

Deepening The Rural Connect: From Immersion to Empowered Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This case highlights one of the best practices of a premier business school situated in Central India, which aims to sensitize management students towards the rural challenges and highlights how this initiative has been transformed over the years. The case is woven around the protagonist who is the director of this business school and is instrumental in conceptualizing this transformation. It highlights his vision to add value to the rural engagement program and is a sequential narration of the transformation of this initiative from rural immersion to rural engagement through experiential learning and in the process, kindles the inquisitiveness on how the rural sensitization can be further extended to newer perspective of exploring rural economies and carving out business opportunities.

Keywords: Rural Immersion, Rural Engagement, Rural Marketing, Marketing Mix, Social Sensitivity, Social Entrepreneurship, Rural Empowerment

INTRODUCTION TO THE CASE

On a chilled morning of January 2019, Himanshu Rai, the newly appointed Director of IIM Indore was sitting in his office sipping white tea just before the rounds of scheduled meetings were to commence for the day. Taking charge as the Head of a premier B-School came with a lot of expectations not only from people but from one's own self! Rai, the youngest ever Director of any IIMs has been known for his proactive dynamism and optimistic outlook towards everything he comes across with the intention of adding on his bit to it. The refreshing aroma of fresh flush tea was constantly pushing his ever-evolving mind to ponder over innovative ways to add-on to institutional best practices and take forward the flag high. He soon realised the meetings were about to start and he proceeded to the board room all set to brainstorm with his energetic team.

During the meetings, while scrolling at documents of several best practices of IIM Indore, one of the files held his attention for a longer span. It said 'Rural Immersion Program'. He wanted to analyse more of it but couldn't really do so due to the paucity of time as the next meeting was shortly scheduled. The day ended with multiple rounds of meetings and candid discussions. Himanshu Rai's mind was still absorbed by the Rural Immersion Program and he wanted to explore more of it and hence, decided to carry the file home. Soon after he reached home, he quickly finished with his daily chores as his mind was wanting him to get an in-depth into Rural Immersion Program. Analysing the documents, Rai collated the facts about the existing Rural Immersion Program as follows.

Initiated in the year 2008 by IIM Indore, the Rural Immersion program was the first of its kind to sensitize students towards the rural challenges. Initially the program started just to give them a feel of rural life and to develop sensitivity towards that essential sector of our economy. The program precisely gives exposure to students in context to rural areas and issues faced by them in daily life. As

most of the students come from urban backgrounds, they have never even seen a village life. The program not only sensitizes them but also gives them a new perspective in identifying rural economies and challenges and opportunities for the business. This program is regularly redesigned in order to give students an overview of government initiatives towards rural areas, their policy and administrative dimensions along with ground realities of execution of schemes too. The theme for the program is defined every year in context to the running government initiatives.

The Rural Immersion program was majorly about data collection through surveys. The program started with an objective to understand challenges of the rural areas and learning which can trigger sensitivity and basic awareness of this important sector of India. This consciousness about rural life will help in the development of a management graduate as a holistic individual. The program was instituted with an objective to orient the participants towards the execution and effectiveness of various schemes undertaken by the state government in the selected rural areas. Spread over a week, across several districts in Madhya Pradesh, the program's main objective is to be an eye opener as it provides insights on the various dimensions of district level administration, focusing primarily on the policy administration and the execution gaps, while dispelling several stereotypes associated with the rural population at large.

With an objective to sensitize upcoming entrepreneurs and budding managers towards the issues and challenges of the rural environments, Rural Immersion Program was additionally expected to provide youth with an intellectual exposure of the rural economy. There was a scope to further engage with the rural challenges by way of thoughtful deliberation and interaction with district officials and villagers and brainstorm on the probable solutions. This was in fact an additional aspect which laid the foundation of taking Rural Immersion Program to the next level, from mere immersion to deep engagement. Utilization of intellectual capabilities to address public issues that are of importance to villages can be a mutually beneficial learning program.

The program is organised in coordination and collaboration with the Department of Rural Development and Panchayat, State government of Madhya Pradesh and UNICEF Madhya Pradesh team. Though the program is organized in coordination with the Madhya Pradesh Mantralaya, Bhopal, the coordination with the Block Development Officers and Nodal Officers about their travel itinerary is left to the students.

As a part of the main curriculum of the first-year post-graduate program of IIM Indore, the entire batch of 624 students compulsorily undertake this program. The duration of the field exercise is spread over a week. The participants are formed into teams and the locations are allotted across villages in selected districts of Madhya Pradesh. Each team has to work together for the period of the field work.

Approximately 100+ teams of 6 students each are formed and allotted with the villages for their field visits. Senior officials of Government of Madhya Pradesh along with REP coordinator are involved in village allotment to the respective teams. IIM Indore in consultation with the state government shortlists 10 districts out of which villages are allotted. The only concerns laid down by the institute is the accessibility aspect of the villages so as to make learning convenient and manageable. The theme to be addressed for the program is jointly narrowed down by all the stakeholders which comprises of state government, institute and students. These pointers are aligned with central government agenda.

To Himanshu Rai, this framework appeared to be an appropriate base to gradually align with the vision of the institution. The institution seeks to be a contextually-relevant business school with world-class academic standards and pedagogies and develop socially-conscious managers, leaders and entrepreneurs and prepare them to contribute meaningfully to every segment of the nation. Institution's approach ensures that the students are well-rounded, collaborative with a global mind-set and sensitivity to societal issues. **(IIM vision statement link - <https://www.iimdr.ac.in/about-us/iim-indore-at-a-glance/>)**

While analysing the past reports of Rural Immersion Program, Rai found that the students were immensely sensitized to rural problems which was a commendable practice. He could witness an exhaustive list of problems which were identified by the management students during their course of stay in rural areas. But he felt that there was something missing! Only identifying the problems limits the scope of this entire initiative. Mere immersion had to be taken a step forward which leads to an active engagement. He precisely recognised the perspective of what he would like to add-on to the existing Rural Immersion Program. He was content to have identified an opportunity for transforming the youth for a better tomorrow.

Soon, the dynamic Director fell asleep with his ever- aspiring mind looking forward to yet another day of opportunities to review and improvise best practices in the light of dynamic surroundings to facilitate the youth with holistic development opportunities.

Himanshu Rai knew that whenever an improvisation is to be conceptualized, there has to be a larger participation from all stakeholders. The next day he called a meeting of the team of concerned officials led by coordinator of Rural Immersion Program and student representatives to further brainstorm and share his thought process to take the Immersion Program to the next level. While seeking the feedback from the students, the director felt a strong need to address the concern that the participants got disconnected once they came back from the field visit and submitted the report. Somehow, they did not feel a sense of fulfilment due to this disconnect and hence, there were all possibilities of this experience missing out on the opportunity to create responsible leaders. This called for an immediate attention so that the entire experience be documented in the memory lane of the participants. The revamping was conceptualized and the roadmap for 'Rural Engagement Program' was successfully initiated.

The coordinator alongwith his team started to have a relook at the existing structure and identifying the ways for incorporating the engagement aspect. The team immersed themselves into exploring the ways to modify and enhance the program in a way that addressed this concern while not making it too inconvenient for the participants. The re-positioning of the existing Rural Immersion Program with an added perspective of suggesting solutions to the identified problems and taking it forward till implementation came up as a thoughtful strategy. It truly would turn the program holistic in terms of rural engagement which not only limits itself to problem finding but to look at it from a broader and long- term perspective by truly owning the problems.

Soon a dynamic framework was on its way for the proposed Rural Engagement Program. (REP). The team developed an experiential learning approach which was oriented towards ensuring that the participants get to apply their classroom learnings to a real-time environment. **(Exhibit 1 – REP Course Outline)**

Rural Engagement Program emphasizes offering the students a platform to explore the rural markets, thereby identifying implementation gaps or business opportunities, which can help fill these gaps. The program structure was revamped with this additional aspect along with the baseline to sensitize students towards social issues, which are prevalent in such societies and learn that the government might not always be wrong and it is sometimes about getting a different perspective. **(Exhibit 2 and Video link <https://youtu.be/h9NX9FGzZSo>)**

In addition to identifying the problem there were some added perspectives conceptualized to ensure that the students get associated with the challenges. The Rural Engagement Program emphasized that in addition to identification of the challenge's students should get ample opportunities to interact with all the stakeholders and get absorbed and owe the existing issue. This initiation further motivated them to proactively come up with probable solutions to the identified challenges. Rural Engagement Program introduced a structured feedback mechanism wherein the teams were formally evaluated by the respective District Officer on account of their performance and involvement. They also got feedback on their suggestions from district officials. This process generated a rich data which was

sought by panchayats for effective implementation of the probable solutions to tackle the identified issues.

The Rural Engagement Program is characterized primarily by physical visits to various blocks in the district where the teams critically analyze the execution plan of the assigned government scheme and observe the actual level of implementation of the said scheme. This leads to assessing the challenges that are faced in the execution of the schemes and identification of operational gaps. The teams then suggested possible strategies to bridge these gaps. The students submit a report of their analysis and make suitable recommendations that can prove to be helpful, not only at the rural administration level but also the district level.

For the last few years the participants of Rural Immersion Program were working on Swachh Bharat Abhiyan's open defecation campaign, where the teams travelled and stayed at the assigned locations and spent time understanding the rural demographics and lifestyle. The teams attempted to research the problems faced by the villagers. The first batch of Rural Engagement Program was assigned the theme of issue of Rural Water Management. With a broad mandate to carry out a baseline survey of availability of water resources in the village in correspondence with village representatives and government officials. Also, the teams were assigned the task to make an assessment of the gap between the supply of and the demand for water in the village, thereby developing a water management plan to effectively address this gap.

This was approached through a structured stage wise framework of Participatory Net Planning. In the first stage PRA, the village map was drawn on the ground in consultation with all the stakeholders. This was the first step to identify the available water resources and the respective locations. **(Exhibit 3 – Photographs of ground map)**

In the next stage, participative water budgeting is undertaken to understand the level of rainfall, identify the ways in which rainfall can be collected, expenditure in water resources in terms of major crops and the water requirement per acre of the area. Accordingly, the expenditure expected is budgeted for the same.

In the third stage, water revenue and expenditure is assessed in terms of water shortfalls and an analysis of water structure to be developed, this is followed by suggestion to preserve water to tackle the identified shortfall. A unique Problem-Case-Effect-Solution Map is created for final submission of project report. **(Exhibit 4 – Project Report with Problem-Case-Effect-Solution Map)**

The data which was collected by IIM students reflected the amount of rainfall received in that particular area and year, amount of water usage in households like drinking, cooking etc. and then agriculture. They also surveyed the village's main source of water (like nearby water bodies) and the current state of water supply infrastructure. On the basis of survey and the data collected, the IIM students team got down to work bringing in ideas and solutions for better water management. A part of the training happened at villages with the water experts (with the government's help), were called in, and they also helped brainstorm ideas to devise better water management strategies. This analysis necessitated a thorough and structured understanding of water management tools and structures for the participants. As the participants do not possess any prior training in the domain of water management, experts from state government and UNICEF were empanelled for a formal training as a part of Rural Engagement Program. A day long exhaustive orientation program is imparted at the institute prior to the commencement of the five-day rural engagement program. This facilitated the participants with the domain knowledge on water management and equips them with the requisite tools to understand the system in an effective way.

Taking forward the Rural Engagement Program during the COVID times was a big time challenge as it posed the limitation to the physical visits of the students. Rai called for repeated rounds of meeting with the team and the government officials for deliberations and discussions to explore the possibilities to let the learnings continue. Soon, the team conceptualised yet another framework to

ensure that the management minds are at work and in February 2021 launched the REP on a virtual mode wherein the participants would be conducting a telephonic survey of around 40,000 participants from rural areas of 52 districts of Madhya Pradesh.

The REP was weaved around the theme 'School Education in Rural Madhya Pradesh: Overcoming the Challenges of Covid19 and Beyond'. There are 1.33 Lakh schools in India; out of which 69 percent are in the urban region and 31 percent in the rural areas. 94 percent of the government schools are in rural areas in Madhya Pradesh, while just 6 percent are in urban. There are 98 lacs students enrolled in both elementary and secondary levels; however just 30 percent have access to a smartphone. Majority of the students (65%) have access to radio and television (60%). IIM Indore REP participants would be able to analyse the initiatives taken by the Government to provide obstacle-free education to the school students in rural areas.

The participants would focus on finding the efforts put in providing education after the schools were shut down amid COVID. The survey includes finding about the technologies used in school education during the pandemic and how receptive and equipped are the stakeholders for this blended form of imparting education. The teams will be assigned to study a specific district which will extract a database of around 600-700 contacts of officials/teachers/students and parents from each district. The participants would then submit a report suggesting solutions to the problems faced by the respondents. <https://www.iimidr.ac.in/news-events/online-rural-engagement-programme-begins-at-iim-indore/>

Yet another pandemic hit year did not let the aspirations crush and IIM Indore continued taking intense steps for increasing the engagement of participants with a noble cause of making a difference in the lives of rural people. In the next virtual project, the participants were made to study the impact on health and hygiene after COVID19 in the rural areas of Madhya Pradesh, based on the COVID guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. The participants were mentored to have a constructive engagement with the villagers during this one week wherein they focused on finding out the impact of the pandemic and how to cope up with the same. A total of 648 participants from IIM Indore communicated telephonically with over 30,000 villagers from 52 districts in Madhya Pradesh to understand the present situation of COVID appropriate behavior in the area. This includes the adherence to COVID guidelines by the citizens, understanding the constraints faced and the reasons behind the same and coming up with recommendations to address the constraints. <https://www.iimidr.ac.in/news-events/rep-2021-begins-at-iim-indore/>

Being a part of REP on diverse themes has been a life-changing experience for the students of IIM Indore, which changed their outlook and the way they look at things. It has not only brought them closer to their roots and society but brought a significant change in their perspective. Once the student graduates from the institute and immerse into their corporate or entrepreneurial journeys with handsome earnings and a rich lifestyle amid the posh-urban environment, they will be too self-involved with their own professional and personal life. This might not leave them with any time or opportunity to rekindle the experiences if they aren't deep-rooted.

This was at the back end of the mind of Rai which prompted the advancing of immersion to engagement and further to empowerment, thereby prompted the young minds to add to the social and economic development. This program was expected to bridge the gap and make this experience a lasting association. His strong belief was that the students should not let go of these interactions and experiences for a longer span. The institutional vision was aligned with the proactive changes needed for an inclusive growth and emphasis on the rural and urban interactions necessary for social, economic and cultural transformations.

In line with the mission of IIM Indore to create responsible leaders; those who make inclusive decisions and diversity is indeed important to achieve this. Considering that 833 million people in India live across 6.7 lakh villages, Rai knew it's important to find a way to address their needs and

aspirations, solve their problems, understand what they're all about—how they live, and what management fraternity can do to empower them and connect them to the economy.

Rai, passionate about collaborations was open to partnering with public or private organisations who can add purpose to this initiative and take forward this vision to the next levels. As a part of the Government of Madhya Pradesh, Panchayat & Rural Development Department (R&RDD)'s vision to explore partnerships for harnessing Rs. 50,000 crore of business in Madhya Pradesh, IIM Indore entered in to a collaboration and signed an MoU (December 2021) to facilitate the promotion of an ecosystem for the marketing of SHG products to Business Centers. This will entail facilitating to provide technical cooperation in the promotion, development, and the operational aspects of Business Centers for the purpose of sales and marketing of community products. This will also include establishing a framework for cooperative institutional relations for encouraging and promoting cooperation in developing and strengthening of the Business Centers as one-stop facility. These Business Centers will offer end-to-end business creation and expansion support for the sale and marketing of the products and services produced by the Community Institutions developed under the P&RDD. REP with this collaboration aims at reviewing the existing schemes of the marketing strategy of community products and recommendation for the further strengthening of the system. The Institute will contribute to sharing of expertise, experiences, and ideas in the areas of advertising and branding, enterprise promotion, rural start-up development, marketing, and sales. <https://www.iimdr.ac.in/news-events/iim-indore-signs-mou-with-panchayat-rural-development-department/>

With Rural Engagement Program taking a leap forward, Himanshu Rai's aspirations kept emerging and moved ahead countless steps further. Although he felt content that their students were not only trained to live in that environment and imparted the rural sensitivity but were also facilitated with a culture of responsible citizenship. He aspired that this paves a way for instilling an urge to contribute towards economic development by inculcating the mindset to explore the rural potential and exploit the economic opportunities from the rural sector and find avenues for social entrepreneurship. Rai had in the back of his mind the numerous initiatives like HUL Project Shakti, Mahindra Trringo, ITC e-Choupal which can facilitate and cater to yet another subtle objective of Rural Engagement Program to attract social entrepreneurs and big brands that have an eye to venture into the newer markets after catering to the saturated urban markets. This will pave way for developing and exploring rural economies which will take off in all probabilities and create excellent job opportunities in the rural areas, promote social entrepreneurship, enhance education awareness and help develop infrastructure. Rai sensed that the social consciousness and sensitivity of the young students has to be taken to the next level. There should be parallel avenues to enhance the managerial and decision-making skills and also, the orientation to connect society and business can be instilled in the young minds. Still, there is a lot more to explore and much work needed to be done in this sector for an inclusive and empowered society, thereby enhancing the rural aspirations and connecting them to the economy.

CASE QUESTIONS

Question 1. Identify the dimensions which necessitated the transformation of this program from immersion to engagement. Suggest future strategies to take this to the next level. Also, suggest the avenues for social entrepreneurship.

(Note - This question can be an apt platform to discuss the social entrepreneurship and empowerment of local rural population with the students. The facilitator can brainstorm on identifying the avenues for social empowerment by exploring the opportunities for social entrepreneurship.)

Question 2. Elaborate on the aspects which a management student can explore through such programs which can connect business and society thereby contributing towards economic development.

(Note - This question can be a platform to discuss the rural marketing mix with the students. The facilitator can brainstorm on identifying the untapped rural aspirations which can form a basis to explore the avenues to connect the brands to rural population. The marketing mix elements. 4Ps - Product, Price, Place and Promotion can be stretched to their corresponding 4As – Acceptability, Affordability, Accessibility and Awareness respectively in rural context. § Product – Acceptable § Price – Affordable § Place – Accessible § Promotion – Awareness)

BACKGROUND READING

<https://www.iimidr.ac.in/rural-engagement-programme/>

<https://www.freepressjournal.in/indore/indore-iim-indore-to-take-rural-prog-to-next-level>

<https://www.iimidr.ac.in/news-events/online-rural-engagement-programme-begins-at-iim-indore/>

<https://www.iimidr.ac.in/news-events/rep-2021-begins-at-iim-indore/>

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<https://www.icmrindia.org/short%20case%20studies/Marketing%20Management/CLMM139.htm>

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ANNEXURES

OBJECTIVES

- Draw insight on the linkages between the society, government and business.
- Experience the functioning of the rural economy and the rural way of life
- Engage with the rural administration on an issue of public importance
- Analyse how public problems may be addressed within a rural set-up

Duration:

The programme is scheduled for 6 days spanning from 14th and 19th October 2019. Following is the tentative daily schedule.

Day	Activities
1	Travel to District Head Quarters from Institute. Meet with District Collector and other stakeholders. Reach the assigned village.
2	Collection of baseline data on village through interaction with village officials, preliminary field visits to water sources
3	Focus Group discussion with villagers
4	Application of water management tools
5	Develop an Action plan for Water management
6	Presentation of Water plan to District Collector and other officials, Return to campus
7	Preparation and Submission of Field Report to IIM

LEARNING OUTCOMES

The REP would give participants an experience of a rural setting and introduce them to the functioning of the rural economy. It would also expose participants to the functioning of local government institutions and the democratic setup (panchayats) at the local level. Lastly, it would present participants an opportunity to apply some of their learnings in management in order to address a real-life public problem.

Exhibit 1: Excerpts from Course Outline

IIM-I students trek villages for water woes' solution

ATUL GAUTAM
Indore

Students of Indian Institute of Management Indore are not only bookworms but they are socially sensitive also.

As part of their rural engagement programme and discharging social responsibility, more than 600 students went to villages across Madhya Pradesh to study and find out solution to the water problems of villagers.

IIM Indore director Himanshu Rai said that he is super proud of his students who have pledged to

participate in nation building by strengthening villages.

"Over 600 of our students will spend a week across 106 villages of MP as a part of our Rural Engagement Programme," he said.

He tweeted: "The students would report and suggest solutions for villagers water problems #jalshaktiabhiyan."

The district administration and UNICEF have put together a team that would guide the students in their quest. IIM Indore is a part of the main curriculum of the first year post-gradu-



FILE PHOTO

ate programme. REP is an initiative that was instituted with an objective to sensitize the budding managers and entrepreneurs of this Institute towards the various schemes undertaken by the government in villages and to study and an-

alyze their execution and effectiveness. Spread over a week, across several districts in Madhya Pradesh, the programme's main objective is to be an eye opener as it provides insights on the various dimensions of district level administration,

focusing primarily on the policy administration and the execution gaps, while dispelling several stereotypes associated with the rural population at large. The entire set of participants is uniformly divided into groups of 10 each, based on their own choices. The entire programme is organized in coordination with the Madhya Pradesh Mantralaya, Bhopal.

However, coordination with the Block Development Officers and Nodal Officers about their travel itinerary is left to the students. CONTD. ON P12

Exhibit 2: Media Clipping



Exhibit 3: Ground Map - 1



Exhibit 3: Ground Map - 2

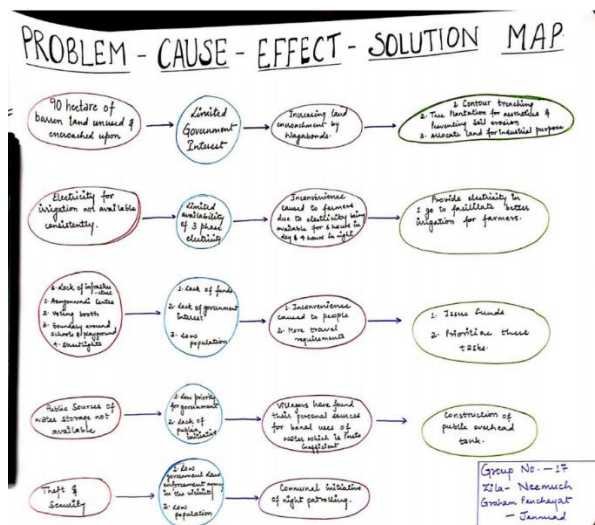


Exhibit 4: Sample of Problem-Cause-Effect-Solution Map

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