
Atma: Education, Inclusion and Acceleration

Abstract

Since its inception in 2007, Atma, an “accelerator” for education NGOs in India, has been providing strategic consulting and capacity building services to non-profits and voluntary organisations in the education sector. This case study traces the journey of Atma, the core strengths of this organisation and the support it has provided to the ecosystem of education NGOs in India.

Atma has a team of young and qualified professionals, most of whom have made a shift from their corporate careers to the development sector. The case explores this trend and attempts to understand the motivation behind such crossovers. Notably, Atma also runs a volunteering programme placing skilled professionals from the private sector into its partner NGOs where their management experience can contribute effectively to the organisational development and growth potential of these partner organisations. The way these partners have benefitted from such a collaboration with Atma draws attention to a critical need of small and mid-size NGOs in India: that of capacity building support to enable them to mobilise their resources and develop capabilities to be able to deal with any roadblocks on their path of development work.

Keywords: Capacity Building and Organisational Development; Education, Inclusion and Civil Society; Intermediary Organisation; Non-profits in Education; Philanthropy in Education; Professionals and Non-profits; Strategic Consulting; Virtual Organisation; Volunteer Model

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A child without education is like a bird without wings

-Tibetan proverb

Origins

The importance of education can never be overstated. It not only fosters personal development of a child but also contributes to a nation's progress and economic growth. Hence, it is imperative for the governments of countries to provide equitable education opportunities to all.

In the first decade of the new millennium, significant progressive changes took place in the education landscape worldwide. However, the towering responsibility of providing education to every child could not be achieved by governments alone. Civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) across the world have befittingly been instrumental in filling the gaps left by the government and the private sector in ensuring that every child receives quality education.

It was around this time, in the year 2005-06, that two young women, Hayley Bolding and Adrienne van Dok, one from Australia and the other from Netherlands, had come to India as volunteers of AIESEC, an organisation that focuses on empowering young people to make a progressive social impact: bringing together youth from countries around the world to exchange ideas, explore new cultures and providing opportunities for youth to travel to other countries on exchange programmes. As part of one such programme, Hayley and Adrienne arrived in India, where they spent time volunteering with several Indian non-profits. Reminiscing on her early days, Hayley said, "I went to India to volunteer and see the world. It was meant to be for six months and ended up being nine years" (Shankar, 2019).

Nonprofits in India draw their culture from its age-old tradition of philanthropy and volunteerism, where contributing towards the well-being of others and the welfare of the community has long been regarded as one of the highest forms of virtue. Most of the organisations in this voluntary sector, at the turn of the millennium, reflected this approach and were mostly small, largely unorganised and depended heavily on volunteers and donations. A 2001 PRIA report¹—a few years prior to Hayley and Adrienne's arrival in India—noted that there were nearly 1.2 million non-profit organisations (NPOs) in India then with more than half of them based in or working in rural India. A lot of them were unregistered. A majority of them had only volunteers or at most one paid staff. Only 8.5% of these organisations employed more than 10 paid staff. Nation-wide, the number of volunteers was nearly five and a half times more than the paid

¹Participatory Research in Asia

staff working with NPOs. For funds, the NPOs were dependent on donations, grants, or self-generated revenue sources. Foreign funds were very limited at the time (PRIA, 2001).

Of these 1.2 million NPOs operating in India then, around 20% worked in education. It was some of these education-related organisations that Hayley spent some time volunteering with. She witnessed their struggles in trying to make education accessible to children of low-income families and the deprived sections of the society. She noticed that while there was commitment to the cause in the founders of these organisations, they often lacked the resources required to make their reach wider and programmes more effective. She shares:

I fell in love with the country but also became inspired by the non-profit sector in India and the cause of education. This led me to set up Atma, an NGO, along with an amazing group of people I had met in Mumbai who also wanted to work towards my vision of quality education for all children. (Duttagupta, 2013)

Like many, this gap in the intention and the reality of such organisations caught Hayley's attention. She saw that millions of children remained excluded from relevant education even when there were numerous organisations trying to cater to this very need. She was struck by the efforts she saw in this sector—in the organisations working for the cause of education—and at the same time was concerned by the bottlenecks she saw on their path. Motivated by the desire to help them deal with the impediments on their way, she thought of doing something, especially for the organisations that were working at the grassroots and trying to deliver quality education. Strengthening their internal structures and processes was one possible way to enable them to achieve their goals, and become sustainable and scalable.

She began her work in a local café where she worked on her laptop, raising funds and establishing partnerships (Australian of the Year Awards, 2013). Thus, together with Adrienne, she started working with small and new education NGOs to help them become more effective. This is how Atma was born in the year 2007.

A Timely Arrival

Atma set up an office at a time when a flurry of activities was taking place in the education space. A point to note is that education had always been one of the top priorities for governments, policymakers and international organisations. It was one of the fundamental human rights listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed in the year 1948.² But work in this sector found fresh impetus around the turn of this century. In present times, it forms an important part of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as SDG4.³

Over time, this focus on education has indeed led to encouraging results. On average, the enrolment rate of three-to-five-year-old children has risen by 8% points at the global level between 2005 and 2020, with an especially large increase in many countries that had low enrolment rates in the year 2005 (OECD, 2022).

In the first decade of the new millennium, the Analytical Report of 2009-10 on elementary education in India (NUEPA, 2010) revealed that the Indian education system, one of the largest in the world,

² In the year 1948, the United Nations had proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which lists certain rights as fundamental and to be universally protected. The right to education is one of the fundamental human rights listed in the UDHR.

³ Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

catering to the needs of a population of more than 1,200 million people at the time, had 190 million children in the age group of 6–14 years. The report showed there was an increase in the enrolment at the primary and upper primary levels, going from 101.16 million in 2002-03 to 131.85 million in 2006-07 and further to 133.41 million in 2009-10.

These efforts on the ground have also found an empathetic defender in the Constitution. On 1 April 2010, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (also known as the RTE or Right to Education Act), brought about by the 86th Constitutional Amendment, came into effect. This made it mandatory for states “to provide free and compulsory education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years as a Fundamental Right in such a manner as the State may, by law, determine” (DSEL, 2021). The use of the terms “free” and “compulsory” in the wording of the Act perhaps best summed up the rights-based approach to education that India had committed to adopt: removing all liability to pay for education from the child and casting a legal obligation on all levels on the government to provide and ensure the completion of elementary education of all children aged 6–14 years in the country.

This Act provided fresh impetus to the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), a large-scale government initiative launched in 2001 with the goal to attain Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE): a Constitutional provision in India since 1950. Though programmes to provide elementary education to all existed, they did not have legal backing and had not been able to achieve the desired results. The RTE legislation was a push in the direction of “making the dream of SSA a reality.” Policymakers in particular observed that RTE gave SSA the necessary legal backing to achieve the results it had not yet been able to. SSA, in turn, became an important vehicle for the implementation of RTE, since “a mechanism already existed at the grassroots level due to the efforts of SSA, which had built the capacity to implement large-scale education programmes” (The Times of India, 2010).

In a country as large as India, achieving the ideal of providing elementary education to all remains persistently elusive. The reasons for this are many. The complex social set-up in India: its diverse demography, fast growing population and cultural and linguistic diversity; parental poverty that often pulls children into work at the earliest possible; long-standing gender biases and prejudices that make education of the girl child particularly challenging; inadequate resources and infrastructure; inaccessibility in some parts of India due to inhospitable terrains, and difficulties in reaching the marginalised sections of the society are some of the challenges that have stood in the way through India’s history post-independence.

In this regard, it is the non-profit organisations working in the education space in India, who have historically shouldered a significant amount of the responsibility of education provision, filling the gaps in education and working with communities to promote learning and ensure quality education with relevant learning outcomes. Long-running advocacy efforts by civil society organisations have led to the issues within the education space being pushed into government agendas: right from increase in funding to the inclusion of children with special needs, they have made a significant contribution to the improvements that have taken place in this space. The government’s recognition of the role that the civil society had to play in realising its education objectives has also led to it becoming a key stakeholder in the conceptualisation, design and implementation of RTE and other government interventions (Jagannathan, 2013; Srinath, 2022).

Around the time Atma was taking its first steps, numerous non-profits and social enterprises had come up with innovative programmes to engage children at the community level and create a conducive and engaging learning environment for them. What Hayley observed during her time volunteering with several such organisations was that many of them were limited by resource and capacity constraints in their efforts to expand their reach or in scaling up their programs and that they needed support (Shankar, 2019). And this was what the founders of Atma identified and decided to commit themselves to.

Capacity Building support for education nonprofits

Mary Ellen Matsui, former CEO and Executive Director at Atma, who had been with Atma for over ten years, shares how she could, based on her own volunteering experiences in India, relate to the concept underlying Atma:

In 2007, I flew from London, Ontario, to Mumbai, India, to work as a volunteer. Through working with a few different organisations, I began to understand the lack of capacity in Mumbai's NGOs to address the huge issue of educational inequality. When I met Hayley Bolding, Atma Founder, she explained that Atma was founded to strengthen organisations that were impacting education. I was intrigued by the innovative NGO model. I had perceived the resounding need of NGOs working in Mumbai's development sector. There were many high-potential educational organisations that were simply unable to access the resources necessary to grow and sustain their programmes. I began working with Atma in 2009, and moved into the role of Executive Director of the organisation in 2011. (Atma, 2012)

Citing the example of Bright Future (a non-profit Atma first worked with between 2012 and 2015 as part of its three-year Accelerator programme) she explains Atma's approach:

We find people who are doing amazing work in the field of education for kids from low-income backgrounds and help them to grow. One example of an organisation like this is Bright Future. When they started with Atma's program, they had a very small centre where they had their computer training and had their office and their classroom all in one place.

By partnering with Atma they were able to figure out what exactly they wanted to do, who they were going to be and how they would communicate with various stakeholders. That allowed them to expand their program, get more funding and to serve even more students. So, by helping people who are already doing amazing work in this field, Atma is able to fulfil its own vision: of quality education for all children. (Feminist Official, 2016)

Kishore Palve, the Founder and CEO of Bright Future, speaking about his experience with Atma, shared: "If Atma would not have been with us, with Bright Future, it would have taken us three to four more years to reach this level." (Global Giving, 2020)

So Atma, quite literally, helped Palve to "accelerate" the growth of Bright Future. After reaching a certain level of growth, this non-profit, which works with adolescents to help them identify their interests and skill set to choose a suitable career, realised that their older systems were not capable of handling the new scale. They felt a need for capacity-building support in the area of human resource management and a strategy plan for the organisation, and partnered with Atma for a second time in 2018. After two years of intensive capacity-building support from Atma, Bright Future began to feel confident to take its work forward in the areas of human resources, fundraising and strategy with its own team (Atma, 2021a).

About the role of Atma in the education sector, Mary Ellen says:

When we were founded, we realised very clearly that NGOs played a very important role in the social sector and in the lives of students who don't necessarily have the economic means to afford expensive means of education options. We realised really quickly how important NGOs are in bringing high quality education to children and students who needed it, and so we decided that the best way that we could really influence the lives of young people would be to support those organisations. (Meraklis, 2020)

"Accelerator"

In Hayley's words "Atma is a capacity building organisation, with focus on education." Speaking in 2011, she highlighted the spirit of collaboration that underpins Atma's working model:

Everything that we do is focussed on having collaborative input because at the end of the day, all the inputs that Atma gives our partner organisations, the volunteers that we connect them with, we're all going to leave eventually. So, what's important to us is that the local staff, the local people that run these organisations are equipped and able to carry forward the work on their own because it's their organisation and they're going to do it forever. Therefore, their capacity and their empowerment is paramount.

We do that through dialogue. We form really strong relationships and have a really sensitive and patient approach to how people want to change their own lives. When you do that, when you listen, they come up with the answers. They have the answers inside them, and once we have those answers, we can find the solutions to make those a reality. (ABC Local Radio, 2011)

In 2011 Hayley decided to move on from Atma to return home to Australia. There she set up Atma Australia, which supports Atma's projects in India. While Hayley continues to lead international youth programs for the Australia India Institute, Mary Ellen took charge of Atma in Mumbai and led the organisation for over 10 years. During this time she spearheaded the growth and expansion of Atma both in terms of geography and its network. At the same time, she worked out a succession plan for Atma to make the transition smooth and ensure long-term stability for the organisation (Matsui, 2021). Atma's current CEO, Sneha Arora, who stepped in following Mary Ellen's tenure, has helmed it since January 2021. She was an internal hire who had been with Atma for about two and a half years leading its Programmes vertical as Chief Programmes Officer, before taking on the CEO role.

Sneha, bringing several threads together, succinctly locates the role of Atma in the Indian social sector:

Our vision is to empower more children to have access to quality education. That is our sectoral alignment: to education as a sector. The way we do that—our mission—is by building the capacity of other education NGOs. So, we are an "intermediary" organisation, specifically, an "accelerator," for enabling the impact and accelerating the impact of non-profits that already

exist and that are trying to change the ecosystem for education in India.

Notably, Atma does not work with organisations in their very early stages of growth. It engages with, in its words, “high-potential” education non-profits, those that have achieved a certain level of size and are already delivering a certain level of impact, and looks to take them to the next stages. Abhijat Bedekar, the Chief Programme Officer of Atma, makes this subtle but important distinction clear:

We see a spectrum of organisations that are working in the most difficult, rural or remote areas. At the same time, there are organisations that are working in the urban landscape. They are run by passionate, intelligent NGO leaders, but they still have a set of problems that impact their work and impede their growth. We deal with this spectrum of problems.

We are not an “incubator” that would help an organisation set up and create its foundation and first steps. We help organisations that have already created a foundation; they already have a strong grasp of their programme, but they need additional support in taking their organisation further. In our jargon, we call them “mid-stage education NGOs.” They have, for instance, a proven programmatic track record, basic funding in place, full-time employees and a structured team. But then, they want to progress, reach the next stage of growth, and deal more effectively with increasingly complex issues: that is the group we work with and focus on.

This is where Atma steps in. There comes a stage in the life of an NGO when it begins to see the good result of its work and the value it has added in the communities it is engaged with. Then there is a desire to unfold its potential more strongly: whether to extend the benefits to a wider set of beneficiaries or expand in other regions or to expand the sphere of its influence or make a significant shift in quality. However, the singular focus of such NGOs on the achievement of their primary goal, in this case learning requirements of their beneficiaries, stretches them thin to upgrade their own skills and systems, expand and manage their fund-raising programs, and develop their own infrastructure. Such organisations have a choice to partner with Atma for their own capacity building to scale up their operations and become sustainable. Atma offers them intensive long-term or short-term, and sometimes even customised tracks of support to strengthen their capacity by providing guidelines and tools for better execution.

According to Mary Ellen: “That support turned into what we now call the Accelerator programme in which we’ve worked with over 92 organisations all across the country who themselves reach out to lakhs and lakhs of students.” (Meraklis, 2020)

On Partnering with Atma

Devina Nigam, a Consultant at Atma, is an HR professional with about 10 years of corporate experience. She had earlier joined Atma as a volunteer, initially for three months which extended to 10 months, with her role and responsibilities gradually expanding. Later, she returned to Atma after another stint in the corporate sector, and is presently a consultant with Atma’s Programme team. She talks through Atma’s core programme for partner non-profits, called “Accelerator”:

We work directly with our partner NGOs. Each Atma Consultant works with about three to four partners, supporting them in the capacity building of

their organisations. Our “Accelerator” programme, which is the core of Atma’s work, is a three-year programme, and so we usually sign our partner organisation on for three years. We firstly understand the three to five-year goals of our partner NGOs, and on the basis of that, over the three-year programme, we do project-based work with them to ensure they’re able to achieve their goals. Along with that, we ensure that after three years, they don’t need Atma. We make sure that enough knowledge has been acquired by the partner NGO team and the required skills have been built by them to be able to manage the work independently.

We’ve identified 10 organisational development (OD) areas that we feel most organisations need support in. Once these organisations have already been around for 8 to 10 years, when they’ve figured out what their core programme is, and then want to start scaling, start growing further, that is when we step in. We identify the areas and the kind of support they will need: whether it is to expand the organisation, or, for instance, to put in place a monitoring and evaluation process or any other area of organisational development. Often, founders are just so passionate about their work and so focussed on their mission, that sometimes these pieces just get missed out as their organisations grow.

She further lays out that while Atma provides crucial organisational development support to its partners, the nature of this support emphasises the ultimate independence of these partners: they must be able to sustain and take forward these changes by themselves following Atma’s exit. She continues:

And in many cases, organisational development is not the forte of NGOs. A lot of organisations want to grow, but they do not have certain basic policies and processes in place. So, we support them in building those, and help them acquire those skills within their teams. This capacity building is the essence of our programme. The idea is that after receiving initial support and guidance from Atma, the organisation and the team are able to carry out all of their work by themselves. So, as a consultant, I work with about three to four such partner NGOs, each across three years. We call out the projects that we feel are important, keeping the goals and priorities of the partner organisation in mind.

Under Accelerator, Atma’s core programme, a three-year intensive engagement, which has with time evolved a system of support: it starts by looking at the vision and mission of the partner NGO, clarifying the key pillars of success for them, defining the problem statement and then co-creating the strategy plan for the organisation (refer to Exhibit 1). It has identified 10 organisational development (OD) areas in which it provides specialised support, depending on the requirements of the partner. These are: strategy, monitoring and evaluation, fundraising, human resources, programmes, digital, finance, leadership, marketing, and governance (Accelerator Team, 2018). In addition to the core Accelerator programme, Atma also offers other short-term customised projects, workshops, training sessions, and webinars, aimed at filling any important gaps in the organisation.

A Shifting funding landscape

In recent times, there has been another trend that limits the smaller to medium-sized NGOs from funding their own internal development. The Companies Act, 2013, passed by the Parliament of India in August 2013, made it mandatory for corporates, with financials above certain thresholds, to spend at least two percent of their average net profits during the three preceding years on corporate social responsibility (CSR). The law also stipulated that CSR activities should be undertaken only in a “project/programme” mode (The Times of India, 2014; WIRC, 2023). This essentially meant that corporate donations to NGOs were to be spent on the projects or programmes those corporations chose to sponsor. Thus, NGOs drawing their primary funding from CSR sources would hardly be left with any funds to invest in their own organisational development. Any funding they received would have to be spent predominantly on meeting the targets of projects agreed with CSR partners, with the projects to be completed within specific, allotted time periods.

In such a scenario, though NGOs get to make a contribution in their chosen thematic sector of work, they often do not have sufficient degree of independence to choose the spectrum and the depth of their own involvement.

Incidentally, according to data from the Union Ministry of Corporate Affairs, between the financial years 2016-17 and 2020-21, the education sector has been the biggest beneficiary of CSR funding. During this five-year period, it received INR 29,918 crore (approximately USD 4.1 billion) in CSR funds, followed at a distant second by the health sector which received INR 2,0716 crore (approximately USD 284 million) (India CSR, 2022). Despite this and the other grants received by the sector, there are several education NGOs struggling at many functional levels because they lack the resources to build their own capacity and in turn struggle to effectively absorb increased inflows of available funds. There are various areas in which capacity building may be needed, ranging from building leadership and managerial skills, financial planning and management to spending on knowledge building, upskilling human resources, and upgrading technology and infrastructure.

This comes against a backdrop of an increasing sense of urgency in civil society about the need to pay attention to their own organisational development for an impactful implementation of their social development initiatives. This sense of urgency is not misplaced nor is the effort of organisations like Atma to help NGOs to respond to it.

The Bridgespan Group, a US-based non-profit organisation that provides management consulting to non-profits and philanthropists, did a survey of Indian NGOs in 2021 to understand the prevailing mindsets of funders in the sector, and the effects of “projectisation” of funding on non-profits. It found that most funders paid only for the implementation of projects and specific deliverables, leaving the organisational development expenses of the NGOs unfunded, not realising that this is a critical requirement for the effectiveness of the programmes they fund. In its report, Bridgespan called out the case of one particular organisation, 17000 ft Foundation, whose “inspirational journey from stagnation to scale is an outlier amongst Indian NGOs,” a feat 17000 ft achieved with Atma’s support:

Like so many small NGOs, 17000 ft Foundation aspired to increase its impact but barely registered on the funders’ radar screens. Sujata Sahu founded the organisation in 2012 to improve education for children living in remote Himalayan villages of the Ladakh union territory. Money trickled in for programmes, such as stocking libraries and building playgrounds, but funders balked at paying for non-programmatic expenditures, such as hiring administrative staff. “It was the hardest thing in the world for us to try

and get them (funders) to support non-programmatic expenditures,” says Sahu.

After eight years, 17000 ft still existed “hand-to-mouth,” spending whatever revenue it could get nearly as quickly as it came in. It desperately needed a funder willing to invest in the organisation’s growth. “We were really clutching at straws at that point,” recalls Sahu.

Outreach to A.T.E. Chandra Foundation in 2019 set the wheels in motion for its transformation. The Foundation paid for a year-long engagement for 17000 ft with Atma. Sahu called it an “eye-opening” experience, adding: “I wasn’t aware that there were organisations that worked with non-profits on organisational development.” (Venkatachalam, 2022)

According to Bridgespan’s report, “Learning how to assess and present indirect costs (often called overhead) and organisational development costs to funders opened doors [for 17000 ft Foundation]. New funders stepped up, resulting in a six-fold increase in 17000 ft’s annual budget and enabling it to hire administrative staff and expand into Sikkim state.” Atma, in its own case study on the partnership with 17000 ft, also observed the six-fold increase in budget, which happened in “8 months from their partnership completion.” Refer to Exhibit 3 for further details on Atma’s impact on its partner organisations.

Since around 2021, Atma has been actively advocating for donor support for NGO capacity building, and has pursued this strand of engagement through various strategic initiatives. Leveraging its core expertise in this area, it has been building compelling case studies and impact assessments to provide the funding ecosystem with concrete evidence of the positive impacts of capacity building. It has also curated events like the Open House, where capacity building advocates and donors have been able to come together to share successful approaches for funding capacity building in non-profits.

Rise in corporate volunteering

The changes in the funding landscape that followed the enactment of the Companies Act, 2013, also brought with it additional interest amongst the corporate workforce of systematically taking part in developmental initiatives, beyond only providing funding. Many corporations set up their own CSR units and began encouraging their employees to volunteer for such initiatives and projects. Thus, the trend of corporate volunteering, also known as “employer-supported volunteering,” started to become popular in India.

A research project on corporate volunteering as a CSR initiative, sponsored by the University Grant Commission (2020), categorically emphasises that the CSR rules under Companies Act passed in August 2013, “have paved a path for many HR and CSR heads to engage employees in social commitments. Many corporates have been vigorous in driving volunteerism to go beyond just engagement and creating a culture of change by investing in value-based volunteerism.” It further added that “there has been a drastic revolution with a majority of the companies calling for pro-bono or skill-based volunteering.”

Against this emerging trend, Atma's other key strand of engagement with its partner NGOs has been its volunteer programme—especially designed to take in such volunteers, and which has been described as “the centrepiece of its work” (Mehr, 2012).

Channelling skills: Atma's volunteer programme

Volunteers are an integral part of Atma's work force and contribute to over 70% of its work with education NGOs and social enterprises (Atma, 2022a). 500+ volunteers from more than 28 countries have been part of the Atma Volunteer Programme. Atma's volunteer cohort comes from a diverse background, and has included consultants, teachers, students, lawyers, doctors, accountants, and even pilots (Atma, 2022b): But the most distinctive feature of the volunteer programme is that it looks for professionals, often with many years of work experience.

This is an intentional part of the design of Atma's model, enabling it to provide crucial skill support to its partner NGOs. The skill sets and experience that Atma's volunteers come in with allow them to directly "plug in" and immediately start providing support to NGOs on a range of operational, technical or management areas where NGOs might be struggling but do not have the bandwidth or resources to hire full-time personnel for. Wilibrord George, CEO of St. Willibrord George International School, one of Atma's partner organisations, explains the challenge:

Being a small organisation, we did not have access to high quality talent. What Atma has done (through its volunteer programme) is given us the opportunity to work with people with very high passion and very high skills, for example, marketing skills, or business planning skills, or HR skills or financial skills. These are skills that are very integral to running a proper organisation that is serious about growth. (Global Giving, 2020)

This intentionality in design is evident in the selection procedure, which is a stringent one for a volunteer programme. In the year 2020-21, 42 volunteers were selected from 3,602 applications (Atma, 2021b), and in 2021-22, the following year, 28 volunteers were selected from 1,109 applications (Atma, 2022), figures which make clear Atma's preference towards the quality of volunteers, as well as the attention to detail paid in putting together the required support for its partner NGOs.

Carmeline Fernandes, the Chief Operating Officer at Atma, who in 2022 had been with Atma for over 11 years, talks about the organisational structure at Atma, and the place and role of volunteers within their organisational set-up:

We have four people on the leadership team. The next (band) would be a senior consultant band and then the consultant band. And then we have our volunteers; we call our volunteers "associates" as well. They bring expertise in different organisational development areas, and come and work under Atma's consultants, to support them in whatever project they are working on with their partner organisations.

For example, say consultant A is working on an HR project with partner X. We would place a certain volunteer with HR expertise or an HR background with that partner to support that project for its duration. Now, all volunteers also come with certain time commitments. Some of them are available for a few weeks, for instance, six to eight weeks at a time, while some are available for six months or even a year. So, we keep the durations of volunteering placements flexible, and base it on their availability. We also look at their areas of interest, in terms of what they would want to be

involved in, what sort of experience they would want to gain through volunteering, and their motivation for volunteering. We look at all of that and try to make a really good match or a fit with the projects and the vacancies that we are looking to place our volunteers in.

In its mission to foster collaboration between corporates and the social sector, Atma has achieved significant success through its ongoing corporate volunteering programme with Credit Suisse. For four consecutive years, Atma has facilitated the engagement of Credit Suisse directors in meaningful projects with NGOs. This year (2023), Atma introduced a second programme in corporate volunteering in partnership with EY.

Atma's volunteering model places it at an interesting juncture, offering it a way through which it can match select professional skills to NGOs where they might be needed. It offers relevant avenues to its growing body of corporate partners to directly channel their people through to NGOs, and at the same time makes a relevant support system accessible to NGOs to be able to scale and become impactful.

This evolution of its role, as a facilitator for the meeting of development sector organisations and interest and experienced individuals from the corporate space, is also reflected in Atma's own internal make-up.

Crossing over

The Atma team calls itself "a group of development sector professionals, volunteers and management experts" (Atma, 2022c). Quite a few of the consultants and volunteers at Atma have had prior corporate experience or qualifications. Sneha shares, using her own example:

As far as my background, and how I came to Atma is concerned, I am a crossover from the corporate sector. For about eight years in my career, I was in for-profit management consulting with some of the leading consulting firms. My journey was a mix of consulting, finance, strategy and leadership. And that was, I would say, all the arsenal that I had gathered and put together in terms of my skill sets when I decided to make a call to transition to the social sector. I did that by working with a social sector consulting firm as my first role in the sector. That was a great way for me to explore the space because I went into it with the comfort of understanding how consulting works, but then applying it to a very different context and reality. And that was a great starting point for me.

While the corporate world provided the needed platform to garner certain skills, an alluring environment to work in and sometimes hefty perks, it also left many with a desire to search for purpose and meaning of the work they were engaged in. Atma offered a space to such talents looking to contribute in a more meaningful way. Abhijat, like Sneha, Devina and others at Atma, had started his career in a corporate environment. He says:

I have an engineering and consulting background. I started my career as a software engineer after my engineering degree in Mumbai. Then, I came across the Teach for India fellowship in 2012, which got me interested (in the development sector) and so I quit my IT job to work with Teach for India. I was a Teach for India fellow for two years, teaching in Dharavi. That was my

first foray into the development sector and education in general and it made me realise that this was my passion, beyond just working in IT. After that, I moved to the US for some time. I did my Master's in Information Systems, and went back to the corporate world. I worked with PwC in technology consulting. However, as much as I could from abroad, I stayed connected with Teach for India as an alumnus. I think around four years after working in the US, I decided to move back to India to work in the development sector. In 2019, when I was working with Teach for India, I came across Atma.

Something that has stuck with me, especially with regards to education sector NGOs, is that the landscape has grown progressively. There are many intelligent and passionate NGOs doing very meaningful and substantial work. But at the same time, there are NGOs that need a lot of additional support. And I think that's where I found the combination of consulting and education working really well with Atma. So, I joined Atma in 2020 with a purpose, because I truly believe in the power of enabling other NGOs, and I wanted to take my contribution a little further beyond the fellowship landscape that I understood.

Abhijat found a purpose in his realisation of the “power of enabling other NGOs.” Likewise, Sneha had come to possess a skill set that could benefit the development sector. Devina, who was initially not sure if she wanted to change sectors, realised that she wanted to do something worthwhile. She voices aloud the questions that many at Atma had before their cross-over:

I think, along with the perks [at the MNC she initially worked with], there was plenty of stress. Besides, at the end of the day the feeling I had would make me question: what was I doing? what was it leading to? I worked in an MNC with more than 50,000 people. But I wasn't sure if the work that I was doing impacted anybody, for that matter. I think that's when I decided to move away.

She elaborates:

The reason I joined Atma was that here I knew clearly that the work I did had some amount of real impact. There was something positive in it and could lead to a delta change. And also, that it is not just about my work; it is about a cumulative effort. So, even if we have been able to bring about a little change, that has been and continues to be a motivator for me.

Culture fit over expertise

Given that Atma provides OD expertise to its partner NGOs, a natural assumption would be that it hires people with highly distinctive skills and an expertise in OD areas. However, although OD expertise is a desired qualification, it is not a mandatory one, as Devina highlights:

Initially, when I volunteered with Atma, our focus was really on having an expert in each of the OD areas that we were functioning in, because that would have meant that we had a really strong team of programme managers, as we were called then, or consultants (as they are called now). So, we were trying to ensure that there was one expert in HR, one expert in fundraising, one expert in marketing, etc., and this took priority over the softer aspects, like values and culture. That was then. But I think that's changed. Now, most of us continue to have an affinity towards a particular OD area. However, the one big difference now is that there is much more focus on values and culture.

Devina underscores the attention given to value and cultural alignment in the selection of full-time consultants and volunteers: the soft skills, the values they bring and the passion for the cause in the candidates interested in working or volunteering with Atma, for they go towards strengthening collaboration, the basis of work culture at Atma. She further adds:

I think there's been a lot of focus on the kind of values that we all bring, the kind of values we identify with and the kind of culture we're comfortable working in. A lot of the other, more technical pieces, can get learned on the job. So now, there's a significant focus on the softer aspects, and I think that is something that one can see in the culture. It's a very healthy mix of people where everyone's willing to help. There's no unnecessary competition, but you want to support each other. I think the reason that happens is also because all of us, of course, have certain spaces that we are more comfortable in. Therefore, collaboration just becomes the way to go.

Carmeline corroborates, giving further details about what Atma looks for in the hiring process:

When we look to hire someone, one of the big pieces that we look for is a culture fit. Of course, the job description is drawn out based on the requirements of the role and what is really required to be done. That is one aspect of it. But, even in that aspect, we also believe that people with the required training and alignment (to what Atma does), even if they're not "super-experienced," can grow into the role. There's a lot of learning on the role and learning on the job as well. Culture fit is harder to come by. At the first interview, we screen thoroughly for both a culture fit and a role fit. But really, the culture piece has to come together. And once that is done, we then look at all of the competencies of the role that is required and see if that is being met. We have an assignment round as well, which tests for technical skills: can you do the job or not? So, we have all of this built into our recruitment process to understand and arrive at that decision of whether the person really fits into the organisation.

Remote accelerator to virtual operations

Hiring was earlier done for Mumbai, Pune and some parts within Maharashtra as initially Atma's operations were confined to these parts. With time, and the success of the Accelerator programme, Atma started to reach out to non-profit organisations in other geographies as well. Sneha shares:

We started exploring and piloting what's next for Atma. Our goals and our vision have evolved a little bit. In 2018, we started piloting something called the "remote accelerator" where we said instead of us going and opening offices all across the country could we do this remotely? We were interested in Delhi, Bengaluru and Hyderabad because there are so many NGOs in all of these geographies as a whole ecosystem, which we had not explored at all. So, we piloted that. We started offering "bite-sized" capacity building services, working on just one project with one NGO, and we did this across different states. We picked up four or five NGOs across the country, we did one project with each of them, and we tried to see whether this [remote mode] was possible, what was working and what was not working. In 2019, we completed the successful pilot.

We then had the confidence to go out there and start looking for NGOs from across India to support a remote capacity-building model. Our pan-India presence only began in 2019. We worked with a handful of NGOs in that year from geographies outside Mumbai. We worked with an NGO based out of Bengaluru, an NGO from Ladakh, a Delhi-based organisation, and started realising that this is doable, we could do this. And that's when the pandemic hit in 2020.

Coincidentally, Atma had already been experimenting with remote delivery since 2018. As the pandemic and successive lockdowns pushed the world of work online for the better part of two years, armed with evidence from its pilot projects, Atma was prepared. Sneha recounts the pandemic period as it unfolded for Atma:

What the pandemic did was accelerate this entire journey for us in one way, because we were already moving in the direction of virtual delivery. So, in that sense, it was not a shock or a surprise to us, like it has been for many other organisations, because this is exactly how we wanted to expand. That's when we experimented a little bit more and formed a collaborative called The Future of Impact Collaborative, along with three other organisations—Sattva, Sahayog, and Aria Advisory. And then we have donors who are very hands-on and involved, such as A.T.E. Chandra Foundation, Forbes Foundation and HSBC. We came together as a collaborative to provide knowledge and resources to NGOs that were struggling in terms of dealing with the pandemic. Through this effort, we were able to reach out to 888 NGOs last year (2021). If you asked me where we are right now, we're really at a cusp in Atma's journey, where we've gone from a local Maharashtra—Mumbai/Pune-based accelerator—to realising that there is so much potential in terms of the work we do to be beneficial and accessible to NGOs across the country.

For Atma, the exploration and adoption of online modes was of strategic importance: it was a way to expand their sphere of influence and collaborate not only with education NGOs and funders, but also a way to access high quality talent around the country. But the onset of COVID-19 heralded yet another major decision, as Sneha lays out sharply:

When the pandemic struck in 2020, we took a conscious call within the early months itself to give up our office spaces completely and embrace being a virtual organisation. We didn't just temporarily go virtual, we went virtual. Period. There is no such thing as an Atma office right now, other than a registered formal office which is needed. But other than that, we've completely embraced being a virtual organisation.

In terms of our hiring practices, I think one of the biggest changes in the last couple of years has been that we're now hiring people irrespective of their location. We're hiring them not just in Mumbai or Pune, but now we have employees in Bhopal, Chennai and Jaipur. Our hiring strategy has changed. We're no longer constrained by geography, whereas earlier we would filter by that. We have become very comfortable with hiring completely virtually and also hiring in locations across the country.

As businesses across the globe gradually adapted to the hybrid work model that has become the norm of the day, the team at Atma too began settling down in its new way of working. Becoming a “virtual organisation” has facilitated the expansion of its operations, but at the same time has brought up apprehensions regarding losing the thread of connection among the members of Atma team working separately in different cities.

Out of concern that the virtual work mode might affect team work and interpersonal relations, bringing in a sense of disconnectedness, Atma leadership is investing much more in its culture and people-related practices. They have initiated certain practices and documented a policy putting into place very practical markers that can ensure that they don't lose that bond. In the words of Sneha, “we have a lot of things that we do as practices to keep the team together and closely bonded and knit to that Atma culture.” She adds: “We've been very, very conscious of ensuring that we're holding on to the Atma culture that existed even in an office setting.” This sentiment and its influence on their workplace policies became even more pronounced in the aftermath of COVID-19. Post COVID, there has been a lot of emphasis on ensuring and promoting the well-being of its team members, and making necessary modifications in their work pace and process keeping this in mind.

Atma uses online work spaces like Slack, GSuite, and Zoom to create a cohesive virtual working environment. They have weekly meetings, celebrate special days, organise a Connect Day every six weeks for organisational-level updates, have Appreciation sessions during their Friday meetings, encourage open discussions—all this to promote connectedness and team bonding. The intention is to hold on to their culture of collaboration and learning from one another as they work towards enabling their partner NGOs as a virtual organisation.

Post pandemic, Atma has once again evolved itself to go from a completely virtual to a hybrid workplace. Annual team retreats are back as a bonding exercise and Accelerator programme consultants are required to visit the partner NGO site and spend 3-4 days once a year working out of the partner location.

Cementing a space for the “professional”

Atma has been adapting to the changes in the sector, launching new initiatives, designing new collaboratives and widening the sphere of their role in the building of capacity and delivery of quality education.

Approaching 15 years of its being, it is proactively engaging the ecosystem through The Atma Lab: an initiative for the design and implementation of innovative new projects in close cooperation with external stakeholders. The Lab includes a broad mix of initiatives, with Future of Impact, Outcomes Readiness Programme, Community Connections Programme, Atma Change Leader Fellowship and TaRa AtmaNirbhar Grant being some of its current projects housed under it (Atma, 2022d).

Through The Lab, Atma is also driving the advancement of volunteerism in the social sector. In addition to its two corporate volunteering initiatives (with Credit Suisse and EY), Atma introduced the “Atma Change Leader Fellowship” this year (2023). This fellowship aims to strengthen NGOs' capacity for volunteering by enabling them to develop robust volunteering programmes like Atma's, thereby enhancing their ability to scale their impact.

The criticality of the role of education in modern economic order is of little doubt, especially for a country of nearly 140 crores, of which more than half is under the age of 30 (Reed et. al, 2023). The public expenditure on education has traditionally outpaced that of many other public initiatives but today it is an important share of the wallet of the average household. The issues of accessibility and quality, then, have never been so prominent.

Organisations like Atma are filling in a crucial gap in the functioning of education NGOs working at the grassroots level. While such NGOs are commonly driven by the passion of the founders, and have deep community engagement and a better understanding of the realities on the ground, they are often confronted with challenges, both internal and external, that they need to deal with, while dealing with programme implementations, to be able to survive, deliver and scale up their operations and reach. These challenges demand access to experience and expertise to complement.

The external context of civil society is a changing one, in particular when it comes to regulations, expectations of donors, or the sweeping influence of digital technology on how organisations work, stakeholders communicate or information flows. Education, in particular, is a crucible where many of these forces have left their deep mark in a remarkably short period of time.

By partnering with an organisation like Atma such NGOs get support in overcoming the obstacles that limit the scope and scale of their development goals. This also allows certain management skills to complement development work and meaningfully contribute to an important sector of society. Atma was one of the early set-ups to respond to this need. It has seen through two leadership transitions already, and its journey has opened up a pathway: for those professionals wishing to convert the intention of a volunteer into a lifelong choice and vocation, in a manner that respects the sensibility of civil society. In creating and nurturing such an environment is perhaps where the critical contribution of Atma lies.

Exhibits

Exhibit 1: Acceleration in Action: Atma's three-year intensive engagement programme with Saturday Art Class

Exhibit 1 provides an overview of Atma's work with Saturday Art Class as an example of Atma's three-year Accelerator programme. It includes an overview of the organisation, problem identification, Atma's solutioning approach, goal setting, and impact on Saturday Art Class over the three years.

About Saturday Art class

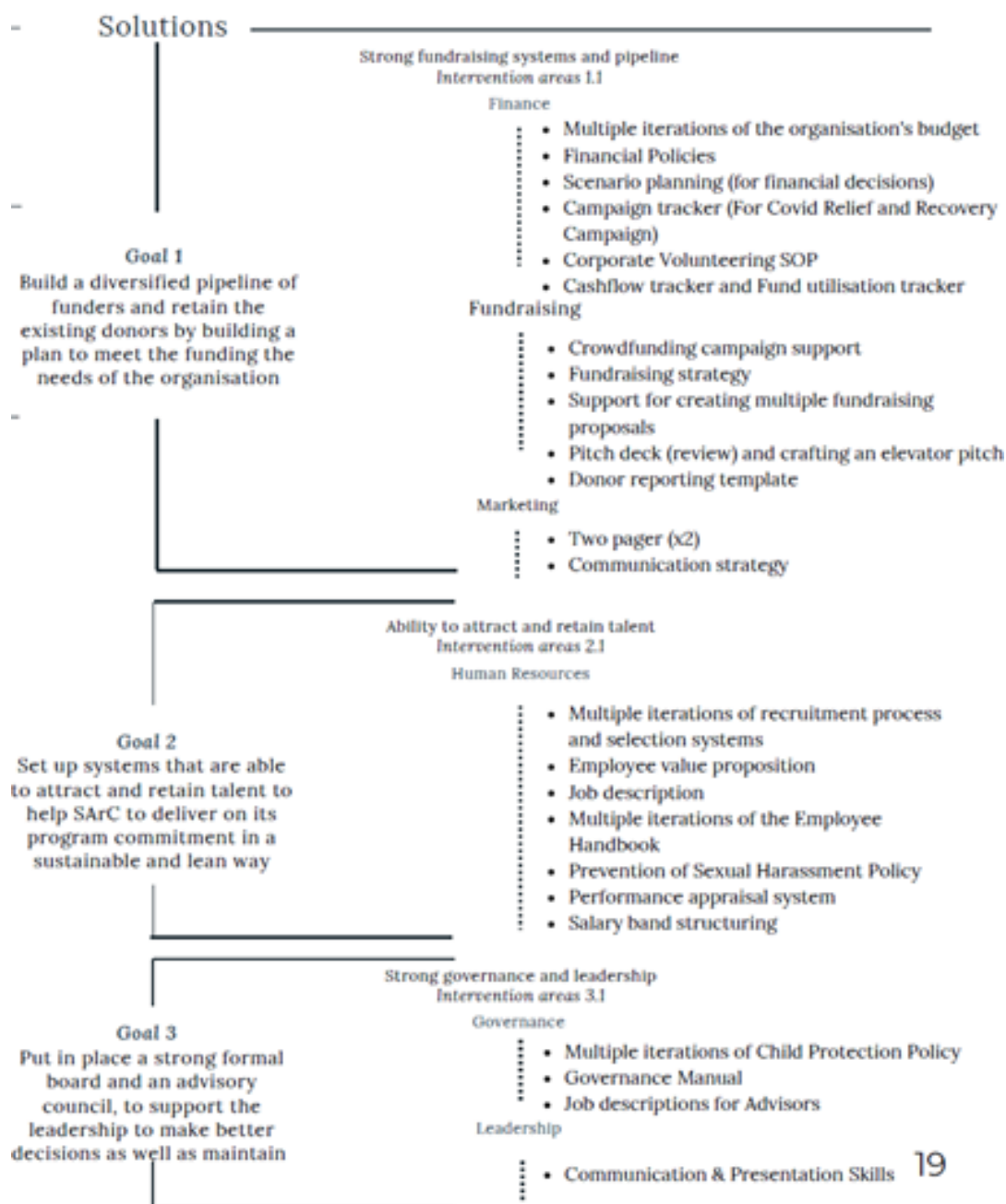
Saturday Art Class is a school-based intervention working towards empowering children from low-income communities by taking them through a process of creative exploration and expression as a means to facilitate Social and Emotional Learning integrated with Art. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process of developing the self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work, and life success. People with strong social-emotional skills are better able to cope with everyday challenges and benefit academically, professionally, and socially.

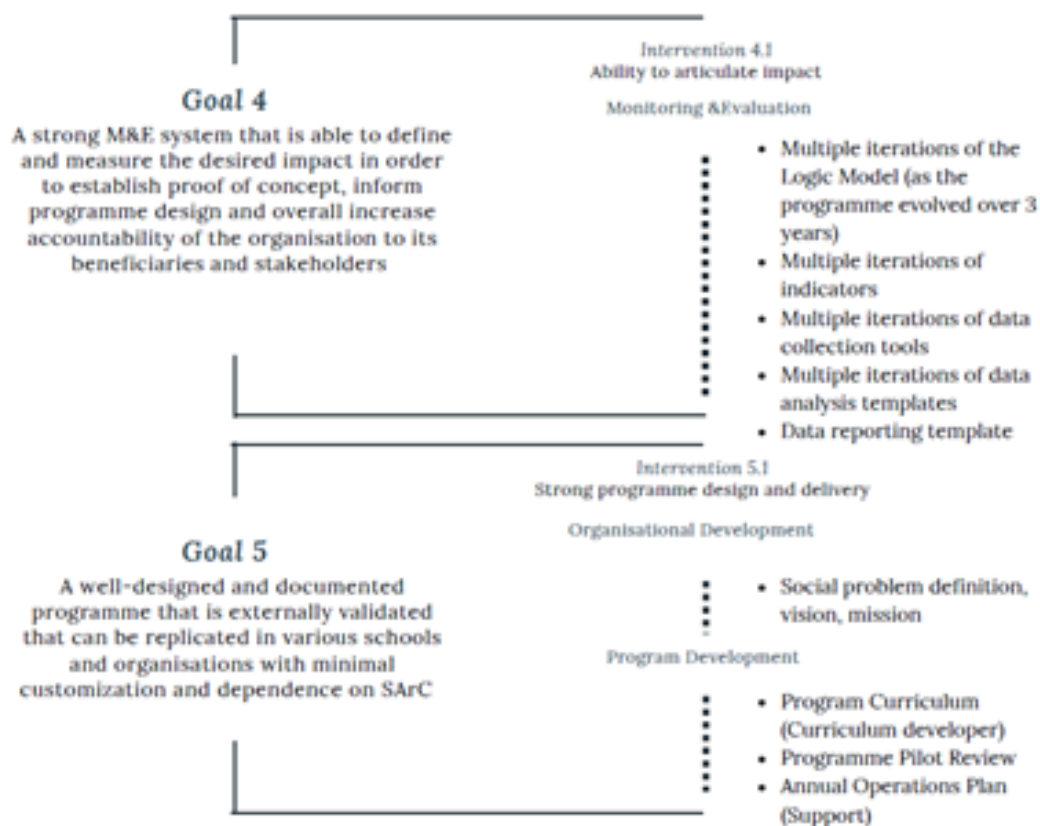
Problems identified

SEL and Arts integrated learning are both growing movements within education and Saturday Art Class is among those spearheading them. When Saturday Art Class joined the Atma partnership, they were **building a solid foundation for organisational growth and sustainability and putting key systems and processes in place**. During the pandemic, Saturday Art Class demonstrated agility in responding to the needs of the situation with their COVID Relief (supplying dry rations to families in need) and Recovery (programmes for students rendered through digital platforms, designed to inculcate SEL and resilience) programmes. COVID-19, while being a challenge, allowed Saturday Art Class to reflect on the impact it would like to create and build readiness for scale.

Atma's Approach

Through the use of Atma's Life Stage Survey tool, Saturday Art Class was able to **assess its capacities across 9 different organisational development areas**. Separately, Atma also helped Saturday Art Class **articulate its long-term goals**. Using the assessment and the articulation of long-term goals, Atma helped Saturday Art Class **develop a blueprint of critical areas for capacity building for the 3 years of the partnership**. Due to externalities like COVID-19 and Saturday Art Class' own journey towards clarifying its vision for impact, the long-term goals of the partnership and the organisation were revisited year on year. Atma periodically revisited the partnership plan to make sure the work taken up during the partnership stayed relevant to the needs of Saturday Art Class.





Saturday Art Class Growth

Stakeholders

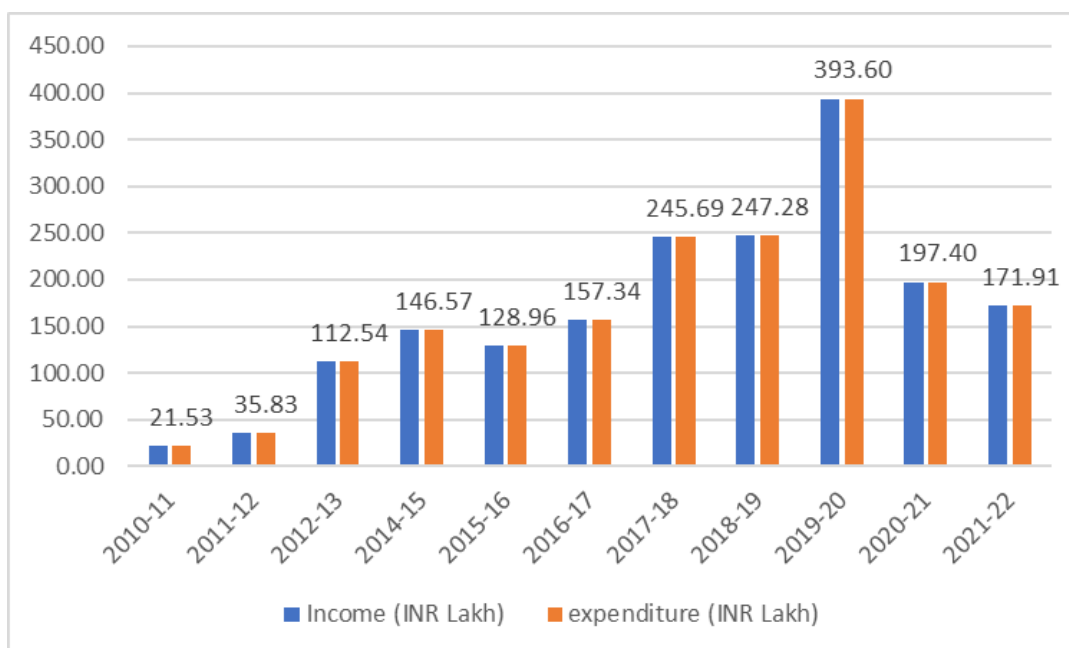
2019-20	917 children
2020-21	250 children through virtual classrooms 80791 users through digital interventions 15330 individuals through COVID relief work
2021-22	1-year training: 60 educators, serving 1459 students 3-month training: 20 educators, serving 400 students 1-day training: 963 educators, serving 38,520 students 35000+ users through digital interventions

Budget

2019-20	20,80,885	₹
2020-21	45,09,192	₹₹
2021-22	52,00,000	₹₹₹

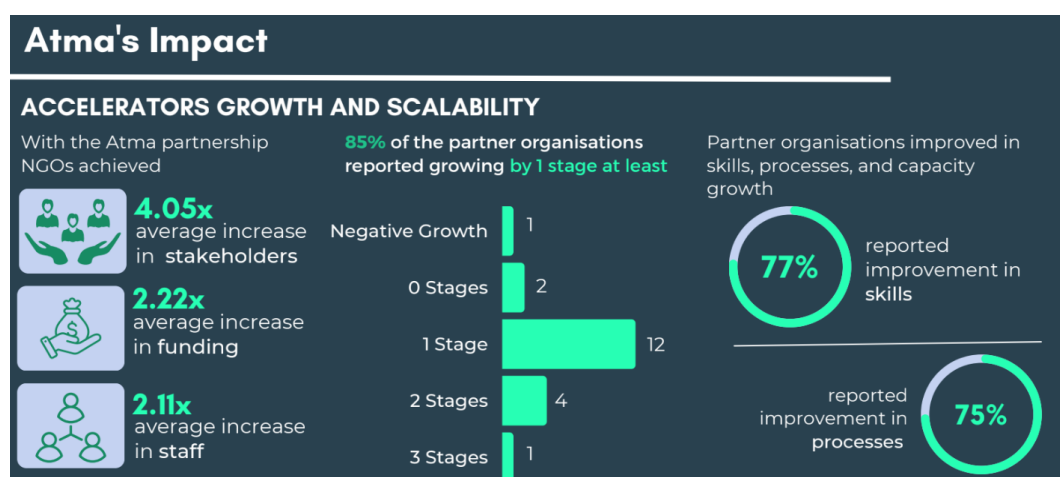
Source: Atma Annual Report 2021-22

Exhibit 2: Income and Expenditure account of Atma Education of the past 11 years



Source: Atma Annual Reports 2010-22

Exhibit 3: Impact Assessment of the Accelerator programme, 2022



Relevance



Partner organisations agree or strongly agree that the Accelerator adequately met their needs

The Accelerator is aligned with the needs and priorities of the partner organisations

Coherence

The Accelerator is positioned to bridge gaps of Organisational Development

70%

NGOs report that a majority of funders do not support their OD needs¹

BUT

75%

funders report that they provide funding for grantees' OD needs on a case by case basis¹

The Gap

Articulation of the need for funding support for OD by the NGO¹

Atma's Accelerator bridges this gap by teaching the NGOs the necessary skills and processes for articulating what their organisation's needs to thrive, instead of making do with what funders give

¹Bridging the Gap on Funding the True Costs of NCOs in India by Pritha Venkatachalam, Donald Yeh, Shashank Rastogi, Anushka Siddiqui, Kanika Gupta, Lahari Shekar, and Roger Thompson, The Bridgespan Group, 2022

The Accelerator contributes to the following international priorities and policies



The Accelerator is in coherence with international policies and priorities in the education space

Effectiveness

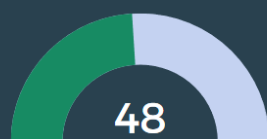


partner organisations were satisfied with support on the diagnosis of capacity building needs, goal setting and planning, and design and implementation of projects



partner organisations were satisfied with Consultant Support, Knowledge Products and Progress Tracking

Atma's Net Promoter Score



NPS is a widely used measure of customer sentiment

There are strong systems and processes to measure the needs and outputs and incorporate feedback.

The NPS indicates a high likelihood of partner organisations recommending the programme

Mckinsey &
Company **20**

Boston Consulting
Group **37**

Goldman Sachs **33**

The average score for likeliness to recommend (on a scale of 1-10) is 8.04 (n=21) indicating a very high likelihood of partner organisations recommending the programme.

Source: Atma Internal, 2023

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