
New Millennium Voluntary Agencies

Examining the role of voluntary agencies, **Vijay Mahajan** traces the shift from early 'Volunteerism' to the 'Professionalism' of the nineties. He sees NGOs, not as over-institutionalised entities, but rather as a process of moving from critique to working for improvement. **He argues that we need to strengthen the institutions of Civil Society, as they play a vital mediating role today.**

Neera Chandhoke views this role with a tinge of cynicism - and feels that the idea of civil society has been hijacked by NGOs, - as if they constitute the entire civil society.

Chandhoke cautions that the emergence of the Global Civil Society Organisations (GCSOs), dovetails with the consolidation of neo-liberal consensus. Civil society is thus cast as a gradualist alternative to revolutionary, radical change. Yet, Chandhoke sees that GCSOs do provide elements of an alternative internationalist vision.

Far from being cynical, **Sunita Narain** concludes from a very recent experience, that we need to engage the State, that in this engagement we can influence the State, and make the practice of democracy real.

These apparent contradictions call for an integrating, overarching vision, for autonomous processes to create an agenda that links emancipatory politics, social movements, and people's economics.



The Pain of Others by *Vijay Mahajan*. *Humanscape*, Vol 10, Issue 11, Nov 2003. <http://www.humanscapeindia.net/humanscape/new/nov03/thepain.htm> [C.ELDOC6008049]



Civil Society Hijacked by *Neera Chandhoke*. *The Hindu*, Jan 16, 2002. <http://www.hinduonline.com> [C.ELDOC6003856]

Democracy Must be Worked at by email from *Sunita Narain*, Centre for Science & Environment, February 26, 2004. [C.ELDOC6008277]

The Pain of Others

Vijay Mahajan

Two of the fountainheads of voluntarism – charity (parmaarth) and service (seva) are part of the Indian tradition.

In the nineteenth century, the origins of voluntary action can be traced to enlightened Christian missionaries, who went beyond proselytisation and decided to attend to the worldly problems of the people they were working with in rural and tribal areas.

Partly in response to such efforts, Indian organisations such as the Ramakrishna Mission were formed and began voluntary work. **However, Mahatma Gandhi can be called the father of the modern voluntary movement in India. Gandhiji's first "satyagraha" in support of the indigo labourers in Champaran, while primarily a political struggle, also had elements of voluntary action or "constructive work"** (as Gandhiji called voluntary action), such as training villagers in hygiene, educating children, building roads and digging wells.



After this, Gandhiji made constructive work an integral part of his political strategy, where periods of intense struggle for Independence were interspersed with long periods of voluntary action for the alleviation of suffering and social and economic upliftment of the poor.

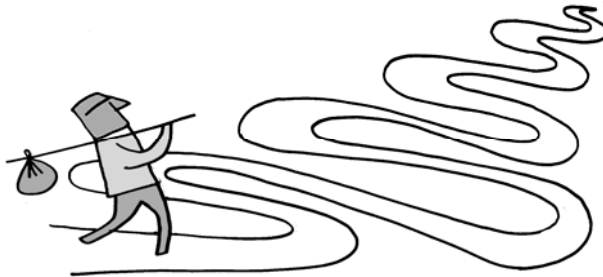
Gandhiji established these activities around interested individuals, who eventually established organisations such as the Harijan Sevak Sangh, the Hindustani Talimi Sangh and the All India Spinners' Association, from where they carried out these various activities. These organisations constituted the beginning of indigenous voluntary action in India.

Voluntary sector and the State: a difficult relationship

In some ways, the difficulties in the relationship between the State and the voluntary sector began soon after independence, with some of Gandhiji's followers opting for politics and power and others for voluntary constructive work.

In 1966, the country had a major drought, and as a result near famine conditions prevailed in many parts, particularly in Bihar. This resulted in an upsurge of voluntary relief efforts, often spearheaded by Sarvodaya workers who had established ashrams all over Bihar. Jaya Prakash (JP) Narayan was the leader of this movement, working from the Sakhodara Ashram in Nawada district. After the relief efforts, many of the workers, including JP, decided to take up longer term efforts to reduce dependence on rains, increase agricultural production and generally work for rural development. JP also helped establish the Association for Voluntary Action in Rural Development (AVARD), as an all India forum for such efforts.

At the same time, many idealistic youth rejected the route of voluntary action in favour of more militant activism. The inspiration for this was the Naxalite movement, which began with an armed uprising of peasants in the north Bengal village of Naxalbari in 1967, and became entrenched in parts of the Bengal and Bihar countryside. It attracted many individuals with good education, who were disenchanted with the system and were inspired by the work and ideas of Mao Zedong, Che Guevara and Indian proponents of the armed struggle – Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal.



From volunteerism to professional voluntarism

Since the late seventies, the voluntary sector began to be professionalised with the formation of specialised agencies like the Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA), to rehabilitate Tibetan refugees. Many NGOs such as ASSEFA, AWARE, Seva Mandir and Gram Vikas, began to expand their work to multiple districts and states. New NGOs came to be established by people with

higher educational and professional backgrounds, who were concerned about the problems of the mainstream institutions and wished to explore alternatives in social action. Many support NGOs with technical specialisation came up, such as Action for Food Production (AFPRO) for water resources and animal husbandry, Bhartiya Agro Industries Foundation (BAIF) for cattle/rural development, Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI) for primary health, Society for Promotion of Wasteland Development (SPWD) for afforestation, PRADAN for providing technical and management assistance to voluntary agencies, Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) for training and research.

The Institute of Rural Management came up at Anand and along with some schools of social work established earlier, such as the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay and the Xavier Institute of Social Service, Ranchi, it provided a steady supply of young professionals to the voluntary sector. A large crop of young professionals joined the sector since the mid-eighties. The voluntary sector's response to this was polarised. On the one hand were those who equated "**voluntarism**" with "**volunteerism**" and found professionalisation unpalatable. Such people considered self-abnegation and "**sacrifice**" as the hallmarks of voluntary action. The young professionals joining the sector since the mid-eighties found it difficult to be accepted in many non-government organisations. Thus some gravitated to funding agencies, or became development consultants, trainers or "**policy advocates**", while many others established and continue to work at the grassroots for many years.



The nineties

In the early nineties, the flow of foreign funds went up significantly in the same period as northern governments began to channel more of their aid through their respective country NGOs.

This was partly a result of the Reagan-Thatcher ideology in the US and the UK, under which the welfare state was dismantled and the "**private sector**" was encouraged to take over many of the roles that the state was playing. In the social and development sectors, this meant that "**private voluntary organisations**", as they are called in the US, were to take the lead.

The same ideas were imported in a typically watered down version to India.

Voluntary action in the next decade, and beyond

There are at least five roles for the voluntary sector in India. They are not mutually exclusive, in the sense that in the sector one can simultaneously find some agencies playing one or more of these roles.



The first is as a “public service contractor”.

This term implies that the non-government organisation is a service provider in return for a fee, and can do the job better and more efficiently than government agencies or work in situations where private, for-profit service providers will not enter.

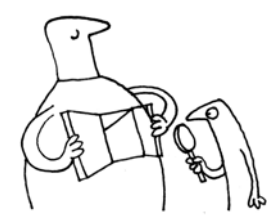
The second role for the voluntary sector is as a collaborator of the government and the private corporate sector in activities where community participation is necessary (e.g. watershed management, forest protection, and resettlement of project affected persons). Here the collaboration includes playing a role in design of the programme and in policy reform if required.

The third role for the voluntary sector is as social innovators, experimenting with new technologies (e.g. treadle pumps), new services (e.g. savings and credit through self-help groups), and new methodologies of social organisation (e.g. joint forest management). In this role, they need to be given policy support and flexible funding by the government, and the activities need to be carefully studied by senior officials for the purpose of possible replication across the system.

The fourth role is as social critics and policy advocates for specific issues (e.g. child labour, environmental protection). Non-government organisations adopting a stance of critics without having an appreciation of systemic constraints or positive alternatives leads to unnecessary confrontation and impasse. On the other hand, voluntary agencies can become more effective if they are able to span grassroots work with policy analysis, and build bridges with sympathetic people within the system who are as eager to bring about changes.

The fifth role is that of building civil society institutions.

The primary challenge in the forthcoming period is to build the strength of **civil society institutions** (CSIs). People's organisations at all levels need to be strengthened and enabled so that they can together act as strong civil society institutions. NGOs themselves need to become more democratically governed, participatory and accountable. They also need to be more thorough and professional in their chosen fields of work, be it grassroots action or policy advocacy. Only then can the voluntary sector develop the internal strength to become a progenitor of civil society institutions and also become an



integral part of it.

Building effective civil society institutions

We hypothesise that the following resources are crucial for the survival and growth of civil society institutions.



Inspiration

The primary resource for voluntary action for collective good is inspiration. In the earlier days, it used to emanate from religion. All the religions extol the value of serving others. Interestingly, in the nineteenth century, it was the western liberal tradition, which fostered voluntary action to a great deal.

The only passion seems to be with people in terrorist movements and religious fundamentalists. Thus, the task before civil society institutions is to create systematic opportunities for young people to establish a wider worldview.

Leadership

Voluntary action is triggered by individuals, usually by those who feel strongly about some social condition. Usually, such people are from among the upper echelons of society or have had education and/or

professional opportunities of a high order. There is nothing contradictory about the elite origins of the leaders of social change. Indeed the elite is the only class that can afford the opportunities required to be adequately equipped for social action in today's complex world. This is of course a double-edged sword, for the elite have the main vested interest in favour of status quo. Also, giving up on mainstream opportunities is not easy for someone from the elite. Nevertheless, this is where leaders are drawn from.



Having said this, we are not denying that leaders of voluntary action can come from elsewhere – from religious orders, social movements and political parties.

Thus, civil society institutions need to systematically look for socially motivated individuals in the government and in the corporate sector to induct into civil society institutions. One way to initiate them is to invite them to serve on the Boards of civil society institutions. Eventually, some will step over on a full-time basis. This would also improve governance of the institutions and help build bridges with the other two sectors.

Legitimacy

In the public field nothing of significance can be done unless it is seen to be legitimate by a vast majority of the people.

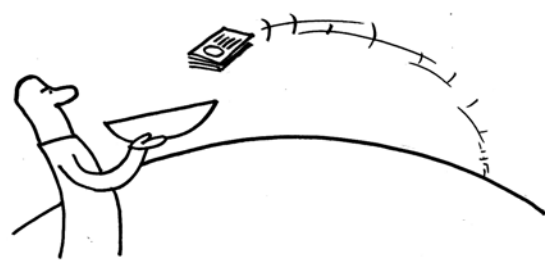
In addition to ideological background, there is the issue of personal conduct. Legitimacy can be earned by ensuring that the personal conduct is consistent with the cause for which a person is working.

Many young people who were drawn into development work in the 1970s went through a phase of ***“identifying with the poor”*** in various ways – living in remote villages, taking very little salary, etc. However,

as the complexity of the problems became better understood, it became obvious that effectiveness is more desirable than self-abnegation. Now, it is accepted that one could work for the rural poor and draw a decent professional salary, and even live in a city.

Funding

Closely linked to legitimacy is the question of where the funding comes from. For some, accepting funds from government is not acceptable, as it is seen to reduce autonomy. For others, accepting foreign funds is a sure sign of **“working at the behest of foreign masters”**.



Within this, finer distinctions are made – some find American money to be a problem but not Scandinavian money, etc. Yet another cleavage is in accepting funds from the corporate sector. A grant from say, the Tata Trust, to an activist organisation is seen as an attempt to **“buy them”**.

Finally, a few non-government organisations which have made serious attempts to raise funds through cards, events and appeals are seen as primarily in the business of fund-raising and treating their founding mission as secondary.

The summary is that no source of funds is seen as completely legitimate by everyone, just as no ideological predilection or professional background of the leader is.

Linkages

By this term, we mean the complex web of relationships that any civil society institution has to establish to function effectively. Institution building theorists Rolf Lynton and Uday Pareek talk of five types of linkages: **enabling, functional, collegial, normative** and **diffuse**.

Diffuse linkages are a spill-over category, by which an organisation interacts with the rest of the world – such as by being a neighbour, a corporate citizen, a member of various associations.

Epilogue

The central thesis of this essay has been that civil society institutions (CSIs) have to play a mediating role between the excesses of the State and market institutions, and to do this well, they have to be strengthened in numbers and become more effective.

In suggesting this, the author is painfully aware of the ills of over-institutionalisation in any sector, including the CSIs. There is no guarantee that CSIs, if they become dominant, will not become another oppressive form, reducing rather than increasing human welfare. Indeed, there are examples of this in history.

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forms of state control. Many Gandhian voluntary institutions have completely lost their original sense of purpose and continue to exist and draw on State resources due to historical reasons.

In this battle, the primary source of hope is nascent formations – splinter groups, social reformists, religious sects, environmental protesters, entrepreneurial spin-offs, corporate start-ups, even cyber-radicals.

These nascent formations represent the evolutionary process in all three types of institutions – they embody the best practices of the established institutions but also have a critique of the establishment. More importantly, the nascent formations that are likely to survive and make an impact, are the ones who go beyond critique to improvement.

If the improvement is found useful by society, the nascent formation derives more support, till it eventually becomes part of the established institutional structure. Then the process of atrophy and decline starts.



And the cycle begins afresh!

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Civil Society Hijacked

Neera Chandhoke

The claims that have been made by global civil society actors reflect perfectly the values of the most powerful states in the western world.

If WE, imitate fashion designers and carry out even a random survey of which political concept is 'in' and which is 'out' today, the concept of civil society would rank rather high on our 'in' list. For, since the late 1980s, the idea of civil society has exploded onto the political scene, to command both political vocabularies and activism as well as shape political visions.



The Failure of the Revolutionary State

The astonishing success of civil society makes sense only when we remember two things. For one, the state in third world countries has simply failed to deliver basic conditions for human well-being. At one point in human history, it had been hoped that the developmentalist state would be able to carry out a '**revolution from above**', and thus transform people's lives and destinies. However, it was precisely this state that lapsed into the unabashed pursuit of personalised power.

Even as the nationalist dream petered out and democracy was compromised, the people, as the subaltern group of historians stated baldly, failed to come into their own. And that '**revolutions from below**' had bungled the revolutionary project itself, became all too painfully obvious. Recollect that we were to see agitating and agitated crowds in Central/Eastern Europe bringing down some awesome and powerful 'socialist' states like proverbial nine pins.

For, leaderships that had once led dramatic social revolutions had pulverised the same dreams of freedom that had inaugurated revolutions in the first place. It was at this historical moment of complete disillusionment with the two political options that had been available to the people that the civil society argument offered an attractive third option.

Enter Civil Society

Actually, in front of the kind of fervent imaginations and political passions that revolutionary dreams evoke, the imagery of civil society is tame and practically bland. It promises no dramatic or radical change in the lives of people.

What it does do is proclaim that ordinary men and women have the political competence to make their own histories in small but sure ways. By engaging in an activity called politics in a free civil society, they realise their selfhood and recover agency, even as they acquire the political confidence to bring the non-performing and non-responsive state to order and hold it accountable.

The argument also excites the hope that a vibrant civil society, inhabited by concerned and ethically motivated citizens, may be able to restore the same political ardour that had roused masses to action during the anti-colonial struggles.

But history has its own way of playing tricks with well-meaning projects and inspiring concepts. ***For the idea of civil society was to be quickly hijacked by a relatively new set of actors that emerged on the national scene. These were non-governmental organisations, which were to intervene increasingly in areas crucial to collective life. In fact, these actors were to proceed upon their tasks on the blithe assumption that civil society means the non-governmental sector.*** Even as we saw NGOs subcontract for the state in areas that have traditionally fallen within the provenance of state responsibility such as the social sector, civil society, proclaimed many scholars and activists, represented a third sector of collective life. The other two are

the state and the market.

Global Civil Society Organisations

Something of the same kind happened on the international arena - the emergence of global civil society organisations (GCSOs). The power of these organisations was first dramatically visible at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, when about 1,500 NGOs came to play a central role in the deliberations. By putting forth radically different alternatives, by highlighting issues of global concern, and by stirring up the proceedings in general, GCSOs practically hijacked the summit.

At the 1994 Cairo World Population Conference, increasing numbers of GCSOs took on the responsibility of setting the agenda for the discussions. And by 1995, this sector almost overwhelmed the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Almost 35,000 NGOs, consisting largely of advocacy groups and social activists, completely dominated the meet.

From then on, we have seen that GCSOs either participate directly in international conferences or hold parallel conferences, which incidentally attract more media attention than the official meets.

Some scholars were to conceptualise these events as the advent of a global civil society. ***The power of the nation state – which is now considered to be one of history's serious mistakes – has finally ended, they were to state with some relish. We now, they went on to add, see the advent of a post foreign policy world.***

Others suggested that GCSOs mediate and limit not only state sovereignty, but also question the ordering of the international economy, as well as the power of giant corporations that straddle the world as if national boundaries are just not there. Therefore, ***GCSOs it is agreed, provide an alternative to both the state-centric global polity as well as the exploitative economy.***

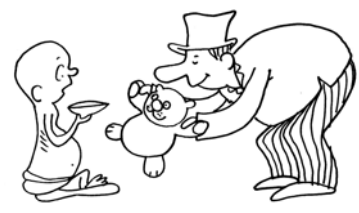
It is true that GCSOs have expanded the agenda of international

concerns in major ways. And they have been able to do so because they possess two properties not generally available to states. One, civil society actors networking across the globe are able to collect a host of information on specialised issues via the information revolution.

What is more important is that these actors are seen to possess moral authority, simply because they have charted out an international instead of national vision on issues that range from human rights records, to nuclearisation, to ecological concerns, to people-friendly development.

Playing into the hands of the neo-liberal consensus?

The idea that GCSOs provide an alternative to the power driven state-centric global order, or to the exploitative global economy, is, however, riddled with ambiguities. Recollect for instance that the growing size, sophistication, and influence of the GCSO has been facilitated and indeed actively encouraged by one main factor - the neo-liberal consensus that emerges from the power centres in the West.



Among other things what the consensus dictates is ***(a) that the state in particularly 'third world' countries should withdraw from the social sector, (b) that the market should be freed from all constraints, and (c) that 'communities' in civil society should organise their own social and economic reproduction.***

Note that the very people who lack access to primary goods are now told they are responsible for their social reproduction and well being. Also note that the state has been liberated from its traditional responsibilities of providing the conditions of human flourishing.

What is important is that all this provided an unprecedented opportunity for NGOs to organise the social reproduction of communities faced with

an indifferent state. The entry of GCSOs is further facilitated by the fact that globalisation has drastically eroded people's capacity to order their own affairs. These developments are in turn legitimised by the globalisation of liberal democratic ideology, which, it is suggested, is the only ideology available to societies in the aftermath of the collapse of communism.

The emergence of GCSOs dovetails neatly with the consolidation of the neo-liberal consensus, globalisation, and the diffusion of democratic globalism via the aggressive foreign policy of Western states and political conditionalities attached to economic aid.

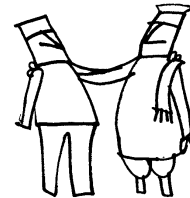
Admittedly, GCSOs have instituted a normative discourse in international forums. The project, however, may not be quite as autonomous of power constellations as is generally believed. For, the claims that have been made by global civil society actors – the kind of human rights that are on offer for instance – reflect perfectly the values of the most powerful states in the Western world. After all it is political and civil rights not social and economic rights that have been globalised today.

Therefore, *even as we recognise that global civil society actors articulate a new moral vision for global politics, there is nothing to suggest that this vision transcends the norms of powerful Western states.*

Arguably, the imaginings of global civil society actors seldom move beyond the space of liberal, even neo-liberal projects, and the agents themselves remain mired within the limits of liberal thought. In any case, the overlap justifiably gives us cause for thought▶

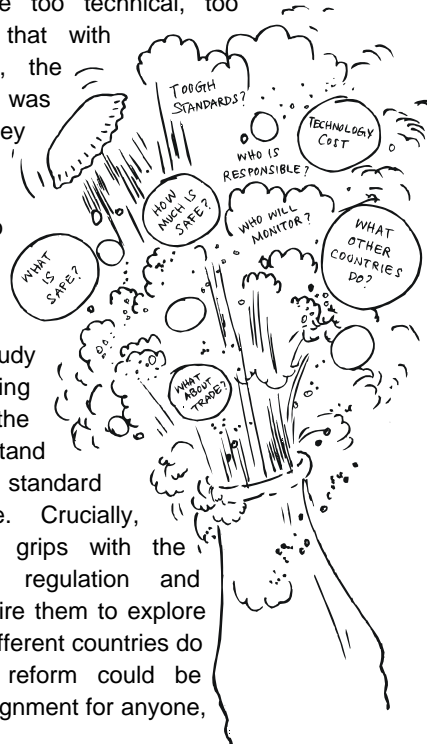
Democracy Must be Worked at

Sunita Narain



A Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) was set up to investigate the issue of pesticides in cold drinks. It was charged with determining if the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) study on pesticide residues in soft drinks was correct or not, and to suggest criteria for evolving standards for soft drinks, fruit juices and other beverages, where water was the main constituent. Everyone told us that we had reached a dead end. Parliamentarians aren't interested, we were told. The issues were too technical, too contentious. Cynics added that with elections round the corner, the committee's outcome was predisposed towards big money and powerful corporations.

The committee had to determine the veracity of our findings. But to do this, it had to understand both the science of the analytical study and the science of determining safety in food and drink. ... the JPC also had to understand regulations on food safety, standard setting and pesticide use. Crucially, members had to come to grips with the institutional framework for regulation and enforcement. This would require them to explore global best practices – what different countries do – so that a roadmap for reform could be suggested. It was a tough assignment for anyone,



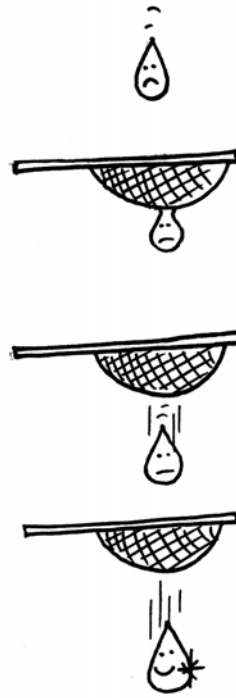
let alone busy parliamentarians in a time of election fever. Our first interaction with the committee was stereotypical. Corporate disinformation had reached them: we were pushing European Union (EU) norms, which would destroy Indian industry...it was a plot to weaken our trade... and destroy our competitive advantage. In addition, we were seeking publicity sans science. We were not credible.

But their reaction changed as we stated our positions. What stunned us was their willingness to be engaged in knowledge. There were hard issues at hand; they asked tough questions. But they also took their responsibility seriously. They were prepared to be informed, without arrogance or fixated minds, like that of “experts”.

For instance, we were asked: why did we want such stringent standards for pesticide residues in water? Industry had said that we were asking for the “surrogate zero”, an impossible standard. Would this not damage Indian industry and its competitiveness?

A fair question. Our reply was: we want tough standards for pesticide residues in water. Because the world over, regulators agree that pesticides serve no purpose in water. ... Furthermore, technology to clean residues exists; the cost isn't prohibitive. Most importantly, we argued, India cannot afford contamination, for the clean-up cost was too high. Therefore putting in place precautionary and preventive principles was vital to future water security.

Certainly we were not asking for the same stringent standards (EU norms) for all industries. ... But regulations for distinctly



different categories of products – with different ingredients, technologies and scale of operations – would have to differ. In other words, you could not club soft drinks with fruit juices, or malt beverages.

We asked JPC to consider the nutrition and poison trade-off in pesticide regulations. ... It became evident we were not asking for EU norms for all food. We had to do what the EU or the US does: set our own pesticide residue standards keeping in mind our diet and trade interests. The entire system of mandating and enforcing food safety standards had to be urgently overhauled. ... ***The parliamentarians listened.***

Their report sets out a firm and progressive reform agenda for food safety. ...This will be an important precedent to hold corporations accountable, in a world speedily globalising. ... Most importantly, the report says that a government cannot abdicate its role as the protector of the health of its people.

We have learnt. For democracy to succeed, it must be worked at.

NOTES
