Case Development & Pedagogy For The Social Sector

ASHOKA UNIVERSITY | 10 YEARS | CENTRE FOR Social Impact and Philanthropy

Executive Summary

This reflective brief report summarises the Centre for **Social Impact and Philanthropy's** (CSIP, henceforth) learnings from interacting with multiple learning and development–focused (L&D, henceforth) organisations on the barriers and potential of case studies in their training programmes. These emerge from semi-structured in-depth interviews with stakeholders from 15 L&D organisations. We highlight the key insights below.

What are the barriers to organisations not using case studies in their current curriculum?

Primarily, three factors contribute to the limited use of case studies.

- The first among them is accessibility. There is a consensus among the participants of the survey that, for most use cases, appropriate case studies are not available. And many of the available cases are not usable either because of their size or because of the way they have been written (from a business-school vantage point).

- The second factor is that the cost of acquisition is generally high. All of the reputed case centres (Harvard, Blavatnik, IIMs etc) are mostly paywalled, and barring a handful of organisations (like Dasra), most of them are prohibitively expensive. The cost ranges from upwards of 5 USD per case download to several thousand dollars for pedagogical training.

- The third factor is the lack of pedagogical knowledge. More often than not, facilitators don't know how to teach cases to a diverse audience (this is a pedagogical challenge).

There is a strong demand for the inclusion of cases as knowledge creation and teaching tools.

- The overall feedback was that the current set of existing (mostly inaccessible) cases is not relevant for most of the training programmes, and also does not capture the right set of stories and learnings.

- The L&D organisations need cases that are concise, teachable, multilingual, have multimedia-supported content and provide instructional support for the said cases.

- Even for instances where cases are self produced, there is support needed in the research process, refinement, and training of trainers.

Methodology

We relied on remote, intensive and structured conversations. The questions focused on past experiences with case studies, challenges in using them, the need and expectations from future case materials, and openness to co-production and integration. Participants shared important feedback on how they have (or have not) used case studies, their perceived challenges, willingness to co-create, and the kinds of support they would require to integrate such materials effectively into their work.

The interviews were conducted in 2 weeks of April 2025.

Data Collection
15 semi-structured interviews.

Respondent Profiles
Directors and CEOs of organisations, program heads, course leads.

Types Of Organisations
Capacity-building institutes, fellowship programmes, intermediary organisations.

Detailed Findings

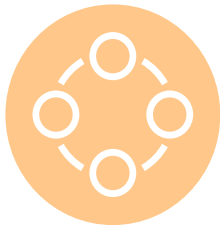## Challenges with existing case studies

Lack Of Contextual Relevance

Current case studies don't contain examples from the social sector. Most of them are business-focused case studies (e.g., HBS, IIMs) that do not reflect the relatable dynamics of social impact. Also, the interviews highlighted that several L&D organisations are producing their own cases, but most are journey/process cases. There is a demand for (leadership) decision cases, which require a certain level of expertise and skill to collate and teach.

High Cost And Access Barriers

Licensing fees and limited open access restrict the long-term use of cases. Additionally, the lack of dedicated funding for teaching resources prevents institutions from utilising high-quality cases, such as those from Harvard.

Long-Form Content Of Cases

Standard case formats of 30+ pages are not well-suited to the short-format training that L&D organisations mostly deliver. Multi-day trainings or two-hour workshops often lack the time needed to engage with such lengthy material, especially when they require engagement beforehand.

Language Limitations

Few case studies are available in Hindi or regional languages, which excludes several participants.

Facilitation Gaps

Teaching case studies, especially at the senior leadership level, can be challenging, as many cases lack accompanying teaching notes and do not focus on training of trainers. This limits effective facilitation and often makes the discussion overly dependent on the availability or involvement of the case protagonist.

Need and Opportunities

Multilingual Case Studies

The availability of case studies in Hindi and regional languages is essential, as most grassroots NGOs struggle to relate to or effectively use case studies due to language barriers.

Short And Readable Formats

The preferred length of cases is five to ten pages for easy integration into workshops and programmes.

Contextual, India-Specific Content

There is a demand for case studies from the social sector that address human resource challenges, fundraising problems, impact journey and leadership crisis.

Willingness To Co-Create

Multiple organisations are willing to co-develop case studies with CSIP from their field learnings.

Teaching Support (Facilitator Guides)

Notes, templates and short training content (aimed at training of trainers) are required to use cases effectively.

Emphasis On Successes And Failures

Learning from failures is seen as critical to avoid the replication of mistakes. This feedback has been critical, as a lot of existing case studies seem to focus only on learning from successes.

Audience-Tailored Case Studies

Cases are needed at various levels, ranging from junior managers and mid-career professionals to CXOs.

Next Steps

We received several important feedback from our L&D partners. This shaped our current thinking about the case centre and the distribution channels. We are now distinguishing between our approach to cases that are supposed to be taught in traditional academia and the approach needed/recommended by our current set of L&D partners (who are focused on shorter courses, ranging in duration from a few days to weeks).

To address these findings, we are adding the following considerations to our plan:

Develop Shorter Case Studies

For shorter courses and programmes, the cases should mostly be three to five pages and written in clear, jargon-free language.

Facilitate co-Creation workshops

Invite organisations to collaborate on writing and testing cases.

Prioritize themes most needed by practitioners

The themes that are emerging are fundraising, leadership dilemmas, donor practices, impact measurement, HR, scaling impact and board governance.

Create facilitator guides and training modules

Ensure effective integration into programmes with teaching notes, learning outcomes and prompts. Further, we will create facilitator training workshops (offline and online) to democratise training cases.

Include failures and challenges as learning points

Focus on practical, real-world lessons, not just success stories.

Translate select cases into Hindi and regional languages

Pilot test case translations with grassroots NGO partners.

Distribution and Adoption Channels

To ensure effective dissemination and adoption of case studies produced by the Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy (CSIP), we have identified three key channels of engagement: **Academia, Intermediaries and Alternative Channels.**

Traditional Academia

Traditional management Institutions are seen as important allies for disseminating and integrating case studies into their social sector, impact and development, and academic programmes. Some institutions expressed interest in integrating co-produced cases with faculty review and rigour. This could involve working with faculties to curate relevant case studies for existing courses or designing specific modules based on the cases. Regular engagement through workshops, seminars, and case study discussions will be key.

Intermediaries (Existing Training Programmes and Workshops)

All surveyed organisations run ongoing training programmes for nonprofit leaders and mid-career professionals. These programmes can serve as early adopters and testing grounds for case studies, especially if supported with facilitator guides and multilingual versions. For these organisations, we will focus on developing customised case studies based on the challenges faced by social-sector organisations. Additionally, we will also provide (online) training and support for facilitators to effectively use these case studies in workshops or seminars.

Alternate Channels (Digital Channels)

We foresee a case for case studies be offered as on-demand or customised courses through an online platform . This will democratise the access and teachability of cases further and will reduce the per-case cost significantly.

This distribution strategy, combining traditional learning partners, grassroots networks, and digital dissemination, will be critical to scaling the reach and impact of the Case Study Centre.

Conclusion

This set of interactions with the L&D partners underscores a clear and growing demand for accessible practitioner-focused and India-relevant case studies in the social impact space. There is also a significant opportunity for CSIP to catalyse a shared learning ecosystem by launching a structured, co-created multilingual Case Study Centre that supports capacity building across the nonprofit sector.

Questions

To understand the landscape of case-study usage in the social sector, we designed a semi-structured interview guide. The objective was to explore not only whether organisations use case studies, but also how they engage with them, what barriers they face, and what they would like to see in future materials. The guiding questions included the following:

01

Has your organisation worked on case studies (producing, writing or teaching) before?

If yes, what were the topics? How were they used (e.g., in which programmes)? How did participants respond.

02

Why don't you use HBS/IIM-style case studies (if applicable)?

If no: Have you considered using case studies? If so, why didn't you pursue it further?

03

What would your expectations be if CSIP were to produce case studies for the social sector?

04

How willing would you be to integrate these case studies into your course offerings or learning initiatives?

05

What kind of support would you require (eg, facilitation training, teaching notes translations)?

06

Would you be open to co-producing and teaching case studies with CSIP?

07

Any other thoughts or feedback on how case studies could support sector learning?

These questions were designed to gather information and provoke reflection on how experiential and narrative-driven learning, through case studies, could be more effectively integrated into social sector capacity-building.

csip.ashoka.edu.in

csip@ashoka.edu.in

Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy (CSIP)

ashokacsip

Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy

Centre for Social Impact & Philanthropy (CSIP)

All photos are of the **Ashoka HDFC library,** Image copyright, **Ashoka University**

Designed by Studio CoDe