Intimate Technologies for Affective Development: How Crowdfunding Platforms Commodify Interpersonal Connections

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Abstract
Recently emerged as transformative fundraising tools for development causes, crowdfunding platforms leverage the ‘feelingful ties’ that connect individuals in pursuit of NGO fundraising. Focusing on research conducted in 2018 with Indian platform LetzChange, this article frames crowdfunding platforms as ‘intimate technologies for development’, exploring how platforms leverage different forms of social and digital capital from their NGO partners to shape power relations within the development sector. By examining how crowdfunding platforms train local NGO staff to market their projects in digitally affective ways on social media, this article demonstrates the influence of modern technological tools that recreate affective social bonds and social capital in digital spaces for the purpose of mobilizing donors. It shows how NGO staff must navigate the complicated landscape of social, digital, and financial inequalities created within the crowdfunding process. Through analysis of specific digital fundraising practices, this article reveals how LetzChange compels its NGO partners to invest emotional labour into crowdfunding campaigns, inevitably creating apprehension from staff around the depletion of social capital. This article argues that affective digital practices like crowdfunding fall short of their inclusive aims and reinforce existing top-down power relations in the development sector by financially instrumentalizing the interpersonal connections of NGO staff.

Keywords: ICT and the digital economy, humanitarianism, aid and capital flows, India, social capital, crowdfunding

Introduction
While development practice has long been a story of emotions and power, few recent cases demonstrate this more prominently than crowdfunding platforms. Crowdfunding is a form of alternative financing which allows fundraisers to collect money for specific projects through large numbers of small donations. Crowdfunding platforms are websites specifically designed to facilitate this process by creating a digital space for fundraisers to interact with their ‘crowd’. The rise of these platforms and their use by international development entities like non-governmental organisations (NGOs) draws out important questions around how crowdfunding platforms leverage and reconfigure affective power relations among actors in this sector. The field of international development contains multi-faceted layers of affective power, though how these hierarchies and inequalities present themselves in practice has come under increasing scrutiny. Using the concept of ‘intimate technologies for

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development’ (Banerjee, 2020) — modern technological tools that recreate affective social bonds and social capital in digital spaces for the purpose of mobilizing donors — I reveal the commodifying elements of crowdfunding models, particularly how they mobilize the social capital and connections of the NGOs during online fundraising campaigns.

Digital crowdfunding platforms have rapidly grown in prominence over the last decade as a mechanism for individuals and NGOs to raise funds for specific projects — in the case of NGOs, these projects are often those overlooked or unsupported by the organisation’s existing funders. By training NGO staff to create new forms of connection through their organisation’s social media and digital presence, crowdfunding platforms generate novel virtual affective relations between the NGO and its supporters. Through an extended case study of Indian platform LetzChange and its NGO partners, this article demonstrates that while innovative digital tools like crowdfunding open up new possibilities for NGOs, they simultaneously reinforce existing top-down power relations in development by commodifying the interpersonal networks of NGO staff.

Though crowdfunding platforms have lofty ambitions to demonstrably change traditional development paradigms by making fundraising more accessible and democratic to organisations of all sizes and capacities, this leads to the question of how their adoption of and adherence to ‘philanthrocapitalist’ private-sector models may limit the ability to truly create inclusive spaces for NGO fundraising. By highlighting and analyzing new virtual practices and digital inequalities, this article reveals how NGO staff find themselves increasingly compelled to commodify their networks, effectively depleting their own social capital in order to execute a crowdfunding campaign. Collectively, these findings broaden ongoing discussions of affect in development (Jakimow 2021, Anderson 2014), the impacts of digital platforms and emotive fundraising (Schwittay 2014, Banerjee 2020), and social capital in digital spaces (Chen 2018, McKay and Perez 2019).

I begin by situating my findings conceptually within existing literature and frameworks on affect in international development, intimate technologies for development, philanthrocapitalism, and social capital. Then follows a short exploration of the context for this research, focusing on philanthropy and NGOs within the digital transformations currently taking place in India. I subsequently detail my research methodology before moving onto two sections of analysis supported by my empirical findings from Indian platform LetzChange and 20 of their NGO partners. The first explores the power of intimate technologies for development, examining the curation of various digital ‘currencies’ (Schwittay 2014) utilized by crowdfunding platforms and the leveraging of social capital by NGO staff during fundraising campaigns. This section explores how NGO staff members often incur a depletion of social capital through new forms of digital crowdfunding, including through social media and WhatsApp. I end this section by examining the digital inequalities highlighted by crowdfunding in practice, and how these are often exacerbated by the recreation of existing top-down hierarchies by platforms. The final section of this article is a specific examination of the LetzChange Annual Fundraising Challenge, a yearly competition designed by the platform to engage their NGO partners in crowdfunding. By highlighting unique LetzChange digital fundraising tools, I analyse how practices meant to financially benefit NGOs often incurs further social and resource costs for the organisation, concluding
that crowdfunding likely cannot create an inclusive fundraising space for NGOs until they grapple with the detrimental impacts of their existing models.

**Situating the ‘Affective-ness’ of Intimate Technologies for Development**

The findings presented expand existing debates on how affect and sentiment can be used analytically in development studies to include digital development practices, particularly manifestations of intimate technologies for development like crowdfunding platforms. As Jakimow (2021, in press) writes in the introduction to this Special Issue, “Affect is intimate, experienced at the level of the person, but also impersonal... in that the forces that mediate our responses emerge through encounters, rather than belonging to a single human or non-human object”. Coupled with the commodification of sentiments generated during crowdfunding campaigns, I use this conceptualization of affect to demonstrate the personal and impersonal intimacies mediated through platforms by NGO staff both socially and digitally. How platforms and NGOs leverage these sentiments conveys the growing and substantial role that intimate technologies play in reproducing power relations and hierarchies in development practice.

As with most interactive digital technologies, crowdfunding platforms have grown in international popularity over the past decade, reflecting expanding trends in social media use and digital humanitarianism through citizen aid. I fashioned the concept of ‘intimate technologies for development’ to describe the interconnected levels of social, digital, and financial brokerage facilitated by crowdfunding platforms in development practice. The term builds on previous understandings of affective fundraising and small-scale interpersonal giving through ‘citizen aid’ (Fechter 2019), and the intimacy developed through ‘affective investments’ in the form of micro-loans between Western lenders and entrepreneurs in the Global South (Schwittay 2011). The idea of intimate technologies for development describes how “…various new media— including crowdfunding platforms— have embraced the fast-paced digital nature of modern social interactions, while simultaneously attempting to recreate the human relationships and connections online” (Banerjee 2020, 251). As intimate technologies for development, crowdfunding platforms impact and have power over an organisation’s capacity to raise funds from individual donors, with many platform staff claiming that a lack of access to technological tools is among the most prominent barriers to effective crowdfunding.

In this sense, crowdfunding platforms aim to create a democratic digital fundraising space (Light and Briggs 2017) for all partner NGOs, where each organisation has access to the same online resources so long as they have a consistent internet connection. However, as my findings later demonstrate, online access is but one facet of broader digital accessibility, with divides persisting in technological ability and awareness. Through the lens of Toyama’s ‘law of amplification’, technology on its own has little to no transformative capability, it can only serve to amplify existing human intent and capacity. Most importantly, technology access “…cannot act as a substitute where human capacity and intent do not exist” (Toyama in Hernandez and Roberts 2017, 6).

In order to build and develop this human capacity and intent, platforms promote affective forms of digital appeals when training NGO staff in effective crowdfunding. Schwittay (2014)
discusses the use of digital storytelling in crowdfunding, noting the affective role stories play in promoting the social, financial, and emotional roles necessary in humanitarian campaigns. Writing about American fundraising platform Kiva, Schwittay comments on co-founder Jessica Jackley’s promotion of Kiva’s purpose as ‘a love story’ and a manifestation of collective desires to be both meaningful and useful in someone else’s life (Jackley in Schwittay 2014, 57). These emotive ambitions from platform founders apply to the Indian crowdfunding space as well, with LetzChange’s philanthropist founder opting to create a whole platform versus simply developing a personal foundation. As one LetzChange director told me “Our founder didn’t just want to support a single cause, he wanted to create a space where anyone can support the causes they care about most passionately. He wanted the people to choose what they thought was the most important project or worthwhile NGO and allow them to stay connected to each other.” The notion of promoting individual choice and supporting causes through micro-level, citizen-driven giving builds on Fechter’s (2019) understanding of citizen aid, an interconnected citizenship framework whereby individuals funnel small-scale flows of resources directly to beneficiaries, and demonstrates the desire to create a digital space for connective ‘feelingful ties’ (Moodie 2013, 280), a term that describes how the technology of platforms facilitates the mediation of a relationship between donors and recipients. In the case of digital NGO fundraising, the potential for feelingful ties is created by the NGOs and mediated through the sociotechnical tools afforded by crowdfunding platforms. By leveraging the affective power of storytelling, digital imagery and the reach of social media, crowdfunding platforms aim to amplify NGO fundraising capacity. This in turn results in the financialization of interpersonal connections through the use of intimate technologies.

Given the financialized and competition-based fundraising models promoted by crowdfunding platforms, I argue that these platforms fall under the umbrella of philanthrocapitalism. Coined by Bishop and Green (2010), philanthrocapitalism not only refers to the philanthropy of the world’s wealthy elite, but more broadly defines the inclusion of successful capitalist practices from the business sector into development. The popularity of philanthrocapitalism-based models in development has grown alongside the field of information and communications technologies for development (ICT4D) (Heeks 2010), a synergistic relationship since philanthrocapitalism promotes increased marketization, innovation, and technologization of the development sector. Crowdfunding platforms sit at a nexus of these two fields, attempting to harness the best of both in the service of the NGO partners. However, though LetzChange is a registered non-profit that serves exclusively NGOs, ‘microphilanthropy’ through crowdfunding still employs many for-profit ideologies and is therefore susceptible to the detrimental effects of allowing private sector principles infuse development practice. These profit-driven trappings particularly include the tendency for platforms to emphasize the beneficial aspects of crowdfunding — such as the platform being free-of-charge for NGOs — while overlooking the considerable costs of labour and social capital expended during the fundraising process (Banerjee 2020).

Furthermore, crowdfunding platforms monetize the social capital of their NGO partners, a model that is particularly lucrative for them as they often charge 3-5% fees on the donations. The building of social capital, and particularly digital social capital, is essential for Indian NGOs — as I will discuss in the following section, there is a considerable lack of public trust
in the NGO sector. Here I use Harriss' definition of social capital as “…the resources that are inherent in certain social relationships…” (2001, 2), coupled with McKay and Perez's (2019) conceptualization of digital social capital to describe the technological features (social media followers, online engagement) that serve to amplify the existing social capital of an NGO. To be successful in garnering individual donations, NGO staff must build out the organisation’s social networks, often starting with their own interpersonal connections. Crowdfunding goes a step further, tapping into the social networks of NGOs in order to achieve greater impact (Chen 2017). While these models of leveraging social contacts during fundraising can often lead to financial success—effectively turning friends into commodities—this raises the question of how the social, emotional and digital costs of those practices might also leave an NGO’s resources depleted by the end of a campaign. This line of inquiry is particularly important in the case of digital social capital generated through successful use of social media and digital branding on crowdfunding pages and social networking apps like Facebook and WhatsApp. This article investigates these questions, particularly how an NGO’s ability to create digital social capital, developed through digital viewership, shares, and ‘likes’, can determine the how successful a project is during a crowdfunding campaign.

Indian Context and Research Methodology
This research was conducted during a particularly interesting sociocultural moment in India, with the country’s rapid digital transformations impacting traditional giving practices, everyday social interactions, and the advancement of the local NGO sector. NGOs became popular in India in the late 1980s and 1990s when aid was formalized through international development assistance programs, leading to a large-scale increase in local and national organisations (Rajasekhar 2000). Currently one of the world’s most NGO-saturated nations with more than 3 million estimated registrations, India represents the ‘NGOisation’ trend that captures these large-scale transformations in the international development sector that coincided with “…economic liberalization and the withdrawal of state funding from key areas where NGOs stepped in to deliver—and not merely demand—development” (Roy 2015, 97). Decades later large swathes of development practitioners have advocated for a dismantling of these top-down aid structures, calling for decentralized approaches and more local ownership of funding distribution (Cramer 2002).

Local Indian NGOs have long struggled to gain financial support for their projects, as most official development funding is distributed to larger international and national organisations. Due to heavy criticism around the efficacy of these traditional, ‘mainstream’ development practices, ideologies like philanthrocapitalism—with its emphasis on innovation, technologization, and harnessing the agility of the private sector—have taken root and flourished through various development funding models, including crowdfunding (Bishop and Green 2010). The 20 Indian NGOs represented in this study sought to move away from reliance on big grants and diversify their revenue streams, particularly given the retraction in domestic and international spending on aid in recent years. This has led many NGOs to focus on expanding their individual donor bases, an effort crowdfunding platforms have been actively supporting. However, later sections of this article will demonstrate how crowdfunding platforms can easily become the problem reinventing itself as the solution, as they re-inscribe many of the power inequalities between NGOs in more traditional development practice.
From the perspective of individual philanthropy, Indian citizens most commonly practice religious giving; if non-religious donations are made, they are likely informal exchanges between individuals—i.e. to household staff or someone within the community—rather than to an NGO. This preference for direct giving and aversion to third party donations was a prominent during my research. As one LetzChange manager relayed “Indians don’t always trust the NGOs, they’re not sure the organisation will do what they say. People prefer to give where they can see the impact themselves—like sending the maid’s child to school.” Public mistrust of the NGO sector has increased over the last decade, particularly with widespread media coverage around Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government crackdowns on seemingly fraudulent NGOs (Bornstein and Sharma 2016). During my research, platform and NGO staff voiced the challenges of operating during this period of NGO skepticism, and discussed how building digital social capital through crowdfunding campaigns is an effort to maintain strong connections with their individual donors in a digital age.

The popularity of crowdfunding platforms is made possible by India’s heightened levels of digitization over the last two decades, with the notable rise in information technologies leading to a rapid appearance of local crowdfunding platforms since 2013. Crowdfunding platforms saw a further boost since 2016, when the Indian government imposed the demonetization of the 500 and 1000 Rupee notes. The post-demonetization period has been marked by an influx of financial technologies and digital money transfer applications (apps), leading the population to become ever more comfortable with ‘cashlessness’ (Masiero 2017). The blend of Indian NGO oversaturation and public mistrust, coupled with the country’s emerging financial and social technologies created an ideal space for observing new digital fundraising practices.

The data presented in this article was collected through fieldwork in India between September 2017 and May 2018. I employed qualitative mixed-methods approaches comprised primarily of elite interviews with staff at Indian platform LetzChange2 and 20 of their NGO partners. While many other crowdfunding platforms operate in-country, LetzChange is one of the largest Indian platforms to partner exclusively with NGOs. Founded in 2014 by wealthy Indian philanthropist Vikrant Bhargava, LetzChange exclusively partners with local NGOs and trains organisation staff on digital fundraising tools available on the platform. Over the course of 5 visits to the LetzChange offices in Delhi, I also employed on-site observation of staff relations, organisational culture, and human resource capacity. The 20 partner organisations I researched are anonymized due to heightened levels of competition in Indian NGO fundraising. These NGOs ranged widely in focus-area, human resource capacity, and annual budget. To maintain the confidentiality of my participants, all staff quoted in this article are referenced only by generic titles, never by name. In total, I spoke with 4 senior staff at LetzChange and 45 staff at partner NGOs, aiming for a range of large, medium, and small-sized organisations. For this research, I classify large NGOs as those with budgets of $1 million USD, medium organisations have an annual budget between

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2 The crowdfunding platform LetzChange has recently merged with larger Indian philanthropic entity GivelIndia with the aim of combining LetzChange’s strengths in online crowdfunding with GivelIndia’s expertise in payroll and subscription giving.
$100,000 and $999,999 USD, and small NGOs operate on less than $99,999 per year. Using these thresholds, the 20 NGOs in my sample include 7 large, 7 medium, and 6 small-sized organisations.

Further to the on-site research detailed above, I also carried out multimodal digital analysis (Jewitt 2013) through content examination of the LetzChange digital platform as well as the fundraising webpages and social media profiles of their partner NGOs. Multimodal analysis allowed me to scrutinize how NGOs represent themselves in digital spaces, assessing how successfully they’ve employed the tools and methods encouraged by crowdfunding platforms for building digital social capital. By studying the quality of this online content—including fundraising pages, campaign email templates, and social media posts—I was able to analyse and draw conclusions about the digital capacity of the NGO staff, and reveal the prominent role of digital inequalities in crowdfunding.

**LetzChange It Up – Indian Crowdfunding and Generating Digital Social Capital**

As previously mentioned, Indian crowdfunding platform LetzChange was founded in 2012 by a high net-worth entrepreneur who envisioned a virtual philanthropic platform that allowed the Indian people to choose where to direct their donations, a space that would inspire feelings of hope and happiness. Though crowdfunding platforms change their appearance often, during my research period the LetzChange interface featured a whimsical and uplifting layout (Figure 1). Using plasticine clay animation or ‘clay-mation’ on their homepage and each of their thematic landing pages, LetzChange’s imagery and branding reflect a post-humanitarian perspective on fundraising. As Lilie Chouliaraki (2010, 108) notes, post-humanitarian appeals often feature “…low-intensity emotions and short-term forms of agency” that “…should be seen as a contemporary attempt to renew the legitimacy of humanitarian communication – one that abandons universal morality and draws on the resources of the media market in which humanitarian organisations operate today”. Using clay-mation clouds and a small globe against a sky-blue backdrop, LetzChange brands itself as “Your gateway to the world of giving”. Multiple LetzChange staff reported that they wanted to center the platform around a light-hearted effect, adding emotions like fun and nostalgia through the clay-mation and vibrant colours.
These warm, ‘low-intensity emotions’ frequently achieved the desired outcome for LetzChange donors, with one director telling me “I had an email from a regular donor telling me how much they like our look. They said most other platforms have lots of project photos on their pages and endorsements, it can be overwhelming for a viewer. Our platform has a calming effect, I think.” Adding to LetzChange’s visual appeal is the power of the specific language they use on their homepage. An examination of other prominent Indian crowdfunding platforms like Impact Guru, Milaap, and Ketto reveals that each use competitive language on their homepages, with messaging centered around being the ‘best’, ‘most successful’, or ‘most popular’ crowdfunding platforms in India. By contrast, LetzChange’s opening narrative is centered around ‘giving’. This language is designed to appeal to a prospective donor’s altruistic instincts, further demonstrating the integral role of private-sector practices around marketing, branding and user experience in influencing a platform’s visual aesthetic. Important user experience data from international crowdfunding platforms confirms that positive feelings a donor receives from contributing to a digital fundraiser and having a good experience on the platform are consistent drivers of recurring donations (Banerjee 2020). As such, constructing an uplifting appeal on their website provides LetzChange with a level of credibility when training their NGO partners in digital fundraising.

During the course of my research, one platform manager spoke specifically of training NGOs to fundraise online, noting, “If you’re an NGO fundraiser, your job is to tell great stories. Our job is to help you tell those great stories online”. Whether or not NGO staff agreed on the validity of this statement, the importance of storytelling for effective digital fundraising and the building of social capital cannot be overstated. Given the philanthrocapitalist undertones pervasive in crowdfunding, it is appropriate that the various forms of multi-media tools used in digital fundraising be named ‘currencies’. As Schwittay writes, “Stories are also the currency in which [donors] are paid, thereby becoming transformed into a kind of narrative capital” (2014, 55). While the previous section established that positive user experience keeps donors coming back to the particular crowdfunding platform, compelling stories drive
the creation of feelingful ties and keep donors coming back to specific NGOs or projects. Digital story-telling has become an onerous skill that NGO staff must learn, considering the narrative style and details often differ from official donor reports or grant applications. Visual currencies in crowdfunding are just as crucial as narrative ones with Nandita Dogra (2013) discussing the importance of powerful imagery in fundraising, noting that NGOs bear a great responsibility to communicate with donors visually.

During crowdfunding campaigns, these communications most frequently come in the form of emails, WhatsApp texts, and social media posts. While the 20 NGOs I researched all voiced some basic knowledge of how social media operates, only 15% of respondents understood that the quality of images and narrative captions has a direct correlation with how visible the post will be through ‘likes’, shares, and clicks (Wohn et al 2016). As social media users scroll through their timelines on laptops, tablets, or more likely mobile phones, crowdfunding platforms train NGO partners to post the most affective images and captions in the hope of compelling users to pause long enough to engage with the crowdfunding campaign. If a post is captivating enough, users will potentially ‘like’ and share it. When successful, these forms of virtual engagement build an NGO’s digital social capital by drawing increased viewership to the content that has been shared. While the benefits of increased digital social capital are not always correlated to immediate financial gains (donations), staff at prominent American crowdfunding platform GlobalGiving have found that the more viewership and engagement a particular fundraising campaign has on social media, the more likely some users will eventually donate.

LetzChange encourages multiple forms of digital currencies being utilized at the same time, including compelling stories, eye-catching photographs, clear videos, and tailored text messages. When I asked about their strategy for welcoming new partner NGOs, they told me their first recommendation is for the NGO to post a video on their crowdfunding page. One LetzChange manager noted, “People don’t really want to read long emails anymore, particularly younger people. You have to get your message across quickly and visually. We tell our partners to make a video introducing the NGO and their project. Even just an iPhone video is better than nothing. It will help draw in donors.” LetzChange staff heavily promoted these forms of digital and visual media to NGO partners, as they were key to mediating the feelingful ties that organisations hoped to build with their donors. LetzChange also noted the unusually pervasive popularity of WhatsApp in India, and designed text message templates for the social and digital media service ‘packs’ that they offer to NGOs. The phenomenal prevalence of WhatsApp in India over the last 5 years is being studied currently, with Naveen Kumar and Sudhansh Sharma writing, “Previously, only friends and lovers tend to possess robust relationships with intimate conversations. However currently whoever you chat through WhatsApp, you develop intimate conversations. WhatsApp has created a way of belongingness, distance and intimacy with friends and relatives” (2017, 57). LetzChange hope to harness the affective and emotive power of WhatsApp by promoting text-based crowdfunding; they provide malleable text message templates to staff at partner NGOs:

Campaign Specific Message:
Thank you for always being with us through our ups and downs. As we gear up to participate in the LetzChange Fundraising Challenge ’18, we would urge you to create a campaign for us, which will help us win rewards and thereby grow significantly [link].

Donation Specific Message:
You’ve always stood by us in all our initiatives. We’re geared up to participate in the LetzChange Fundraising Challenge ’18, where every contribution can take us close to substantial rewards. Support us now: [link].

The app’s ‘Broadcast’ feature allows users to send large numbers of individualized text messages to selected contacts. Unlike ‘group chats’ where blast messages can become effectively meaningless and alienating, broadcasted messages deliver to each recipient individually. Recipients are more likely to engage with a text sent directly into their message inbox, rather than an email that’s easily deleted or a Facebook post buried in their newsfeed. This usage of WhatsApp for crowdfunding purposes fits the app under the umbrella of intimate technologies for development, with NGO staff leveraging the enhanced intimacy of 1-to-1 text messages to create tailored, targeted fundraising campaigns.

While platforms like LetzChange believe WhatsApp fundraising is a worthwhile expenditure of an organisation’s social capital, NGO staff reported apprehension about consistently instrumentalizing their personal networks by turning friends into commodities. Staff at 5 NGOs reported the potential for a circular depletion of social capital within these WhatsApp interactions, with one manager saying: “I think WhatsApp messaging your potential donors is generally a good idea. You know people will see it and hopefully respond. But you might get yourself into trouble! I asked a close contact of mine to give during one of our Diwali campaigns. Then a few months later he turned around and asked me for a donation to a fundraiser he was doing.” This process demonstrates that social capital can very quickly become a social cost, with Castillo et al writing, “...if our friends donate out of friendship to us... we might incur a social cost by asking. Indeed, by asking a friend to donate to a charity we care about, we may be asked to return the favor in the future...” (2014, 29). Another danger of social capital depletion is the affective and emotional toll these crowdfunding interactions take on the NGO staff in question. Staff members at 16 NGOs researched reported feeling exhausted by the need to be ‘always online’ during crowdfunding campaigns, with one noting, “If I’m not posting to our NGO’s Facebook account, then I’m emailing the donors, and if I’m not emailing then I’m sitting in an Uber and broadcasting a fundraising link to my friends and family on WhatsApp. So it is exhausting because it’s different from what us NGO workers are used to.”

This process exposes and emphasizes the affective power hierarchies created within the practice of crowdfunding, with platforms advocating the accruing and expenditure of an NGO’s digital and social capital, and the NGOs following these practices despite the potential for detrimental social costs. Also noteworthy are the gendered power dynamics, as all LetzChange senior staff were male whereas 71% of the NGO staff researched were female. In this context, the transactional nature of accruing and spending of social capital through intimate technologies like crowdfunding platforms and WhatsApp contributes new understandings of evolving forms of social cost and emotional labour taken on by local NGO staff. More than two-thirds of the organisations I researched also find themselves
marginalized in the traditional aid arena due to programmatic scale, demonstrating that even the arrival of new development actors can reinforce existing top-down power dynamics.

While this section has focused on the nuances of social capital in crowdfunding, equally important are the digital divides that inhibit the development of digital social capital and prevent crowdfunding platforms from becoming egalitarian fundraising spaces. Though LetzChange offers detailed guides on how to crowdfund effectively, digital skill or resource-based inequalities continue to be pervasive among local Indian NGOs. Figures 2 and 3, screenshots taken from two NGOs in the ‘animal welfare’ category on LetzChange, exemplify several key elements of digital divides and their consequences. Both NGOs followed digital fundraising advice from LetzChange by providing project photos, however, there is considerable variation in the quality of images used, leading to a deficit of digital social capital for the NGO in Figure 3.

The NGO in Figure 2 has collated good quality photos into an emotionally impactful fundraising banner. The succinct title coupled with professional standard images draw an affective response, demonstrating the ‘theatricality of humanitarianism’ (Chouliaraki 2012) by creating a poignant, visceral narrative about the plight of stray puppies through little more than high-definition photographs. By contrast, the second organisation employed a poor quality photograph of sea turtles in coastal Orissa—an image likely taken on a mobile phone and not edited for webpage use. The definition is so low-definition that viewers may have difficulty determining that the shapes are sea turtles without referencing the project title. Unfortunately for this NGO, if their staff or fundraising volunteers wish to share the LetzChange link on social media, emails, or WhatsApp, the photo below is used as the thumbnail by default. These low-quality images deplete the NGO’s ability to draw affective or sentimental responses from their target audiences, thereby hurting the organisation’s potential to generate digital social capital through ‘likes’, follows, and shares during crowdfunding campaigns.

Figure 2: LetzChange public project page on 18 June, 2019 (Banerjee 2020). Used with permission.
The poor digital currencies employed by the NGO in Figure 3 likely impeded the organisation’s ability to create meaningful ties with their prospective donors. McKay and Perez conceptualise ‘images as brokers’ in social media-based fundraising, writing, “For those who ‘liked’ or ‘shared’… Facebook posts, the images accumulated digital social capital, enhancing their profile and on-line reputation as humanitarian and knowledgeable” (2019, 13). Since high quality imagery on social media leads to increased likelihood of digital engagement from supporters, an NGO with substandard imagery can easily damage their digital social capital in the long run. This digital divide between organisations with better digital media and online engagement versus those without creates a noted difference in the NGO’s capacity to affect (Anderson 2014), with this reduced technical ability often resulting in financial inequalities through lower rates of donations.

Despite knowing that lower digital engagement often leads to lower donation frequency, staff at LetzChange hesitated to play a more steering role in how their NGO partners promote themselves online. As one manager noted, “Our role as the platform is to inform and advise our partners on how to build digital connections on our site. We’re not here to push them about what to post, just make informed suggestions.” The NGOs enjoyed the flexibility to present themselves as authentically as desired on a crowdfunding platform and share these pages with their Indian donor base. However, in reality organisations that perform well and receive substantial engagement on a crowdfunding platform are those that can invest time and human resources into cultivating a strong digital presence through not only their crowdfunding pages, but also their organisational websites and social media profiles. In this way, the platforms effectively recreate problematic hierarchies within the NGO sector which favor better-resourced, tech-savvy organisations even within a space that was intended to be democratic, with digitally-poor NGOs often achieving limited overall success. Considering that the majority of NGOs I researched operate on a budget of less than $1 million USD per year, most did not have the human or digital resources to focus on building the digital social capital necessary for effective crowdfunding. These challenges further bring to light how the small, under-resourced organisations often omitted from top-down aid programs continue to face exclusions even within innovative aid spaces that are promoted as being more inclusive.
The LetzChange Annual Fundraising Challenge

The LetzChange Annual Fundraising Challenge (henceforth just ‘Challenge’) is a six-week fundraising campaign designed by the platform’s staff to promote crowdfunding to their NGO partners. As one director informed me, “NGOs hear about us and join the platform— then they’ll post a project on our site but never promote it. We realized it’s because they don’t really know how to use the tools we’ve provided.” This realization from platforms that NGOs enlist themselves onto a crowdfunding site, but don’t actually understand how to execute a successful crowdfunding campaign was an important one. For this purpose, LetzChange has designed a ‘digital fundraising pack’— a tailored digital folder for each NGO partner filled with fundraising templates including sample emails and WhatsApp texts, and templates for Facebook and Twitter posts. Since improving an NGO’s digital presence will likely lead to increased donations, platforms aim to ensure their partner NGOs are well-equipped to engage with supporters digitally through their website, email campaigns, and social media.

As LetzChange staff noted repeatedly, the rapidly growing information and communications technologies (ICT) market in India and the saturated NGO market rarely overlap. This was a significant point of market entry for platform staff, who detailed a potential link between NGOs missing an opportunity to harness the growing digital resources at their disposal and how they can mobilize their donor networks through the platform. One LetzChange manager described this situation to me:

“The NGOs do need a lot of help. They join our platform to get money from new donors. But we have to explain to them that the initial contact has to do with them getting in touch with their existing donors and volunteers. And to understand this and mobilize them, they need to have good online communications and a good social media presence. It’s the easiest and fastest way to reach a large number of people. This is where our trainings and communications packs come in.”

While LetzChange offers the digital fundraising pack to all partners during the Challenge in order to support NGO staff in effectively leveraging their social capital during the campaign, the mechanisms by which the platform implements these resources are inherently philanthrocapitalist in nature. Platforms perform their role as ‘experts’ in digital fundraising, delivering a service to those less experienced. While training is useful for the NGOs, it is deployed from a hierarchical standpoint with platforms wielding power through their institutional knowledge, embodying a top-down view that an organisation’s lack of digital fundraising prowess is simply a problem to be solved. This alludes to the interesting concept of ‘the afterlives of development’ whereby even new models of development practice— like digital crowdfunding for donations— still inherently contain traces of those that came before. As Rudnyckyj and Schwittay write, “The afterlives of development, even though populated by a range of new actors, forms of expertise, and moral projects, remains animated by the spirit of previous development regimes” (2014, 8). This concept demonstrates how even in their desire to create interactive spaces fostered in egalitarianism, crowdfunding platforms do, at times, fall into the same trappings of traditional top-down development.
In order to demonstrate how crowdfunding platforms coach NGOs into becoming more effective generators of digital social capital, I analyse below several elements of the LetzChange digital fundraising pack, starting with their Step-by-Step Guide to campaigns. The practices outlined in the Guide often led to varying levels of resource and social capital depletion for many NGOs, from executing the campaigns to converting existing donors into fundraisers themselves. The LetzChange Guide assumes that many of NGO partners have not “fully unlocked their digital fundraising potential”. The Challenge awards matching funds and bonus prizes to high-performing NGOs, motivating organisations new to crowdfunding. Figure 4 shows how the Guide walks the NGO through creating a fundraising page on the LetzChange platform.

LetzChange directs NGOs to ensure their project descriptions are “crisp and persuasive” with the organisers explaining their passion for particular causes to prospective donors. This further emphasizes the affective aspects of successful crowdfunding, highlighting the importance of creating the most emotionally riveting stories to appeal to prospective online donors through intimate digital connections. For this purpose, imagery remains a key component when creating a fundraising page with NGOs encouraged to use captivating photos from project sites (Figure 5). The emphasis placed on photos highlights the idea of using images as an affective currency to accrue digital social capital in crowdfunding campaigns. Since these fundraising pages are designed with the intent to be shared on social media, email, and WhatsApp, the NGOs are encouraged to choose pictures that capture the viewer’s attention, prompting recipients to read the project description.
LetzChange demonstrates the ‘power of share’ (Figure 6), outlining three major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn) where NGO staff should promote their Challenge campaign. They emphasize the invaluable digital reach of social media, explaining how effective posts about a project will engage more potential supporters. This strategy is reinforced by on-the-ground realities reflected by research in the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan. McKay and Perez discuss the experiences of a participant who promoted citizen aid projects on social media, noting, “Cheryl explained: ‘even if someone can’t donate, their likes, their shares, and their comments— It helps. I mean, just the way the algorithms of Facebook are made, every like, every share kind of spreads it further and further’” (2019, 10). These social media algorithms, which rank viewership based on the amount of ‘attention’ paid to a particular post— thereby boosting the post’s digital social capital— are critical to helping an NGO gain engagement for their projects.
In addition to the Guide, LetzChange staff craft individualized social media templates for each NGO participating in the Challenge. Figure 7 displays a template Facebook cover photo for a specific NGO (Bhumi) that features the key benefits of donating to that organisation. A sample caption support the photo:

A campaign for happiness! Help us win exciting rewards by creating a campaign for us on LetzChange, during the LetzChange Fundraising Challenge '18. Click here to support: https://letzchange.org/start-a-campaign/bhumi.
Further adding to the ease of promotion, LetzChange has also created an eye-catching image (Figure 8) for any WhatsApp texts related to the Challenge. Like the Facebook template above, this photo also includes a sample text which reads:

“Don’t we always consult our friends before taking an important decision? It is this power of communicating through peers that can help us connect to more supporters.

As we gear up to participate in the LetzChange Fundraising Challenge ’18, campaign for us and invite your friends to join our cause. Any contribution can take us closer to winning exciting rewards and escalating our network significantly. What’s more, every donation is liable for a tax exemption. Visit the link to start your campaign: https://letzchange.org/start-a-campaign/bhumi.”

Both the Facebook and WhatsApp templates encourage NGO staff to not only solicit donations from their networks, but go one step further by encouraging their contacts to create their own fundraising pages for the project on LetzChange. This model brings to mind Julia Elyachar’s (2002) ideas of citizens in the Global South turning networks and long-term relationships into an economic resource. In this case those relationships become a digital economic resource with LetzChange pushing NGOs to foster a community around the Challenge, using affective language around friendship and support to leverage different levels of social capital through crowdfunding. Choosing who to ask for a donation versus starting a fundraiser can be an arduous and emotionally draining task for NGO staff, with one manager saying, “It’s tough to decide who to approach— Older people have more money to give and are often less tech-savvy so we usually ask them for a donation. Younger people, millennials and all, we ask them first to start a fundraiser since they will likely be able to
manage the technicalities.” These concerns and emotional investments from NGO staff were at times minimalized by LetzChange staff, with one manager intimating that organisations are often prone to apprehension until the strategy starts working for them.

This promoted practice of turning friends into fundraisers broadens the idea of commodifying friendship, moving beyond donation-seeking to actually extracting time, effort, and digital skills from NGO staff networks. These crowdfunding strategies, though marketed by platforms as being ultimately beneficial for NGOs, reinforce the issues of social capital depletion and digital inequalities highlighted previously. Often already stretched for programmatic and administrative capacity, NGO staff expend valuable time and resources implementing the practices outlined in the Guide to develop a successful online fundraising campaign. NGOs with limited staff, poor connectivity, and limited digital skills will already struggle at this early stage, losing out on an opportunity to win matching and reward funds available during the Challenge while also having redirected resources from other organisational activities. Others who do manage to create a strong digital campaign will inevitably deplete the social capital of their staff by soliciting donations from personal contacts or asking them to create a fundraiser of their own. While all 20 NGOs I researched noted that diversifying their fundraising away from dependence on top-down aid was essential, 15 organisations noted the exhausting effects of adapting to the skills, time, and emotional investments of crowdfunding campaigns.

Furthermore, the competition model of campaigns like the Challenge reinforces the power hierarchies and imbalances within the sector, with local NGOs once again finding themselves in the most vulnerable positions. In this instance platforms leverage their power as experts in digital fundraising, promoting practices that may inadvertently mimic the same top-down aid models that they aimed to avoid (Rudnyckyj and Schwittay 2014). NGO staff, in turn, exert social power on their interpersonal connections through these campaigns, using the time-bound urgency of the Challenge coupled with affective imagery and narratives to garner individual donations. While the end goal may be an altruistic one, I argue that crowdfunding campaigns, and the platforms more broadly, instrumentalize the interpersonal networks of their partner NGOs without sufficient regard for the potential long-term consequences of social capital depletion.

Conclusion
New mechanisms for development practice aim to avoid the trappings of top-down aid through innovation and application of successful digital strategies. As this article has demonstrated, crowdfunding platforms are certainly new in their technological services and capacity to harness the intimate capabilities of NGO fundraising from individual donors, though they do not bypass the pitfalls of more traditional models. Through an exploration of Indian platform LetzChange and perspectives from 20 of their NGO partners, I detailed how crowdfunding platforms—in their role as intimate technologies for development—aim to expand the digital fundraising potential of their NGO partners through the generation and expenditure of social capital through ‘feelingful ties’. By further analysing the hierarchies that are created during the digital crowdfunding process, this article demonstrated the challenges local NGOs face in combatting existing power relations within the NGO sector
even through models meant to foster egalitarianism, and the emotional and social depletions incurred in the process.

As part of the first academic study of Indian crowdfunding platforms, this article contributes significant insights to existing literature on affect and emotions in development, specifically by highlighting the commodification of social connections that occurs in digital fundraising. By utilising the crucial new concept of intimate technologies for development, these findings expand current knowledge of social capital and social costs through the analysis provided on Indian platform LetzChange, their crowdfunding practices and their unique campaigns. Additionally, I have contributed significantly to the limited research on digital social capital, detailing how crowdfunding platforms influence the interpersonal networks of their NGO partners in digital spaces like social media. Collectively, the findings I have presented here provide new understandings of power in the development studies including how it is used, generated, leveraged in the NGO sector.

The insights from this article add further nuance to studies of power in development, demonstrating how crowdfunding platforms recreate problematic affective power relations by promoting the investment of emotional labour from NGO staff. This practice often reinforces digital divides that disproportionately impact the most vulnerable organisations. As the crowdfunding industry rapidly evolves, more research is needed into the affective nature of digital fundraising, particularly the long-term effects of social capital expenditure on NGO staff. For now, I conclude that the current levels of digital divide and social capital depletion perpetrated by crowdfunding platforms create an unsustainable situation for most NGOs I researched. So long as the platforms are designed to reflect the competitive best practices of the private sector, the opportunity for more inclusive, bottom-up crowdfunding will be difficult to implement. Until and unless crowdfunding platforms create a space built around the protection of an NGO’s digital and social capital rather than its expenditure, they will continue to reproduce the same problematic hierarchies and power imbalances that they have purported to resolve.

Acknowledgements: This article was developed following a paper presented at the University of Birmingham during the Development Studies Association annual conference in June 2020, and is based on findings from the author’s doctoral research with crowdfunding platforms and NGOs in India. Warmest thanks to the special issue editor Dr. Tanya Jakimow for her limitless capacity for advice and constructive feedback. Special gratitude to Dr. Anke Schwittay and Professor Geert De Neve at the University of Sussex for their tireless support in bringing these ideas to light.

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References:


**Figure Captions:**
Figure 1: LetzChange.org public homepage on 11 December 2018 (Banerjee 2020). Used with permission.
Figure 2: LetzChange public project page on 18 June, 2019 (Banerjee 2020). Used with permission.
Figure 3: LetzChange public project page on 18 June, 2019 (Banerjee 2020). Used with permission.
Figure 4: LetzChange 'Step by Step Guide to Using the Fundraising Tool” (Banerjee 2020). Used with Permission.
Figure 5: LetzChange 'Step by Step Guide to Using the Fundraising Tool” (Banerjee 2020). Used with permission.
Figure 6: LetzChange ‘Step by Step Guide to Using the Fundraising Tool” (Banerjee 2020). Used with permission.
Figure 7: LetzChange Facebook cover photo template (Banerjee 2020). Used with permission.
Figure 8: LetzChange WhatsApp template (Banerjee 2020). Used with permission.