

The Barefoot Model for Global Sustainability

SUMMARY

As the world shifts its attention to global poverty alleviation and combating climate change, the success of The Barefoot College's holistic approach built on empowering women from around the globe offers a clear plan for large-scale impact.

BY AMPLIFIER STRATEGIES

When something is told often enough, it becomes easier to believe. Few things have been repeated for so long as the old axiom: the poor will always be with us. But The Barefoot College, an innovative, grassroots programme for rural poor, has proven over the last four decades that people everywhere have the wherewithal and ability to rise above the limitations of extreme poverty.

The College's model, built on a philosophy it calls "The Barefoot Approach," offers a range of impact strategies that do far more than alleviate poverty. These strategies—called "The Barefoot Solution"—were constructed in the field starting in 1972 in the

rural outpost of Tilonia, Rajasthan, India. Meshed together, The Barefoot Approach and The Barefoot Solution offer a road map for 14 of the 17 priorities of the 2015 U.N. Sustainable Goals and a track record few global programmes can match.

The Barefoot College Founder Sanjit “Bunker” Roy describes the organisation’s work as a “Forty-five-year love story with the poor, those making less than a dollar a day.”

2015 UN Sustainable Goals

The United Nations no longer believes the poor will always be with us. In 2015, the global organisation issued an ambitious goal to “end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all,” according to a press release. The 2015 UN Sustainable Goals are not mere rhetoric but backed with 17 goals and a timeframe of just 15 years. The number 1 priority is specific, leaving no wriggle room: No Poverty.



“For the goals to be reached, everyone needs to do their part: governments, the private sector, civil society and people like you,” its website states.

For Meagan Fallone, CEO of The Barefoot College, the UN goals were welcomed but long overdue. Through its innovative, bottom-up model for sustainable economic growth, The Barefoot College has believed deeply in the wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi and followed his lifestyle and work since its inception. Gandhi wrote to promote “action.” It is his ongoing inspiration that provides the compass for dealing with communities and remains as relevant today as it was four decades ago. His teachings align completely with the UN’s directions in 2015.

Barefoot’s leadership often describes its revolutionary approach adopted and proven in a tiny Indian village that now has a footprint around the globe. From the idea of what a “professional” is, to what defines “education,” to elevating the crucial leadership role



Meagan Fallon
CEO, The Barefoot College

“The Barefoot College is a place where words like inclusion, social justice, equality are not just words. They are a way of life. We have been championing ideas of capacity and confidence building within rural poor communities through solutions like water, solar and livelihood development for our entire 42-year history.”

and talents of women as the foundation of economic enhancement, Barefoot has proven to be far ahead of the times.

Fallone pointed out that statistically women invest twice as much of their incomes back into their family than men (80 percent to 40 percent). According to a 2010 McKinsey Report, gender parity could raise GDP by 26 percent, roughly the equivalent to the combined economies of the United States and China. Women prioritise education for the children, stability for the community and place-based skills that build on existing cultures.

“It’s pretty clear to us that women are the right place for us to invest and where we’re going to get the best return,” Fallon said.

This central theme of empowering women has now taken hold all across the globe. As Barefoot expands its international outreach into places like Africa and Latin America, women are the first and most direct beneficiaries.

“We try to be part of this positive equation to support and empower every single woman in Latin America,” said Rodrigo Paris, head of Latin America for The Barefoot College.

These inexorable goals of empowering women, alleviating poverty and combating climate change explain why a rural outpost “college” has attracted international attention in recent years.

Case in point: Roy has shared The Barefoot College model with the Dalai Lama. He and Fallon have given TED talks and have presented at the Clinton Global Initiative. Roy was honored with Clinton Global Service Award in 2013. In response, the Indian government authorised \$2.5 million so Barefoot could expand with five regional training centers in the continent of Africa. Governmental stakeholders in Guatemala, Papua New Guinea and Fiji are also funding regional training centers in 2016.

With women fundamentally at the helm, this model of change has fully arrived on the global stage.

The Barefoot College Story

In 1965, Roy was a young post-graduate who volunteered to spend the summer working with famine-affected people in one of India’s poorest states. This life-changing experience culminated in a personal mission to fight poverty and inequality, he said.

He launched The Barefoot College seven years later with his wife Aruna Roy and a group of like minded urban individuals with a shared vision. Together, they established Barefoot College as a non governmental, community-based organisation that would

be managed and operated by the villagers themselves. Aruna Roy left the the organisation nine years later to found Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan with Shankar Singh and Nikil Roy.

“The college was built and remains the only college built by and for the rural poor,” Fallon said.

When he first arrived in Tilonia, Roy said, the village elders met him with skepticism.

“Are you running from the police?” Roy said they asked him.

The wisdom of the elders became a foundation for this grand experiment of grafting together formal urban learning with rural wisdom and knowledge. This allows the voices of the rural poor to be at the heart of creating their own solutions. It carried on the ideas shared and spread by Mahatma Gandhi based on respect for all, inclusion and social justice.

“What the poor considered important would be reflected in this college,” Roy said.

Using lessons learned about the need for solar power, water and professional development, the college’s mission centered on the recruitment of illiterate and semi-literate women from rural communities around the world. They are brought to Tilonia and trained holistically in cross-cultural cohorts for a period of six months. Despite vast cultural differences, the women are trained to become solar engineers.

Roy said women were purposefully recruited. Once educated, men head to cities in search of jobs, but “Grandmothers always come back to their villages,” Bunker says. “We’ve empowered women in over 70 countries to be self-sufficient agents of change in their communities.”

The programme helps people rise above the poverty line with dignity and self-respect. The leadership is still comprised of mostly non-formally educated barefoot professionals.

The Barefoot Approach

The college remains distinct in that the same principles that guided it from inception remains in place despite rapid expansion to places like Africa and Latin America. The Barefoot College is one of the few places in India where Gandhi’s spirit of service and thoughts on sustainability, are still alive and respected, according to Fallon. The College has adopted the Gandhian ideas into its lifestyle and work ethics, holding it true and relevant universally even in the 21st Century.

“We are working to build a sustainable world where the transfer of life changing technology, access to information and the ability for communities in the developing



Bunker Roy
Founder, The Barefoot College

“It’s the only college in India where if you should have a Ph.D. or a Masters, you are disqualified to come. You have to be a cop out, or a washout or a drop out to come to our college. You have to have a dignity of labor and show you have a skill you can offer to the community.



world to share among themselves, innovation designed and deployed with them at the center, is the only acceptable solution to fighting poverty.” Fallone said.

These principles form what is called The Barefoot Approach. Roy, Fallone and others associated with the programme refuse to compromise this approach regardless of location or expansion.

“You eat on the floor, sleep on the floor, work on the floor,” Roy said. “No one can get more than \$150 a month. If you come for the money, you don’t come to Barefoot College.”

This guiding philosophy explains the organisation’s name. All over the world, the rural poor walk barefoot. Likewise, a college is a universal symbol for education and development.

The Barefoot Approach also stresses respect for five “non-negotiable” values: equality, collective decision making, decentralisation, self-reliance and austerity.

Respect for all permeates the college.

“The teacher is the learner, and the learner is the teacher,” Roy said



Equality

Every member of the team is equally important and must be respected. An individual's education, gender, caste or class does not make her or him any less or more valuable.



Collective Decision Making

Everyone is accountable to each other. The flat organizational structure creates a free flow of information and gives voice to the concerns of all the groups.



Decentralisation

By decentralising planning and implementation at the grassroot level, the college empowers individuals to articulate their needs.



Self-Reliance

When people develop self-confidence and join together to solve problems, they learn that they can depend on themselves.



Austerity

A balanced way of life requires simplicity and moderation. Everyone works for the collective aspirations of rural communities, resulting in a sense of ownership.

Barefoot Solutions

To be clear, the issue of extreme poverty is far from resolved, despite progress in recent years. The UN's goals remain grandiose.

"Fifty percent of the world lives on less than \$2.50 a day," Fallone said, "without access to electricity, water and basic needs."

Roy admitted that the success of the college depended on results, not respect. Early cynics were abundant.

"They'd say, 'It's all mumbo jumbo if you can't show it on the ground,'" he said. "So we built the first Barefoot College in 1986. It was built by 12 Barefoot architects who can't

Solutions



Solar



Water



Advocacy



Education



Professions

read or write. It was built for \$1.50 a square foot. One hundred fifty people live there, work there.”

Results become the hallmark of professionalism within every emerging solution to poverty the college adapts. Expertise at the college is not designated by degrees or certificates but an acknowledgment of skill by the community itself.

“We redefined professionalism: A combination of confidence and competence and belief,” Roy said. “Traditional occupations are professionals. These are the professionals all over the world. These people should come into Main Street and show the knowledge and skills they have remained relevant even today.”

Each of these fields of expertise helped shape what has grown into a codified model of learning within the college called The Barefoot Solutions.

This collective effort and the programme initiatives that came from it—solar, education, water, livelihood, health, advocacy—comprise The Barefoot Solutions.

Training in the Barefoot Solutions begins, appropriately, with the source of all things, light.

Solar - Barefoot College trains women, especially grandmothers from rural villages around the world, to become solar engineers. Barefoot College Solar Engineers learn the skills of solar electrification, water heating, and filtering water through solar-powered desalination.

“The power of the sun not only fuels a village but serves as a catalyst to create employment, boost income, reduce carbon emissions, save trees, and most importantly, to provide self-reliant solutions within village communities,” Fallone said.

Once trained as solar engineers, the so-called “Solar Mamas” or “Barefoot Grandmothers” return to their villages equipped with the skills and equipment to electrify more than 50 homes each.

This initial training and power source then ripples out in other areas offering other solutions.



Aarti Devi
Radio Station Engineer, India

“The archaic mindset, the older way of thinking that says ‘stay at home, do things only this way... Do not let the girls go out, keep them inside...’ This thinking needs to change.”

Education - The Barefoot College Education Programme is geared toward fostering childhood development in rural areas. Barefoot Education emphasises hands-on, learning-by-doing processes of gaining knowledge and skills.

For the 60-70 percent of children restricted from school by family chores, education at night offers an alternative path to learning and growth. Education is “issue based, place-based and academic,” Fallone said. “We integrate things like child marriage and domestic violence, issues that are real to them.”

Barefoot Education inverts formal school system by making learning accessible to all and relevant to all. Traditional wisdom where appropriate is hailed, but challenged where social norms are discriminatory.

“We tackle social norms around gender and the value of education while developing the idea of the rural hero and the value of traditional livelihoods,” Fallone said.

Education places a high priority on the importance of building a strong citizenship and open society principles. It has involved more than 3,000 children annually in a vibrant children’s parliament structure that teaches the importance of transparency and collective decision-making, participation and ethics. Children have a full and participatory voice in the running of their schools leading to a higher level of excellence and commitment by teachers and staff.

Water- Access to clean water is one of the world's most urgent climate challenges, a precious resource that many countries have yet to manage sustainably. Even in developed countries like the US, sustainable community managed water systems are almost non-existent. Rural communities throughout India and the rest of the southern hemisphere often suffer from water scarcity, droughts and a lack of clean water sources for sanitation, drinking and cooking.

As one of life’s most essential ingredients, Barefoot College believes access to water a critical component of the plan. Its solutions include rainwater harvesting tanks, dams, solar powered reverse osmosis, water desalination plants and wells and ponds for groundwater recharge.

“For many communities that don’t have access to water, more than a third of their waking hours are spent walking to retrieve water,” Fallone said. Most often it is the women and girls who bear the brunt of this onerous and time-consuming task.

Professions- Driven by its culture of social justice, every person is valued for the role they play in the development of their community. Any adult member from the rural community—irrespective of gender, caste, ethnicity, age and schooling—can and should be allowed to contribute toward the development of their own rural communities.

The college trains thousands of men and women as Barefoot professionals in a variety of careers that also help sustain the community. For example, the Barefoot College health care programme provides basic health services to more than 150 villages through a team of Barefoot doctors, health workers, midwives, pathologists and dentists, all practically and experientially trained.

The College has equipped rural communities with basic health facilities. More than 260 Barefoot doctors have been trained to treat patients with common ailments.

Barefoot professionals include teachers, mechanics, architects, artisans, designers, masons, carpenters, computer instructors and accountants, in addition to our job development in other areas of solar and water. Still other jobs come through a radio station that reaches 50,000 people a day.

Advocacy - The very nature of empowering the rural poor requires the development of strong partnerships, capacity building and advocating for the needs of those on the margins, according to Fallone.

“We leave behind lasting and durable partners while globally advocating at every level for the inclusion of decentralised community owned and managed renewable energy models,” she said.

“It is always surprising the amount of work we must do with governments to gain respect and a sound understanding to what constitutes the work of social change and community transformation. And more importantly how critical it is for government to play a strong role in supporting that process.”

The vast Barefoot network, which includes donors, sponsors and volunteers from around the globe act as catalysts of positive change, speaking against social inequities, including caste discrimination, gender bias, illiteracy and feudal practices.

Together, the Barefoot Solutions ripple outward and produce the results that UN Sustainable Development Goals seek. The results can be seen in the lives of those who have gone through the programme and returned to villages all over the globe.

Kanoa Sharif Haji, a 47-year-old mother of eight children in an African village, works now weaving mats under a solar-powered LED light in her home. She says the Barefoot light has increased her earnings by \$15 a month.

“The work I do at night earns money we need to survive,” Haji said.

Another villager, Miza Juma Othman, earns \$60 a month installing solar panels that power batteries, phone chargers and lamps.

“I decided to go to India for the training programme,” Othman said. “My husband was supportive at first. But then he divorced me. Now I have a husband who is not threatened by the money I make.”



Rodrigo Paris
Head of Latin America

“I met Columbians in India as a Colombian, so everything was connected at that time, and I absolutely fell in love with Barefoot from the beginning.”



International: Wherever poverty exists

After so many years of bringing people to Tilonia to train them, the college itself has now shifted into a new phase of expansion with plans to build new training centers based on the Tilonia model in places like Africa and Latin America, or “wherever poverty exists,” Fallone said.

When Roy was honored by the Clinton Global Initiative, African Bishop Elias Taban received the same award. Their meeting kicked off a partnership to expand the Barefoot College experience into Africa. Barefoot College International was born. The Tilonia Campus has now been replicated in Zanzibar. South Sudan is under construction. Liberia, Burkina Faso and Senegal are both in stages of pre-construction.

Rodrigo Paris is hoping to see Latin America’s first campus within the next two years, he said.

“The regional center in Guatemala will be incredible. It’s our big dream to finish one in two years,” he said.

Paris, a former journalist and diplomat, decided to join the Barefoot staff after connecting with work in Tilonia. The cross-cultural learning experience hooked him, he said.

Rodrigo Paris said the ambitious move into Latin America meant adapting to a wide variety of cultures and environments.

“Latin America is an absolutely huge region and different in many ways. So now we are working with 17 countries in the region... each country is a different work, a different ecosystem...to get results,” he said.

The Barefoot College partners with local organisations and governments to deliver establish the training centers. Paris said the College’s track record of conservation of

the environment, tackling climate change and preserving indigenous communities,” is the right plan for the region.

“During Pope Francis’ visit to Latin America in 2015, he highlighted those issues as crucial and critical for the future of the region,” Paris said.

Conclusion: Unlearning and Relearning

The footprint in The Barefoot College logo is appropriate, as the inclusive strategy spreads, leaving a mark on vital issues of social progress. The Barefoot College, still built on the foundation of its unique Approach and producing demonstrable results through its comprehensive solutions, will continue to make its way into the outer reaches of the world with a message of economic hope and prosperity.

Fallone said the College works because of a simple idea that began way back in the beginning inspired by a quote from noted American futurist Alvin Toffler about the vast resources of the world’s illiterate poor.

“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn,” he wrote.

“We do a lot of unlearning and relearning at Barefoot College,” Fallon said. But those seeking to change the scope of poverty in the world and ambitiously fulfill the UN’s goal of poverty elimination must do necessary unlearning and relearning themselves.

New paradigms are needed that view the resources and talents among those who for so long have been marginalised. Many are catching on, including volunteers who come to the college to have the life-changing experiences that started first with Roy during those early days of famine.

“I’m a Barefoot fellow because I believe in human potential and human relationships,” said Lauren Remedios, of Bangalore, India, who studied at the Clinton School of Public Service before becoming Project Director For Friends of Barefoot College, USA.

She too is learning to unlearn what she once thought she knew and relearn a new idea of what’s possible.

About Amplifier Strategies: Amplifier is a social impact agency based in San Francisco, California working around the globe to build and scale mission-driven programs. Amplifier inspires and supports visionary leaders in creating far reaching

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