The usefulness of networks: A study of social innovation in India

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Abstract

Actors, the individuals or groups of individuals (organisations) who are able to influence outcomes and cause change, are in many ways the repositories of knowledge and skills for social innovation in a fast-changing environment where there is limited external, contemporary documentation. Because knowledge is spread across actors, interaction is required for the different knowledge types to mix. Networks are therefore important to social innovation as innovation is the result of new combinations of diverse knowledge types. This paper uses data from an existing research project mapping individual networks of innovating social enterprises in India to improve our understanding of 1) who social entrepreneurs turn to for access to knowledge and financial and non-financial support in order to innovate, build and grow the business and develop social capital; 2) the mechanisms through which they build the relationships that form the basis of their network and 3) the role of networks of individual social innovators in contributing to meeting goals of social innovation that are systemic rather than individual.

1 Introduction

India has seen a recent and rapid emergence of social enterprises as a potential alternative development channel, where these enterprises can undertake social and development improvements in a more financially sustainable manner than other kinds of programmes. Innovation is central in social enterprises: many are creating new products and services, accessing, and/or at times creating, new markets. These enterprises also exist in a new and rapidly evolving sector and need to innovate to adapt to new challenges. However, to innovate and grow their social enterprise, entrepreneurs need to interact with other actors, including fellow entrepreneurs, suppliers, wholesalers, investors, incubators. For this they build networks of contacts that they rely on for access to new information and knowledge, access to finance, access to business connections along the value chain and access to markets and customers.

This paper[1] sets out to look at two interrelated areas. The first is the role of networks for individual entrepreneurs. The second: the impact of these individual networks on social innovation at the system level.

2 Literature Review
2.1 Social Entrepreneurs and Innovation

A recent study notes that "there is social innovation wherever new mechanisms and norms consolidate and improve the wellbeing of individuals, communities and territories in terms of social inclusion, creation of employment and quality of life" (OECD, 2011).

Social entrepreneurs, one such community and ecosystem, has attracted particular attention over the last decade or so. These "ventures in the business of creating significant social value … do so in an entrepreneurial market-oriented way, that is, through generating own revenues to sustain themselves" (EU, 2013). As agile, often self-sustaining non-state actors, they are particularly important as key actors for social innovation in the early stages where social innovation remains weakly institutionalised (OECD, 2011).

Here, innovation, defined as the continuous process of upgrading using new knowledge or the new combination of existing knowledge that is new to the local area, is generally seen to emerge from a system of actors whose interactions, behaviour and patterns of learning are conditioned by institutions (Freeman, 1987; Lundvall, 1992; Edquist, 1997). The institutions that facilitate flow of information between various actors are particularly important for the innovation ecosystem.

2.2 Knowledge Flows and Networks Characteristics

Within the social enterprise ecosystem, actors, the individuals or groups of individuals (organisations) who are able to influence outcomes and cause change,[2] are in many ways the repositories of knowledge and skills for social innovation in a fast-changing environment where there is limited external, contemporary documentation. Because knowledge is spread across actors, interaction is required for the different knowledge types to mix. It follows that collaborative knowledge accumulation and learning process are essential bases for innovative activity (Arora, 2009) – in other words, the performance of an innovation process is a function of the structure of its knowledge-sharing network. It is through networks that new relationships between actors with different knowledge form that result in knowledge sharing and innovation.

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2   Actors include, for example, entrepreneurs, suppliers, traders, wholesalers, end users, investors, incubators,
        banks, self-help groups, cooperatives, competitors, NGOs, and Government.

Because knowledge is spread across actors, interaction is required for the different knowledge types to mix. It follows that collaborative knowledge accumulation and learning processes are essential bases for innovative activity (Arora, 2009). An effective network structure, characterised as wide (a range of different sources of knowledge types including geographical sectoral and professional) and open (ensuring access to knowledge both within the network and outside it) helps knowledge and information flow between different actors (Sonne, 2011; Castilla et al. 2001).

Networks provide actors with social capital, or 'the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures" (Portes, 1998:2 in Cowan and Kamath, 2012). In other words, networks not only provide direct access through contacts, but the quality of those contacts and the network as a whole indirectly affects an actor's standing and, in turn, ability to access resources he requires outside his own immediate network.

2.3 Why Entrepreneurs Network

For innovating social entrepreneurs, networks are important in order to access new business opportunities and contacts, finance, suppliers, markets and customers, technology, knowledge and credibility (Partanen, 2011; Semrau, 2013). Further, according to Gebreyeeus and Mohnen (2013), the most common reasons for entrepreneurs to collaborate are to exchange information and experiences. Ebber (2013), note that entrepreneurs emphasising networking are more likely to know of business or collaboration opportunities. Lastly, according to Allison, 2011, most networks are geographically close, especially for smaller and newer entrepreneurs. Larger social entrepreneurs may have a more international network.

2.4 Network Brokers and Support

When networks do not emerge spontaneously, agents acting as catalysts can facilitate the emergence of effective networks (Unido, 1999). The role of network platforms is to connect the social enterprise ecosystem - to widen and improve the quality of individual networks, while also connecting the ecosystem as a whole. The network platforms are a place to trade, establish collaboration, exchange knowledge and information and access new investment opportunities (for impact investors) and potential investors (for social enterprises). Incubators and facilitators are important actors in any network because they act as 'brokers' -connecting disparate parts of the system, such as social entrepreneurs to impact investors in order to access finance, or to mentor to access new information. A study on social enterprise in the UK noted that network brokers, regional catalysts and entrepreneurship support organisations (Kimmel and Hull 2012) help galvanise networks within the sector. In the Indian social enterprise ecosystem, we see a number of such different agents and the emergence in recent year of network platforms (Unconvention, Sankalp Forum, Artha Platform), facilitators (Dasra, Idobro), incubators (Villgro, UnLtd India).

Nevertheless, studies on networks in the SME and social enterprise sectors have shown that many network platforms and facilitators, are inefficient. Networking needs to be a deliberate strategy (Akcomac, 2009) and support organisations must have a deep understanding of social enterprises, but a UK study on social enterprise networks suggested most do not (Allison, 2011). A separate study on entrepreneurs and incubators agree, noting that on the whole, incubators, while expected to act as facilitators or brokers, often do not, and even when they do link entrepreneurs to external partners, the success rate is very small (Ebbers, 2013). In fact, Allison (2011) noted that the social entrepreneurs surveyed in the UK found interaction with fellow social entrepreneurs to be more helpful than that with incubators, and that social entrepreneurs are often supporting each other through informal peer-to-peer exchanges. Networks are therefore important for sharing knowledge and information informally, which in turn builds confidence among entrepreneurs, and provide opportunities for collaboration to reach economies of scale, share resources or perhaps collaborate on projects as partners (Rocket Science, 2008 in Allison, 2011).

2.5 Conclusion and Framework

This review of literature on existing research suggests that innovating social entrepreneurs require networks in order to accumulate knowledge and information to solve problems and innovate, and advice on how to start and grow their business, access funding, access stakeholders such as suppliers along the value chain, and access markets and customers. Social entrepreneurs are also likely to use networks to develop social capital and standing in the community in order to more easily access information, funding and useful business contacts and markets. We also find that the source of networks differ and that while there are now may enterprise enablers, or support organisations, an entrepreneur's social network (friends and family) play a major role, especially in the beginning. Lastly, the review found that organisations such as incubators or investors that act as 'network brokers' have a mixed success rate, and often enterprises find speaking to fellow entrepreneurs more useful than being supported by brokers in order to learn about something new or expand their network.

3 Methodology

The research relies on primary and secondary data, and to study networks, we use an egocentred method for data collection and analysis. (Greve, 2003; Knoke and Kuklinski, 1982). This method looks at an individual's network of actors rather than the total system level network. Here, respondents provide information on actors in their networks and the activities, and nature of those relations. Egocentered network methods are appropriate when data on the whole population is not available, or only a small sample of the population is included.

Interviews and visits to the four social enterprises were undertaken to: learn about each social enterprise's individual network in detail, and the roles that different actors play, learn how their networks evolved over time and how their use of the network has changed over time and understand the role of social enterprise support organisations. The unit of analysis is the social enterprise, and to select the four case studies, we used purposeful sampling. By using multiple cases, one can study patterns, similarities and differences across cases while avoiding coincidental occurrences (Eisenhardt, 1991; Yin, 1989). The criteria to select the three case studies were based on finding social enterprises from a range of backgrounds, in different sectors, and at different stages of development.

Table 1: Case Study Selection

Enterprise	Sector	Rural/Urban	Backhround
SMV Wheels	Cycle Rickshaw	Urban: Varanasi	Ran rickshaw organisation
Under the Mango Tree	Honey/farming	Rural to Urban	Formerly World Bank
Rose Computer Academy	Education	Village/semi-urban	Graduate/local IT teacher

Interviews were semi-structured and follow "a conversation with a purpose" (Burgess, 1991) approach, which allows interviewees to vary the detail of their answers and the order of the questions. The analysis followed a grounded and iterative process (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003), and has been strengthened through triangulation of theory, case studies and a survey (Yin, 2003).

4 Overview of Case Studies

Following on from the overview provided by the survey, this section looks at the networks of three social enterprises. The case studies are SMV Wheels, a cooperative providing financing for cycle rickshaws; Under The Mango Tree, which produces honey through partner farmers; and Rose Computer Academy which trains rural and semi-urban youth in computer literacy.

4.1 SMV Wheels: knocking on doors

This case study shows how separate local business and implementation networks can be from the strategy and funding networks. It also highlights the importance of experience and of knocking on doors to build a network.

SMV Wheels, started by Naveen Krishna in Varanasi in 2010, offers rickshaw pullers the opportunity to become members of the SMV Wheels Cooperative and to apply for a loan to buy a cycle rickshaws. There are four different types of rickshaws: regular rickshaw (Rs 15500), rickshaw with double seating by SMV Wheels (Rs 15500), trolley (Rs 11500) and push cart (Rs 9000). Following the loan application and due diligence, SMV provides the rickshaw upfront, and it is subsequently paid off in 52 instalments over one year, at Rs 200-300 per week. The weekly payments are registered against the rickshaw puller's ID, providing him with proven credit and payment record which can be used to access other loans or government schemes.

Naveen spent several years working for a government agency setting up local rickshaw organisations through a government-funded programme. It is this experience that he relied on when setting up SMV Wheels: For example, a common issue was that once the project grant funding ended, the rickshaw organisation had to close. He therefore chose to set up SMV Wheels as a for profit entity. While Naveen had the knowledge and experience to set up an organisation supporting rickshaw pullers, he believes the social enterprise idea came not from him, but from rickshaw pullers with foresight, and five rickshaw pullers he met when moving back to Varanasi co-funded his first rickshaw purchase so that he could start SMV Wheels.

Naveen makes a distinction between networks that exist locally, and that he needs to run his business day-to-day –including insurance and hospital partners, buy-in from government entities, and customers, and the pan-Indian network that he uses to attract funding, and learn how to grow and scale the enterprise.

4.2 Under The Mango Tree: strong existing networks

This case study shows how established professional and social networks and being based in a metro can really help a social entrepreneur make the most of opportunities to grow.

Under the Mango Tree (UTMT), started by Vijaya Pastala in 2007, links bee-keeping farmers with markets for honey in cities through local partner organizations in rural areas and tie-ups with supermarkets and high-end retailers in urban areas. UTMT operates a hybrid for profit and NGO model with a for profit business purchasing and marketing honey as one arm, and an NGO training and support farmers to take up bee keeping as the other arm.

UTMT started as a proprietorship in 2007, had its first sale in 2008, became a not-for-profit Society in 2009 and registered as a Private Limited Company in 2010. It is headquartered in Mumbai and operates across Western and Northern India. UTMT won Vilage Capital in 2009, became a Level two incubatee with UnLtd India in 2009, received incubation support and funding from Villgro in 2012 and has recently been awarded the Development Marketplace award.

Vijaya grew up, and studied in Mumbai, before moving to the US for undergraduate and postgraduate studies. When she returned to India, she worked in livelihoods for international foundations such as the Aga Khan Foundation, the KfW Bankengruppe, and the World Bank. It is this experience working with livelihoods, that she based the business model of UTMT on.

At UTMT, the wide range of networks and their central importance is striking, as Vijaya is a very active networker. The networks can be broadly and loosely divided between networks for access to marketing and retail based on Vijaya's social network, networks based on contacts from the social enterprise ecosystem for funding and scaling the enterprise, and value chain networks mostly drawn from a decade's worth of professional experience. The other noticeable characteristic is that Vijaya and UTMT have spoken to a lot of contacts, and in that way continuously filter their most important network.

4.3 Rose Computer Academy: importance of key people

This case study shows how meeting a series of key individuals can trigger change and access to the social enterprise network when not living in a metro or well networked. It also highlights the issue of not being confident in English, and the importance of boosting confidence and providing support at an early stage, especially when an entrepreneur cannot rely on his social network for business support.

Amit Kataria's Rose Computer Academy in Haryana provides short-term computer courses such as basic computing, accounting and graphic design for villagers with little formal education. It was set up in a village outside the National Capital Region in 2006 and became operational in 2007. In the first year the school had 119 students and by 2013 a total of 5000 students have completed a course there. There are now a head office and three branches within a 12km radius. The organisation started out as a proprietorship, registered as a partnership firm in 2008 and as a private limited in 2012. Rose Computer Academy has recently received funding from UnLtd.

While in his final year at Delhi University, Amit returned to his villages to teach basic computing with Literacy India in his village in the mornings. Within a year Amit had started an entrepreneurship course with, Dhriiti, an NGO that supports the formation of micro enterprises. While at Dhriiti, Amit created a plan to start a computer training organisation. With a little bit of funding from a cousin and a friend, Amit began work on the school in November, 2006, with students coming in 2007 when he had three basic computers, and official opening ceremony in 16 August 2007. Amit uses his networks for general queries and does not divide it between access to finance, business advice of new knowledge. Instead there is a distinction between queries of a business, strategy and finance nature (for which his links are pan-Indian) and network for customers (students) and suppliers (of IT infrastructure or teachers), which are local.

5 Networks of Social Enterprises

This section will discuss the networks that social enterprises rely on to access new knowledge, information and business strategy, access business partners along the value chain and access to markets and customers, in light of the case studies described above and summarised in the table below. It then goes on to discuss change over time, before finally considering the impact networks have on the system.

Table 2: Summary of Case Studies

	SMV Wheels	UTMT	Rose Computer
Information, business strategy	Incubator Unltd India central to strategy, advice and building business. Rely on fellow entrepreneur network from Dasra. New technology: work with Dutch CSR skills exchange programme and students at a top engineering colleges in collaboration with America-India Foundation.	Being part of the UnLtd incubation programme gave Vijaya access to a large number of mentors. She also relies on old colleagues and friends who have been there early on. Today her board is important for strategy. Also get support through CSR initiatives like Eidelweiss that wrote HR policy.	Amit has built network through organisations supporting social enterprises. Dhriiti taught him business strategy and writing a business plan. UnLtd India has helped with management. Sandeep Kirpalani is a key advisor and writes applications. Uses network of social entrepreneurs to access information and contacts.
Finance	Finance came first via business plan competitions. The competition also connected Naveen with KL Felicitas Foundation and First Light Verntures, which led to a syndicate investing	Business plan competition provided funding early on, followed by incubator Villgro in 2012 and in 2013, World Bank's Development Market Place. Now the Board is important for fundraising.	Early on friends and family invested. Recently incubator UnLtd provided finance to stabilise operations and expand.
Business partners along value chain	Use local manufacturers and assemblers of rickshaws that SMV tested out and now train and monitor. Partner with local insurance and hospital to offer medical coverage. And NGO train in HIV prevention, health and hygiene. Local authorities proved uncooperative at first, but persistence paid off.	Business network is made up of local partners supplying honey. These are large local NGOs Vijaya worked with or set up in her previous jobs.	Amit has tied up with a local foundation (NIT) to provide certificates on completion of computer courses, through a contact at Dhriiti. For teachers, Rose relies on course graduates, local people and graduates from local colleges. For computer infrastructure, Amit uses people based locally – a hardware shop .

Customers	Built rickshaw walla networks by hanging out with them, took nine months to build trust. Five initial rickshaw pullers supported him from start and helped build network. Weekly customer outreach, now have 1300 pullers in cooperative. To sign on new puller, visit family, friends, speak to wife to reduce risk.	The customer network includes large supermarket chains in India's main metros through which the honey is sold. These hard-to-reach partners were accessed through Vijaya's personal network (school, friends, family) as well as networks of board members.	The students that Rose trains are all based in local villages. He first tried tying up with local school but that local administrators disapproved. He now gets students through word-of-mouth, and recently employed a campaign manager to improve student numbers.
Confidence and day-to-day support	UnLtd for building coonfidence, fellow entrepreneurs met through Dasra programme.	Through Dasra and Unltd met a lot of social entreprenuers and mentors that relies on for day—to-day queries.	Mariam Jafri at Dhriiti was the first to boost his confidence. At Jagriti Yatra (social enterprise tour) he met people from International Institute for Social Enterprise who support him.

5.1 Individual Social Enterprise Networks

The case studies show that there is often no clear distinction between different kinds of networks, such as between new knowledge and advice on the one hand, and access to finance on the other. Often the key people are the same in both networks. Vijaya from UTMT relies, for instance, heavily on her board for advice on current fundraising, but also on more general advice related to the current expansion. Naveen of SMV Wheels, meanwhile relies on his friend and mentor at UnLtd India together with Lisa Phizer of KL Felicitas Foundation for both fundraising and knowledge connections. In the case of Rose Computer Academy, Amit relies internally on his colleague and advisor Mr Kiprani, and externally on his investor, UnLtd India for advice, information and funding connections.

However, there is an obvious distinction between networks used for fundraising and business strategy and new information on the one hand, and business inputs along the value chain, and customers, on the other hand. The value chain and market networks tend to be considerably more local, while the advice, information and finance network is pan-Indian, and often based in India's metros. Rose Computer Academy, for instance, has a highly localised business and customer network, based within a radius of 12km from its head office. Naveen's business network of stakeholders providing value added services, or government officials, is also very much local, based in Varanasi. The same goes for SMV Wheel's customers – the rickshaw pullers of Varanasi. UTMT, meanwhile, uses large partner organisations for connecting with farmers and procuring honey, and these are therefore not local, but pan-Indian. UTMT is also using a different customer network -reaching urban high-income individuals through high-end supermarkets. However, it is noteworthy that while UTMT's customer and business partner network are not as localised as those of Rose Computer Academy or SMV Wheels, UTMT generally relies on Vijaya's personal network, rather than contacts provided by the social enterprise support ecosystem.

One area that is less tangible but highlighted as important by all social enterprises in the study, is personal support and confidence boosting- being able to talk to somebody understands what the social entrepreneur is going through. Here, all case study entrepreneurs emphasised the vital role that networks of fellow social enterprises play. Vijaya from UTMT relies on the support of social entrepreneurs she met through UnLtd and Dasra. Naveen of SMV Wheels also thought the Dasra cohort of social enterprises was a source of support. Meanwhile, Amit uses the online alumni network of Jagriti Yatra for support, queries and as a source of new contacts.

5.2 Change: the Evolutionary Nature of Networks

We found that the the networks varied for each social entrepreneur. However, all entrepreneurs relied on social networks (including professional created from previous jobs) when starting up their social enterprise. That also means that the background that the social entrepreneur came with mattered a great deal when it comes to how useful his existing network was.

Table 3: Change in Networks over Time

	SMV Wheels	**UTMT**	**Rose Computer**
Starting Out	Friends were important, especially the chartered accountant who helped register and do all legal formalities.	Relied heavily on existing social network -friends from college and former colleagues. Vijaya contacted people working on similar things. The founder of A World of Good was one such early mentor	Amit relied on friends and key people early on were: his brother who co-funded, a friend and a cousin who invested, and Mariam Jafri from Dhriiti who told him he could do this.
Now	Incubators and investors have become important.	Currently UTMT focussed on growth and focussing network on that. The Board of UTMT plays an important role. A network of social entrepreneurs important. Today have a network within UTMT with senior staff all have their own networks to tap into.	Today his brother is important, as is the friend. Other important people are those he met through the social enterprise training, Jagriti Yatra and forums. He relies less on Dhriiti today and more on UnLtd. Other important people are his campaign manager and Dipika from Intllecap.
Change	Relied more on personal network and friends before while now professional contacts have become more important. However, for local hires and local matters, still rely on personal contacts. Notes that contacts or advice looking for today is more focussed and less general than when starting out.	Network changed from 70% social network when starting out to 40% being social network today. Her needs of network has changed as business has grown and so the composition has changed. For example, the advice she seeks now is more specialised or nuanced.	Amit's network was family and friend-focussed at the start but through his journey he has made a lot of contacts- both from support organisations and social enterprises and these are now very important for his business.

Key People/ Triggers	Tej from Unltd India for business strategy and advice. Lisa Kleissner (KL Felicitas Found.) and Bob Patillo (First Light Ventures) for first believing him and provide access to finance.	Because of her existing network, UTMT has not relied on key people to trigger change much. Though initial funding and access to UnLtd important. A man who contacted Vijaya in 2010 with an interest in bee keeping is now a key patron.	Mariam Jafri at Dhriiti helped early on. Tej from UnLtd helped with business strategy. The Jagriti Yatra was a key trigger in connecting him to key people and organisations. Sandeep Kirpalani is vital in turning the business model more professional and connecting to finance.
Expand Network	Business plan competitions, Dasra and Sankalp helped expand network. Also uses TIE Delhi and Actions for India	UnLtd helped expand mentor network. Dasra provided access to network of fellow entrepreneurs. Vijaya is clear on importance of networks and the need to 'milk' her network.	Dhriiti told Amit about the Jagriti Yatra. At the Yatra he met Dipika from Intellecap who connected him to Sankalp Forum, where he met UnLtd. At the Yatra he met Mr Kirpalani who is a central advisor. The Yatra and Dasra provided networks of entrepreneurs.

Amit from Rose Computer Academy had initially relied almost exclusively on his local social network in his villages, with his friend, brother and cousin helping him to launch the enterprise. However, starting with Dhriiti, as he, almost linearly, progressed through different social enterprise support programmes, he made key contacts that then became cornerstones of his networks, such as Dipika introducing him to Sankalp while at the Jagriti Yatra, which in turn led him to meet UnLtd who invested in him and Dasra who took him on as a fellow and improved his business plan. He was able to take advantage of these opportunities because of meeting his partner and mentor Mr Kirpalani at the Yatra.

Vijaya of UTMT, on the other hand had a very strong professional and social network prior to starting her enterprise, based on studies in the US, work experience with international foundations and the World Bank, and growing up in South Mumbai. These, taken together, put her in a unique position to use her network to further the enterprise right from the start. While she was new to the social enterprise support ecosystem, she was already networked in development finance in India, which likely has many overlaps with the social enterprise ecosystem. Meanwhile, she has been able to market her products very efficiently because of her social network opening doors to major retailers. Another person using his professional background extensively when starting the social enterprise is Naveen of SMV Wheels, since he had previously worked with a government agency setting up rickshaw organisations..

These networks have also changed and evolved over time. All social entrepreneurs noted that their networks had become more heavily based on professional sources, while reducing the reliance on contacts met through social networks. Vjaya of UTMT pointed out that this is partially a function of the advice needed becoming more targeted and specific the more the enterprise evolves, therefore needing more specialised help. SMV Wheels also emphasised that the kind of help and advice that is most useful to them now is that which is more targeted, specific and concrete. Before they found more general advice to be helpful as they were building the foundation of the organisation.

Lastly, it is noteworthy that in many cases there have been specific key people action as triggers for the social enterprises. For Amit's Rose Academy, for instance, meeting Mariam Jafri was a key turning point in believing he could start his own business. Likewise, meeting Dipika and Mr Kirpalani at the Jagriti Yatra provided him with access to the Sankalp Forum – the biggest social enterprise and impact investing event in India, and Mr Kirpalani was able to help him write the application as necessary since Amit did not speak English well at that point.

For SMV Wheels, Naveen, meeting Tej from UnLtd and have her help on creating a viable business model was important. So was taking part in the business plan competition that led to him meeting Lisa Phizer of KL Felicitas Foundation and Bob Partillo from First Light Ventures.

5.3 Individual Networks and System Impact

Support organisations have a clear goal in creating networks, as seen by the references to incubator UnLtd, accelerator programme Dasra and the social enterprise journey Jagriti Yatra. Once created, these networks become powerful tools in their own right and appear to be managed more by the social entrepreneurs themselves, in a self reinforcing manner. They have an impact on systems dynamics in three visible ways: 1) social entrepreneurs support each other and provide advice; 2) they collaborate; 3) expand their networks further, across the country.

The importance of the support that social entrepreneurs provide to each other has been documented in the literature (Allison 2011), and what we find in this study is that social entrepreneurs often find the advice of fellow entrepreneurs the most useful. For instance, Vijaya from UTMT noted that she speaks to fellow social entrepreneurs on a very regular basis because they are the only ones that understand the journey she is taking – since they are there themselves.

In terms of collaboration, the case study organisations highlighted that while they are not yet working with many other social entrepreneurs, it is something they aim to do. Collaborating with fellow social enterprises along the value chain or in the development of products and services provides opportunities for economies of scale, but also offer the potential for risk reduction since social entrepreneurs have a fairly good understanding of each others mission and values. At the system level, these collaborations hold the potential for creating yet more opportunities for social entrepreneurs to take on by expanding the ecosystem in scale and scope.

Lastly, Amit and Naveen who are both located away from the main metros, find the use of existing social enterprise networks really helpful for day-to-day advice and support. Amit in particular pointed out that the large alumni network of Jagriti Yatra is a very good source for contacts across India, and he used it, for instance, when visiting Bangalore speaking to technology companies. In that sense, the network expands individual networks to provide a much greater reach across India. This is especially important for social entrepreneurs working out of smaller cities and towns across India, who often miss out on the important networking, both formal and informal, that happens in the major indian cities.

6 Concluding Remarks

This paper set out to improve our understanding of how innovation social enterprise use their networks. We reviewed the literature and provided three case studies which showed how entrepreneurs use their networks in different ways. What was striking across all case studies was that in spite of coming from very different backgrounds, all social entrepreneurs found that their networks changed substantially during since they started out as a social entrepreneur. In the beginning they relied more heavily on family and friends, while they now have more professional contacts from the sector on board, whether as mentors, investors, and/or board members. Further, it was stroking how important the social entrepreneurs find the connection to other social entrepreneurs, as a source of day-to-day support and best practice advice. Lastly, we note that the impact of individual networks go beyond the individual entrepreneurs to affect the social enterprise ecosystem by multiplying through network platforms, creating vast networks of actors within the social enterprise ecosystem, such as the Jagriti Yatra network or the Dasra cohort network.

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