

Proceedings of STARS Forum's 10th Annual National Conference

The 10th Annual National Conference of the STARS Forum was held on 6 & 7 Dec, 2019. BAIF Development Research Foundation (Warje, Pune) was the host partner and the Atal Innovation Mission (Niti Ayog) was the Knowledge Partner.

The Conference theme was ***Re-Imagining Rural Skills Development – Bridging Policy and Practice***. Nearly 90 professionals from different skills development institutions, NGOs, social enterprises, academic institutions and government bodies attended the conference to deliberate on this theme. In-depth panel discussions with experts explored the theme from four angles - (a) a review of how skilling of rural India has worked and what are the lessons learnt for the way forward, (b) engaging rural youth - challenges, opportunities, (c) rural entrepreneurship to fuel job creation in rural India and (d) emerging role of CSR and Foundations in skills based development of rural India. Presentations, workshops, and masterclasses by experts helped expand our knowledge base. Open Spaces helped small groups focus on topics of common interest.

Skilling Rural India – Lessons learnt and the way forward.



Panel Chair: **Dr. Rajashree Joshi** (Chief Thematic Programme Officer - BAIF)
 Panelists: **Girish Sohoni** (President, BAIF), **Mrinalini Kher** (Co-founder - Yuva Parivartan), **Anil Manekar** (Member-Secretary, Rajiv Gandhi Science and Technology Commission, Govt. of Maharashtra), **Dr. Yogesh Kulkarni** (Executive Director - Vigyan Ashram, and Chair - STARS Forum).

Key points on this theme:

1. Skill development as is currently delivered in India, is being driven by the context of the past. Hence it continues to address the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy. However there is a need to re-think skilling - for a post-carbon economy, with new disciplines of engineering and technologies of the future.
2. Given the paucity of jobs in today's context, skills training has to focus on livelihoods rather than skilling for jobs. SDG goals, sustainable agriculture, climate change offer new opportunities and avenues for skilling, from single-service to multi-service provider

opportunities. Agriculture that uses increased mechanisation and value chain development will require large numbers of agri-entrepreneurs.

3. The numbers involved are huge - whether in number of school drop-outs (or “school walk-outs”), unemployable educated youth, number of youth entering working age etc. But we need to keep thinking about ways and means to reach every single one of them. This continues to be an unsolved problem. Youth continues to be an enigma and there are no easy answers.
4. Skills training becomes difficult after the age of 30 for women and 25 for men because of the life changes that take place for them. Hence the urgency of reaching them soon. However the motivation for skill development is higher amongst young women than amongst young men.
5. Mobile skills training centres, use of popular mobile technologies (e.g. TikTok), hybrid (classroom and distant learning) models all need to be tried.
6. Only focusing on skilling for employment by industry is not sufficient. There are limits to how many such trained youth can be placed in jobs, how much the organised sector can absorb the trained population. Hence it is important to place equal focus on rural livelihoods and emerging opportunities in technology, agriculture, renewable energy etc. Holistic rural development perspectives are required. Short term courses (even if for a few hours) that provide short-term/seasonal employment are equally important.
7. Giving dignity of skill training is important. There is a tendency to relegate skilling to “drop-outs” or those who do not go into higher education. This needs to be corrected. The absence of skills training and vocational education in formal education is showing in various forms - poor tinkering and innovation mindset, low employability of educated youth, poor quality of goods and services, etc.
8. Increasing aspirations, access to higher education (including engineering), ability to afford higher education is leading to large numbers of youth in rural India who have completed such degrees but are unable to find jobs or able to compete with others from better institutions. Unemployment amongst educated youth is one of the biggest demotivating factors for them to join skill development programs. Many prefer to remain idle rather than do something that seems below their dignity or education levels. This cohort needs to be addressed along with those who have lower educational attainment.
9. “Learning to Learn” is a life long, essential skill. To enable this, skill training should be complemented with the development of scientific temper, the attitude of curiosity and questioning, and avoid giving readymade answers.



10. Innovation in skills training is required. There is a need to bring skills to the people, the need to use popular technologies (e.g. mobile internet) and new apps (e.g. TikTok) to enthuse content creation and distribution.
11. Industry 4.0 is becoming a reality. Technologies like 3D printing are facilitating the move from mass-production to custom manufacturing and personal fabrication. These bring new possibilities to the rural population such as local manufacturing. Such new technologies will require new skills to be acquired - including design, customisation, etc. These will mean that a rural person need not come to urban areas for such services - they can be delivered from rural areas too.
12. Self-sufficient villages are a real possibility. Good roads and mobile internet is helping e-commerce reach beyond urban and peri-urban areas. Renewable energy, water conservation, waste recycling, food processing - all such activities are becoming accessible and affordable and can be operated at small scale. These will create new employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.
13. Tools deficit in villages can be and need to be urgently rectified. “Fab labs” are a replicable model that cover such tools deficits and make innovation accessible to local children, youth and anyone who has a tinkering mindset. Dr. Yogesh Kulkarni - Executive Director of Vigyan Ashram, where the world’s first Fab lab was set up, has offered to assist any organisation wishing to setup a Fab Lab in their community/area.
14. Several incubation centres operate around India. However they tend to target those who have sophisticated ideas presented well etc. We need different incubation centres that are designed to cater to the mindset, abilities of educated rural youth to enable ideas/opportunities solving rural problems.

Links to Videos of the Panel: [Talk by Girish Sohani \(BAIF\)](#), [talk by Mrinalini Kher \(Yuva Parivartan\)](#), and talks by [Dr. Yogesh Kulkarni \(Vigyan Ashram\)](#) and [Anil Manekar \(RGSTC, Gov. of Maharashtra\)](#).

Engaging Rural Youth - Challenges, Opportunities, and New Approaches.

Panel Chair: **Ashok Kalbag** (Vigyan Ashram, Pabal)

Panelists: **Pravin Mahajan** (Janarth, Samarthan), **Vaibhav Kaley** (Wondergrass, Nagpur), **Subhash Deshpande** (Jnana Prabodhini, Pune), **Ajay Kumar** (Teach For Green, Delhi)

- 59% of the population resides in rural India but contributes only 15% to the GDP.
- Extremely weak primary education reduces overall effectiveness of skill development. And this is more challenging in the case of women.



- Dignity as well as respect for skills development requires to be re-emphasised. For example, the [recent announcement](#) of the SSC-HSC board in Maharashtra that no student will be declared as “failed” but as “eligible for skill development”, denigrates skills. This is ridiculing skills development itself. STARS Forum strongly objects to such a statement.
- Skill training content needs to be localised - for example, showing success stories from Kerala to youth in Uttarakhand may not create the same impact as showcasing local success stories. Secondly content often is English - this needs to be made available in local languages to become accessible and useful.
- Soft skill and business skill development is weak in our current school education. Even higher education colleges are unable to produce graduates with a high level of skills and knowledge.
- Providing skill development locally, within reach of the youth is important. Expecting them to travel to other towns may not work for those who have to support their families, work on their farms etc. Local infrastructure (gram panchayat) as well as human resources (local teachers) should be leveraged rather than expecting the local youth to go outside for several weeks to get trained.
- General skills offered to men cannot necessarily work for girls. Given that girls constitute around 50% of any age group, it is essential to think about gender sensitivity in skills development. What kind of occupations are girls not picking up because of gender bias? What can be done to overcome this bias?
- Access to information about government schemes is usually not available with most youth. How to bridge this information gap?
- Rural youth cannot survive on a single skill, they need a basket of skills. In fact with changing seasons, they often need to acquire new skills.
- Aspirations of youth, their perspectives of skill development - especially what they want out of it, what are their immediate needs - are important. Often times skill development programs are designed considering the needs of the economy, and may not include aspirations of the target youth.
- There is a loss of artisanal skills in rural india - Artisan has a understanding of trade, nuance of knowledge, practices that are beyond a simpler understanding of skills. We may have people with skills but that does not mean they know as much as an artisan. In many cases, it is not the skill but the sense of artisanship that adds value to the end product.
- Decentralised technologies - rooftop solar, biogas, etc. - require local capabilities for sales, installation as well as after sales servicing. There are many essential skills that are required for the youth to be successful in these activities - skills that are beyond the technical skills of the product. Hence development of “soft” skills as well as business skills are as important as developing technical or “hard” skills.
- Rural youth is going away from agriculture - interest in agriculture is declining. Hence skill training in agriculture is very important. Lots of new technologies are coming into

agriculture - hence skills training and certification in agri-tech skills will regenerate interest amongst youth in this primary sector, or increase the productivity of those who remain engaged in agriculture.

- Thanks to downsizing, many new technologies have come up in recent years that can be adopted on a smaller scale in rural India. The rural-urban connection also offers new business opportunities. For example rather than send vegetables in as-is condition, if



they are cut and packed, it would save on transportation costs, it will reduce the solid waste loads on urban areas, while keeping naturally compostable material in rural farms. Similarly technologies to convert agriculture waste into briquettes can help improve quality of life for those who otherwise have to fetch firewood from far. However professionally managed aggregation and market linkage service

providers are critical to make this work.

- Hand Holding for new entrepreneurs is critical to help them sustain in the early days. Hence support systems - such as to access to markets, access to finance - are as critical as access to technology and skills.
- Telemedicine is a source of healthcare access to far off areas and hinterland. Devices for accessing healthcare services can be a source of employment and entrepreneurship for rural youth.
- Solar drying techniques for extending shelf life of vegetables. If this can be scaled up, it can address multiple opportunities - including supply to urban markets, and when scaled up with the help of professional intermediaries and aggregators, can service export markets as well.
- Economic returns may be vastly disproportionate to the kind of work that youth may want to put in. Working hours and discipline issues. The transition from a self-reliant, informal form of work and livelihood to a organised, more formal kind of work environment is not easy for many. Flexible work hours are woven into the fabric of rural life in India.
- Motivation to excel! - cannot be imparted. How to inculcate this across the board? The “daily wage” mentality can be detrimental to this. The shadow side of the “jugaad” makeshift mentality also affects coming up with high quality goods and services. Jugaad makeshift mentality kills the attitude to understand the problem bottoms up, develop a holistic understanding.
- Counselling services are critical to help a youth identify skills that are of interest to him/her. This will enable them to excel at something, take ownership of their professions.

Video recording of the Panel discussion: <https://youtu.be/PXqxRu9xqUg>

“Make in Rural India” – Fueling rural entrepreneurship, rural MSMEs and job creation in rural India. Aligning Policy direction and Implementation.

Panel Chair: **BR Venkatesh**, Entrepreneurship trainer and mentor, MBTLA Udyojakta Vikas Sanstha (Mumbai)

Panelists: **Dr. Sudha Kothari** (Managing Trustee, Chaitanya Rajgurunagar), **Dr. Dinesh Awasthi** (Advisor – SRISTI, Former Director Entrepreneurship Development Institute), **PM Amir Sultan** (Skills, Livelihoods and Vocational Education Expert), **Kulbhushan Birnale** (Social, Technology and Business Entrepreneur), **Narendra Karale** (Exec. Dir., PeopleSide Consulting)



- Most of the industrial development is largely aligned along the urban and developed areas of states. However the demographic dividend is much more widespread. Infrastructure penetration across the countryside enables new possibilities from an industrialisation point of view. So in addition to promoting rural entrepreneurship, governments and corporations should also look at decentralisation and moving from urban areas to peri-urban to rural areas. This would balance development and population load beyond urban centres.
- First-time MLAs should be supported in using their first legislative term in connecting opportunities to their districts-blocks-villages.
- Rural Entrepreneurship has a very high failure rate. Reasons for failures - The typical Rural entrepreneur is too weak to face the market. Low level of education and poorly developed technical skills are a major reason. The Produce often does not meet quality standards expected by the market. Small scale operations mean that the cost of manufacturing is higher than that in large scale manufacturing. Packaging falls short of expectations. Serious competition is presented by products coming from urban areas.
- However, Government needs to be proactive in helping rural entrepreneurship grow by addressing some of the factors listed above.
- Many government-run entrepreneurship development programs focus on providing definitions and theory. Hands-on experience of how to do business is missing. Hence this blocks converting participants into entrepreneurs and job creators, reducing the impact of such programs.
- Lack of soft skills and business skill training is a big hurdle to promoting rural entrepreneurship.

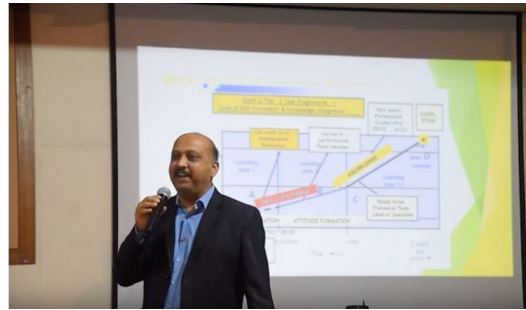
- Individual and group entrepreneurship - Group entrepreneurship as an attempt to overcome these shortcomings of entrepreneurship by an individual. However internal conflicts, conflicts over allocation of successes and failures are issues that affect group entrepreneurship efforts. An alternative design for scale allows the individual entrepreneur to produce for the market, but use a professionally managed locally staffed aggregation service to buy inputs in wholesale and in bulk quantity, saving in transaction costs. While each unit will be owned and operated at an individual or family level, for the purpose of input purchase and output disposal works better when done as a group. However professional management is critical for all these activities. FPO failures can be attributed to lack of professional management. Local educated youth and elders could act as a support group for the producer units. This interdependence works for the benefit of both. ITI trained youth looking after machine maintenance enables improved uptime and reduced breakdowns.



- SHGs provide a platform for women to interact and learn together, learning from each other, and understanding how to build institutions. Gram panchayat and Gram sabha looking at livelihood opportunities at the local level, enables better and holistic approach to using local human and natural resources. Training is usually available at Taluka level and not at the village level. This imposes a travel and opportunity cost on villagers - especially women and adolescent girls - to participate in skill development.
- Support systems for SHG and group entrepreneurship are critical and should be such that the members pay for the support services. Support systems include accounting, auditing, MIS, accessing government services and schemes, etc.
- Package of practices for farming and animal husbandry should be introduced at the school level. Innovations take time to be adopted - early adopters should be supported, and realistic expectations required for innovation to spread on a wide scale.
- Trust and relationships are critical components for success in developing value chains. Hence networks like STARS Forum can enable connecting with trusted, credible advisors who can support community institutions such as SHGs, SHG federations, FPOs.
- Wage work continues to remain in high demand, particularly amongst women. This is often a better alternative to high risk micro-entrepreneurship. When local youth who have migrated are coming back with investment capacity, can synergise with local aspirations and capacities, new opportunities for local wage work can be created - such as in organic farming.
- We had excellent models of rural enterprise, starting with Amul, that have scaled up and withstood competition. However these models have not been replicated sufficiently. Framework not used for skill development in rural areas. For example matching quality

standards expected in the market. No institutions for rural skills, e.g. craft based occupation, integrated farming. Ecosystem and frameworks missing that can address the needs of the people.

- Quality of training in rural skills by NGOs far better than that by NSDC training partners. NGOs directly face the communities, link them with financiers and local markets.
- Skills to produce high quality goods are extremely essential. Deductive training methods currently in use in the skill development sector. This approach certifies a student, but the certificate is not enough - the student needs to prove that he can apply the knowledge gained. Inductive training - similar to apprenticeship and hands-on practice oriented learning - is much more effective in rural skills. The conversion of training into actual demonstrable skills is much higher.
- Use of technology in small scale agriculture is very low. Hence skill training needs to be complemented with application of technology for true productivity increase. Hence provision and servicing of various technologies - from agriculture implements, power generators, irrigation, storage etc. - provides a large number of self-employment opportunities. Food processing technology, ability to grade farm produce, export of sun-dried vegetables are applications of technology that have potential.
- Entrepreneurship that is primarily based on agriculture needs to address seasonality of agriculture. What can be done during off-season time?
- Profit sharing of group enterprise amongst individuals in the group -- An individual's share of the profit is low which leads to declining interest in the enterprise. Hence this needs to be thought about when promoting group enterprises. It should generate adequate remuneration to each individual involved.



Video recording of the panel discussion on rural entrepreneurship -
<https://youtu.be/tW-QkY1a44A>

Emerging role of CSR/Corporates and Foundations in Rural Skills Training and Entrepreneurship.

Panel Chair: Dr. Yogesh Kulkarni, Executive Director, Vigyan Ashram & Chairperson - STARS Forum

Panelists: Rita Sengupta (Independent consultant and former Director, NIESBUD), Rohit Saroj (DGM CSR, Tata Motors), Hemant Gadgil (La Fondation, Dassault Systemes Pune), Poonam Bajpai (Head - Non-Farm Livelihoods, Jankidevi Bajaj Gram Vikas Sansatha)

- CSR spend is going up; More and more corporates are meeting their CSR spend requirements. Education is one of the favourite areas for CSR investments. Skills development is typically part of overall Education spend.
- Often the CSR activities get driven by what the corporate wants to do, rather than driven by the needs of the community. Short term program focus is a problem that limits impact and long term change. Livelihood projects and microenterprise creation need a longer timeframe of support - sometimes a year or more. At the same time, the willingness and investments in long term projects is going up.
- CSR teams may be limited by the range of skills and expertise they possess to support a full scale engagement. Would they have the experience or on the ground understanding of issues? Hence a good partnership between the corporate and its on-the-ground partners is critical. Increasingly funders are looking for impact from the programs they support, hence field partners also need to get better at defining, measuring and reporting impact of these programs.

- Most of the skilling programs are still focussed on classroom based training. These are often target driven. The conversion to jobs is still quite poor - as low as 13% - and those that do get jobs are not paid adequately. In fact many of the jobs are paying less than the minimum wage. Quality of training and trainers needs to be at the level that will make skill development effective. Due to this corporate India's interest in support skills development is



likely to be negatively impacted.

- Skill training and microenterprise development that have a business connect with corporates, attract a higher degree of support from CSR. This will also enable informal economy players to be brought into the formal economy for mutual benefit.
- Because corporations have preferred to look for impact in localities in their neighbourhood, the total spend on rural India has actually been low. This also reflects the uneven distribution of corporate India - mostly urban oriented, and also unevenly distributed across various states of India.
- Most corporate CSR investments also expect employee engagement opportunities. Hence this is an important point to be kept in mind when proposing projects for CSR investments.

Video recording of the panel on CSR - <https://youtu.be/ikAQDXUvOxg>

Other sessions at the Conference (with links to videos):

[How to think differently](#) - Talk by R. Sridhar, Innovation coach and author of the book “Unlock the Real Power of Ideation”.

How NGOs can be skills providers in association with NSDC, Sector Skill Councils? How can NGOs help increase outreach of skilling programs in rural India?

- [Talk by Laxmikant Malvadkar](#) (Swayam Shikshan Prayog, Latur, Maharashtra)
- [Talk by Dr. Reghu Ram Das](#) (Mitraniketan, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala)



[New collar and Green collar entrepreneurship - Opportunities in Rural India](#): Talk by Shri Vivek Sawant, Managing Director, Maharashtra Knowledge Corp. Ltd. (Pune, Maharashtra)

[Session on Community Innovation](#), by Dr. Unnat Pandit – Program Director, Atal Community Innovation Centres (Atal Innovation Mission, Niti Ayog, New Delhi)

Open Spaces:

The following parallel sessions took place during the Open Spaces.

- Nimesh Ingle and Manish Nair from Rural Caravan gave a demonstration of eGramVyapar - a software solution to help SHGs and entrepreneurs track their business performance.
- Lalit Meisheri (Founder, Tech Know Consultants, Mumbai) presented Innovative techniques for Dehydration of vegetables and herbs at Room Temperature so as to retain essential nutrients and extend their shelf life.



- Ashok Chand Mathur hosted a discussion on techniques for rapid afforestation especially for hilly areas, leading to improved tree cover, better soil moisture retention etc.
- Satish Pendharkar (Quality Systems consultant) anchored a discussion on the design of quality skills training programs.
- Ch. BS Subrahmanya (Trustee, Eklavya Foundation) anchored a discussion on future of organic farming
- Dr. Pooja More (Director Incharge, Skill Development Centre, Pune Univ.) anchored a discussion on skill development in institutions of higher learning.

Workshops and MasterClasses:

1. Dr. Shilpi Mohan supported by Rita Sengupta, conducted a workshop to reflect and experientially share the Mentors role in development of a trainee and to participatively chalk a new approach based on assessment and Mentoring style.
2. Pankaj Singh - an Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning Researcher from IIT-Bombay - gave a session to help understand AI and ML, the role they play, and how to develop our understanding so that we can leverage it for society's benefit.

In a conference that covered such a large canvas, it was important that all key “take home points” were brought together. The Conference Panel Chairs summarised the sessions, facilitated by Dr. Sudhir Prabhu. The attendees also shared their feedback, inputs, experiences and suggestions for the STARS Forum. The video link of this final session is available here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhOvlumpACI&t=475s>

The Conference concluded with the announcement that the 11th Annual National Conference will be held on 4 & 5 Dec, 2020 at Mitraniketan (Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala).

For videos from previous STARS Forum Conferences, please visit the [STARS Forum Youtube Channel](#).

The contact list of Conference speakers, panelists as well as Open space session facilitators is available here ->

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/12RfOg9Lk0hbLtUF6Ld3UHsA59liAyKaCxaY4RHfuPFM/edit?usp=sharing>

Did the STARS Forum Conference help your mission? Tell us if you made useful connections through the conference.



How can STARS Forum help you? Keep us informed of your initiatives, success stories, events etc. We will be happy to publish them on the STARS Forum website www.starsforum.org.

Check the STARS Forum Affiliates Directory here -
http://www.starsforum.org/affiliates/?wpbdp_view=all_listings.
