Teaching Note:

Azim Premji Foundation: A Philanthropic initiative to Improve Indian Rural Primary Education (A) & (B)

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TEACHING NOTE

ABSTRACT

The case elaborates on Indian business tycoon, investor, and philanthropist Azim Premji’s (Premji) philanthropic initiative – the Azim Premji Foundation (APF) – which envisioned transforming the Indian primary education sector. In 2001, Premji through his foundation, APF, started taking initiatives to fulfill the goal. The case discusses the vision, strategies, and programs that drove the change. It describes APF’s efforts to accomplish the change in three broad phases of implementation, elaborating on the objectives, initiatives, and challenges that shaped each phase. Phase I, where APF played a facilitator’s role in bringing about the change, elucidates the early interventions of APF and the various challenges and lessons that resulted in Phases II and III.

The case also throws light on the persona of Azim Premji – the values, beliefs, principles, and practices which shaped him into a successful entrepreneur and a passionate philanthropist. The case shares a few reminiscences from Premji’s early life that laid the foundation for his leadership style.

Premji, who signed the ‘Giving Pledge’ – a global declaration to give away a substantial amount of one’s wealth to charity – worked relentlessly to transform the Indian primary education sector. However, the task was a mammoth one and the road ahead was replete with challenges – systemic, administrative, involving people, etc. Though the primary education sector in India attracted substantial donor interest, it was known for the low quality of its outcomes due to inherent problems. While Premji along with his associates worked relentlessly toward the mission, how far they would succeed in achieving the ambitious targets remained to be seen.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This case is designed to enable students to:

- Appreciate the unique challenges that India faces in providing education to all children, irrespective of their gender, economic status, or location.
- Analyze APF’s strategy to bring about a transformation in the primary education sector in India and evaluate the results achieved.
- Draw up an action plan for APF to overcome the challenges it faces and scale up its activities.
- Apply the principles of change management to APF’s efforts to transform the primary education sector in India.
- Prepare a framework to assess the social impact of APF’s efforts on the education sector.
- Critically evaluate Azim Premji’s philanthropic initiative in terms of creating an impact on society.
TARGET AUDIENCE

- This case may be used for postgraduate courses in Management, Education Administration, and Philanthropy for teaching chapters dealing with Transforming the Education Sector, Change Management, Leadership, and Philanthropy as well as in standalone executive workshops on Philanthropy, Change Management, and Transforming the Education Sector.

RESEARCH METHODS

The case study has been developed using information in the public domain through secondary research.

SUGGESTED SESSION PLAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Time Duration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Icebreaker and introduction</td>
<td>5 Minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion question 1</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
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<td>Discussion question 2</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
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<td>Discussion question 3</td>
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<td>Discussion question 4</td>
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<td>Discussion question 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion question 6</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wrap up of the discussion</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total duration</td>
<td>90 minutes</td>
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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the unique challenges that India faces in providing education to all the children in the country?
2. Analyze APF’s strategy to bring about a transformation in the primary education sector in India and evaluate the results achieved. How did APF use the PDCA cycle to periodically assess the results and challenges and make modifications in its approach and priorities?
3. What action plan do you suggest for APF to overcome the challenges it faced and scale up its activities based on the success it had achieved in the first 15 years of its journey?
4. Apply the principles of change management to APF’s efforts to transform the primary education sector in India and suggest ways by which the foundation can become more effective in its efforts.
5. What framework would you employ to assess the social impact of APF’s projects?
6. Critically evaluate Azim Premji’s philanthropic initiative in terms of creating an impact on society. Should he continue with the intervention strategy that he followed from 2001 to 2015 or should he make any course corrections to enhance the impact his philanthropic contributions could create? Should he continue with his single-minded focus on the primary education sector?
ANALYSIS

1. What are the unique challenges that India faces in providing education to all the children in the country?

India’s educational system is one of the largest and most complex educational systems in the world. The size is huge, with around 1.3 million schools across the country. The schools are managed by a multitude of organizations, both governmental and non-governmental. Though the country has been successful in providing children access to schools, retaining the students has been a major problem. Drop-out rates are high. There is a wide disparity in the quality of schools in urban, semi-urban, and rural India. Similarly, the quality varies between private schools and government schools. The schools in rural locations face infrastructural problems—many of them don’t have a separate toilet for girls or provision for drinking water. The quality of teachers and high absenteeism are the other issues in rural schools and linguistic diversity only adds to the complexity. The methodology followed in the schools emphasizes rote learning, curbing the inquisitiveness and creativity of the children. Allocation of funds by the government to the education sector, especially primary education, is not commensurate with the size and spread of the sector.

2. Analyze APF’s strategy to bring about a transformation in the primary education sector in India and evaluate the results achieved. How did APF use the PDCA cycle to periodically assess the results and challenges and make modifications in its approach and priorities?

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) oversees major educational initiatives around the world. Education for All (EFA) is a much coveted project led by UNESCO and associated bodies, which has the goal of universalizing primary education and reducing illiteracy to a major extent. UNESCO’s 3-stage framework is an elaborate framework for Human Capacity development with an emphasis on ICT (Information Communication Technology). (See Exhibit – TN I).

UNESCO’s framework advocates 3 critical stages in which the change program can be rolled out progressively, viz. Technology Literacy, Knowledge Deepening, and Knowledge Creation. Each of them has different components viz., Understanding ICT, Assessment and Curriculum, Pedagogy, Understanding the Various ICT Tools, Teacher’s Learning Efficiency.

The students may be asked to map APF’s change program through Phases I, II, and III with UNESCO’s 3-stage model. The instructor can offer a brief understanding of the framework to prevent any confusion or ambiguity among the students. In ‘Understanding ICT’, students can discuss APF’s initial efforts to take ICT to primary schools. They can analyze the various issues and challenges in the context and the possible solutions to the challenges. The students can analyze the possible solutions to take ICT to the levels of knowledge deepening and knowledge creation. They can further discuss the curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy in the context of the initiatives and experiences of APF, which realized that the primary schools were paralyzed, using conventional teaching techniques of rote memorization. The students can discuss the prevailing challenges in the pedagogy and curriculum and suggest solutions to attain improved and advanced stages in these aspects.

The various ICT tools implemented by APF, as discussed in the case, include compact discs, projectors, and computers. Taking a cue from the case study, the students can be encouraged to discuss and suggest various creative ICT tools and techniques that can add value to the pedagogy and curriculum.

The instructor can ask the students to discuss the organization structure of APF and the functions of each of APF’s constituents that contribute to its vision. While discussing the development of trained professionals for the education sector, students can discuss the Azim Premji University’s (APU) role in training teachers and encouraging them to contribute to the social sector.
The case clearly describes how the foundation followed the Plan – Do – Check – Act cycle in each of the phases. Students may be asked to map the progress of the foundation’s work through different phases using this cycle.

3. **What action plan do you suggest for APF to overcome the challenges it faced and scale up its activities based on the success it had achieved in the first 15 years of its journey?**

   APF has been successful in laying a strong foundation for achieving its mission. It has addressed the problem of talent through the establishment of APU, which focuses exclusively on creating and developing education professionals. Taking into account the problems it faced in achieving the desired results through a facilitator role, APF has embarked on a direct intervention route with a plan to establish 1300 schools across the country by 2025. This initiative can provide APF with better control over execution and outcome; however, this cannot be done on a large scale. APF could develop these schools as model schools and make them into hubs for bringing about the desired changes in the schools located within a certain radius. These model schools can also be developed as centers for training teachers and school administrators in their respective areas. This could gradually evolve into a hub and spoke model for achieving the desired results.

   Given the generous contribution of Azim Premji, APF is not constrained for funds. However, the foundation can play a more active role in influencing policy making at the state and central governments. Another area where APF needs to make an effort is increasing the involvement of stakeholders and local bodies and educating them so that they can play a supporting role in bringing about social change.

4. **Apply the principles of change management to APF’s efforts to transform the primary education sector in India and suggest ways by which the foundation can become more effective in its efforts?**

   This case is about leading and managing change. APF, under the leadership of Azim Premji, is leading what is arguably considered one of the largest change programs – transforming the primary school scenario of the world’s largest democracy.

   APF rolled out change in three phases. Phase I was the most elaborate of all. While Phase 2, that is, establishing APU, has started, Phase 3 is still under wraps. Students can evaluate Phase I and study the phase through all the stages mentioned in the change management framework by Enda Larkin. *(See Exhibit – TN2).* Larkin’s model looks at a change program through 6 stages, each of which is split into its various components. While Phases II and III are still progressing, the students can map each of the stages to APF’s Phase I of the change program.

   Premji, through his foundation APF, started the mission for primary education with a very clear vision in his mind. APF, before implementation, had carried out an expansive study across rural India, which resulted in several challenging facts surfacing about the prevailing condition of primary education in the country. Based on the findings, APF found a compelling reason to go ahead with the interventions.

   APF went ahead with collaborations and tie-ups with several government and non-government bodies that showed an interest in the mission. It identified the strategic components that it needed to focus on and chalked out several programs and projects around the strategic components.

   With pre-defined objectives and timelines, APF rolled out its Phase I programs and projects. Some of the programs brought recognition to APF. The foundation measured the impact of each of the programs implemented as part of Phase I of the change program. The results were mixed. While a few programs did meet with success, others failed to make a mark due to a mix of systemic and individual incapacities. This prompted APF to move on to the second phase of change.
APF possibly faltered in its assessment of teachers’ competencies and systemic strengths. It assumed that it could address the challenges of the primary schools as a facilitator. But its assessment of Indian primary school teachers and the system proved incorrect, and it realized that a deeper participation and longer hand-holding were required of it. It cost APF a lot of resources and 10 years of fieldwork to realize that change was yet to begin. It is possible that the field staff initially underestimated the magnitude of the change they were implementing. They also assumed that technology was a quick and easy enabler for effective education. However, implementing the technology was easier said than done. The awareness and acquaintance levels among the teachers were very low, and this took APF by surprise.

The instructor can lead a healthy and in-depth discussion around Phase I of the change management program. In order to keep the discussion organized, the instructor can form teams of six members with each member in each team analyzing and presenting one stage of the program i.e. six members of a team can present one stage each of Larkin’s model of change management.

5. **What framework would you employ to assess the social impact of APF’s projects?**

On the lines of the model used by Ernst & Young for evaluating the social impact of the Bharti School Program, we can develop a framework that incorporates the following parameters:

- a. Strengthening the value fabric of the children in the community
- b. Instilling greater confidence in children
- c. Building cohesiveness in communities
- d. Inculcating better health and hygiene practices
- e. Developing a deeper appreciation for the environment and for public goods
- f. Delivering quality and developing a greater value for education
- g. Making a socio-cultural impact on teachers and on the various service providers
- h. Evaluating the economic impact of the schools based on the amount spent on each student
- i. Creating knowledge resources that can be utilized by the larger community
- j. Contributing through the development of professionals who can play a multiplier role in bringing about the desired change in the education system

6. **Critically evaluate Azim Premji’s philanthropic initiative in terms of creating an impact on society. Should he continue with the intervention strategy that he followed from 2001 to 2015 or should he make any course corrections to enhance the impact his philanthropic contributions could create? Should he continue with his single-minded focus on the primary education sector?**

McKinsey’s study on ‘Designing philanthropy for impact’ showed that primary education was among the sectors where demand and supply for donor funds were reasonably close but the quality of outcome was low. There were important sectors in the economy like water, malnutrition, and vocational training and livelihoods which had quantity gaps between demand and supply. The demand was high but supply of donor funds was not adequate. The study also found a preference for direct interventions by donors due to the degree of donor control possible, impact, and ease of measurement, and shorter time horizon for change. However, direct interventions were not amenable to large-scale scaling up. Also, the sustainability of the outcome depended on individuals.

APF initially focused more on categories C and D interventions (see Chapter 2 of the McKinsey Report cited). In Phase III, it planned to also focus on category A interventions through the establishment of schools. Though this would help in achieving demonstrable and
measurable results in a shorter period of time compared to other interventions, the ability to scale up and bring about a large impact would be limited. It would thus be appropriate for APF to invest its effort and resources on category C and D interventions.

Also, an independent assessment may be carried out to assess the work of the foundation so far and the impact it has made and suggest improvements.

The foundation can also look at other under-funded sectors like water, malnutrition, and vocational training which will also indirectly help in bringing about the desired changes in the education sector.

The instructor while discussing this question can enhance participation by dividing the students into two groups – one group which recommends that APF invest in other sectors and the other group which does not want APF to invest in other sectors. Each group may be asked to discuss the matter among themselves and present a justification for their recommendation.

TEACHING APPROACH AND STRATEGY

The instructor may use an icebreaker in the form of a question to the class about what type of schools they attended and what their experience was like. Another question would be: How did it influence their further learning and development? This will bring in varied responses because different students would have studied in different types of schools at different locations. The instructor can then ask them to come out with their observations on the specific problems and challenges of delivering quality education to all in a country like India.

The instructor may then start by asking students about Azim Premji’s philanthropic approach and what contributed to his developing such an attitude and approach, which were not common in India. The discussion may move on to the foundation’s efforts to bring about a transformation in the primary education sector and how it went about achieving it.

CASE WRAP-UP

The instructor may wrap up the discussion by asking students how the experience of APF and the lessons it learned can be applied to similar projects in other developing countries and summarizing the takeaway from the case.
Exhibit – TN I:
UNESCO’s 3 Stage Framework for Human Capacity Development


Exhibit – TN II:
A Framework for Change Management

Suggested Reading:

1. Students may be advised to study the following material prior to the case discussion: