



## SERVICE AND PRESIDENTIAL INITIATIVES

Shekhar Mehta  
RI President-elect  
5 February 2021

Ever since I joined Rotary, Service Above Self has been the North Star of my life.

My first encounters with service were through the club projects. Eye camps, tree plantations, food distribution drives — these were my first Rotary “dates.” But as time passed, the projects became bigger and the impact of service became deeper. The more I served, the more service became a way of life for me.

My dear change-maker governors, you are soon going to assume a higher level of leadership. You will be leading districts with thousands of Rotarians. You will inspire them to *Serve to Change Lives*. Service, my friends, is to care for others and share with others. It is about thinking of others before you think of yourselves. Caring and sharing is the mission of life itself, and beyond.

Speaking of the beyond, I’m reminded of a parable. A man died. At the pearly gates, he met St. Peter. St. Peter said, “You were a good man, so you deserve to go to heaven, but you also did things that could take you to hell.” The man asked, “What is the difference between the two?”

St. Peter took him to a square room with a round table, at which sat eight emaciated, frail, sad-looking people. They had a big bowl of soup on the table. They were hungrily looking at the food but unable to eat, as each of them had very long wooden spoons with handles tied to their elbows. So they could pick up the food but not bend their elbows to bring to their mouths and so were dying of hunger.

St. Peter said, “This is hell.” He then took the man to the next room — same size, same table, same soup, same wooden spoons with handles tied to the elbow. But here the people were healthy, happy, and satiated, because here they cared and shared. They picked up the soup, and as they could not bend the elbows and eat themselves, they shared the soup with others by feeding them. Each of them fed the other, and all were happy.

The world, my friends, is divided. In one part, there is plenty, and in the other, there is huge deficit, whether it is of water and sanitation facilities, whether there is deficit of food, or lack of housing, or lack of medical care, the list is endless. We Rotarians act to

balance these resources as best we can. We move resources from one part of our community or the world to another, trying to fulfill needs. The outcomes and long-term effects of our work can be huge because of our sheer numbers, our geographic spread, our networking and leadership abilities.

We are people of action. Whenever we see problems, we take action to help and do good in the world. Over the years, Rotary has set up hundreds of hospitals, thousands of schools, has provided health programs for millions and brought clean drinking water to many. Wherever there was a need, Rotarians have come forward to meet the same, whether at the local level or international level. The polio program is an outstanding example of scaling up service initiatives.

So my dear district governors, for a 115-year-old organization with 1.2 million leaders across the world, and with the legacy of success in fighting polio, our programs have to be of scale. Service is our core value; it is our DNA. In this very special year of your life, I therefore urge you to dream big. Start small, serve locally, but think of how the work you do can be translated at a large scale with deep impact. Find a need and plan a solution. But never stop thinking about the big picture. When our clubs join hands together, the result is impactful projects that leave a long-lasting impact on the community, city, or even the country. I tell you all of this by personal experience, that this is absolutely possible. When the Indian government stopped allowing import of relief materials, including ShelterBox, this scarcity created an immediate need. My fellow Rotarians and I were prompted to start a local version of ShelterBox. We named it Shelter Kit and put 52 items of daily need in a large trunk. These kits were a major support to disaster survivors. My friends, over the last 15 years, in every major disaster in India, Indian Rotarians have volunteered to bring Shelter Kits to areas struck by disasters. It has become a successful national program for Rotarians and for people.

Similar was the case with heart surgeries. Since the year 2005, for years, each day I entered into my office, my first job was to meet a child and its parents who had come to my office seeking Rotary's help to receive heart surgeries for the child. What started as a club program soon became a district program, and then the program spread across India. To date, more than 20,000 life-changing heart surgeries for children have been done by Rotarians in India.

The Rotary India Literacy Mission is another example of a program that scaled to national levels. We developed a holistic program called T-E-A-C-H. The program has been appreciated by all, and also by the prime minister of India.

Many of you do service at both the community and international levels. For those of you who mostly serve close to home, consider the times when you may not find the need for service in your community or even your country. DGEs, then go beyond boundaries and serve in countries where there is a need.

This International Assembly itself will provide you many opportunities to find project partners. Interact with fellow DGEs and do visit the pavilion, Connect for Service.

Use the virtual world not only to plan projects but even to oversee projects. When you sink bore wells in an Ethiopian village, connect your own club over a Zoom call to the Ethiopian club and see how the project has helped the community. As the water gushes out of these bore wells onto the parched lands, your club members will be excited to see it virtually. They will want to *do more*. Each of them will see how they can serve to change lives even in another country. In India we call it “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,” meaning “the world is a family.” Serve it well.

As we go about Doing Good in the World: empowering girls. Too many girls face discrimination, disadvantage, the lack of opportunities. Empowering girls will mean securing their education, securing their health, their economic development, equipping them with skills for greater opportunities. It will mean curbing child marriage and teenage pregnancies. It will mean preventing trafficking and abuse and gender-based violence against women.

Adolescent girls have the right to a safe, educated, and healthy life. We know that when girls are supported and encouraged starting at the youngest ages, they have the potential to change the world — both as empowered girls of today and as tomorrow’s workers, mothers, entrepreneurs, and leaders. An investment in them upholds their rights today and promises a more equitable and prosperous future. One in which half of humanity is an equal partner in solving the problems of climate change, political conflict, economic growth, disease prevention, and global sustainability. There is so much that can be done to serve to change the lives of girls.

Do also remember that, starting 1 July, you can apply for grants to protect the environment.

Of course our war against COVID will carry on with full vigor. We played a meaningful role in helping people with innumerable masks, ventilators, sanitizers, PPE kits, etc. We even created hospitals for COVID patients. The Rotary Foundation gave grants worth \$30 million. Clubs added to this and did projects of millions of dollars more. Being a premier service organization, the world looks up to us to act at such times of crisis. And we have played our role well. Now we will play our part in supporting the vaccination process.

Dear change-maker governors, you will be busy Doing Good in the World, but be sure to share these stories of your wonderful work. Inspire every Rotarian in your district to share their stories of serving and changing lives. Whether it is health camps, building toilets, or setting up hospitals and schools, these are heart-touching stories that inspire others to emulate, participate, and contribute. I strongly feel that every Rotarian is a brand ambassador of Rotary. The good word of Rotary, the good word of our work, will best travel around the world when each Rotarian tells their story on social media. Telling our story is as important as doing the work itself is.

We will leverage all means of storytelling and will showcase our work with two presidential initiatives.

One way we will do this is through seven presidential conferences across the globe, focusing on the seven areas of focus. These two-day conferences will celebrate our accomplishments and recommit our dedication to service. They will feature speakers to inspire us to develop more impactful projects and allow us to exchange ideas and build partnerships to empower communities.

The other will be the Rotary Days of Service. These will be events organized by two or more Rotary or Rotaract clubs to provide meaningful, hands-on volunteer opportunities for our members, their families, and friends and showcase our work to the outside world. These will be excellent opportunities to engage current and prospective members, showcase our work, and tell our story. Do ensure that every club in your district participates in the Rotary Days of Service and creates a major buzz on social and traditional media. Once again, empowering girls will be the overarching theme.

Change-maker governors, during this special year of yours, remember what Gandhi said: “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” And what Martin Luther King Jr. asked, “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’ ”

Dear governors, let our answer be “We will *Serve to Change Lives* because service to humanity is good for both body and soul.”