess effort, cost, benefits, and alternatives. For example, choosing proportionate, sustainable solutions over expensive, off-the-shelf tools where that is prudent and realistic.

Also, we believe, digital investments are most fundable when they build enduring organisational capacity beyond a single project. Over time, strong funder–NGO relationships enable flexible funding for program indirects, general operating grants, or capability-building support.

Q/ Based on your experience, what factors make funder-nonprofit partnerships successful in digital transformation?

A/ Ashwin: The effectiveness of community initiatives ultimately hinges on the actual work being done on the ground. If these

Image source: Linkedin

efforts do not align with the communities' needs or create meaningful impact, discussions about digital solutions or scaling efforts become secondary.

A significant barrier to digitisation is often the comfort level, or the lack of it, with technology among key stakeholders. For instance, some government officials responsible for digitisation rely on printed emails for feedback, not being comfortable with basic digital tools like Gmail. The general apprehension towards digital solutions is evident in discussions about readiness and the genuine intent to change and innovate, emphasising the importance of relationship-building.

Demonstrating comfort with digital tools is crucial. There are instances where individuals respond to any mention of 'digital' by insisting on bringing in a chief technology officer. This discrepancy raises questions about genuine commitment to digital transformation when basic comfort with technology is lacking.

Q/ Technology products can get irrelevant over time. How should innovation keep happening? How should funders support SPOs when the tech landscape is changing?

A/ Ashwin: The product is often the hero of the conversation. But if you change the narrative to focus on the intervention you are supporting, that's a stronger conversation. As foundations, whether CSRs, individual philanthropies, or family offices, we are all working toward certain impact goals. As long as you gravitate the conversation toward that, we are not worried about the pathway. Whether it is a stagnant platform requiring manual work or an evolving digital platform, as long as you continue moving the needle on impact objectives, that is the right conversation. Let us say we are committed to reducing maternal and newborn mortality. If you have created a digital solution to bridge one of these issues, it is in our best interest to ensure you are supported beyond our funding cycles.

Craft the narrative around flexible funding to sustain and refine the solution. The donor side is evolving as well. Post-COVID, there is much more discourse around patient capital and investing in organisational capacities. I see the maturity in the funding community to have that conversation today. I won't get granular about open source versus proprietary platforms or perpetual licensing. If you say you have developed something that will evolve and require a flexible pool, it is definitely worth discussing.

A/ Chetan: If we evaluate an organisation's innovation capability, we ask: where does thinking about innovation start? Does it start from the product you designed, or from the problem you are trying to solve? These are two different things.

Technology's history is not just evolution; it is also obsolescence. If I am hung up on the product I created and want innovation just around that, I may be headed for obsolescence.

Technology's history is not just evolution; it is also obsolescence. When we started with smartphones, Blackberry was everything. Nobody uses it now. When we started with sheets, we used Lotus Notes. Nobody uses that now. If I am hung up on the product I created and want innovation just around that, I may be headed for obsolescence. But if the solution is my end goal and I evolve my thinking around it, I have a long play.

To give another example, for the visually impaired, Braille has been the standard. About 5-6 years ago, the Annie Braille device was developed by Tinkerbell Labs. We are now bringing that to where we work. But with AI-based glasses and wearables, we are experimenting

Image source: Annie Braille Website

with Meta AI glasses, enabling people who are visually impaired to see or have things explained to them.

At the end of the day, the problem needs to be solved. Funders are dependent on people who can think on their feet and innovate. Funders may never reach the communities where organisations are working. It is a very symbiotic arrangement.

Q/ Sometimes funders are keen to fund only advanced technology or apps, even when simple ones might suffice. How do you approach these discussions about when and where to invest?

A/ Ashwin: I completely agree. My personal philosophy is that technology adoption should be driven by a felt need, rather than donor-driven. It's important for donors to approach the hype surrounding such technologies with a critical perspective, as there is a need to demystify the reality behind these trends.

If something can happen on Google Sheets or basic Excel, why should a donor want to spend money on something else? I get the appeal of an app. But beyond WhatsApp and maybe food delivery apps, there are hardly any other apps we use regularly.

In fact, there was a surge in app development 3-4 years ago because people wanted to build something proprietary. However, this enthusiasm has diminished significantly over the past couple of years. The realisation has set in that investing in an app that might only attract a thousand users for a couple of years, and then fade into obscurity, is not a sustainable strategy. Also, apps require continuous evolution, which funders may not want to support.

Q/ From a donor's perspective, is there a bias for or against depth versus scale, especially when it comes to funding digital innovation?

A/ Chetan: Even before talking about funders, let me tell you my personal bias: always depth before width. You have to scale deep before scaling wide.
It's intuitive: before solving for the country, solve for the community. Before the community, you solve for the individual. It requires working at depth to understand and unravel issues. Sometimes the intensity needed to solve for the individual is so much that you can't think of scale given the resources required.

This goes back to my early journey. We used 'scalability and replicability' in the same breath. But then I reflected on why it should be scalable and replicable, always at the same time?

You have to aim for replicability. When designing a solution, design it so that by adapting and contextualising, you can use it somewhere else.

You have to aim for replicability. When designing a solution, design it so that by adapting and contextualising, you can use it somewhere else. If you aim at replicability, allowing others to take it and replicate it elsewhere, you have achieved scale. There are now examples of organisations working with this approach that have managed to scale by collaborating with others, creating networks of their kind that take it to other places.

But at least in my understanding, depth has to come first before you go wide.

A/ **Ashwin:** For me personally, depth is important. I would rather spend five years working with a hundred people than aspiring to reach a hundred million people over five years.

There's a difference between scaling a solution and designing something that's scalable. Let us say you are working with tribal communities.

We would be keen to see a common minimum set of interventions or ideas that could find replicability elsewhere. It's hard for an institutional funder to support work which is a 'segment of one'. Every individual is unique, and it's difficult to support that institutionally.

The main challenge is to use design principles learned from a deep understanding of local situations, often revealed after two years into a program. As a private foundation, while we want to expand our reach, this goal must be based on a thorough understanding of community needs.

Q/ **What opportunities do you see for collaboratives between the government and private organisations in the next decade, to build and/or democratise shared digital platforms?**

A/ **Chetan:** I am quite hopeful about collaboratives. It is fundamental to build collaborative DNA. The largest foundations realise it cannot just be about brandishing your logo. It has to be about solving challenges. Many solutions would emerge if you look through a collaborative lens — more open to learning, sharing, and coming together.

We are just beginning to scratch the surface. There are so many possibilities with shared resources. I see a need for shared services. Like in the IT sector, it is possible here too. I have seen smaller organisations scramble to enable functions like HR, finance, and communication. You can have a solution provider serving multiple organisations.

Similarly with data. Looking at data or evidence in a fragmented manner does not serve a purpose. If you are willing to share data and create a story much larger than what we can do individually, you could move the needle on policy. Otherwise, not every organisation can aim for policy and advocacy.

The interview is edited by Aashi Sengar and Tapoja Mukherji

ILSS TIPS

Escaping the 'Data-Rich & Insight-Poor' Trap

A Practical Guide for Nonprofits

Last month, I sat across from the founder of a 12-year-old education nonprofit in Mumbai. She slid her 42-page annual impact report across the table and asked me:

'We have a comprehensive and nice-looking report. But does it tell you which of our three programs is actually working?'

As I flipped through the pages, I was drowned in data but was left parched for insight!

This question surfaces repeatedly in my work with social purpose organisations (SPOs) across India. Many organisations today are data-rich but insight-poor — collecting large volumes of information for compliance and donor reporting, yet rarely analysing or using it to guide decisions. Data exists, but answers do not!

The gap between data chaos and data intelligence is not about funding or tools. It is about how data is collected, interpreted and embedded into decision-making.

ILSS Tips

Anirban Chaudhury,
Head, Koita Centre for Digital Transformation, ILSS

Why This Shift Is Urgent for SPOs

SPOs today operate under intensifying pressure to demonstrate outcomes, efficiency, and accountability. Donors increasingly want to know what changed rather than what was done. At the same time, Indian nonprofits continue to lag in digital maturity, often missing out on operational efficiencies and technology-linked funding opportunities [1].

While over 70% of social organisations now use digital tools for monitoring and evaluation [2], most data practices remain retrospective and compliance-driven. In a resource-constrained sector, decisions taken data-driven without evidence are not neutral — they are expensive mistakes.

What 'Using Data' Really Means

Being data-driven is often misunderstood as producing more dashboards or sophisticated reports. In reality, it means **using data to make recurring decisions better — and being able to explain those decisions clearly.**

In practice, this shows up in a few core use cases [3]:

1. **Fundraising and donor management:** understanding donor behaviour and engagement to improve retention and alignment.
2. **Program delivery:** identifying which interventions work best for which beneficiary cohorts.
3. **Operations:** analysing cost-per-outcome and field effectiveness to guide resource allocation.
4. **Reporting:** shifting from activity-heavy narratives to outcome-focused stories that explain trends, choices, and learning.

Data is the new language of trust. When SPOs can show how funds are used, how programs adapt, and how decisions are informed by evidence, they demonstrate accountability and transparency.

This is why I often say **data is the new language of trust.** When SPOs can show how funds are used, how programs adapt, and how decisions are informed by evidence, they demonstrate accountability and transparency. Research shows that organisations with stronger data governance and transparency practices enjoy higher donor confidence and retention [4]. For beneficiaries, ethical data use reinforces trust that their information is handled responsibly and used to improve services, not merely to satisfy reporting requirements.

ILSS Tips

Anirban Chaudhury,
Head, Koita Centre for Digital Transformation, ILSS

Turning Data Chaos into Actionable Intelligence

Many assume that turning data into actionable insights requires costly software or specialist analysts. In practice, it is far from it.

1. Start with decisions, not data.

The first question should never be 'what data should we collect?' but 'what decisions do we make repeatedly?' Program redesigns, budget reallocations, scaling choices — each should clearly define the evidence required. **Data collected without a decision in mind rarely creates value.**

2. Ruthlessly simplify what you collect.

Many SPOs collect excessive data 'just in case', leading to fatigue and poor quality. A small set of accurate, validated, and actionable indicators is far more powerful than bloated formats. Quality matters far more than quantity.

3. Build systems, not one-off reports.

Excel-heavy workflows may work temporarily, but collapse at scale. Even simple, interoperable systems that capture data once and reuse it across programs, fundraising, and reporting enable meaningful analysis, visualisation, and learning.

4. 'Use' the data collected to learn and drive action.

Trend analysis, cohort comparisons, and clear visualisations help teams spot issues early like drop-offs, uneven outcomes, and cost anomalies. Institutionalise data-driven reflection: What did the data tell us? What did we change? Remember, **learning loops matter far more than perfect data or complex analyses.**

5. Democratise insights where decisions are made.

Data should not sit only with M&E teams or senior leadership. Field staff, program managers, and fundraisers need role-specific insights. Regular review forums, shared dashboards, and documented decision logs ensure evidence influences action.

6. Scale data practices cost-effectively.

This journey is inherently scale-agnostic. Smaller SPOs can begin with basic analysis and simple visuals. As organisations grow, they can gradually introduce more structured analytics and governance. **In practice, digital maturity comes from use, not from expensive technology choices.**

As a case in point, Magic Bus offers a strong example of embedding data into decision-making at scale.

ILSS Tips

Anirban Chaudhury,
Head, Koita Centre for Digital Transformation, ILSS

Case Study: Magic Bus, India

As its skilling and livelihood programs expanded, data were abundant — attendance records, placement data, staff reports, and feedback — but fragmentation made it difficult to detect quality issues early.

Rather than adding more reports, Magic Bus redesigned monitoring and evaluation as an organisational capability. The Metal Score Card framework was created to enable learning and performance excellence, not just reporting. It deliberately distinguishes between program performance (enrolment, attendance, placements, retention) and quality and efficacy (delivery quality, governance, ethics, and stakeholder feedback).

Centres are reviewed quarterly and categorised as Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum. These categories guide review conversations, targeted interventions, and capacity-building. Data is triangulated across finance, HR, trainers, feedback mechanisms, and program MIS, reducing bias and strengthening credibility. Crucially, the framework is embedded into governance and review cycles, ensuring evidence consistently informs decisions.

Data Ethics and Responsibility

With India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act and global data governance principles, SPOs carry heightened responsibility, especially when working with vulnerable populations. Purpose limitation, informed consent, and data security are not compliance burdens; they are foundations of trust [5][6].

The Opportunity Ahead

The ability to answer which programs are working and why is no longer optional. It is central to an SPO's credibility, resilience, and effectiveness.

SPOs that treat data as a strategic capability, rather than a reporting obligation, learn faster, earn greater trust, and operate with greater credibility.

SPOs that treat data as a strategic capability, rather than a reporting obligation, learn faster, earn greater trust, and operate with greater credibility. The future belongs to organisations that use data not just to prove impact, but to improve it. LI

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GUEST COLUMN

From Compliance to Cultural Change: Understanding the Relevance of Personal Data Protection

Deepika Mogilishetty,

Chief - Policy & Partnerships, EkStep Foundation

India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDP Act), which took effect on 13 November 2025, marks a decisive shift from ad hoc data practices to a rights-based legal framework. For social sector organisations working directly with vulnerable communities, the law is not merely a compliance exercise; it is a call to build new habits of care and prudence. The next 18 months, before full enforcement in May 2027, offer a strategic window to embed those habits, rather than to defer action until penalties loom.

In this article, we explore crucial and practical approaches organisations can take to build data protection practices and ensure their operations are resilient as well as compliant.

Guest Column

Deepika Mogilishetty
Chief - Policy & Partnerships,
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Beyond Checkboxes: Cultivating Compliance as Practice

The DPDP Act foregrounds principles that require behavioural change: informed, specific, and unambiguous consent; purpose limitation; data minimisation; accuracy; storage limitation; security; and accountability. The high financial penalties anticipated under the Act are meant to signal seriousness, yet their true value will be realised only if organisations translate legal obligations into everyday practice. In this sense, data protection should be approached much like workplace safety or the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) rules: a matter of organisational culture, not a legal checkbox.

Data Minimisation: Less is More

A practical starting point is data minimisation. Organisations must routinely ask whether a data point is truly necessary. For example, do field intake forms require an exact date of birth, or would an age band suffice for program eligibility? Reducing unnecessary collection lowers risk and simplifies consent. Managers, not only legal teams, must be empowered to question long-standing data practices and to approve simpler, safer alternatives. Not surprisingly, this also reduces the cost of data collection, storage and maintenance, especially for NGOs who are already resource-constrained.

Inclusive Consent: Bridging Barriers

Obtaining informed consent in low-literacy, multilingual, or emergency contexts is a recognised operational challenge. The law requires consent to be free, specific, informed, and unambiguous, and organisations should adopt practical adaptations: audio or video explanations in local languages, itemised notices rather than dense legal text, and visible checkboxes for explicit consent on digital forms. Group sign-ons should never substitute for individual consent when personal data is involved. Organisations must also retain records of consent as demonstrable evidence of compliance.

Special Care: Protecting Children's Data

The DPDP Act treats the data of individuals under 18 with heightened sensitivity. Verifiable parental or guardian consent

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Deepika Mogilishetty
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is mandatory, alongside stricter limits on behavioural tracking and profiling. Nonprofits working in education, child protection, and health must design consent pathways that are verifiable and age-appropriate, and they should define clear deletion or transition practices for data when a child reaches adulthood.

Vendor and Donor Relationships: Contractual Safeguards

External tools, SaaS vendors, and donor reporting requirements introduce distinct risks. Contracts should include explicit data protection clauses, with defined roles as either data fiduciary or processor, mandate breach notification and specific data retention and residency/localisation processes. For vendors hosting servers abroad, organisations should require demonstrable legal and technical safeguards, and avoid assuming that consent gathered by a third party is sufficient without verification.

Breach Readiness: 72 Hours to Act

Breach response obligations are immediate and concrete: notify affected individuals and the Data Protection Board without delay, and submit a thorough report within 72 hours. Preparing templates and processes in advance makes compliance practicable; waiting until a breach occurs breeds confusion, reputational damage, and potentially higher penalties. Treat breach drills and clear escalation pathways as routine elements of organisational safety.

Organisation Ownership: Privacy as a Habit

Embedding data protection requires cross-functional ownership. Legal and IT teams cannot carry the burden alone; program managers, field staff, communications teams, and senior leadership must be trained to recognise data risks and to follow simple, consistent workflows. Regular training, accessible notice-and-consent templates, vendor due diligence checklists, and a clearly assigned grievance redressal mechanism will convert legal requirements into everyday practice.

The Implementation Runway: Act Strategically

The interim period before enforcement is an opportunity to audit data flows, streamline

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collection, update MOUs and contracts, and instill a culture of purpose limitation and access control. Think of this as building institutional muscle memory: small, repeated actions that become default behaviours. Organisations that seize this period will not only reduce legal risk, they will strengthen trust with beneficiaries, donors, and partners.

By prioritising data minimisation, designing credible consent processes, securing vendor contracts, and practising breach readiness, organisations can turn regulatory obligation into a competitive advantage.

The DPDP Act compels nonprofits to move from procedural compliance to cultural change. By prioritising data minimisation, designing credible consent processes, securing vendor contracts, and practising breach readiness, organisations can turn regulatory obligation into a competitive advantage: greater trust, better ethics, and more resilient programs. The law is the prompt; the real work is building the habits that make privacy routine. LI

Deepika Mogilishetty,

Chief - Policy & Partnerships, EkStep Foundation

Deepika Mogilishetty is the Chief of Policy and Partnerships at EkStep Foundation, where she has been since 2014. She is a lawyer whose journey across law, human rights and public policy, and technology has always been anchored in questions of inclusion and justice. She has worked on issues such as the right to information and women's access to justice, and on core digital infrastructure like Aadhaar.

At EkStep Foundation, her work continues to be about creating possibilities — whether through digital public goods for learning or through initiatives in the early years that celebrate abundance and potential in every child — Bachpan Manao. Across all of these, her core belief has remained the same: law, policy, and especially technology must serve human dignity, expand agency, and open doors for equitable access for all.

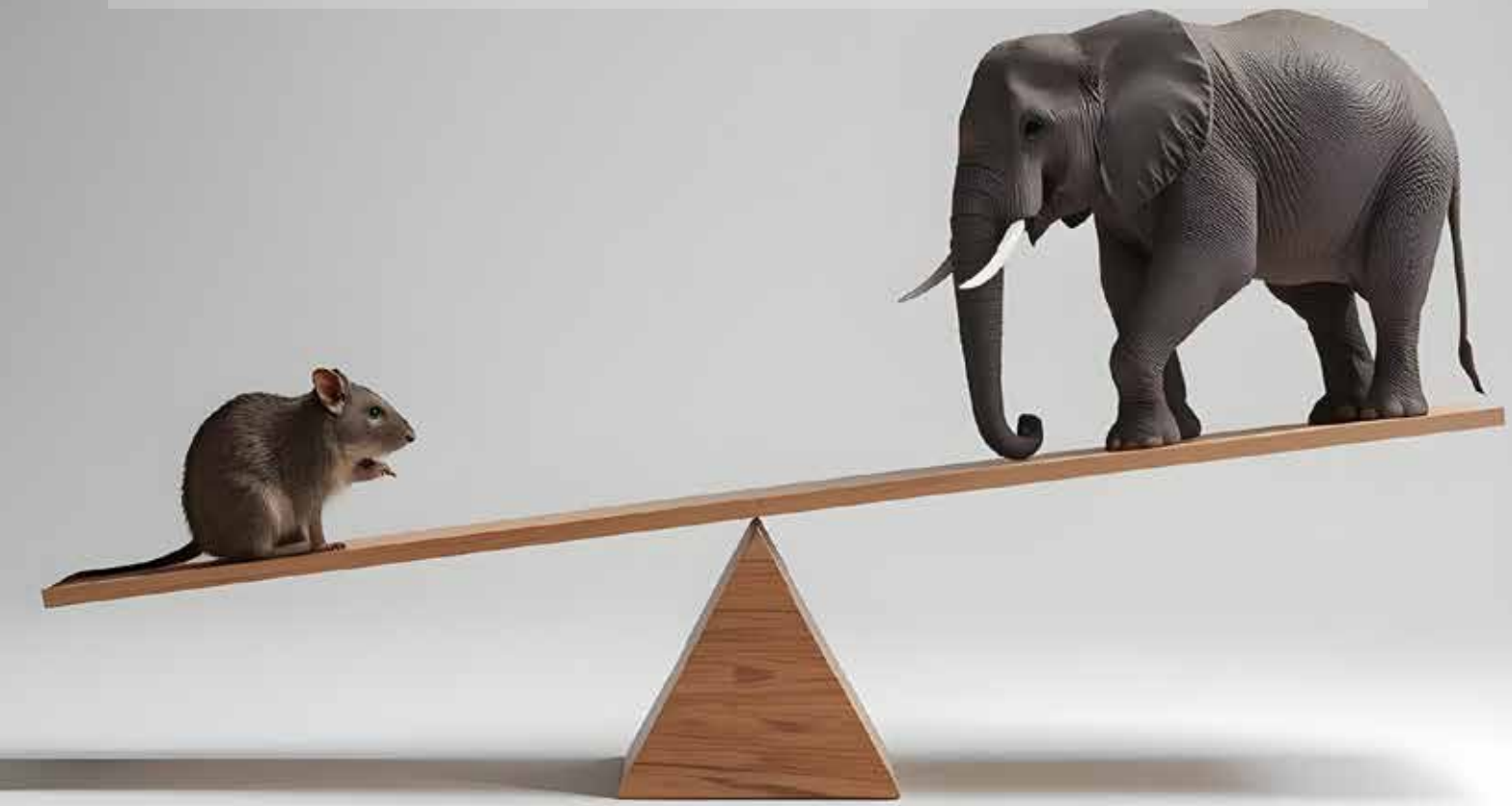
GUEST COLUMN

Doing More with Less: *Digital Transformation of Nonprofits in India*

Why Digital Transformation Matters for Nonprofits...and Now

Indian nonprofits today face a difficult paradox. Expectations around scale, accountability, and measurable outcomes are rising, while funding, talent, and organisational bandwidth remain constrained. Philanthropists increasingly expect data-backed impact narratives, regulators expect audit readiness, and communities expect programs to expand without compromising quality.

In this context, digital transformation has become essential — not as a trend, but as an operational necessity. Global and Indian research consistently points to digital as a key enabler for efficiency, transparency, and scale in the social sector [1][2]. Yet, transformation is not about adopting technology for its own sake. It is about strengthening mission delivery.



Guest Column

Sanjeev Prasad,
Advisory Board Member, Anudip Foundation;
Ex-Global Business Head, Cloud & Digital, Coforge

Having spent four decades leading large-scale transformation journeys in the corporate sector and mentoring social purpose organisations (SPOs) through real-world digital change, I have learned one thing clearly: when digital is anchored to purpose, it becomes a force multiplier. When it is treated as a standalone initiative, it often becomes an expensive distraction.

Reframing Digital Transformation: Start with the Problem, Not the Tool

A core principle I emphasise repeatedly is simple: nobody should do technology for the sake of technology. Digital transformation must start with clarity on the problem to be solved, whether operational inefficiency, fragmented data, or limitations in program reach.

Many SPOs fall into the trap of digitising broken processes. Manual reporting is automated without removing duplication; siloed systems are introduced because a donor requires them; pilots remain fragmented and never scale. Research from global nonprofit studies highlights this pattern clearly. Technology alone does not create impact unless organisational fundamentals are addressed first [2][5].

This is where process discipline becomes critical. Lean thinking — long used in manufacturing and services — offers powerful lessons for SPOs. By identifying delays, rework, and non-value-adding effort, organisations can simplify workflows before digitisation. Digital then amplifies what already works, instead of locking inefficiencies into systems [3].

Many SPOs fall into the trap of digitising broken processes. Manual reporting is automated without removing duplication; siloed systems are introduced because a donor requires them; pilots remain fragmented and never scale.

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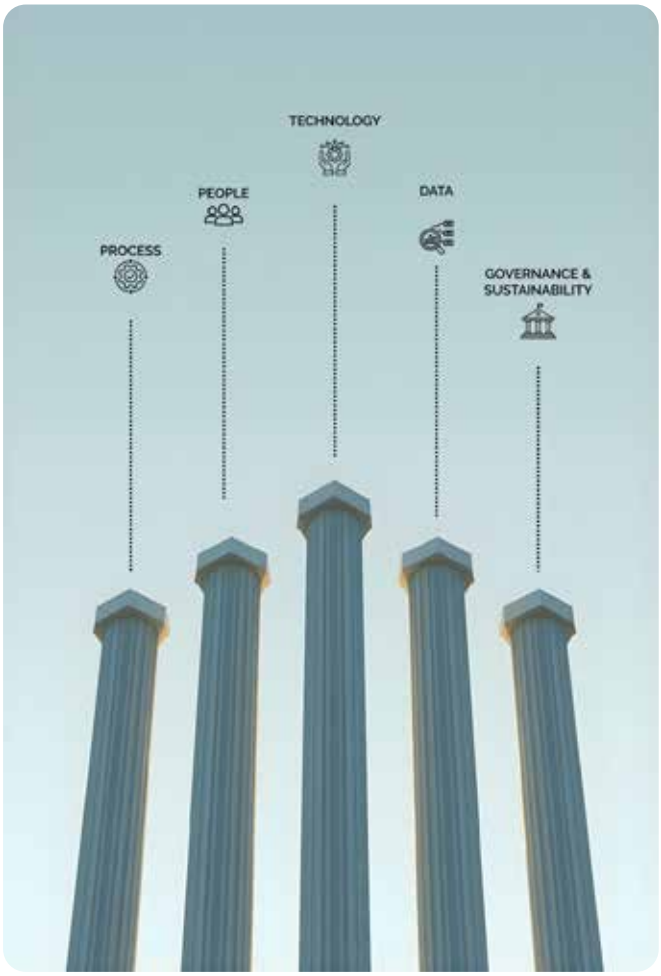

The Five Pillars of Effective Digital Adoption in SPOs

1. Process: Simplify Before You Digitise
Effective digital journeys begin with mapping value streams from beneficiary to donor. Manual reporting, duplicate approvals, and fragmented data flows consume enormous staff time across SPOs globally [1]. Small, focused improvements, such as standardising data capture or integrating reporting, compound into significant efficiency gains over time.

2. People: Mindset, Capability, and Change Management
Digital transformation is fundamentally a people's journey. Tools do not change organisations, and people do. Building comfort with data, fostering experimentation, and investing in training across leadership and field teams are essential. Studies show that SPOs that invest in change management and internal capability are far more likely to sustain digital gains [5]. Leadership sponsorship and cross-functional ownership are non-negotiable.

3. Technology: Fit-for-Purpose, Not Cutting-Edge
SPOs do not need the latest technology; they need the right technology. Modular, scalable, and affordable tools, often cloud and mobile-based, deliver the highest return. Increasingly, AI is helping SPOs bridge human capacity gaps, from learning support to administrative functions, without inflating costs [4]. Build-versus-buy decisions must be grounded in organisational readiness, not aspiration.

4. Focus on Data
One of the crucial steps in digital transformation is having the right data framework and architecture. Especially in today's AI-led world, data is key to defining relevant program interventions for targeted population segments, optimising fundraising strategies, scaling impact, and strengthening governance. Creating the right data architecture/framework is key to creating solutions which are sustainable and impactful for beneficiaries.

5. Governance and Sustainability
Digital systems must be treated as long-term organisational assets. This requires embedding digital costs into program economics, ensuring data privacy and security, and remaining audit-ready. Research from global development institutions underscores that sustainability, not pilots, is what separates successful transformations from failed ones [3].

Guest Column

Sanjeev Prasad,
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From Theory to Practie: Lessons from the Field
What follows is drawn not from theory, but from my direct experience of walking alongside SPOs as they navigated the complexities, trade-offs, and mindset shifts required to make digital transformation work on the ground.

Image source: Seva Mandir Website

A. Seva Mandir: Strengthening Community-Centric Programs Through Integrated Data
Seva Mandir operates at a significant scale across multiple development themes and geographies, with deep roots in community engagement. When I began working with their team, a disproportionate amount of staff time was consumed by manual data aggregation and reporting across programs.

By shifting to integrated family- and village-level databases and a digital MIS, reporting became faster, more accurate, and decision-ready. Program teams reclaimed time for meaningful community engagement, while leadership gained real-time visibility into impact trends. Crucially, the systems succeeded because they respected Seva Mandir's long-standing, people-first approach rather than imposing a purely technical solution. Equally important was the significant focus directed towards process mapping, designing solution components and how they will be stitched into a meaningful data architecture, before starting to build the applications.

B. Anudip Foundation: Using Technology to Multiply Program Reach and Quality
Anudip Foundation operates nationally, training large numbers of learners for employment. Here, the challenge was human capacity at scale. Through carefully designed digital and AI-enabled tools, Anudip augmented trainer capacity, enabled personalised learning for thousands of learners, and dramatically accelerated content creation.

Image source: Anudip Foundation Website

What impressed me most was the discipline around change management, budgeting, and iteration. Technology was used to augment human effort, not replace it, allowing Anudip to scale without compromising program quality.

Guest Column

Sanjeev Prasad,
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Digital as a Force Multiplier for Social Impact

Digital transformation is not a destination; it is a continuous journey. SPOs should start small, learn fast, and build confidence through early wins. The temptation to chase tools must be resisted; mission outcomes must remain the anchor.

With patient capital, long-term thinking, and disciplined execution, digital can free SPOs to focus on what matters most: beneficiaries and communities. Done right, digital truly enables us to do more, with less. LI

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Sanjeev Prasad

Advisory Board Member, Anudip Foundation;
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Sanjeev has been a serial entrepreneur, business leader, and CIO for large global corporations. He has been part of the global leadership team at Coforge, Genpact, and Sutherland and a founder, COO, and director of STG International Ltd. His initial years were spent developing and managing new products in leading companies like Nortel, Amdahl, and a healthcare startup in Silicon Valley acquired by General Electric.

Sanjeev is focused on enabling business transformation and identifying and creating successful new ventures at key technology inflexion points — client-server to internet age, cloud, and now digital transformation enabled by cloud, AI, mobile, and social technologies.

He has been on the advisory boards of Oracle, Gartner, and Avaya. He is a certified coach, investor, adviser, and mentor to various startups.

Comics

Digitise, Digitalise, Transform?

Match the following:

1. **Digitisation**
2. **Digitalisation**
3. **Digital Transformation**

EXAMPLE

1. **Field staff fills a Google Form instead of paper**
2. **Donor reports auto-generated monthly**
3. **Beneficiaries receive customised services based on usage data**
4. **Data shared across programs in real time**
5. **Scanning paper forms into PDFs**
6. **Online approvals instead of physical signatures**
7. **Migrating data to the cloud**
8. **Collecting fewer but better indicators**

What's On?

A list of upcoming social sector events

Curated by Team ILSS

20th International Conference on CSR

19-20 Feb

2026

This annual conference will bring together distinguished leaders from business, government, civil society, and academia to advance critical thinking and practical strategies in responsible corporate leadership.

Click Here

India Green Week

16-20 Feb

2026

India's Green Week in Mumbai features major sustainability events advancing clean energy, decarbonisation, green finance, and collaboration across energy and maritime sectors.

Click Here

NIER: International Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility and Economic Policy in Lucknow, India

21 Mar

2026

National Institute for Engineering & Research

The National Institute for Engineering and Research will host the International Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility and Economic Policy (ICCSREP-2026) in Lucknow, India on 21 March 2026. This event aims to showcase innovations and research in CSR and economic policy by bringing together professionals to discuss developments in the field.

Click Here

Social Sector News

Hyundai's Urban Forest Milestone

Hyundai Motor India Foundation has planted 1 million trees across a 90.5-acre urban forest near Talegaon, Pune, using the Miyawaki method to boost biodiversity, absorb carbon, and support local livelihoods under its IONIQ Forest initiative.

Know More

India to Host AI Impact Summit

India will host the India–AI Impact Summit 2026 from 16–20 Feb in New Delhi, the first global AI summit in the Global South, bringing leaders, experts, and innovators together to discuss inclusive, people-centric, and sustainable AI impact.

Know More

The Koita Foundation Tech Awards 2025

The Koita Foundation Tech Awards 2025, launched in collaboration with India Development Review (IDR) and ILSS – India Leaders for Social Sector, aim to recognise and strengthen nonprofits driving meaningful digital transformation. The awards will spotlight organisations using artificial intelligence for social impact across critical areas such as education, healthcare, livelihoods, gender, and inclusion. By celebrating innovation and responsible technology adoption, the initiative seeks to amplify scalable solutions, encourage ecosystem learning, and support nonprofits leveraging AI to deepen impact and improve outcomes at scale.

Know More

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