



**Kerrin:** Hello, and welcome to the Untapped Philanthropy podcast. I'm your host and Fluxx co-founder, Kerrin Mitchell. I've spent my career exploring technology's role and amplifying impact within our social sector and, more specifically, helping funders to learn to leverage technology and data to connect and better serve our collective causes, constituents, and communities.

In this podcast series, my team and I will profile social sector leaders, public figures, philanthropists, and industry futurists to explore this fascinating intersection of funding, technology, and policy. We're here to analyze the most critical and formative topics and trends that shape philanthropy both today and tomorrow. We hope this series leaves you inspired to think and act through a more collective and visionary lens.

This month, I am thrilled to welcome co-founder and partner at Dasra, Deval Sanghavi. Dasra is an intermediary in India's multistakeholder development ecosystem, helping givers and family philanthropies to give more strategically to vulnerable communities. But I'll let Deval tell you a little more about his work. Welcome, Deval.

**Deval:** Thank you so much, I really appreciate the opportunity.

**Kerrin:** I'm so excited that you're here. And this is a really interesting episode to me because I've always been fascinated by the dynamics of the Indian philanthropic system. It's such a growing, evolving group. But before we dive into that, I'd love to just have you tell a little bit about yourself and what brought you to a career in philanthropy.

**Deval:** I was born and brought up in Houston, of Indian origin. So, we'd visit India quite a bit to see family and I would just be shocked at the disparity I saw growing up in Houston versus seeing what was happening on the ground there with children who looked more like me begging on traffic lights. I couldn't comprehend why this occurred, number one, and number two, why my family was not doing anything about this. And they weren't as shocked about what was happening.

I decided to volunteer once I got older and graduated from college and I had an amazing experience and learned far more from the community than I thought I could ever give. But I had a job to come back to and student loans to pay off. That's also where I met my wife Neeraj. She was born and brought up in Canada and is also of Indian origin and had volunteered in rural India. And both of us were up at 4 am working on pitch books for different investors and realized that we would rather use some of the skills we learned in banking to serve NGO leaders instead of for-profit entrepreneurs. And that led to the creation of Dasra.

**Kerrin:** Wonderful. I'd love to get an overview of the India-giving landscape and the power balances that are at play. There's quite a range of givers and grantees in the US, but there are also very important nuances in this burgeoning giving world. There's been a lot of change in India — back in the 2010's we saw mandated corporate giving, and there's new muscle. I'd love to hear your take on the kind of India-giving landscape.

**Deval:** To give the listeners a perspective, it was only in 1991 that the economy sort of liberalized and made it possible for immense wealth creation, similar to other capitalist societies. And a decade or two after that is when you started seeing family businesses thrive both within India and globally. And billionaires started emerging.



We started our work in 1999, and quite a bit of funding for the nonprofit sector came from global sources versus Indian sources. But that started to change quite rapidly from around 2009 onwards when we started seeing announcements from families that ran large companies, making large pledges and commitments to fund the sector and including In Azim Premji, Schiff, RJ Biddle, and others.

And with that, you saw the beginning of shifts in terms of domestic funding coming from more localized programs as well as a view of what the scale looks like in terms of organizations growing their outreach and working more closely with the government and providing support to improve what the government was already doing. It brought more innovation and impact to their programs and services across the country.

**Kerrin:** How are the government and the private sector working on that together? I'm very curious to understand the dynamics. Are they working together? I mean, how does that play out as this industry evolves and money starts to funnel in more often?

**Deval:** When we started out in 1999, I think many organizations were non-governmental organizations and didn't work in partnership with the government, but quite the opposite. And the government back then felt skeptical of these NGOs. But over the years, we started to see greater collaboration happen, and both groups realized that they had their own strengths and weaknesses. And they were easing legislation. I guess maybe it's a trust thing.

**Kerrin:** That's such an interesting evolution on that trust factor between the government and NGOs.

**Deval:** And I think all institutions and sectors have good people and bad people. But I think when the good NGOs started to meet with the good government officials, you saw scale and impact happen in a lot of these nonprofit organizations when they were invited to work within government schools, hospitals, or clinics. And in both groups, sort of figured out how to work with each other and created a greater impact at scale.

**Kerrin:** So that's super interesting because that same concept of trust and empowering grantees is something that is also a major focus for Dasra. So previously, you had mentioned a lot of practices to really help build some of that empowerment for grantees. And you and your wife have been trying to promote some of these same concepts of trust-based philanthropy practices in India. Can you explain a little bit about that? And what changed in your organization during the pandemic that caused you to sort of double down on that approach?

**Deval:** So, a couple of things. We've been around for 23 years, and we've been very lucky to support multiple organizations to improve and scale their programs from one district or even scaling from state to state or nationally — some even globally now. And in that process, we focused a lot of our energies as an organization on scalable models focused on a particular sliver of development.

This could be girls' education, youth empowerment, or malnutrition for children ages 0 to three. And through those efforts, I think we were able to allow organizations to hone in on a particular aspect of development and really take that to different geographies. I think, unfortunately when COVID hit, we saw millions of families walking home because all the transportation was cut, and migrant and informal workers were left to fend for themselves. It was clear to us that many of the holistic smaller community-based organizations did everything because there are very few



groups and nonprofits working in those communities. Those organizations that we left out were respected. They were community-based. They did good work. We just didn't really know how to support them in scale. And when COVID hit, we realized that there was a need to double down in some of these community-based organizations, especially those that were working with more marginalized and vulnerable communities that traditionally don't even have access to strong government programs because of how remote their locations are.

**Kerrin:** What I find compelling is that you tried something new. And that was a risk you took that worked in the sense that you were able to connect to new communities. Were there any shocking or interesting, or exciting results that came up that you would be interested in sharing?

**Deval:** Definitely. Number one, we started tapping into our network. And instead of just sort of supporting the 700 organizations we've worked with in the past, we said, "why don't you all recommend groups that need the help?" And many of our partners started unearthing smaller community-based organizations that they had partnered with over the years that we just never even knew or heard of.

So, the network effect of NGOs recommending others was amazing. And the leaders of these larger organizations were also so excited that we were making the shift because they saw us when they were smaller. And so, they were really happy to see, in this greater time of need, that we were going to groups that needed the help. And they felt they played a role in recommending those groups to us. So, it was a real sort of community of practice that came together to shift and support the most vulnerable during this time.

**Kerrin:** That warms my heart. This is a repeatable concept that people are just getting their arms around. And it's a change in mindset. It's change management to change cultural approaches where every giver is leveraging their network to collaborate. It's a cooperative economic gain in philanthropy. And it's a beautiful thing to be able to open up that network and have some common denominators to be able to create that communication. We're working on that at Fluxx from a technical perspective. We're asking ourselves: "how do we start to make that happen more? And how do we open people's eyes up to the smaller groups that are big impact players but run under the radar to most people?"

I started Fluxx because I wanted to see something that could connect people and make that collaboration occur. So, I love that you can move in that direction. It's very aspirational for me. I think that's the key to success and trust-based philanthropy. And I know that leveraging collaboration to drive change within your communities is something that you guys did differently. Can you elaborate a bit more on that?

**Deval:** We had two approaches to sourcing in select organizations. One, we've gone to existing networks of organizations and asked them to recommend partners that sort of fall within our criteria of evaluating the intersectionality of vulnerability, proximate leadership, and focusing on groups that are just not as known. And so, we shared these criteria with multiple organizations that had networks of hundreds of groups on different topics and issues and asked them to recommend 10 that fit these criteria. We automatically provide them grant funding because we know if they were recommended, the thought process and diligence would be far greater than any five-page, 50-page, or 100-page results framework. And we trust them to support their communities.



And so that was one way we trusted our networks and their value and judgment. And then the second was just having NGOs recommend other NGOs. So, we partnered with the Roddenberry Foundation in Los Angeles, of all places, who created a tech backbone to make this happen. There were three rounds of NGOs recommending other NGOs, and then the second group that was recommended would recommend another group. Then you start seeing the same groups recommended three or four times over. And that became the shortlist of groups that we automatically funded without bothering those groups with a proposal process, site visits, and diligence that traditional funders kind of look at.

**Kerrin:** Yes, we've been talking about this for years! Wouldn't it be great if you could trust other funder's compliance? And you're finding people through these networks. This is incredible.

**Deval:** I completely agree with you in terms of the benefit of utilizing technology to make it easier for everyone to access this information and open source this work. It really reduces the time and effort that an organization needs to put into talking about its work. Then the NGOs can spend their time where it's needed with the community.

**Kerrin:** It's a cultural value decision that you've made, and it becomes part of how you operate. These works are really mobilized on values. What I am interested to learn more about as well is where things went differently. Where did you come across challenges that you had to redirect? Do you have any examples of running into a challenge with trust-based work? Did you ever have to put more structure back in place? Or has it worked quite well so far?

**Deval:** In 2010, after doing our work for over a decade, we created these giving circles. The goal was to bring 10 philanthropists together and choose an organization to support. In that process, knowingly or unknowingly, we sort of forced philanthropists to put their ego at the door, and then whichever organization got the most votes, all of the money was directed to that organization. And so, we gave the power to the philanthropist but also said whatever the group decides is actually more important than what your personal decision is while still keeping it very open to the giver to fund the organization on top of what the group was doing. We said you can still fund all the organizations you choose in your own right, but a group effort will have a 10x multiplier.

And the reason I say this is because the goal for us at the time was to help philanthropists understand the need to collaborate and to decrease the transaction cost and time of an NGO; because they were meeting 10 funders at one go versus doing individual work. But in hindsight, we realized after managing 15 of these giving circles, we realized we put a lot of power in the hands of new philanthropists.

While we vetted the organizations and did research reports for the shortlisted groups, we realized that the power needs to be put into the hands of the NGO. Now there's a five-member Investment Committee, and all of these are NGO leaders that are very similar in size and shape to the portfolio of organizations that are being selected. And so it's NGOs deciding which groups get it, not donors, not even Dasra. And I think to that earlier point, an investor is an investor and may not know the intricacies of that sector. They haven't done this day in and day out.

**Kerrin:** That's an interesting point. You have these opportunities to go into the sector and make it more effective. What are some things that, when you think about looking ahead, whether it be operationally or improvements, you'd like to see made in the India giving ecosystem? What are



some of these sorts of places where you would want to see investment either made on a procedural level or perhaps even that technological level?

**Deval:** At a procedural level, all of the funds we give are five-year commitments of unrestricted funding to each organization, so they can do whatever they want with it. And COVID and now the climate is teaching us whatever you think is going to happen, it's not going to happen.

And so, the funds are there to enable these organizations to have that comfort and safety net and be more resilient and start rebuilding their communities. But alongside that is capacity building and making it optional for the organizations to participate in programs to help with their elevator pitches or strategic communications or business plans, or financial modeling for the next five years. It's really whatever their needs are.

We are taking this participatory approach when it comes to funding. We still need to build capacity. So, they can access funding from the regular market share, which is not as trusting as perhaps we are, and not as community-based. So, we still need to have these organizations build some of those systems and processes. And utilizing technology to enable that to happen digitally is something that we see making it scalable and just as effective on the ground.

**Kerrin:** That's a great point. When you think about how to magnify change and the value of trust, that's a very interesting call to action for us as technologists. Is there anything about the giving ecosystem that you want to evolve? Any practices or policies you would like to influence if you had a magic wand and could change anything?

**Deval:** At the global development level, I feel there's too much emphasis on big bets and scaling an individual organization across a region or country or globally; versus saying it's not either or but, it's in hand. And there's significant value in supporting a large number of smaller grassroots organizations across geographies who honestly may not scale beyond their geography but are working on issues that cannot be scaled.

I think it's okay to recognize that supporting a large number of smaller organizations versus a few large ones to scale is ok. There are lots of great foundations that are giving \$50 million or \$100 million collectively. But in that process, I think you're sort of losing out on the small and medium sort of enterprises and organizations that honestly probably will do better just providing support to the communities they serve.

**Kerrin:** I think it's so important for us to see the burgeoning exciting evolution that India is going through with their philanthropic community. Redefining how we can work through these trust-based approaches and seeing that happen through Dasra. It's a testament to what we can all aspire to for places where we are looking to embrace trust-based practices.

I appreciate you coming in to share all that with us. And as a wrap-up, I usually run us through this thing called the rapid-fire questions. I will just shoot a couple of questions at you to answer. It's one of my favorite parts. You've been in philanthropy for 22 years, what is the most surprising thing you've seen change in that time?

**Deval:** Organizations across India and even globally have started to collaborate more effectively to work closely with the communities they impact — it's shocking to me. And I would have never dreamed 23 years ago that these groups would just be able to not only sustain but really enable their communities to thrive in the manner that they have.



**Kerrin:** I love that. Is there a fun fact you recently learned that you want to share with our users?

**Deval:** So, I'm in New York right now. It's UN General Assembly week and climate week and all sorts of other things. So, I've come from Mumbai to New York and learned a lot. But I think one of the key learnings is how climate affects education, health, and other core programs. It's just been quite interesting to understand and realize.

**Kerrin:** If you could be a superhero, what would your superpower be?

**Deval:** Trust.

**Kerrin:** All right, last one. What podcasts are you listening to other than ours, of course, that you would recommend to other listeners?

**Deval:** So similar to you. I was inspired about two years ago to start running my own podcast. The goal is just to have these voices of NGO leaders, donors, and others, and talk about philanthropy, what's working and what's not. And so, I'm inspired by what you do here. And I just felt like that's a great way just to give people a chance to hear from those who are doing the work on the ground and be inspired and hopefully realize they don't have to wait for a once-in-a-century pandemic to give back.

**Kerrin:** I have done a little research on it, and I love your podcast. Deval, thank you so much for joining us today on the podcast and sharing more about yourself and your work again. I truly am personally just so in awe of what you guys are doing, and I appreciate all the efforts and the changes that you're making and how you think about giving.