

SCAFFOLDING: A PROCESS OF TRANSFORMING PATTERNS OF INEQUALITY IN SMALL-SCALE SOCIETIES

JOHANNA MAIR

MIRIAM WOLF

Hertie School of Governance

CHRISTIAN SEELOS

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

This study advances research on organizational efforts to tackle multidimensional, complex, and interlinked societal challenges. We examine how social inequality manifests in small-scale societies, and illustrate how it inheres in entrenched patterns of behavior and interaction. Asking how development programs can be organizing tools to transform these patterns of inequality, we use a program sponsored by an Indian non-governmental organization as our empirical window and leverage data that we collected over a decade. We identify “scaffolding” as a process that enables and organizes the transformation of behavior and interaction patterns. Three interrelated mechanisms make the transformation processes adaptive and emerging alternative social orders robust: (1) mobilizing institutional, social organizational, and economic resources; (2) stabilizing new patterns of interaction that reflect an alternative social order; and (3) concealing goals that are neither anticipated nor desired by some groups. Through this analysis, we move beyond conventional thinking on unintended consequences proposed in classic studies on organizations, complement contemporary research about how organizations effect positive social change by pursuing multiple goals, and develop portable insights for organizational efforts in tackling inequality. This study provides a first link between the study of organizational efforts to alleviate social problems and the transformation of social systems.

Organizational scholars have (re)discovered the ambition to study large unresolved societal challenges. These challenges are seen as “grand”: they are important at a national and global scale; they affect many people, including future generations; and tackling them requires big, bold, and novel ideas (Colquitt & George, 2011). Arguably one of the most pressing grand challenges we face across and within societies is persistent inequality (United Nations, 2015).

We are grateful to Jennifer Howard-Grenville and three anonymous reviewers for their generous, constructive, and insightful comments. This paper results from a decade-long journey, and would not have been possible without the work that Gram Vikas has been carrying out for more than three decades. We particularly thank Joe Madiath and Chitra Choudhury for their patience and for sharing their experience. Kate Ganly provided outstanding research assistance in the early years and Marc Schneiberg and Woody Powell offered valuable insights and comments throughout the journey.

Sociologists consider inequality to be an organizing feature of societies (Tilly, 1998).¹ It manifests in unequal access to opportunities and rewards for different social positions or statuses within a group or society, and it is rooted in socially constructed categories (such as gender, caste, or class) that determine boundaries for inclusion and exclusion and demarcate positions of power and privilege. These social categories shape and reflect a shared and taken-for-granted ordering of reality, which is closely tied to a complex institutional grammar of social norms, rules, and conventions that prescribe behavior and interactions and sanction deviance.

For example, the caste system—widely considered central to entrenched inequality in India— involves a set of norms, rules, and beliefs that underpin categories of exclusion and reify social

¹ A review of extant literature on inequality goes beyond this paper. We follow a sociological tradition in analyzing inequality that prioritizes inequalities across groups over inequality across individuals. Our approach is aligned with the work of Tilly (1998) on “categorical inequalities.”

divisions (Béteille, 1965; Dumont, 1980). These rules and norms govern social practices in distinct spheres of social life: political, economic, and religious (Mair, Martí, & Ventresca, 2012). As a result, inequality becomes explicit in everyday life; it is observable in regularities of behavior and stable patterns of interaction. These patterns perpetuate inequality, because they enable opportunity hoarding by the privileged. They restrict access to already scarce resources and opportunities for the underprivileged (Tilly, 1998). Therefore, inequality needs to be understood as patterned: it inheres in patterns of interaction and behavior.

The deeply relational and nested nature of inequality poses substantial challenges for purposive organizational action in the form of programs designed to tackle inequality. Organizational activity often suffers from a lack of legitimacy, motivation, and support from both the excluders and the excluded, because existing patterns of inequality are perceived as “normal” and widely accepted. These aspects make asking how a single organization or a single program can tackle persistent patterns of inequality almost absurd. The nature of inequality also poses analytical challenges for organizational scholarship, because the complexity of social relations in a social system makes determining an appropriate level for analysis difficult and requires a broader range of methods (Stern & Barley, 1996).

In this study, we analyze how purposive organizational activity can tackle inequality locally—in villages in rural India. We focus on locally bound social systems, or small-scale societies (Douglas, 1986). Whereas challenges facing villages manifest on a “small scale” and are confined to a physical place, challenges such as inequality remain “grand”—multidimensional, complex, and interlinked. Analyzing inequality in small-scale societies allows us to be attentive to the social, cultural, and political realities on the ground, and makes organizational research on grand challenges feasible as well as practically and theoretically meaningful.

Centering on small-scale societies opens up possibilities for organizations to engage deeply with local realities and to experiment with multiple villages. It permits designing programs that not only alleviate symptoms of inequality (such as unequal access to social, political, and economic opportunities), but also transform patterns of behavior and interaction and thus revises local social orders that make inequality durable in the first place. In this paper, we ask *how programs can be organizing tools with which to transform entrenched patterns of*

inequality in small-scale societies. Our main objective is to advance organizational studies of societal challenges; we apply a multidisciplinary toolkit to accomplish our goal (Howard-Grenville, Buckle, Hoskins, & George, 2014).

Understanding how organizations affect local social systems and are affected by them is central to organizational theory (for a review and a reminder, see Stern & Barley, 1996; also, Hinings & Greenwood, 2002). In a seminal study, *General Gypsum Corporation* (a pseudonym), Gouldner (1954) showed how one form of bureaucracy was replaced by another and how the change affected the community in unexpected ways. In *TVA and the Grassroots*, Selznick (1949) described how an organization navigated an environment that was full of power struggles and diverging interests. His analysis showed how the original goals and structures of the Tennessee Valley Authority were transformed as a result of organizational commitment and formal and informal cooptation of powerful stakeholders in the local community. Pressures and dynamics associated with local social systems were also of theoretical interest, as they helped to uncover the sources of unintended consequences in purposive action. Nevertheless, the primary focus rested on the transformation of organizations and organizational structures.

Contemporary organizational studies relate purposive action to societal problems. Research on organizations that have an impact on society, create positive social change, or address persistent or new social problems has flourished over the last decade (see Stephan, Patterson, Kelly, & Mair, 2016, for a recent review). Studies center on a diverse set of organizations, including social enterprises, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), companies, and hybrid organizational forms such as benefit corporations, that pursue goals related to societal problems ranging from homelessness, unemployment, and poverty to HIV infection and disease (Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Pache & Santos, 2013; Tracey & Phillips, 2016; Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011).

Some studies recognize the importance of local institutional arrangements and place in affecting the work and societal impact of these organizations (Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Mair et al., 2012; Venkataraman, Vermeulen, Raaijmakers, & Mair, 2016). Still, societal challenges are mostly treated as setting or context (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; McKague, Zietsma, & Oliver, 2015; Seelos & Mair, 2007). This stream of work has paid relatively little attention to how organizations make progress on a specific problem by affecting local social systems

that give rise to the problem and perpetuate it. The theoretical (and empirical) focus generally lies on organizational form, internal structures, and processes (Besharov, 2014; Ebrahim, Battilana, & Mair, 2014; Mair, Mayer, & Lutz, 2015; Tracey & Phillips, 2016), or the relationship between the organization and relevant actors in the institutional field (Lawrence, Hardy, & Phillips, 2002; Mair & Hehenberger, 2014).

Separating the study of social problems and social systems might fit the existing paradigm in organizational theory. As Stern and Barley (1996: 149) contended, “The study of social systems and social problems are different and should not be confused even though many social problems are systemic in nature.” But separation also limits the scope of relevance for organizational theory. Paying analytical and theoretical attention to the nested and interlinked relationship between social problems and social systems is critical for making progress on grand societal challenges.

In this paper, we report on the purposive organizational activity of Gram Vikas, an NGO best known and widely recognized for its program that brings water and sanitation to rural villages in India. But this aspect of its work does not reflect its members’ principal interest. They use the water and sanitation program as a means to transform patterns of inequality within rural villages—a goal they conceal from the villagers they work with. The program is an adaptive structure between the organization and the local social system. It brings an array of social actors into play: the organization sponsoring the program as well as groups across social divides. Using the program as our empirical window, our analysis aims to unpack the micro-processes that transform patterns of inequality.

We identify *scaffolding* as a process that enables and organizes this transformation, and we specify three generative mechanisms. First, scaffolding entails *mobilizing* institutional, social organizational, and economic resources. Second, it hinges on *stabilizing* emerging patterns of interaction that reflect an alternative social order. And, third, scaffolding involves *concealing* goals that are not desired by those affected by the transformation. Most important, scaffolding supports the institutionalization of a new local social order based on the transformation of normative social structures rather than their replacement.

Our findings complement classical and contemporary scholarship on organizations that seek to solve societal challenges. We move beyond conventional thinking on hidden social forces as unintended consequences of purposive action offered in classical studies; we show how scaffolding supports pursuing manifest and concealed organizational goals aligned

with the organization’s purpose. Our findings can be extended to a broader set of societal challenges that are based on interlocking normative and social structures and require organizations not only to address social problems but to transform social systems.

In the following sections, we summarize insights from research in social anthropology and development studies to inform our empirical and theoretical approach. Next, we introduce the context and focal program, describe our research design and analytical strategy, and report our findings in the form of two narratives. In the discussion section, we elaborate on how our findings contribute to the organizational study of societal challenges and efforts to alleviate inequality. We conclude with remarks for future organizational research on grand societal challenges.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

How to transform entrenched and durable patterns of inequality poses puzzling questions for organizational theory and practice. Finding answers and making progress on this grand challenge requires taking seriously—building on and applying—knowledge generated in multiple disciplines. In this section, we first draw from literature in social anthropology to ground our analytical and theoretical approach and help us unpack the interlinked and complex nature of entrenched patterns of inequality in local social systems. Second, we turn to research in development studies to take stock of organized efforts to tackle inequality in the context of small-scale societies.

The Patterned and Relational Nature of Inequality

Social anthropologists immerse themselves in “small-scale societies”—understood as locally bound sites—to understand how these systems affect the lives of people on the ground. The work of Mysore Srinivas and his students Mary Douglas and André Béteille is particularly helpful to us, as it is attentive to the interlock between normative and social structures on the ground and pertains to the small-scale societies we examined—villages in rural India (Béteille, 1965; Douglas, 1986; Srinivas, 1976).² Such villages do not

² We are aware that anthropologists have used the term “small-scale societies” differently, such as in reference to primitive cultures in general or to isolated tribal villages specifically. Our emphasis is not on backwardness or the unique features of a local order, but on denoting locally bound sites that constitute small-scale societies. In this paper, we use the term interchangeably with “village.”

exemplify an ideal vision or sense of community as *Gemeinschaft* (Tönnies, 1887). Small size is not necessarily associated with mutual trust or self-stabilizing dynamics (Douglas, 1986). Instead, stability—regularity of behavior and patterns of interaction—is based on a complex “grammar of institutions,” a set of local norms and rules, shared perceptions of what is proper and improper, and shared commitments created and enforced by the village (Crawford & Ostrom, 1995).

Institutions “do the thinking”; they shape boundaries between groups and reinforce local social order (Douglas, 1986). In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas (1966) argued that norms that define and prescribe what is clean and what is dirty delimit judgment about objective reality, provide scripts for behavior and interaction, and act as evaluative devices that govern daily life. Institutions safeguard access to political, social, and economic opportunities. They determine who is eligible to participate in political decision making, market-based activities, or simply recreational activities such as “hanging out” or meeting in public spaces (Mair, et al., 2012). And, as Douglas’s (1966) work shows, they often make life-and-death decisions, defining who needs to be saved in situations of danger and who does not.

This interlock between normative and social structures characterizing small-scale societies is at the center of anthropological research on the nature and persistence of inequality exemplified in the work of André Béteille. Grand designs to create more equal societies tend to concentrate on inequality among individuals, as acknowledged in the Indian constitution and promoted in the work of Amartya Sen (1973;1992), but Béteille argued that inequality among social groups is more salient, especially in villages in rural India.

Going beyond prominent work on caste and religion (Dumont, 1980), Béteille showed that various social categories such as class and caste are interwoven, that this produces and reproduces patterns of inequality, and that inequality cannot be reduced to one dimension. In his words (Béteille, 2003: 2):

There are inequalities among individuals and disparities among groups; inequalities of income, esteem and authority; and so on. These inequalities do not run along the same lines; they sometimes reinforce and at other times cut across each other. Where simple judgements about increase or decrease of inequality are made without taking into account the multiplicity of dimensions, the judgements tend to be defective.

Béteille’s work in Sripuram—a rural village in the south of India documented in *Caste, Class and Power* (Béteille, 1965)—exposes how class and caste shape patterns of interaction and behavior. Inequality inheres in such patterns. It is entrenched in local orders, becomes visible in patterns of interaction and behavior, and can be observed in three dimensions: the distribution of wealth, power structures, and status. Although empirically these three dimensions are intertwined, they serve as a valuable analytical frame for analyzing inequality. They expose the morphology—form and structure—of inequality at the local level, and they also serve as markers to assess progress toward the transformation of behavior and interaction patterns. We build on these insights in this paper to strengthen our analytical approach, but also to expand current research on institutions and inequality in organizational scholarship.

The core insight of social anthropologists studying small-scale societies—that inequality not only becomes visible through patterns of interaction and behavior, but also gets reproduced through precisely these patterns—is hardly surprising to organizational scholars interested in inequality. In a recent review, Amis, Munir, and Mair (2017) uncovered and summarized the ways in which inequality becomes reified in everyday actions and interactions by and among individuals as members of organizations or organizational fields. Research in social anthropology allows us to expand the scope of inquiry from organizations to local systems—small-scale societies understood as normative and social structures in which patterns of inequality are perpetuated. In this study, we investigate how purposive organizational activity can transform these entrenched patterns.

PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES WITH TACKLING ENTRENCHED PATTERNS OF INEQUALITY

Programs that are established with the aim of decreasing inequality have a long tradition in development practice. Such programs are seen as tools with which to achieve a predefined and desired goal or to empower individuals and communities to achieve their goals. The former perspective is associated with a social engineering logic and the latter with a participatory logic.

Programs following a social engineering logic rely on expert and scientific knowledge to define goals, design solutions, and assess impact. For example, to increase access to economic opportunities for marginalized women, program designs center on

facilitating self-employment (entrepreneurship), training, and skill or cash transfers, and they integrate randomized control trials to compare results with a comparable group not benefitting from the program (see Banerjee et al., 2015, for an example). Critics of these programs argue that they typically focus on a single dimension of inequality and pay little or no attention to the patterned nature of inequality (Viterna & Robertson, 2015). Social norms at the root of entrenched patterns of inequality might be recognized, but they are ignored in planning and evaluating programs (Cernea, 1985). As a result, the processes and mechanisms underpinning the transformation of patterns of inequality remain largely underspecified—a shortcoming that even those involved in planning and evaluating programs acknowledge (Banerjee et al., 2015).

Programs following a participatory logic rely on the active involvement of villages or social groups in formulating program goals and the design and implementation of the program. For grassroots organizations, participation is an end in itself, and goals and strategies form during implementation. For governments and international development organizations, participation is a means to ensure more equal access to the benefits of development. For both, reversing power relations across social groups is crucial for tackling inequality in various domains, such as water supply (Cleaver, 1999; Katz & Sara, 1997) or education (Jimenez & Paqueo, 1996).

Evidence on whether and how these programs alter patterns of exclusion or prevent powerful elites from capturing program benefits is mixed at best (see Mansuri & Rao, 2004, for a review). Defining features such as public events to negotiate program goals make participatory programs inherently political and liable to relations of dependency, authority, and gender. In fact, research by development anthropologists has shown that most programs are dominated by local elites. For example, in a review of water projects, researchers found that benefits are largely appropriated by community leaders, with little attempt to include households let alone marginalized groups. Even well-trained staff struggle to challenge entrenched norms of exclusion (Katz & Sara, 1997). Women are often systematically excluded (Agrawal, 2001), and wealthier members of the community dominate decision making (Rao & Ibanez, 2003). As a result, programs following a participatory logic unintentionally but repeatedly reproduce established patterns of thought, behavior, and interaction. Not surprisingly, a recent review of studies from disciplines including economics, sociology, and

anthropology, covering both social engineering and participatory programs, concluded that we actually know very little about how local development intervention may reshape local patterns of inequality (Viterna & Robertson, 2015).

In this paper, we build on an understanding of inequality in small-scale societies put forward by social anthropologists and take into consideration insights from development studies to understand how programs can be tools for transforming deeply entrenched patterns of inequality. The transformation requires (a) the institutionalization of an alternative order, and (b) purposive organizational action that includes concealing undesired effects and preventing powerful elites from coopting the process. These two aspects make this study particularly relevant for organizational analysis.

METHODS

The question we asked in this study—*How are programs used as organizing tools to transform entrenched patterns of inequality?*—is “problem driven,” and we apply a pragmatic approach to data collection and analysis. A qualitative case study reveals the difficult-to-observe mechanism and processes that transform patterns of interaction and behavior (Rojas, 2010; Yin, 2003). “Being there” (Geertz, 1988), visiting multiple villages and gaining exposure to local realities in small-scale societies we studied, helped us to refine the theoretically and practically meaningful questions (Greenwood & Levin, 2005), to analyze data, and to derive implications for old and new theories.

Inequality in Rural India

India is a textbook example of a hierarchical society and an extreme case of social inequality. The most striking feature of inequality in India is its visibility (Béteille, 2005). Placement in a social category defines inclusion or exclusion that is evident in the way people live and how they dress, behave, and interact with others. An additional striking feature of inequality in India is the subordination of the individual to the group. Individuals have obligations to the group they adhere to by birth; groups have obligations to other groups according to their respective social ranks (Béteille, 2003). Socially constructed categories of caste, class, and gender define who is ranked higher and lower in society. In particular, the caste system (Dumont, 1980; Srinivas, 1962), based

on kinship and religion, prescribes distinct styles of life and regulates the social interactions within and between groups. Caste is acquired by birth and is believed to be changeable only through reincarnation, which is said to reward those who conformed during life and punish those who did not. Castes are grouped in hierarchical order, from Brahmins at the top down to Scheduled Castes,³ with many subcastes in between, depending on the village.

Class is defined by ownership of land, property, and means of production; it is another important social structure and categorization scheme. Caste and class are similar in some aspects, but they differ in others. For instance, caste mobility is never downward, whereas class mobility may be. For a more detailed account of the interrelationships between caste and class, see B eteille (1965; 2005). Over the past decades, the caste system has become closely interpenetrated with class structures (B eteille, 2003). Gender continues to be an important category that prescribes exclusion for women from many aspects of social, economic, and political life. The Indian constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of social categories. Yet, particularly in rural areas, these social divides shape local realities. As research shows, there is little mobility between social groups—the boundaries between castes and classes appear almost insurmountable (Banerjee, Duflo, Ghatak, & Lafortune, 2013; Chaudhuri & Ravallion, 2006; De Haan, 2004).

Gram Vikas and the Rural Health and Environment Program

Gram Vikas is an Indian NGO that confronts patterns of inequality in rural villages in Odisha, one of India's poorest states. Forty-seven percent of the population lives below the poverty line, and discrimination and exclusion of social groups—particularly women, lower castes, and indigenous

tribes—are particularly pronounced (De Haan, 2004; Government of Odisha, 2011). Working with rural villages in Odisha since 1979, Gram Vikas identified poor health caused by waterborne diseases, resulting from widespread open defecation and the use of polluted water sources, as a concern of villagers across social and economic divides. Gram Vikas saw a water and sanitation program as an “entry-point program,” as it allowed the organization to reach out to every household in a village and to communicate direct benefits for them in the form of improved health.

In 1991, Gram Vikas initiated the Rural Health and Environment Program (RHEP), the manifest goal of which is to provide every household in a village—regardless of the social category to which the household belongs—with piped drinking water and a separate toilet and bathing room.⁴ The program is unique among existing water and sanitation programs. It combines elements of social engineering programs, focusing on the construction of water and sanitation facilities, with elements of participatory programs empowering rural villages to solve their own problems.

Four features illustrate the RHEP's uniqueness. First, a “100% inclusion” rule prescribes working together across religious, social, and economic divides to construct and use water and sanitation facilities. The RHEP formally starts only after each household in the village has agreed to the 100% rule. Second, a multilayered local governance structure formalizes equal representation of all social groups in decision making. It includes a Village Executive Committee, which is officially registered under India's Societies Registration Act of 1860. The committee is responsible for implementing the program and for maintaining and monitoring the use of the water and sanitation infrastructure built. Third, a corpus fund, administered by the Village Executive Committee, is collected to ensure that financial resources are available to build water and sanitation infrastructure for families entering the village after the completion of the RHEP. Each household is required to contribute to the fund according to its ability to pay. And, fourth, the water and sanitation infrastructure is collectively constructed. Each household is required to contribute labor and material resources, and Gram Vikas provides material

³ “Scheduled Castes”—often referred to as “untouchables” or “Dalits”—refers to the lowest status groups in the caste system. Together with “Scheduled Tribes”—India's indigenous tribal people also known as “Adivasis”—they are among the poorest in the country. In areas where the tribal population and Hindus are residentially mixed, Scheduled Tribes tend to have a low status within the caste hierarchy. Higher castes take extreme care to prevent physical and social contact through complicated prohibitions on the sharing of food and water and other forms of interaction with these groups (Dumont, 1980; Srinivas, 1955).

⁴ In 2004, Gram Vikas changed the name of the program from RHEP to Mantra (Movement and Network for the Transformation of Rural Areas). The change of name did not affect the objective and content of our analysis.

support and know-how. According to Gram Vikas, as of January 2015, the program has been implemented in 1,140 villages across 28 districts in rural Odisha (Gram Vikas, 2015).

Data Sources

The data for this study were collected and analyzed over the course of ten years. Our study draws on multiple sources of data and several rounds of data collection. We conducted interviews, collected internal and external reports as well as video material, engaged in participant observation and shadowing, and consulted with research teams that have studied the focal program from a different theoretical and empirical angle.⁵ Figure 1 provides an overview of the data collection process.

Interviews. Our interview partners included members of the founding team of Gram Vikas, Gram Vikas staff members coordinating the water and sanitation program with varied degrees of experience with the program, support and partner organizations, experts in development and water and sanitation, village leaders, and villagers. The interviews lasted from 15 minutes to several hours and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. For interviews within villages, we relied on a local translator.

Exploratory interviews in the early stages of data collection helped us to generate an understanding of the program and the local context (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During our second field trip, we conducted semi-structured interviews that allowed us to solidify emerging conceptual and empirical patterns. We conducted a third round of interviews to triangulate and consolidate specific aspects of preliminary findings.

In addition, we applied three measures to ensure and enhance robustness in our data. First, we repeated interviews with the same interviewee in different locales and different years. Second, we corroborated the content of the interviews with multiple sources: reports, archival data, and public appearances. This method helped us to mitigate potential biases of any individual respondent as

well as situational biases (Miller, Cardinal, & Glick, 1997). For example, we interviewed the founder of Gram Vikas, Joe Madiath, multiple times, with interviews lasting from 15 minutes to 4 hours. We observed him in internal meetings in the Gram Vikas headquarters and while he was speaking to different audiences at various events (see Table 1). We reduced interviewer biases by conducting interviews involving different research team members and by comparing notes across interviews conducted by different team members; see Table 1 for a list of interviews conducted.

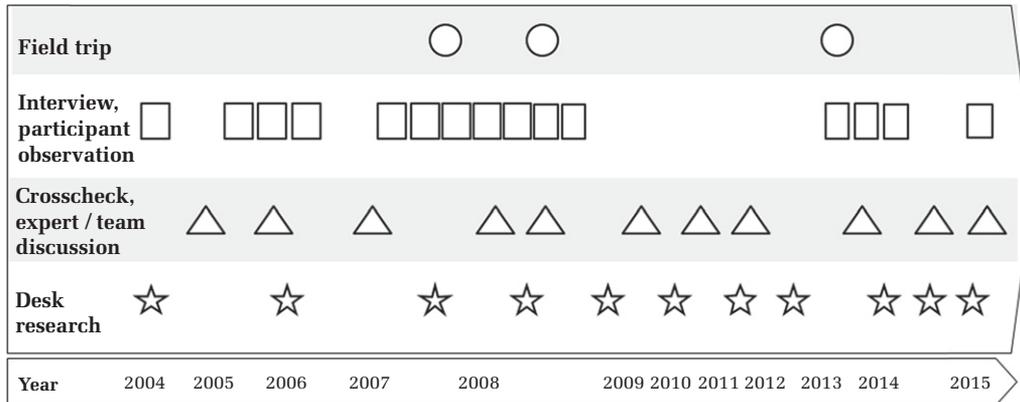
Secondary data. We collected internal and external reports written by Gram Vikas staff, such as annual reports, project reports, mission reports, and progress reports, as well as presentations. Reports are an internal learning device for organizations (Seelos & Mair, 2016); they provided us with an understanding of the historical development of the program and sense-making of the organization. We consulted film material and documentaries created by third parties. Film and documentaries allowed us to triangulate observations from our own fieldwork and more systematically include voices of people affected by the program. Last, we ensured access to program evaluation reports by independent agencies.

The more than 100 documents we collected helped us to deepen our insights from interviews and field trips, and to assess and compare internal and external perceptions and representations of the program. We relied on government reports, legal reports, reports from development agencies (such as the World Bank's *World Development Reports*, World Health Organization reports, United Nations Children's Fund reports, and reports commissioned by the local government in Odisha), and local, national, and international newspapers (such as *Odisha Diary*, the *Hindu Times*, the *Economist*) to further develop our understanding of the local, regional, and national context. We used these documents and videos as an archival database for our analysis. A full list is available from the authors.

Participant observation and shadowing. We used participant observation to better understand local realities, and especially to overcome our biases as researchers trained and socialized in a different—Western—context. Exposure to the daily life and struggles in villages in three field trips over the course of seven years allowed us to appreciate particular local social environments and to explore the social context from within (Bechky, 2003; Van Maanen, 1979). Besides conducting interviews and collecting

⁵ We exchanged views and discussed our findings with an anthropologist who studied life in tribal villages that work with Gram Vikas, and with a research group at the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology that studied the same program but focused on the effect of access to clean water on health outcomes.

FIGURE 1
Data Collection Timeline



archival data, we used these visits to shadow the founder and senior and junior staff members in team meetings and in their interactions with villagers.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data by continually going back and forth between data and emerging theoretical arguments (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Several rounds of coding and involving different analysts in the process helped to spot flaws and/or personal biases. We discussed emerging categories and theoretical themes within our research team, with other research groups and Gram Vikas. Within our research team, we did not always agree on categories and themes. These instances of divergence helped us to sharpen our analytical focus and—most importantly—our theoretical contribution. For example, discussions and a lack of consensus on the characteristics of stabilizing as a defining mechanism of scaffolding triggered an insight that encouraged us to revisit the work of Selznick (1949) and resulted in the proposition of concealing as an additional constitutive mechanism of scaffolding.

Our analysis and coding strategy included two major steps. In a first step, we surfaced local patterns of inequality before and after the RHEP, our focal program. Building on the work of Bétéille (1965, 2003, 2005), we used data across villages to code patterns of access to economic assets and infrastructure, distribution of power, and attribution of status before the start of the program. Next, we coded how such patterns changed as a result of the program, to show that transformation is possible. In a second step, we used RHEP as our empirical

window and analyzed how the program affected the process of transforming entrenched patterns of inequality. First, we coded instances referring to program dynamics, and how villagers across social divisions participated in the program. We identified three sets of resources mobilized in the process of implementing the program in villages: (1) institutional resources, such as local beliefs about purity and pollution; (2) social organizational resources, such as village committees or self-help groups; and (3) economic resources, such as financial means, labor, or material. We then coded why, when, and how different types of resources were mobilized; who mobilized the resources (Gram Vikas or the villagers), and how and why behavior and interactions between social groups started to change. Second, we coded instances of resistance and conflict emerging as a result of implementing the program, and of how conflict was resolved. This allowed us to trace patterns of cooptation and different forms of sanctioning when groups or individuals challenged the implementation of the program. And, third, we coded for instances of variance in how the program was implemented across villages. Although this last aspect of our analysis was not directly aligned with our theoretical interest—specifying the mechanisms underpinning the process of transforming entrenched patterns of inequality—it enhanced the robustness of our findings.

FINDINGS

We report our findings in the form of a narrative and in two parts. In the first part, we take stock of how inequality manifests in patterns of behavior and interaction in small-scale societies and showcase the

TABLE 1
Summary of Our Interviews and Fieldwork

Date	Location	Data
2004 (Jan.)	Geneva, Switzerland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first contact and interview with Gram Vikas founder Joe Madiath (1 hour)
2005 (Jan.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneurship Summit Campinas, Brazil 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participant observation of founder with peers and interview
2006 (Jan.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneurship Summit Davos, Switzerland • Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneurship Summit • World Economic Forum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participant observation of founder with peers and with corporate executives
2006 (Mar.)	Oxford, UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participant observation of founder with peers and with funders
2007 (Jan.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skoll Foundation World Forum Zurich, Switzerland 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participant observation of founder with peers
2007 (Mar.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneurship Summit Oxford, UK 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participant observation of founder with peers and with funders
2007 (Mar.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skoll Foundation World Forum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews with founder and staff member (30 mins each)
2007 (Mar.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barcelona, Amsterdam, London, New York, Mexico City 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interview with 3 senior partners from PricewaterhouseCoopers who had recently completed a two-month strategy project for Gram Vikas on site in India (1 hour)
2007 (May)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • telephone conference Gram Vikas Headquarters, Mohuda, India • field trip / site visit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews with founder (4 hours, 1 hour) • shadowing of founder (1 day) • contact with communities implementing or having implemented water and sanitation program
2008 (Jan.)	Zurich, Switzerland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews with 3 senior staff members (average 1 hour each)
2008 (Mar.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneurship Summit Gram Vikas Headquarters, Mohuda, India • field trip / site visit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews with 2 coordinator level staff members (average 1 hour each) • group interview with senior management team (1 hour) • shadowing of senior manager (2 days) • participant observation among all levels of staff (3 days) • participant observation of founder with peers • interview with founder (30 mins) • interviews with water and sanitation program senior managers (4 hours over 2 days) • shadowing of water and sanitation program senior manager (2 days) • contact with communities implementing or having implemented water and sanitation program
2008 (Mar.)	Oxford, UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews with 3 senior staff members (different staff members to previous site visit: 30 mins, 1 hour, 1.5 hours)
2008 (Mar.)	Oxford, UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews with 3 coordinator level staff members (conducted over 3 days; ranging from 15 mins to 1 hour)
2008 (Mar.)	Oxford, UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interview with independent partner organization implementing a renewable energy project on-site
2008 (Mar.)	Oxford, UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews with founder (over 2 days; 3 hours)
2008 (Mar.)	Oxford, UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participant observation among all levels of staff including volunteers (4 days)
2013 (Jan.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skoll Foundation World Forum Mohuda, India • field trip / site visit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participant observation of founder with peers and with funders • interviews with founder and staff member (20 mins) • interviews with founder (2 hours over 3 days) • interviews with several senior members of staff (5 hours over 3 days) • interviews with water and sanitation program across ranks (3 hours over 2 days) • shadowing of water and sanitation program senior manager (2 days)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Date	Location	Data
2014 (Mar.)	Dhaka, Bangladesh • field trip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contact with communities implementing or having implemented water and sanitation program • interview with independent consultant to Gram Vikas and volunteers (45 mins over 2 days) • interviews with founder (2 hours over 3 days) • participant observation among all levels of staff including volunteers (3 days) • interview with manager of water and sanitation program
2014 (Nov.)	Bellagio, Italy • workshop organized by the Rockefeller Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interview with a member of the top management (2 hours) and participant observation
2015 (Apr.)	Oxford, UK • Skoll Foundation World Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participant observation of founder with peers and with funders • interview with founder (30 mins)

transformation of such patterns. In the second part, we document and explain the process of transforming entrenched patterns of inequality.

Entrenched Patterns of Inequality in Small-Scale Societies

In the following narrative, we illustrate how inequality manifests in small-scale societies before and after the implementation of the RHEP. We followed the work of Béteille (1965) to analyze our data according to (a) how economic assets and infrastructures are accessed by different social groups, (b) how power is distributed between social groups, and (c) how status and privilege are attributed to members of different social groups.

Access to economic assets and infrastructure. Before the program, access to and use of infrastructure related to water, sanitation, and other services was largely controlled by local elites and higher castes. A local woman described how higher castes restricted access to local water sources for lower castes:

We are Dalits. That's why they [those belonging to higher castes] denied us water. If we went to get water, there would be a fight. They would tell us we are untouchable.

(Lower-caste woman, Video)

Lack of clean water and safe sanitation was a major cause of illness, and families had to take out loans to pay for medicines and treatments. Borrowing had severe consequences for poor villagers and led to an upsurge in economic inequality at the local level (Keirns, 2007).

After the program—a local woman explains—not only members of privileged groups but every household in the village gained access to a piped water supply and safe sanitation:

We have [...] piped water supplies to all families, without exception. Every family has its own toilet and bathing room as well.

(Local woman, Interview)

A study of 100 villages that had implemented the program shows that the availability of clean water and safe sanitation in the villages reduced incidences of waterborne diseases by up to 50%—which also resulted in a significant decrease in illness-related indebtedness (Duflo, Greenstone, Guiteras, & Clasen, 2015).

Our findings also point to changes in access to financial resources and relationships of dependency between social groups. Before the program, it was

common practice for members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes to mortgage trees, small pieces of land, or other private possessions to local elites in order to pay for medicine, funerals, or wedding dowries. Another common social practice—inherited from one generation to the next and perpetuating relations of dependence—was bonded labor. Because caste and class membership are inherited, dependent relationships were reproduced, and escaping the vicious circle became extremely difficult. Women were confined to a household with very limited or no access to the household wealth or rights to property.

In the villages where the program was fully implemented, existing dependencies such as bonded labor and mortgaging diminished. Formal courts often validated the changes, an important signal for villagers who may now rely on laws to ensure their rights. Women started to generate extra income for the household as they were trained as masons and learned to operate fisheries in the local pond. A local woman attributed her improved finances to the availability of running water:

We can finish our chores quickly and have more time to earn extra income.

(Local woman, Video)

Women also formed savings groups in which they pooled their income, improving their economic status.

Access to education changed too. Before the program, a minority of boys from Scheduled Castes attended school, and few girls were literate. After the program's implementation, almost all children gained access to education, regardless of caste or gender, according to Joe Madiath, a member of Gram Vikas's founding team. Increased education gave women and lower castes important skills to help them access economic opportunities. These groups grew more independent and were able to access new opportunities, such as working with government agencies or attaining positions of power at the village level and beyond.

Distribution of power. Before the program, positions of power were inherited and available only to men belonging to a certain caste and class. A senior staff member of Gram Vikas explained how local leaders came into office:

By birth, such fellows became the leaders. And, once that fellow dies, his son used to become the leader.

(Senior staff member, Interview)

Members of higher castes and classes who benefited from these informal rules had little motivation to

alter the status quo. Low levels of education among members of Scheduled Castes and lower classes perpetuated the pattern. Certainly, women in leadership positions were unimaginable. Despite government programs and international development schemes, it was extremely difficult to bring Scheduled Castes or women into public offices. A Gram Vikas staff member, suggested why:

[Although the] government may insist that [...] Dalits, women, and minority community members should have appropriate representation in these local bodies, the problem [is] [...] the Tribes or the Dalits or the women have always been considered as incapable, as people not required to give their personal opinion. So, the control of administration was always with [...] the upper castes, and women per se were always thought to be people of domestic involvement [...]. So, these people are [...] not able to [...] perform their responsibilities as anticipated.

(Senior staff member, Interview)

After the RHEP program was implemented, access to positions of power and leadership were no longer exclusively tied to kinship and gender. In a report Gram Vikas conducted in 2002 to document the program's progress, a local woman explained how patterns of interactions with men have changed:

We never thought we could sit on the same mat as the men. But things have changed now. We no longer draw the veil over our faces, and we can talk with men as equals.

(Local woman, Archival data from 2002)

Our own observations, corroborated by interview data from Gram Vikas staff members, revealed that women and members of Scheduled Castes and tribes had gained an active voice in village-level meetings, and their presence in meetings was considered appropriate. Archival documents record that, in one of the villages that completed the RHEP program, a woman was voted into the regional government. The changes in the distribution of power between social groups were closely intertwined with a change in the attribution of status to social groups—a marker of transformation we explore in the next section.

Status assigned to members of social groups. Before the program, restricted access to economic assets and power for women and members of Scheduled Castes or lower classes was not only taken for granted, but perceived as appropriate by all social groups—privileged and disadvantaged alike. Members of Scheduled Castes were considered impure and polluted, and therefore physical distance was

required. Changing caste in this life was considered an offense to a god's will, because Scheduled Castes are believed to be in penitence for misbehavior in a previous life. Conformity to one's fate is considered the only option to escape divine punishment in the next life:

What can I do? I am born Dalit, so, in this birth, I will be excluded. In this birth, this will be my fate. Maybe [in the] next birth, I'll be different.

(Member of the Gram Vikas founding team recasting the voice of a member of the Scheduled Castes, Interview)

Higher-caste members feel entitled to exclude them from most aspects of social, political, and economic life:

We have a right to exclude them [...] we are the privileged.

(Member of the Gram Vikas founding team recasting the voice of a member of the village elite, Interview)

Before the program, for the local elites, conforming to norms associated with purity and pollution ensured privilege and signaled superiority, and, for the Scheduled Castes, it allowed for expiation and hope for redemption in the next life. Both groups perceived the order as god-given fate, and the resulting exclusion was neither questioned nor problematized. Instead, much effort went into safeguarding boundaries between social groups to protect the purity of the higher castes and confine pollution to the Scheduled Castes or Tribes.

After the program, the status attributed to members of various social categories changed. Video data from our archival database corroborates this: a local man, asked if a member of a Scheduled Caste or Tribe was working with him on the community hall, replied:

I don't know, we don't discuss these matters anymore.
(Local man, Video)

An elderly woman explained that the importance of caste membership in daily life has changed, particularly in interactions among younger people:

For ages, we've practiced untouchability. [...] Nowadays, the boys say "what untouchability!"
(Local woman, Video)

During our fieldwork, we observed members of different castes sitting next to each other, sharing meals, working together doing the same type of work, conversing together at village meetings, and working together to build community libraries.

To summarize, our findings show that, although categories of caste, class, and gender are still in place, they are less salient in determining patterns of behavior and interactions between social groups at the local level. After the program, access to economic assets and infrastructures, the distribution of power, and the attribution of status were determined not only by membership in a social group. Our findings resonate with the work of Béteille (1965) and Douglas (1986): the interlock between normative and social structures provides a complex system of rules, beliefs, and norms that make patterns of inequality durable—unquestioned, uncontested, and hard to change. Whereas anthropologists have focused their analytical attention on the local reproduction and reification of inequality, we found that patterns of inequality can be purposefully transformed—by means of a development program.

Scaffolding: A Process of Transforming Entrenched Patterns of Inequality

In the previous section, we illustrated the outcome of the transformation process. Here, we show how it unfolds. *Scaffolding* underpins and shapes the transformation of durable local orders that entrench patterns of behavior and interaction. Specifically, it is a process of transforming deeply entrenched patterns of interaction and behavior that account for durable social inequality in small-scale societies. Our findings suggest three generative mechanisms of scaffolding: mobilizing, stabilizing, and concealing.

First, *mobilizing* resources involves creating, unlocking, and repurposing new and existing resources from both the organization and the villagers. Three sets of resources were mobilized in the process we analyzed: (1) institutional resources—formal and informal rules directly related to the water and sanitation program, as well as local norms and beliefs about purity and pollution; (2) social organizational resources—formal or informal governance structures organizing the interactions within or between groups in the villages; and (3) economic resources—material or economic means accessed from within the villages or from outside.

Second, scaffolding hinges on *stabilizing* new patterns of interaction that reflect an alternative social order. Stabilizing enables the institutionalization of new ways of thinking, acting, and relating. It includes formal and informal enforcement and sanctioning mechanisms that are built to protect the new shared goal. Stabilizing is critical in a transformation that revises a social order rather than replacing it.

Third, scaffolding involves *concealing* goals that are neither anticipated nor desired by the members of some social groups. Concealing requires focusing on the desired and uncontested manifest goal rather than the covert goal of revising the social order. Concealing helps generate consensus across social groups, enables collective purposive action, and prevents cooptation efforts by specific groups.

We document the process in a narrative that further illustrates the rationalization, routinization, and solidifying of new patterns of interaction and behavior.

Coopting power structures, norms, and beliefs: Rationalizing interaction. When approaching villages to join the RHEP, Gram Vikas adheres to local rules by first establishing contact with village leaders and local elites. Although the elites perceive sanitation and running water as desirable for themselves—the pure, clean, and superior people—they do not support involving the Scheduled Castes and Tribes—the dirty, polluted, and inferior ones. From this perspective, using the same water source with the Scheduled Caste people would put the higher castes' superiority and purity at risk, as relayed here:

[The higher-caste women] get water by the turn of the tap, and the Scheduled Caste women also by the turn of the tap will get water. That means there is no difference between us, and we are supposed to be higher and they're supposed to be lower.

(Senior staff member, Interview)

In an effort to gain the local leaders' support, Gram Vikas coopts institutional resources—local norms, values, and beliefs about purity and pollution—to promote the program. Joe Madiath, a co-founder, recalled how he approached village leaders:

You want to drink Dalit shit? Now, you are drinking everybody's shit so, by not [including them in the program], you are only drinking their waste.

(Member of Gram Vikas founding team, Interview)

Madiath recalled a pitch to persuade local elites that involving 100% of village households, including the Scheduled Castes, was instrumental for retaining higher caste purity and thus for safeguarding the existing social order:

Even if 99% is there, but one family shits all over the place, that family can pollute the water, the surrounding, everything of the village.

(Member of Gram Vikas founding team, Interview)

Gram Vikas's tactics included demonstrating how feces dilute in water used for drinking and washing. Staff members organized "walks of shame"—asking local elites to show the defecation spots around the village—to persuade local leaders to include marginalized social groups in the water and sanitation program.

As a result of this sort of argument, local elites actively promote and support the process: they leverage their position of power and privilege to influence, motivate, and coerce other villagers to commit to the program. As Chitra Choudhury, a member of the management team, told us, established hierarchies and traditional enforcement mechanisms start to work in favor of implementing the program because the voice of the elites is heard and accepted by the village.

Gram Vikas continued to insist that all social groups in the villages—not only elites—must actively endorse and participate in the program. Members of Gram Vikas repeatedly pointed out that starting the program without full commitment from all social groups in the community backfires later on:

Wherever we have not got a consensus and we have tried to cut short those methodologies, we have suffered for it.

(Senior staff member, Interview)

Reaching consensus requires intensive effort and time. From various archival documents and our interviews, we learned that, in the early years of the program, Gram Vikas tried to implement the program in a village close to its headquarters. To speed up the process, Gram Vikas did not insist on the 100% inclusion rule. The RHEP could not be completed in that village. More importantly, interactions between members of different social groups could not be consolidated, and existing patterns of entrenched inequality could not be transformed. As Sojan Thomas, a senior member of the Gram Vikas team, observed, once 100% commitment is reached, it is rare for villages to halt implementation or discontinue the program, and thus halt the transformation process.

Even if only a single household does not commit to the program, Gram Vikas will not officially start the water and sanitation program in that village:

We do not take a "no" from anyone [the privileged and the underprivileged]. We do not accept positions like "we do not want them included" or "we do not want to be included."

(Senior staff member, Interview)

Once consensus to implement the program has been reached among all social groups in the village, Gram Vikas launches a formal contract that binds

each household to the prescribed rules of the program. The contract entails multiple rules to enforce a collective effort and thus is an additional mechanism to rationalize new ways of interacting. The contract establishes the villagers' commitment at a stage during which they do not recognize nor anticipate the full extent of the transformation.

In sum, Gram Vikas coopts local norms and beliefs about purity and pollution and local power structures to turn water and sanitation into an uncontested but confined space for breaking taken-for-granted patterns of interaction. Clean water and sanitation as manifest goals of the program unite all members of the village, and interaction between social groups is perceived as critical to protect the purity of powerful elites. Elite pressure and the fear of being punished in the next life are enforcement and sanctioning mechanisms in service of the program. A formal contract between Gram Vikas and the village is an additional stabilizing mechanism to enforce changes in patterns of interaction and behavior. As a result, the local population rationalizes interactions across social divides on the basis of the same local normative order that created and reproduced categories of exclusion in the first place.

Redesigning local governance structures: Routinizing interaction. Contractually enforced program rules require that the villages establish formal governance structures involving all social groups, notwithstanding gender, class, or caste. Our findings point toward a number of challenges and also resistance to this rule. For example, women have never been permitted to engage in decision making at the village level, and their exclusion has become taken for granted. A female member of Gram Vikas's founding team recalled the response of a local woman:

All the centuries our men decided everything—so why should we decide anything?

(Member of the Gram Vikas founding team, Interview)

Husbands often oppose the idea of women leaving the house to join village meetings. We observed in our fieldwork that, even if women do join, they often adhere to traditional ways of interaction: men and women won't sit together in a meeting. Several members of the Gram Vikas team corroborated our observation.

To facilitate change in how women behave and interact with others, Gram Vikas initially adheres to local norms and hierarchies. As women are not traditionally allowed to move freely, team members approach women within the confines of their homes to discuss "appropriate" topics, such as maternal

health and children's diseases. As women gain confidence, Gram Vikas encourages them to form "Self-Help Groups" that meet in public. Meetings of these groups are safe spaces (Mair et al., 2012) where women can raise and discuss issues or problems of a contested nature, such as saving money, alcoholism, and domestic violence. Meanwhile, their husbands are focusing on the requirements for implementing the water and sanitation program. Self-Help Groups are a valuable social organizational resource, as they support women in learning to be more vocal about their concerns and gain self-confidence (Sanyal, 2009).

As women begin to express their needs and concerns outside the confines of the household, Gram Vikas encourages them to create a new social organizational resource in the form of an all-female Village Body, which formally and officially represents the interests of women in the village. It is composed of the female heads of all households independent of caste or class. The Village Body gives women a platform to raise and discuss issues that concern the entire village. Examples include village-level access to health services to reduce child mortality and restrictions of local alcohol sales to combat alcoholism in the village. In parallel to the all-female Village Body, Gram Vikas initiates another Village Body consisting of the male heads of all households. Although the men—both lower and higher caste—are used to voicing their concerns within their own social groups, for many, it is the first time they interact and consider opinions across groups. Gram Vikas actively moderates the interchange, nudging members of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes to voice their concerns, and higher castes and members of local elites to listen. Men willingly comply with this requirement in light of the prospect of obtaining access to running water and sanitation.

As the two committees begin to develop routines for meeting and decision making, Gram Vikas insists that the gender-segregated groups merge into one Village General Body. In most villages, the merger idea meets with skepticism and resistance. Nevertheless, men and local elites agree to compromise within the uncontested domain of water and sanitation and the confines of the program. The following quote, retrieved from archival data in the form of an internal report, illustrates this point:

Gram Vikas says we must involve women to make decisions, but this is just for [the] RHEP, not for other activities.

(Local man, Archival data from 2003)

Gram Vikas does not correct these views. In fact, the organization conceals the extent of the transformation unfolding. Once the Village General Body operates with all social groups represented and equally involved in discussions and decision making, Gram Vikas prompts and oversees the election of a Village Executive Committee. The Village Executive Committee—four women and four men—is elected by the Village General Body, and it stays in power for three years. It gets registered as a legal entity, assumes formal decision-making power over all topics related to water and sanitation, and takes responsibility for adherence to the program rules within the village. The Executive Committee also interacts with outside agencies, such as government agencies or public administration.

As interaction between members of different castes, classes, and genders became a daily routine, ways of dealing with group boundaries in daily routines also started to change. For instance, before the program, a purification ritual—bathing—was prescribed each time a higher-caste member interacted with a Scheduled Caste member. In the archival video material, we analyzed a higher-caste woman's explanation of how this ritual was altered. Wearing a good saree is now enough to prevent being polluted by the lower castes:

We wear a good saree—a synthetic saree. [...] We don't bathe on return if we wear a good saree.
(Higher-caste woman, Video)

Both the villagers and Gram Vikas mobilize and create social organizational resources. As all members of the village—both privileged and marginalized—keep their eyes on the goal of gaining access to water and sanitation, taken-for-granted patterns of behavior and interaction are compromised. The behavior of social groups and interaction between them start to change. The local governance structures that are created, including formal rules established by the contractual agreement and informal rules such as the need to safeguard purity of the elites, further enhance a shared commitment to the program. These efforts stabilize the ongoing transformation of patterns of behavior and interaction between men and women and members of different castes and classes, and thus allow the villagers to build routines that involve interacting across social divides.

“Constructing together”: Solidifying interaction.

Once cross-group divides are bridged by new interaction routines, Gram Vikas initiates the mobilization of economic resources to build the water and sanitation infrastructure. The Village Executive

Committee collects a corpus fund to which every household contributes, regardless of class and caste. Through the course of implementing the RHEP, members of privileged groups become particularly interested in gaining access to piped water and safe sanitation to avoid being polluted by Scheduled Caste feces. Therefore, to prevent delays caused by the limited financial means of the marginalized, elites frequently subsidize poorer families, covering their contributions.

Because there is nobody in that village who can be excluded, the poorer villagers are now subsidized.
(Senior staff member, Interview)

In addition, Gram Vikas motivates and supports the Village Executive Committee to unlock additional financial resources, such as subsidies, available in the form of development schemes at the state level. Mobilizing material and economic resources is a distributed effort: village households across social groups raise the corpus fund, Gram Vikas provides a financial top-up, village households provide basic materials for construction, Gram Vikas provides masonry training, village households build basic brickwork, Gram Vikas provides the material for roofing, and so on. This process continues until the water tank is constructed. The tank is visible from afar and symbolizes the villagers' collective effort.

The collective mobilization of economic resources forces all social groups within the village to work together, to gain confidence and solidify the routine of interacting across social groups. Our study, however, also exposed a high risk to program success: if one group or a single household resists participation, both construction and the covert transformation of the social order could stagnate or collapse. In many villages, the self-esteem of members of Scheduled Castes has grown by this time, and power games and conflicts begin to surface between groups. Madiath told us that formerly marginalized groups, in particular, start abusing their new power to block higher castes' access to infrastructure:

They agree [...] and then, as the work begins, they say, “We will not even contribute physical labor.” So the rest of the village has to bring the materials for those people and even provide the labor for them in order to complete. So this [is] a revenge mentality—[the marginalized groups realize] that this is one time when they can blackmail these people: “These people have blackmailed us all throughout or exploited us all through life.”

(Member of founding team, Interview)

Our findings indicate that, in such critical situations, village members sanction deviance and enforce compliance to the process, with the result that emergent changes in patterns of behavior and interaction are not reversed. According to archival film material provided by Gram Vikas, in one village, for instance:

[O]ne person [a man] tried to stall the work. He refused to participate. The village collectively made a decision to excommunicate him from village life. He was banned from meetings and feasts, denied all services, could not even arrange the marriage of his children. Finally, [...] he came around, requested a compromise.

(Video)

The Village Executive Committees frequently establish their own sanctions, not prescribed by the formal contract, to ensure each household's compliance. Such sanctions include cutting attendance at weddings or other festivities, public shaming, and denial of access to water. In a report Gram Vikas developed in the early days of the program, a local woman elaborated as follows on options to ensure compliance from men:

If the men do not co-operate in the implementation of [the] RHEP in our village, we will employ laborers from outside for the construction of [the] RHEP infrastructure and will go for an indefinite kitchen strike to ensure their co-operation.

(Local woman, Archival data from 2003)

Women assume a particularly important role in policing the implementation of the program and, although it is not the center of their attention, the transformative process. One village we visited was particularly affected by alcoholism. Men's liquor consumption dried up the already-scarce financial resources of families and hampered efforts to raise the corpus fund. In this village, women—organized in Self-Help Groups—collectively decided to take action. They expelled the liquor vendor from the village and called a village meeting to declare that liquor consumption was prohibited in the village and penal action would be taken against those who sell or consume alcohol. As this and other similar instances show, informal and formal mechanisms to enforce rules and impose sanctions are important anchors to implement the program, and also—more important for our theoretical interest—to stabilize the emerging new social order.

The RHEP program officially ends with the construction of a functioning water and sanitation

infrastructure. Our interviews and archival data indicated various stabilizing mechanisms that enable scaffolding and a revised social order to persist after Gram Vikas withdraws. A multilayered net of governance structures establishes legal and formal mechanisms that ensure transparency, accountability, and the representation and participation of all village households. The interest earned from the corpus fund ensures financial viability and substitutes for the subsidies that Gram Vikas has provided or made accessible as part of implementing the RHEP.

As a result, the “100% inclusion” rule is maintained even after the manifest goal—access to water and sanitation—has been achieved. Newly formed households and families moving to the village are automatically represented in the Village General Body, and members of disadvantaged groups are actively integrated into various committees and Self-Help Groups. Although new households are required to build their own water and sanitation infrastructure, they can use the interest earned from the corpus fund to partly finance this effort. Savings and newly acquired skills enable women, men, and lower-caste members to engage productively in a broader set of economic activities. Economic opportunities are more abundant because of the legal status of the Village Executive Committee, which facilitates access to government funds and development programs for infrastructure projects. Such projects include building local fishponds, asphalt roads, community centers, schools, health centers, and improved houses. These projects are collective efforts, and the infrastructure is made accessible to all villagers regardless of gender, caste, and class.

Summary of scaffolding. Through our analysis of the RHEP program, we identified the process of scaffolding, which transforms deeply entrenched patterns that account for durable social inequality in small-scale societies. We identified three mechanisms of scaffolding: (1) mobilizing institutional, social organizational, and economic resources; (2) stabilizing emerging patterns of interactions that reflect an alternative social order; and (3) concealing goals that are neither anticipated nor desired by some groups. These interrelated mechanisms make the transformation processes adaptive and emerging alternative social orders robust.

We found that scaffolding requires active planning and cannot rely on self-organizing. First, the program we analyzed here is the result of many years of experimenting, failing, and learning (for more details, see Seelos & Mair, 2016). It builds on the accumulated knowledge of an external actor—an

organization the purpose of which is to alter deeply entrenched patterns of inequality. Second, whereas scaffolding is instigated and guarded by the organization, villages need to build the first platform of the scaffold and help lay the foundation of the new social order—forming a consensus on the 100% inclusion rule formalized in a contract. And, third, the involvement of the external actor is temporary; its withdrawal needs to be carefully planned so that the new normative and social structure cannot be detached. Rather, the process builds a strong foundation to support ongoing transformation and development efforts.

Figure 2 provides a visual overview of the process we uncovered.

Scaffolding: Robustness and adaptation across villages. The main objective of our analysis was to specify the process of transformation. Scaffolding was remarkably robust across villages in our study. But villages did not “undergo” scaffolding at the same pace. Although it was not the main focus of our analysis, our results point to heterogeneity of social groups within villages as a main driver of variation across villages.

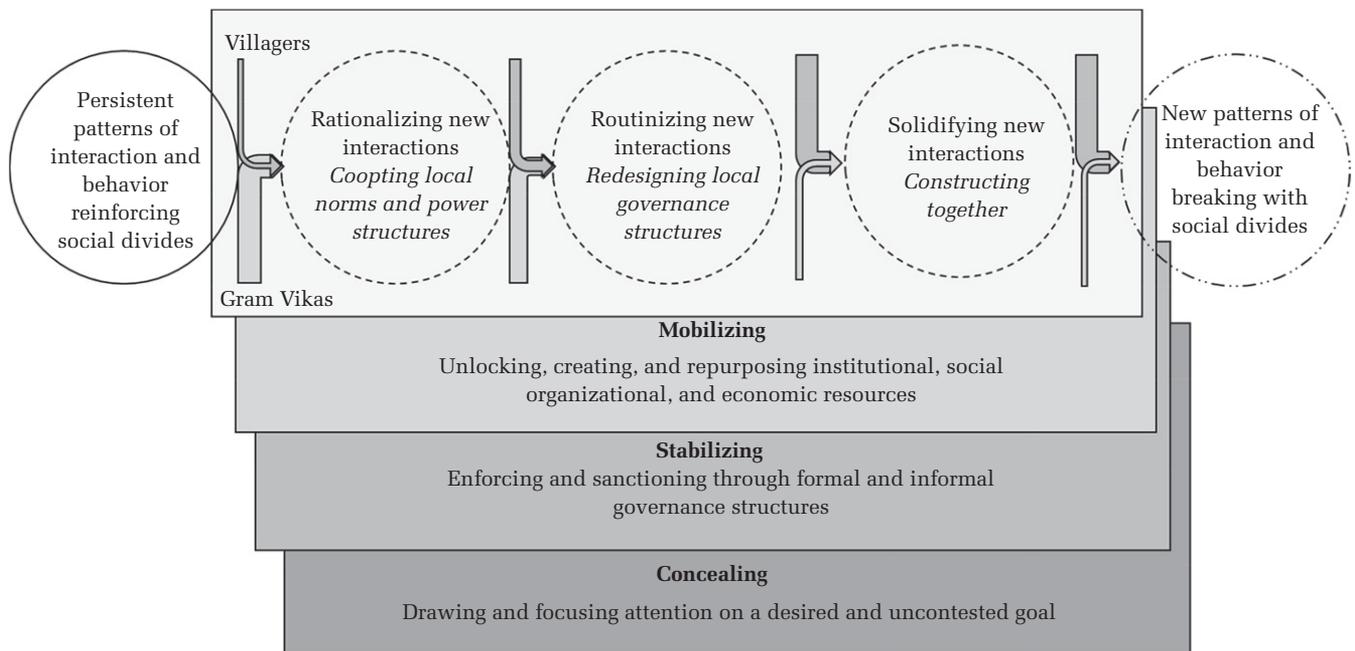
For example, caste villages and tribal villages differed in the time required for changing patterns of behavior and interaction. Caste villages—deeply segregated into multiple castes and classes—took significantly longer to reach consensus and to

establish functional governance structures in which all social groups were represented. In Kholo Samantapur, one of the caste villages, for instance, it took 162 village meetings to reach initial consensus about adhering to the explicit rules of the program. In Bimala Jani, another caste village, it took ten years until the process was completed.

Tribal villages—predominantly populated by members of Scheduled Tribes with less heterogeneity in social classes and castes—struggled much more to raise the corpus fund. Two factors might account for their difficulty. First, local economic elites do not typically reside in the tribal villages and therefore did not subsidize or support financing for tribal villagers; and, second, because of their geographic isolation, villagers are less accustomed to engaging with outside actors such as government agencies. In such cases, Gram Vikas put in extra effort to teach the villagers how to access external funds and mobilize government support.

Specific social organizational resources such as Self-Help Groups played an important role in ensuring a robust scaffolding process. Our preliminary analysis showed that scaffolding is adjusted to account for variance in social structures and available resource types within small-scale societies. For example, the specific types of norms or persuasion tactics that were used varied according to the

FIGURE 2
Scaffolding: A Process of Transforming Patterns of Inequality



sensitivities of local leaders and the marginalized members of the village. The issues that Self-Help Groups dealt with were adapted to the specific needs and problems in the communities, and economic resources were mobilized in accordance with availability and intra-village dynamics. Additional research is needed to examine variance across villages and identify sources of variation as well as enabling and disabling conditions more systematically.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we studied how an organization confronts what mathematician David Hilbert dubbed a “grand challenge.” We examined how a grand challenge such as social inequality manifests in small-scale societies and inheres in patterns of behavior and social interaction. Local patterns of inequality constitute local realities—they are visible and provide comfort to those who marginalize and those marginalized. Alternative realities or social orders are unthinkable and not wanted; therefore, programs confronting inequality are vulnerable, contested, and likely to fail. Yet, transforming durable patterns of inequality is possible—in particular, our findings show that transformation of such patterns is possible through scaffolding.

As a metaphor for building temporary support structures, scaffolding has been used by cognitive scientists to study individual transformation processes (Vygotski, 1964) and by evolutionary biologists to understand the evolution of complex adaptive systems (Davidson & Erwin, 2006). In this study, we demonstrate the relevance of scaffolding for research on organizations and institutions. We go beyond using scaffolding as a metaphor (Orlikowski, 2006) and specify it as a process that enables and organizes institutional transformation. Scaffolding involves *mobilizing*, *stabilizing*, and *concealing*; three generative mechanisms to unlock entrenched normative and social structures and, in parallel, to institutionalize emerging alternative social orders. Although it is temporary, scaffolding blends in and becomes integral to new normative and social structures. In other words, scaffolding is an under-recognized process for building and strengthening alternative local social orders.

In the next sections, we first elaborate how our findings contribute to existing organizational scholarship on societal challenges and to practical endeavors to tackle entrenched patterns of inequality. We then conclude with ideas for future research on grand challenges.

Contribution to the Organizational Study of Societal Challenges

The main theoretical objective of this paper was to advance organizational study of societal challenges. Our findings on scaffolding establish a first but important link between the study of organizational efforts to alleviate social problems and the transformation of social systems. The concept and the three mechanisms of scaffolding—concealing, stabilizing, and mobilizing—build on classical and contemporary work on purposive organizational activity that affect society and extend it in important ways.

First, we revive a theoretical and analytical tradition that deeply engages with organizations and examines how their activities affect the lives of people and communities (Gouldner, 1954; Selznick, 1949). The main objective of these studies was to reveal the hidden social forces in a system—the unintended consequences of organizational activity (Selznick, 1949). Instead, our findings on concealing show that a program sponsored by an organization can be used as a tool to organize these hidden forces. We show that purposive action can entail pursuing both manifest and concealed goals. Scaffolding allows organizations to hide consequences in pursuit of a concealed goal—transforming social orders and entrenched patterns of inequality—and concurrently reveal consequences aligned with a manifest goal: access to clean water and safe sanitation.

Our findings allow us to turn attention to the “the limiting function of end-in-view”—a concept Selznick (1949) identified as significant, but disregarded as sociologically irrelevant in explaining purposive organizational action.⁶ According to Selznick (1949: 255), “The very necessity to *keep your eye on the ball*—which demands the construction of a rational system explicitly relating means and ends—will restrain the actor from taking account of those consequences which indirectly shape the means and ends of policy.”

In our case, scaffolding enabled Gram Vikas to proactively manage villages to keep their eyes on the water-and-sanitation “ball.” Scaffolding helped to provide scope for what people can and will do, and to hide the emergence of a new social order that was neither desired nor anticipated by some social groups. Concealing was important because members

⁶ Selznick (1949) identified two sources of unintended consequences and considered this one as sociologically insignificant compared to commitment.

of specific social groups would resist and potentially compromise the process of transformation. In the case reported here, the formulation of an end-in-view—probably surprising to Selznick—was a commitment structure in itself, and it was an important organizing device for the organization sponsoring the program.

Second, our findings complement contemporary research that has identified pursuing multiple goals as a defining feature of organizations that effect positive social change.⁷ Standing on the shoulders of Selznick, this literature has emphasized conflict, tension, and challenges involved in pursuing multiple organizational goals. Such goals are typically associated with distinct and competing institutional logics—a commercial logic and a development logic (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Ebrahim et al., 2014). Similar to Selznick's, these authors' main interest lies in understanding how conflict affects or transforms organizations (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Mair et al., 2015) or the organization's environment understood as organizational fields (Lawrence et al., 2002; Mair & Hehenberger, 2014). Gram Vikas also pursues multiple goals. But these goals do not reflect "institutional conflicts." Instead, they refer to a specified (uncontested) social problem nested in/related to deeper relational and institutional (contested) challenges.

The concept of scaffolding put forward in this paper is a first attempt to connect the study of goals related to a social problem and the study of goals related to transforming a local social system (Stern & Barley, 1996). Doing so allows us to expand Selznick's ideas on institutionalization as a process of strengthening, stabilizing, and infusing *organizations* with value (Selznick, 1957). We show how scaffolding plays an important role in transforming existing social orders and strengthening and stabilizing alternative ones at the level of *small-scale societies*. Our insights complement existing research on institutional change that predominantly studies attempts to directly challenge or replace existing institutional orders (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006). Instead, scaffolding refers to an ongoing and gradual process of transforming local orderings of reality. Our findings on scaffolding provide a more granular view and analysis of the interplay between those who prompt

transformation efforts and those who inhabit the institutional arrangements to be transformed (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Mair et al., 2012).

In addition, our findings reemphasize the importance of mobilizing resources for organizational efforts to affect institutional and societal change (Battilana & Leca, 2009; Mair & Martí, 2007; Ganz, 2000; Seelos & Mair, 2007). Our study complements this tradition and specifies that mobilizing resources is intertwined with mechanisms such as stabilizing and concealing in the process of transformation. Our findings also show how collective mobilizing and the interplay between organization and village distributes agency in the transformation process, a critical feature of scaffolding.

As we mentioned before, our analysis focused on the process of transformation. Future research based on designs that allow for specific attention to variance across small-scale societies will help to systematically unpack how resources are combined and configured in the process of scaffolding. This will connect to yet another set of literature, social movement theory, which argues that access to resources determines the likelihood of collective action, and hence dynamics and outcomes of transformation processes within societies (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2017).

Contribution to Efforts to Alleviate Inequality

In line with showcasing the relevance of organizational studies, the second main objective of this paper was to develop portable insights for organizational efforts to tackle inequality. Scaffolding has the potential to transform prevailing conditions of the social, political, and economic lives of people and thereby alter patterns of thought and behavior.

Well-intended programs, especially in developing countries, often target specific dimensions of inequality—for example, seeking to decrease the number of households below the poverty line by fostering entrepreneurship, or working to decrease the number of children not going to school by building a school system parallel to the public school system. These efforts might enable access to opportunities for marginalized groups. Yet, the effect of such programs is often elusive, temporary, and reversible. Programs are not designed to monitor the emergence of hidden social forces leading to unintended consequences or to deal effectively with them. For example, elites might not respect new rules, or, as research on microfinance has shown,

⁷ More recently, Markman, Russo, Lumpkin, Jennings, and Mair (2016) have extended this perspective to the entrepreneurship literature and have portrayed entrepreneurship as a platform for pursuing multiple goals.

benefits for women of a community may be appropriated by their husbands (Goetz & Gupta, 1996). We argue that assisted processes of transformation such as scaffolding create more robust and more enduring results. Scaffolding creates a guarded and supported space where manifest and concealed goals can be pursued in parallel until renewed or altered local orders emerge.

Our findings also have implications for evaluating the success of organizational efforts to alleviate inequality. The progress each village makes in transforming local realities so that marginalized groups are included in many aspects of social, economic, and political life is an important marker of success. Yet, evaluating ongoing progress is not included in the standard repertoire of development practice. Evaluations of programs such as the one we report on in this study typically assess effectiveness in alleviating a specific problem that is perceived as important by those affected by it and those seeking to solve it. A study on the RHEP—the program we studied—by economists from the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, assessed how the program affects levels of diarrhea and malaria in villages (Duflo et al. 2015). No doubt, positive health outcomes are an important indicator for progress. But, as our study shows, health problems are deeply rooted in entrenched patterns of interaction and behavior prescribed by a local system of rules, norms, and beliefs.

Our study shows that social problems and change in social systems can be addressed conjointly. Organizational research can complement efforts by economists in important ways. Confronting and alleviating stubborn social problems requires taking local realities seriously to diagnose the root cause of the problem but also to include local factors such as place and local governance structures for understanding processes that are conducive to transformation and positive social change (Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Mair et al., 2012; York, Hargrave, & Pacheco, 2016).

Extending Research on Organizations and Grand Challenges

Research on how to confront grand challenges allows us to recover the ambition to combine rigor and relevance in organizational research (Lawrence, 1992) and, at the same time, to engage with knowledge developed in other disciplines (Howard-Grenville et al., 2014). In this study, we built on literature from social anthropology. Social anthropologists recognize that

“patterns [of inequality] can never be observed by measurement” and “change from one pattern to another is even less observable” (Barth, 1967: 662). Our objective was not to capture change in the patterns of inequality in real time and in situ. Instead, our continuous engagement with the organization and exposure to villages over ten years allowed us to capture instances of transformation across villages, and allowed us to better understand how an organization can intervene and confront entrenched patterns of inequality in institutionally complex settings.

We studied local experimentation without losing sight of the grand challenge. The characteristics of grand challenges are often thought of as being scale dependent (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015). In this study, we draw attention to characteristics of grand challenges as they manifest locally. We propose that the important characteristics of inequality are scale independent. Inequality remains multidimensional, complex, and interlinked even in locally bound settings. Yet, scale-independent grand challenges at the level of small-scale societies—local villages—enable experimentation and learning.

This study centered on a specific and locally bound societal challenge—inequality entrenched in durable patterns of interaction and behavior in rural villages in India. Which other problems could scaffolding shed light on? Societal challenges rooted in normative and structural interlocks abound in the developing and developed worlds. Scaffolding provides a theoretical and practical lens with which to reflect on important societal challenges and the ways we address them. The following two examples illustrate the potential of scaffolding to make progress on established as well as new social problems.

First, a well-documented example represents microfinance, in which a specified problem—women or marginalized groups not able to access finance—is addressed by a technical solution: microloans. Such solutions often overlook the relational aspects of the problem rooted in normative and social structures prevalent in both small-scale and large-scale societies (Martí & Mair, 2009).

More recent and unexpected societal challenges, such as the influx of refugees in Europe, can be assessed through a scaffolding lens too. Most well-intended efforts prioritize the alleviation of a specific problem; for instance, providing language courses or job training to support the integration of refugees. Our insights on scaffolding suggest that programs might also involve various groups within the host

societies in programs. They should identify manifest goals to keep the eye on the ball while adapting normative and social structures necessary for integration to work. Maintaining focus on a technical problem is far easier, but ultimately success will depend on facing relational challenges defined by normative and power struggles. Exploring scaffolding across a diverse set of societal challenges will help to further clarify the boundary conditions of scaffolding.

We hope that our detailed specification of scaffolding as a productive tool with which to organize transformation will serve as a template for researchers and practitioners to expand our understanding of this process and the potential and limits of its generalizability.

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Johanna Mair (mair@hertie-school.org) is a professor of organization, strategy, and leadership at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin. She is also a distinguished fellow at the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society. Her research focuses on how organizational and institutional arrangements affect social and economic development, and the role of innovation in this process. She received her PhD from INSEAD.

Miriam Wolf (wolf@hertie-school.org) is a post-doctoral researcher at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin and a project manager for the SEFORIS Project (Social

Entrepreneurship as a Force for more Inclusive and Innovative Societies). Her research interest lies in organizing processes around social or environmental issues. She received her PhD from Leeds University Business School.

Christian Seelos (cseelos@stanford.edu) is the Leo Tindemans Chair of Business Model Innovation at KU Leuven and a research fellow at the Stanford University Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society. His research focuses on how social sector organizations enact innovation processes and on the link between innovation, scaling, and impact.

