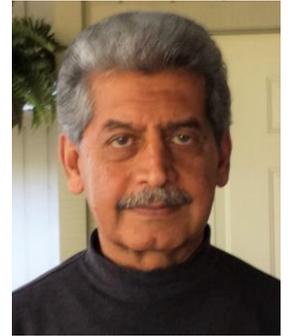




Narendra P. Sharma, PhD  
Founder & Chair, NOC

My Story ...

I was born a third generation Indian in the Fiji Islands. I was educated in Fiji, New Zealand, and the United States. I joined the World Bank in 1973 as an economist and served for more than 32 years, working in developing countries throughout the world. Over the past 10 years, since retirement, my mission has been to help the poor. My passion comes from my core values: love, truth, and compassion, which reflect the influence of my parents, my education, and more than three decades of worldwide development experience. Many individuals throughout the world who have devoted their lives to fighting poverty and injustice have inspired me.



In the early years of my life, my parents shaped my thinking and outlook. My parents were religious and compassionate. My dad helped the poor and my mom cared for disabled children. They both valued education and instilled in me the importance of higher education and lifelong learning. In my early years in the Fiji Islands, I attended a Catholic school. Reading the “Sermon on the Mount” made a lasting impression on me and still impacts my thinking and actions. Later, reading *Bhagavad Gita* at the age of 29 was another important watershed in my life.

After completing my education, my career at the World Bank was eye-opening. I saw the impact of development; I saw affluence as well as poverty and suffering; and I saw the difference that education makes in people’s lives. I met many interesting individuals, including Mother Theresa. She made an indelible impression on me and her focus on love, compassion, and caring for others continues to shape my thinking. I met others too who were doing outstanding work in a quiet and humble way without any publicity. From all of these people I learned that one must have a clear vision, a sense of mission, and core values. More importantly, one cannot lose sight of the end game, i.e., making a difference in the lives of the people you serve.

Toward the end of my career at the World Bank, I realized that we needed more innovative solutions on a larger scale to tackle poverty. Our approaches were too traditional, focusing on “one size fits all” with expectations of quick results. These projects/programs relied too much on capital and less on soft investments that build relationships and trust, as well as listening to people and involving them in defining priorities, developing solutions that are sustainable and replicable, and empowering people and creating opportunities. I realized that development interventions often result in unintended impacts of increased bureaucracy and dependence without eradicating poverty. I realized that we needed to think outside the box to develop new solutions.

After more than three decades at the World Bank, I retired and moved to Hilton Head Island (HHI), South Carolina. I soon recognized that I still had much to offer in helping the poor. I visited a low-income neighborhood, the Oaks Apartments in the middle of HHI, and came to the realization that I did not have to go overseas to fight poverty. Despite widely held perceptions of Hilton Head Island as a community of wealthy retirees living in gated communities, I found poverty right in my own backyard. This experience was a game changer in my life.

People – mostly Hispanics and African Americans – were living in this crime-ridden neighborhood with no sense of community or connectedness with the rest of HHI. Unemployment was high; families struggled to survive on incomes below the poverty threshold; children were not meeting school standards in math, reading, and language arts; many were not staying in school or graduating on time. I found that families had no health insurance or access to health care; obesity and poor nutrition were rampant. My experience in the Oaks neighborhood ignited my passion to help these people. My mantra became “teach them how to fish,” make them independent and self-reliant, and give them dignity.

This led me to create the Neighborhood Outreach Connection (NOC) in 2008, as a 501 (c) (3) community development organization, incorporating lessons and good practices that I had learned over more than three decades of development experience worldwide. NOC’s mission is to fight poverty by improving the quality of life of people living in poverty, thus empowering them to achieve the “American Dream.” Over the past 10 years, NOC has played an important role in bringing resources, services, and technology into poor neighborhoods (accounting for some 10,000 people) through 6 Learning Centers (LCs) in Beaufort County: 2 in HHI, 2 in Bluffton, and 2 in downtown Beaufort. NOC’s presence in underserved neighborhoods, combined with its core programs (education, health services, and workforce development), allows NOC to build strong relationships with people who live there and involves them in its outreach programs. Education is NOC’s flagship program with LCs located within underserved neighborhoods, supported by NOC’s field staff, teachers from local public schools, technology, and volunteers. NOC works closely with other local service providers to bring valuable services, resources, and technology to people within these neighborhoods.

Once invited to implement its programs in a poor neighborhood, NOC works with partners and residents to transform the community. Through its LCs located in these neighborhoods, NOC provides easy access and opportunities to children and families to participate in its outreach programs. NOC’s bottom-up approach empowers individuals, families, and communities by implementing on-site, sustainable neighborhood projects. NOC plays an important role as a “connector,” fostering interactions among people within the community and bringing other service providers into low-income neighborhoods to help people. Oaks Apartment Complex on HHI, where NOC has operated for 10 years, is a good example of how NOC transforms and builds a community. NOC’s flagship education program focuses on after-school and summer learning for children in K through Grade 8.

### **NOC is making a difference.**

- (a) NOC serves over 500 students at 6 Learning Centers in Beaufort County, SC, where transportation is a problem and learning opportunities are limited.
- (b) Over 95% of NOC students show progress and growth in reading and math based on the local schools’ standardized test scores.
- (c) Currently, NOC achieves these results at a cost of less than \$1,200 per child per year.
- (d) NOC, working with its health service partners, has screened more than 350 people in the neighborhoods it serves since 2016.
- (e) Oaks Apartments, in HHI, where NOC has operated for 10 years, is a showcase of community development resulting from collaborative efforts.

Our work is drawing attention from people in other areas. NOC has trademarked its model and logo, and has prepared a comprehensive manual to replicate the NOC model beyond the local community. *My vision is to see many free-standing NOCs running and supported independently throughout the country with the goal of creating an even playing field in low income neighborhoods so people, especially children, can achieve the “American Dream” and enjoy a better quality of life.*