People + Planet

Joining Hands

Annamrita and Steelcase Pune Change Corp come together to battle hunger in India.

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Food insecurity has long been a major concern in India and like so many other social inequities the pandemic has exacerbated the problem. It is estimated that COVID-19 has dramatically increased the number of people facing acute food insecurity worldwide and India is among the worst-hit countries.

The Steelcase Pune Change Corp, an employee-led social innovation initiative, recently collaborated with the Annamrita Foundation for Project Arpan to help a community in Mahabaleshwar — a popular hill station in India's forested Western Ghats range, south of Mumbai. Annamrita aims to liberate underprivileged children from the vicious cycle of poverty and illiteracy by serving them wholesome nutritious meals.

Mahabaleshwar, which relies heavily on tourism, was hit very hard by the pandemic. Many of the residents in the region rely almost entirely on tourism to support themselves. Due to lockdowns, tourists stopped coming and the hill station was deserted. The impact was devastating and what could only be described as a hunger catastrophe.

Over the past several years, Annamrita has been driven by the vision to create a world in which no one in need goes hungry. While their vision is to serve nutritious meals to underprivileged children, when they realized the devastating impact the pandemic was having in areas where people were previously able to sustain themselves, they extended their efforts to help pandemic-affected families.

Project Arpan supports villagers who have selflessly preserved the nature of the hill station despite the economic difficulties and scarcity of the resources due to pandemic. It provides the most vulnerable families with grocery kits containing items such as rice, salt, sugar, edible oil, jaggery, flour, lentils and spices — enough to meet the basic needs of a family of four. With help from the Steelcase Pune Change Corp, 200 grocery kits were distributed in the village of Kshetra Mahabaleshwar to families most impacted by the disappearance of tourism.

"A united front is the key to winning every battle," says Sanjay Bhosle, director Annamrita Foundation. "I was amazed to know about the Change Corp activities and the great work the company is doing through social innovation. We are privileged to get everything that is required for a healthy lifestyle however there are many who are still having difficulties. This is indeed an important project where we helped the villagers who are also guarding the ecosystem and culture of the hill station. I guess this is what service means — doing your part with complete devotion. The more you give, the more you receive. We are grateful for this partnership and look forward to a fruitful venture."

Although COVID is a looming crisis, it did not dampen the spirits of the Change Corp teams. “We are glad to collaborate with Annamrita for Project Arpan with a great cause to reduce the inequality,” says Rushikesh Patil, a Steelcase associate project manager and member of Pune Change Corp. “Water, food and air are basic necessities in the hierarchy of needs pyramid. Without the bottom levels of the pyramid it is more difficult for a person to focus on more complex needs. The teams are committed to helping others to reach their full potential, including those in the communities where we live and work. Through food relief, this project brought a smile on the faces of the family members who were grappling with pandemic crisis. I feel proud that we can leverage the business as force for good.”