



Four focus domains of the India Platform

A background to the Focus Groups of spring 2014

The need for focus domains

Since 2008 the India Platform is developing a vision to collaborate fruitfully with Indian partners. We think it is crucial to collaborate on the basis of a clear vision, because India is neither the developing country it was 20 years ago, nor an industrialised country we are used to collaborate with. It has opportunities for Europe, but it also has its own challenges – just like Europe. For the complete vision note, see www.india-platform.org > policy and vision.

We are convinced that both India and Europe can make use of their unique qualities they have developed in the past centuries. Europe, for example, should, at least partly, focus on (1) the European excellence in higher education, (2) its connection with academic research and (3) her capacity to transfer research results to society in an integrated way. India can contribute with (1) her huge number of young, very motivated and educated students and staff, (2) her indigenous tradition of respect for knowledge and (3) her agility and flexibility in working.

In our recent Roundtable and Symposium on a possible India strategy (see www.india-platform.org > projects and activities) it became clear that possibilities and interest in collaborations can be explored further only if we split up our future activities into focused working groups. For this reason a series of focused sessions will be organised in 2014. Below are four domains the India Platform suggests to focus on in these separate sessions.

Focus domains for the next 5 years

The proposed focus domains are based on the research and experience of the India Platform and its Research Centre Comparative Science of Cultures (see www.cultuurwetenschap.be). Although there are many more domains in which we could and should collaborate with Indian partners, our research shows that the domains mentioned below have a big potential for real win-win collaborations on a middle-long term. Besides the mentioned four domains, there is one more which deserves attention:

the domain of social sciences. This focus will be taken up later and will, for now, appear as a thread through the four other focus domains.

1. School education

In 2002 the Indian government accepted the 'Right to Education Act' and the goal of basic education for all. But there are severe challenges to reach this goal: there are not enough teachers, while the job of a teacher is facing a rapid decrease in status and teacher training is in dire need of reform. On top of it, the methods currently used in most Indian schools are of poor quality, with little room for critical thinking. European education, on the other hand, faces different problems: lack of discipline and motivation on the student's side, stress and demotivation among teachers, huge costs due to great numbers of drop outs, aggression,...

The richness on both continents is also clear: Europe has a century old indigenous education system, with a great tradition in developing methodology for critical and creative thinking. India has its even older indigenous gurukula system in which the role of the teacher is extremely well developed. Because of these realities, the India Platform strongly believes teachers and educationalists on both continents can fruitfully work together. The India Platform already started guiding Belgian interns in Indian school education, but much more can be done. In this focus group we would like to explore which projects can be set up in the short, middle and long term with schools, teachers, kindergartens, students and / or interns.

2. Health care

European health care is coming under increasing pressure: on the one hand, its quality is excellent, both in terms of service and expertise; on the other hand, the available budgets are shrinking quickly. When European medical doctors visit India, they are amazed by what they see: sophisticated state-of-the-art infrastructure and instruments are available in almost every neighbourhood of the big cities and sometimes even in remote areas. At the same time, health care in India is becoming too expensive for the majority of the Indian middle class as a result of the increasing medical tourism.

The India Platform believes that both the European and the Indian problems could be solved through collaborations between India and Europe, where each can help solve the other's problems. It is developing an idea of a universal health care system in India with the experience and the knowledge of such a system in Belgium while at the same time bringing part of the Belgian health care to India. Some preliminary discussions on this idea have already taken place in India and in Belgium (see www.india-platform.org > projects and activities > meetings/roundtables > Roundtables on the idea of a Universal Health Care in India). In this focus group we would like to explore how this idea can be developed into a project and who is willing to commit him- or herself in this project.

3. Waste management and agriculture

India has one of the world's largest agricultural economies. However, there are two domains which need immediate attention: low value-addition to the agricultural produce and negative environmental implications of current agricultural practices. Moreover, the research and education in India in these domains are still at a very early stage. Policymakers are increasingly focused on how to strengthen research and education infrastructure and finally extend the knowledge to the end user to tackle these issues. Europe, from her side, is worried about the long-term impact of industrial farming on the environment. Especially, unsustainable use of natural resources, problems caused by soil erosion, water pollutions and use of pesticides are among the issues that are of particular concern. Finding a synergy and dialogue on these important issues will certainly help Europe as well as India.

One idea that is slowly developing is a project on the use of manure. In many parts of Europe where intensive stockbreeding is practiced, there are often surpluses of animal manure. Different policies have been tried out in the past in order to solve this problem, but the problem does not go away. One possible way of solving this problem is to export processed manure after having studied carefully the conditions in which to do this. India could be a destination country for certain purposes. The India Platform has spoken to several partners in India and Belgium who are favorable to this idea. Of course, caution is needed since we do not as yet know the environmental effects (economic, environmental, public health, etc.) or the costs involved in such an operation, but it seems to us that a potentially promising collaboration between India and Europe lies here. In this focus group we would like to give an overview of what has been discussed until now and start involving the relevant experts on the issue.

4. Urban planning and architecture

Indian cities are growing at an immensely fast pace and face every problem that comes along with such rapid growth: road infrastructure that cannot cope with the increasing number of cars, extremely dense traffic, air and sound pollution and the stress that comes along with it. These problems not only affect the quality of life in the cities, making them almost unlivable, they also affect the transmission and continuation of India's rich cultural traditions. The challenge then is to reorganise some of the main cities in India so that they can become livable places where people live together and where the transmission and enrichment of the Indian cultural traditions can take place. The hope lies in the huge number of young, highly educated people, in their dreams and ambitions, and in an unconditional investment in higher education. Flanders, on the other hand, has a very strong expertise in building efficient, ecological and esthetic urban infrastructure. If we can combine the strengths of India - her large population of young and highly educated people, her growing economy, her dreams and eyes set on the future - with the expertise of Flanders and its embeddedness in a research culture, we can make Indian cities not only livable but also attractive to live in.

The India Platform has already taken important steps here: India Platform representatives in India have contacted the city of Mysore and discussed an urban planning project for the city. This mid-sized city in Karnataka has about 1 million inhabitants. It is an important city because the IT industry is now moving away from Bangalore and choosing Mysore is one of its preferred destinations. This means that the natural environment, the heritage and the infrastructure of this relatively quiet and peaceful

city will come under tremendous pressure. The India Platform wants to develop a “Keeping Mysore Livable” project, involving a consortium of stakeholders and partners from Belgium and India. In this focus group we would like to give an overview of what has happened so far, invite some international experts on the issue, listen to the stakeholders already involved, and plan the next steps in this project.