

# Dasra Girl Alliance: From Then to Now

---

## Learnings and the Way Forward

This document traces the journey and progress of Dasra and its partners into the sector of adolescent girl empowerment, highlighting key milestones but more importantly, learnings for the way forward. The Alliance partners have been critical in this journey for building an ecosystem for adolescent girls in India. Their steadfast and determined support through the challenges and successes has been the cornerstone on which the Alliance has grown taller and accomplished significant progress in the past four years. The unrestricted, long-term, collective funding for Dasra as well as the sector, access to technical expertise, and facilitated engagements with government agencies and other important stakeholders has been invaluable. The Alliance has allowed Dasra the opportunity to constantly innovate, learn, grow and ultimately, accelerate and multiply impact. More importantly, the belief that together we are stronger and the pursuit of putting that belief into action every year has brought us that much closer to achieving what is foremost for us all – a world where girls are safe, heard and celebrated.

In alignment with the organization's core values, Dasra's work in the adolescent girl sector has been characterized by powerful partnerships, trust based networks, and investments in successful, scalable solutions for deeper impact on the ground. In many ways, Dasra's work in this sector follows the evolution of the organization itself, which has become more deliberate, collaborative, data-driven, and impact-oriented over the years.

## DASRA'S INTRODUCTION TO ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Dasra's work to improve the lives of Indian girls began in 2008, when Dasra partnered with Godrej Industries to undertake research and identify strategic investments in girls' education. The partnership yielded Dasra's first report, *Girl Power: Transforming India through Educating Girls* which not only highlighted the need for philanthropic investment in girls' education, but also recommended investing in existing community-based non-profits with demonstrable track record and scalable models to maximize impact.

Dasra Giving Circle: a vehicle for collaborative, long-term, high impact giving brings together a group of philanthropists committed to investing in one high-potential non-profit for a minimum of three years, providing a steady support of funding, networking and capacity-building resources, allowing them to expand their impact and scale.

Based on this research, in 2010, Dasra introduced its first "giving circle" - a group of philanthropists pooled INR 2.8 crore to support the non-profit Educate Girls, one of the 10 organizations identified through Dasra's research. Educate Girls focused on improving the retention of girls in government schools in Rajasthan, a state with the worst educational gender-gaps in the entire country.

The first Dasra Giving Circle and subsequent support from Dasra enabled Educate Girls to scale up its impact from 70,000 children in 500 schools in 2008, to nearly 2MM children in 8,500 schools in just eight years. Additionally, it successfully raised the outcomes in language and math by 35-65%, bridged the literacy gap in a district in less than a decade, and transformed school infrastructure to be more girl-friendly. Equally importantly, with the Dasra Giving Circle funding and capacity building support, Educate Girls managed to escalate their growth, transforming from a team size of 30 and an annual budget of USD 108,000 in 2008 working in just one district, to an organization with a team size of 1000 people in 2016, working in 10 districts, on an annual operating budget of USD 5.6 million.

Building the organization's institutional capacity in terms of management, systems and processes, technology, has enabled Educate Girls to measure the outcome of their effort with far more diligence and rigor. Subsequently they have been able to structure a Development Impact Bond- the first of its kind in India, and the first in the world involving an educational social organization. Currently in progress, this outcome-led financial mechanism allows Educate Girls to innovate, adapt and tailor their programs to achieve the best possible results for marginalized girls and ensure that funders only pay for results achieved.

For Dasra, this investment in Educate Girls provided in-depth exposure to the ground realities of the average Indian girl – the everyday challenges and barriers that keep her from attaining her full potential, as well as the solutions that could help her leap forward. This experience also provided critical insight into the key structural factors necessary for an organization to scale effectively, including: leadership with a vision and willingness to scale, a strong management team, working collaboratively with strategically-aligned partners, the invaluable role of constant data tracking, analysis and evaluation, and deep community engagement.

Perhaps most importantly, Educate Girls was Dasra's first case study that proved the efficacy of the Giving Circle model, showcasing that the right organization, given unrestricted funding and capacity building support, will not only be able to scale radically, but will be able to successfully begin to move the needle on key issues.

## RECOGNIZING THE NEED FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Between 2008 and 2012, Dasra went on to research other areas such as nutrition, sanitation and employability, and to support and scale high-impact organizations such as Magic Bus, SNEHA, Muktanagan and Lend-a-Hand India. Every report created and organization worked with universally reinforced that:

1. **Adolescent girls in India are a largely invisible group:** They are discriminated against twice over: by gender and by age. There continues to be disproportionate number of barriers working against them, such as: patriarchal norms, restricted mobility, early marriage, violence in the home and outside and a lack of access to health services. At the same time, high school drop-out rates and a lack of employable skills prevents adolescent girls from fully participating in society and in the economy.
2. **Investing in adolescent girls leads to an exponential return on investment:** Both academic and field evidence indicated that even though there were a disproportionate number of barriers stacked up against girls, investing in them and their well-being would yield exponential returns on investment. Research indicated that when adolescent girls were empowered, educated and kept healthy, they became successful agents of change, drastically impacting and improving a range of issues such as: maternal mortality, child survival and gender-based violence. It highlighted that investing in girls translates into better futures for women, children and families, which ultimately leads to intergenerational impact.
3. **The ecosystem to support adolescent girls was fractured:** Specific challenges included:
  - a. A lack of policies across various government ministries that addressed the specific needs of adolescent girls. Traditionally, government programs largely aimed either at children or at women, leaving adolescent girls in the gap.

- b. Apart from a few international institutional donors, there was limited consistent, long-term funding allocated to address the challenges of adolescent girls as a primary beneficiary group.
- c. Since traditional funding had typically been attached to sectors (such as education or health) rather than a particular demographic group, non-profits aligned their programs to sectors as well and did not necessarily identify themselves as organizations addressing the needs of adolescent girls.
- d. Lastly, while several development issues such as education, skills development and healthcare had been covered by the media over the years, there was nearly no coverage in mainstream media about the issues impacting the lives of adolescent girls, and its subsequent impact on the development of the country.

This knowledge, gained over the years, was coupled with the assurance of growing philanthropic support. Dasra's success in creating a community of 300+ givers through 13 giving circles committed to directing INR 400+crores clearly demonstrated that there was both the appetite and commitment among Indian philanthropists to dedicate large amounts of funding over a longer period of time to move the needle on issues affecting adolescent girls in the development sector.

### **BUILDING THE DASRA GIRL ALLIANCE: KIAWAH TRUST, USAID & PIRAMAL FOUNDATION**

Dasra's many research reports and in-depth field experience unequivocally showed that in order to truly move the needle on key development issues in India, the holistic needs of adolescent girls would need to be addressed.

In 2011, Dasra partnered with UK based family foundation Kiawah Trust to conduct research on the lives of adolescent girls in India, with a specific emphasis on identifying challenges, gaps, and potential scalable solutions. The report that followed this research, *Owning Her Future*, made a clear case for investing in this cohort. With this also came the realization that moving outcomes for an issue that was neither well known nor well understood by various stakeholders would require significant financial investment and collective action at greater scale than ever before. This realization gave way to what became the Dasra Girl Alliance.

## THE ALLIANCE: ACTION, ACHIEVEMENTS AND INSIGHTS

Launched in 2013 in partnership with USAID, Kiawah Trust and the PIRAMAL Foundation, with an initial investment of \$14 million, the Alliance aimed to build a thriving ecosystem that empowered adolescent girls and improved health outcomes for mothers and children.

When the Alliance was formed in 2013, few in India believed in the power of investing in adolescent girls. However, the Alliance realized that a group as complex and underserved as this could not be addressed by any individual organization, a single stakeholder group or static business models. It required diverse players – enlightened funders, organizations, government bodies and media partnerships to work together to create long-term change.

The Alliance therefore set out to build this collaborative ecosystem by:

- Raising awareness on girls' issues through research and the media
- Unlocking domestic philanthropy to fund social organizations
- Building social organizations so that they can impact more girls, mothers and children
- Fostering collaboration among key players to achieve common goals

With the belief that India's then 113 million adolescent girls had the potential to be the power that could protect and propel India's future, the Alliance leveraged Dasra's core strengths – creating knowledge, building capacity and driving collaboration and funding towards a common goal of improving outcomes for adolescent girls.

Over the next four years, from 2013 to 2017, the Alliance made significant progress towards these outcomes by: highlighting and mainstreaming adolescent girl issues through research and media partnerships, identifying successful non-profit models and providing them with consistent funding and capacity building support to focus and grow adolescent girl programming, mobilizing various relevant stakeholders such as government, non-profits, funders and sector experts to create a community of practice that would learn, share and evolve together, and creating a pipeline of traditional and non-traditional funders for investment in the sector.

#### Headline Impact

- **Leverage of 9x:** Dasra has directed USD 28 million to the RMNCH+A sector using USD 3 million
- Successfully touched the lives of over **3.5 million** children, adolescents, girls and mothers.

#### Funding:

1. **145 unique givers** of which 115 funded this space for the first time
2. Engaged other traditional and non-traditional givers such as the Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives, GSK, J P Morgan, Johnson & Johnson, Bank of America and British Telecom

#### Knowledge:

1. **15** research reports published
2. **1,290** organizations mapped
3. **108** organizations highlighted to funders
4. **55** organizations funded

#### Capacity Building

1. Provided capacity building to almost **200 organizations** through peer learning workshops that cumulatively reached more than **10 million** girls women and children.
2. Organizations receiving hands on support saw an average increase of 38% in their outreach and 108% their budgets.

#### Mainstreaming the issue of adolescent girls:

1. Mainstreamed the issue of adolescent girls with over **240 articles** in leading Indian and international publications such as SSIR, Mint, Hindustan Times, Guardian, Alliance, the Economist and the Hindu

## THE DASRA GIRL ALLIANCE: KEY LESSONS LEARNED

The four years of the Alliance laid a solid foundation to build the ecosystem for adolescent girls in India. While doing so, many valuable lessons were learned – both from the field and from the structural construct of the Alliance. Acknowledging and addressing these lessons and insights will help us as we plan the next phase of the Alliance. Some of the key lessons include:

### 1. **The focus needs to be on adolescents – both girls *and* boys**

Social expectations of how men and boys are supposed to behave, along with rigid gender norms and stereotypes influencing how women are perceived in the context of a patriarchal society, directly impact behaviors and decisions related to schooling, sexual and reproductive health, marriage, mobility, and violence. This is why it's vital to ensure that implementing non-profits and stakeholders interested in moving the needle on adolescent girls also include programming addressing the prevailing behaviors and attitudes of men and adolescent boys towards girls and women. Girls exist in the larger context of their families, villages and societies. Thus, truly serving their long-term needs requires a cultural shift on the part of the societies raising them.

### 2. **Adolescents are a heterogeneous group**

Adolescents are a varied group, with many diverse identity markers. The most significant of these is age. Needs of adolescents – in education, health and skills development vary greatly according to their age. The challenges faced by those aged 10-14 years are very different from those faced by older adolescents. It is important therefore for programs to take a nuanced approach to adolescents based on their life stage. Currently, most programs for adolescents in India focus on those aged 15-19 years. Therefore, it is important for practitioners, funders and the government to acknowledge the heterogeneity of adolescents; collect relevant disaggregated data on distinct groups and ensure that programs are designed to meet their specific needs.

### 3. **Sector specific funding is limiting in its ability to measure true impact**

As mentioned before, traditional funding has been allocated towards specific development areas such as health, education, or sanitation, compelling non-profits to identify with certain sector/s and to specialize their programming to procure funding. For example, a nonprofit with the core competency of keeping girls in school may also have an impact on the outcome of delaying marriage. However, because they primarily receive “education” allocated financing, they would be unable to use funding to measure their impact on delayed marriage or evolve their programming to improve outcomes unrelated to education. This approach is limiting particularly if one is seeking to improve outcomes for a demographic group as it inhibits organizations’ ability to innovate new programs with the potential to create greater impact.

4. **Activity based funding may not achieve desired outcomes**

Even within certain sectors, traditional funders are typically prescriptive, funding non-profits to undertake certain activities or interventions that have known to create impact. For instance, a funder who believes that “teacher training” results in better education outcomes would fund various non-profits to implement that particular intervention. While this approach is logical in theory, it is a generalized solution that tends to disregard the differences in local contexts. The local expertise and insight that non-profits have built over years of engaging deeply within their communities actually puts them in a favorable position to be able to identify strategies that will result in the desired outcomes. Funders should therefore finance outcomes, not specific programs. Funding outcomes allows implementing non-profits to build their internal capacity when necessary and to be innovative with their interventions according to what is most effective, all while holding themselves accountable for the desired results.

5. **It is essential to support non-profits for comprehensive programming**

The needs of adolescents are extremely diverse and cut across many different development sectors – education, health, skills development and building agency. True impact will require addressing all of these needs together while keeping the adolescent at the center of it all. Traditionally, funders would choose organizations that were working on different programs and ask them to relocate to a geography in which they believed the program was needed. In this way, funders would often play the role of coordinators, bringing in different organizations to a particular geography in an effort to create impact. However, non-profits reveal that it is challenging for them to just replicate their program in another geography because they lack the same engagement with the communities and government that they enjoyed in geographies where they were successful. Instead, it would be more strategic for them to receive funding to add other components to existing programs thereby equipping themselves to address the holistic needs of adolescents. This would require funders to be more deliberate in their funding while also providing organizations with technical support for comprehensive programming.

6. **The government needs to be included from the very beginning**

In the past four years, Dasra has been successful in engaging with sector experts, non-profits and funders. Supporting almost 200 organizations through the Alliance, many of whom engage with government in various ways, has re-emphasized the importance of partnering with the government to ensure scale and sustainability. While Dasra has usually interacted with government through its non-profit partners, any group seeking to create large scale systemic change would need to engage with the relevant government body in a more deliberate, direct and strategic manner. Therefore partnering with agencies that have a demonstrable track record in being able to do so or hiring key talent with government expertise should be considered to build out this component.

## 7. **Collaboration demands a shared vision**

For an alliance of this scale to be successful, the facilitator needs to do far more than just align efforts. Such an initiative demands a shared vision. While alliances draw on the respective strengths of each partner to move forward, they are also often at a risk of losing momentum unless all stakeholders involved are in agreement of and are working towards the exact same outcomes. While the priorities for each of the partners of the Alliance were complimentary, they were not always the same (RMNCH for USAID, adolescent girls for Kiawah Trust). While this did not present any major hurdles in achieving the overall objectives, it does sometimes increase the burden on the facilitator to continuously align differing agendas. Dasra and its partners learned that the next phase of this initiative had to begin with a strong shared vision of strategy and desired outcomes, allowing Dasra and its partners to drive targeted, powerful impact.

Based on these key learnings, Dasra, in the past year, engaged with strategic consultants such as Bain & Company, the Dalberg Global Development Advisors and The Bridgespan Group, to analyze the insights gained. Dasra also consulted with over 100 Indian and global experts in the field of adolescents, to understand how best to amplify its impact and meet the critical needs of adolescents in the country.

Through these conversations and after having studied how other sectors have evolved over the years, Dasra in partnership with Bain, evolved a framework to understand the process and elements of ecosystem building. It involves the following five components:

1. **Spotlight shining:** Directing attention to the sector and organizations through research, diligence, and media awareness
2. **Non-profit acceleration:** Building the capacity of social entities and individuals for faster and more effective scaling
3. **Fostering collaboration:** Forming coalitions of relevant stakeholders to synergize efforts and facilitate peer learning
4. **Stage management:** Building and driving outcome based networks, codifying successful models, measuring impact and contributing to policy development

The above framework, coupled with Dasra's experience shows that the Alliance has covered significant ground by directing attention to the sector through research and media, built capacity of non-profits to take grassroots impact to scale and fostered a certain degree of collaboration among funders.

It is now time to incorporate learnings from the past four years to be more adolescent focused, geography-specific and in support of comprehensive programming while moving towards a more outcome and evidence-led collaborative addressing the holistic needs of adolescents in India.

## 10TO19: THE DASRA ADOLESCENTS COLLABORATIVE

Continuing to build on the foundation created by the Alliance, Dasra has now launched 10to19: the Dasra Adolescents Collaborative, a USD 30MM outcome-led platform to improve outcomes for adolescents in India. Its goal is to support and scale 6-8 adolescent health and development focused non-profits across geographies that will collectively work towards scaling positive pathways for 5MM adolescents (aged 10-19 years) over the next five years. The Collaborative will unify a key set of stakeholders (including funding partners, implementing partners, technical experts, and governments) under a shared vision to achieve the following specific outcomes:

1. Completing secondary education
2. Delaying age at marriage
3. Delaying age of first pregnancy/birth
4. Increasing agency (self-esteem and self-efficacy)

**Specific program goals:** The Collaborative aims to move the needle on the four core outcomes by at least 10% for the adolescents that it works with. To this end, it will fund 6-8 organizations to scale by 30% over five years to reach a minimum of 2 million adolescent girls in India.

The Collaborative is the first initiative of its kind in India and will include six key elements in its operating model that are designed to overcome the particular challenges of the adolescent sector in India. These elements are:

### **1. Big bets on local, homegrown organizations**

Dasra believes that local non-profits, by virtue of being entrenched in communities for years, have developed a deep understanding of their communities' unique needs, challenges and possible pathways to address those solutions. Therefore, the most effective way to address the challenges of adolescents holistically is to invest in existing non-profits that have the relevant experience and expertise. The Collaborative's "anchor funders" will provide sustainable funding to 6-8 selected non-profits during the five years of the collaborative (investing at least INR 2-3 Cr in each of them every year). Additionally, they will be provided with intensive capacity-building support, strategic advice, and measurement and evaluation of programming, allowing them to effectively scale by at least 30% in that period.

### **2. Aggregating impact in specific geographies**

India is an extremely diverse country – each state has its own unique context of adolescents, challenges, infrastructures and government policies. Because of this profound diversity, solutions that are successful in one state are often not transferrable to other state contexts. Identifying and concentrating resources on select geographies will ensure focused collective efforts, opportunities to engage with relevant state governments and ease of measuring impact.

In its first few years, the Collaborative will begin with investments in three states – Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Rajasthan.

### **3. Funding comprehensive programming**

Since the issues impacting adolescents are intertwined, successfully creating the desired outcomes requires a holistic approach on the part of the non-profits implementing the program. Dasra's research and mapping of more than 1200 nonprofits in the field clearly shows that non-profits that adopt a multi-pronged, holistic approach and simultaneously address gaps in health, education, employability and agency consistently have the deepest and most sustainable impact on the lives of adolescents. The collaborative will therefore move away from the traditional sector specific funding approach and instead fund the selected non-profits to innovate and grow through comprehensive adolescent programming.

### **4. Outcome-led funding**

By shifting the focus to funding outcomes rather than activities, the Collaborative will strive to empower non-profits to be more experimental in their approach and adopt the programming that is ultimately the most effective in achieving the agreed-upon outcomes. At the same time, outcome-driven funding will help keep non-profits accountable, as it requires them to consistently measure and demonstrate their overall impact.

### **5. Measurement, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)**

Measurement, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) activities within the Collaborative will be anchored in a rigorous data measurement system to understand aggregated impact, clarify and prioritize the relative effectiveness of different interventions, and generate evidence for the sector as a whole. The Collaborative will co-create outcomes frameworks for implementing partners in various pathways in addition to defining a cohesive set of intermediate results that make the measurement towards the four key outcomes more realistic in the short and medium term. The designed framework will not be prescriptive in nature. Instead, it will be co-designed with all partners to ensure that it has the required flexibility to be adapted to various intervention strategies across different pathways. The aim is to create a comprehensive, data-backed view of the Collaborative that enables actors in the sector to focus on high impact activities, seek out partnerships to plug in gaps in service delivery and create evidence that can be used for advocacy and public policy changes.

### **6. Knowledge sharing and collective advocacy**

In addition to working intensively with the 6-8 chosen organizations, the Collaborative will hold conferences and workshops with its community of practice, which comprises of more than 60 other non-profits in the sector. These conferences and workshops will allow non-profits to share and learn key insights, evidence, proven strategies, and best practices on what works to move the needle on adolescent issues, in order to maximize overall sector impact. The Collaborative

will review the insights and evidence from its MEL efforts, conferences and workshops to compile and agree upon “what works” for adolescents, as well as set sector-wide benchmarks for impactful interventions. It will bring together some of the largest and most influential players and, using evidence generated by its research, engage policymakers and other stakeholders to improve adolescent programming in India. Evidence-based advocacy has the potential to attract further resources to the field. This, coupled with government buy-in, will ensure long-term support for the sector, ultimately impacting and improving the lives of adolescent in India.

#### **HOW WILL THE DASRA ADOLESCENTS COLLABORATIVE WORK WITH IMPLEMENTING NON-PROFITS?**

Over the five years, the Collaborative will work intensively with 6-8 implementing non-profits, providing them with significant capacity-building support and external expertise, and to help them scale. These nonprofits are responsible for innovating interventions to move the needle on the Collaborative’s four core outcomes. The Collaborative’s engagement with implementing non-profits will follow this trajectory:

1. **Support and fund core competencies:** After implementing partners have been selected, they will be provided with capacity building support and funding to implement interventions at scale according to their core competencies. For example, a previously education-aligned NGO might have a core competency of keeping girls in school, whereas an organization that had previously identified as health-related might have a core competency in delaying first pregnancy.
2. **Use innovative programing to evolve beyond core competencies:** Implementing partners will then be encouraged to use innovative programming and interventions to evolve beyond their core-competencies, in order to increase impact on other outcomes of the collaborative. To do this, they will be encouraged to form partnerships with other scaled non-profits and community-based organizations, which will provide them with mentoring and support to deliver additional interventions. They will also fine-tune and expand their existing interventions with the help of consultants, experts and technical partners.
3. **Document best practices:** Finally, based on the data linking outcomes with interventions acquired by the Monitoring & Evaluation team, the Collaborative will identify which interventions and programs were the most efficient and effective in achieving the outcomes. These will be subsequently documented and shared with relevant stakeholders within the larger sector.

#### **Coordinated action for India’s adolescents has transformative potential**

Standing at a decisive point between youth and adulthood, the needs of India’s 243 million adolescents are as diverse as they are urgent. Addressing them requires coordinated, large-scale and long-term

action. The Collaborative therefore seeks to maximize the potential of strategic philanthropy to transform the lives of 10 to 19 year olds by leveraging the strengths of each stakeholder, and harmonizing their actions to achieve four key outcomes: delaying the age of marriage and first pregnancy, enabling the completion of secondary school, and increasing agency. By doing this, the Collaborative will make a powerful measureable impact on the lives of India's adolescents.