

Thought and Action

Perspectives on Leadership and
Organizational Change in the Indian Voluntary Sector

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McGill-
McConnell Program:
Master of
Management
for National Voluntary Sector Leaders

McGill University, Montreal, Canada

December 2002 • Revised April 2005

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of issues of leadership, organizational design and civil society within the voluntary sector in India. In particular, it is a study of transitions impacting the voluntary sector and offers some analysis through the application of various models and approaches introduced through the McGill-McConnell Program. Several themes run through this paper: the tensions between emergence and structure, the capacity and opportunity for learning, and the balance between values and action. Part One examines ways in which deeply rooted values and traditional styles of leadership precipitate tensions around issues of governance and succession. Part Two looks at the paradox of structure and emergence in organizations and considers two case studies of Indian voluntary organizations that have balanced these forces. Finally, the paper explores some of the larger forces impacting civil society and suggests criteria for shaping a model to understand and integrate the diversity of the voluntary sector.

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening
Thought and action –
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.*

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Introduction

This paper was submitted as part of the requirements of the McGill-McConnell Program for National Voluntary Sector Leaders. It is also offered for consideration by Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) in their deliberations about potentially initiating a similar program in India.

In the years 2000–2002 the three classes of the McGill-McConnell Program travelled to India as part of an educational program, in which Canadian voluntary sector leaders met Indian voluntary sector leaders in a series of forums, site visits and informal exchanges. Stimulated by this experience, several leaders from the Indian voluntary sector organizations formed the idea of initiating a similar program, drawing upon the design elements of the McGill-McConnell curriculum to create a uniquely Indian program. There was a need for someone to help adapt the Canadian design to the Indian context. I accepted this role and returned to India in 2002 to spend some time understanding the dynamics of the voluntary sector and identifying issues important to India at that time. This experience also provided a cue for reflecting on and comparing some of my observations to Canadian issues.

The present paper explores several dimensions of the voluntary sector in India, including leadership, organizational design and Indian civil society. In particular, it sets out to explore the emerging transitions facing the voluntary sector and to offer some analysis through the application of various models and approaches introduced in the McGill-McConnell Program.

Several themes run through this paper: the tensions between emergence and structure, the capacity and opportunity for learning, and the balance between values and action. Part One looks at the historical context of leaders in India and the important connection between values and leadership. Part Two examines some of the paradoxes inherent in the continuum from institutionalized to emergent organizations, and the impacts of scale and project dependence. Part Three explores globalization and other macro forces and suggests a model for understanding and integrating the diversity of the voluntary sector.

All of these themes are significant because, while the challenges are great at this time, the forces of change in India may be even greater.

1

Leadership

This section examines the nature of leadership in the Indian NGO context – specifically, the circumstances that have shaped the development of leaders in the Indian voluntary sector. Leadership is a complex concept with diverse, and sometimes contradictory, meanings: F. E. Fielder talks of the need to project a vision; Howard Gardner argues it is the ability to communicate compellingly to others; Peter F. Drucker considers its significance to lie in the setting of personal examples. Lao Tsu, a more ancient authority, writes: “When actions are performed without unnecessary speech, the people say, ‘we did it ourselves.’ ” Trait theorists apply their analysis to leaders’ unique characteristics – intelligence, persistence, confidence, judgement, adaptability, humour, initiative – while behaviourists examine the approach of leaders, be it democratic, facilitative, commanding, demonstrative or a combination of these, depending on the situation (Dwivedi 2002, 17).

Alan Fowler argues that leaders of NGOs are especially required to provide inspirational guidance and align goals and values, because their followership is compelled by “a less tangible foundation of cultural, socio-political values, norms and associated aspirations” (Siddiqi 2002). This notion of inspiration is particularly strong in the Indian context, where NGO leaders function through relationships that are shaped and strengthened by a strong sense of social, spiritual and vocational values. In the values-rich culture of India, the charismatic leader seems central to volunteer action and organization.

Historical Background

Recent history – ideological as well as social and political – has dramatically shaped the story of leadership in India’s voluntary sector. At the time of Independence in 1947, it was widely accepted that the state must play a lead role in repairing the impact of

colonial rule. A desire for self-rule and also for self-reliance had been expressed in processes of conscientization and mobilization during the struggle for independence. This desire culminated in Gandhi's "constructive work," which bridged grassroots action and political change. For Gandhi, self-rule meant more than a new government; it meant the creation of a new order that offered (among many other things) protection to the poor, safety for women and an end to hunger.

Many who were involved with this work became part of the post-independence Congress Party, subsequently promoting the philosophy of a strong state-led development agenda. The result was a reduced space in which the voluntary sector might operate as many spheres of activity that had belonged to voluntary organizations were absorbed into state-run institutions. For example, the cottage industries that were central to Gandhi's mobilization strategy now fell under the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (PRIA 2001, 13–16)

Student volunteers from urban centres were attracted to work on government development projects. Ela Bhatt writes:

During the early years of Independence – thanks to our teachers and parents who threw us to the people of India saying, "Go to villages, stay there, learn from them" – we learnt that the right to vote is not enough for the poor. They wanted voice and visibility. They wanted to come out of the day-to-day struggles of survival and "enjoy" freedom. Like so many young people at that time, we were all inspired to make meaning of the recently gained freedom from the British rule. The early glimpse of the idea of Second Freedom was emerging. (Ibid., 13)

One such movement was that of Jaya Prakash Narayan, who led relief efforts following the drought and near-famine in Bihar in 1966. These efforts evolved into longer-term objectives of rural development, and the student volunteers started voluntary organizations as a result of this experience. As widespread discontentment with the state and its development policies grew, Narayan's movement evolved into a popular political force for "total revolution" and came into increasing conflict with the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. There was a sense that government had failed in its capacity to address the poverty and inequalities central to development and social justice. This disenchantment manifested itself in the emergence of various movements, which became strong and powerful voices for social change. Their impact was often substantial:

for example, the Navnirman movement in Gujarat, which was orchestrated by student activists, precipitated the fall of a corrupt state government in the early 1970s. In 1975, a “state of emergency” was declared, suspending citizen rights and freedoms, and leading many to total disillusionment. This disillusionment in the state carried through the 1980s and continued to fuel the creation of numerous voluntary organizations functioning in a wide variety of activities.

The era of the Emergency strongly shaped the growth of the voluntary sector. The emergence of NGOs of various sizes marks a coming of age for the sector.¹ Many organizations that remain today were formed by these revolutionary leaders of the 1970s and 1980s and are a critical piece in the history of India’s voluntary sector. Today, this era of leaders is entering a phase of significant transformation. In particular, there is a widespread issue of leadership succession emerging. There are multiple dimensions to this issue: an increasingly professionalized voluntary sector; a rapidly changing global and national context; changing governance structures and questions about national voluntary sector identity in India.

Leadership and Charisma

Many voluntary sector leaders of the previous generation in India could be characterized as “charismatic.” As Ashok Singh has noted, “Many NGOs have organized around a charismatic leader and the whole thing has been created around them. . . . We have a large number of NGOs that have been formed in this way. The entire energy and inspiration comes from the leader.”²

The dimensions of charismatic leadership are important to understanding the scope of, and potential for, change in an era of transition for the Indian voluntary sector. The charismatic leader is a passionate leader – the creator of a vision, compelled by a sense of responsibility to live and work for a cause in which he or she believes. The leader

¹ It is important to note the long and rich tradition of voluntary action in India in the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Health and education remain closely intertwined with religious life.

² In February 2002 I conducted a series of interviews asking Indian leaders and scholars to comment on the nature of leadership in the Indian voluntary sector. This quotation is from an interview with Ashok Singh, Executive Director of Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra.

engaged in the history of social or political struggle understands this struggle well and is able to articulate the situation and the aspirations of the people.³ The leader is also able to read the situation and guide people to action. Ela Bhatt (1996) argues:

Struggle is an essential part of development. Injustice has to be effectively fought. When a policeman beats and kicks a helpless vegetable vendor, he has to be opposed. When a contractor makes a garment stitcher labour for many hours and pays a pittance, struggle has to be launched against him. The government has to be pressured to include garment stitching in the schedule of the Minimum Wages Act. The ILO has to recognize the home-based workers as “workers,” and pass a Convention for their protection. In order to be effective, struggle has to be carried out on all levels.

Charismatic leaders have a capacity to inspire and motivate others around this vision. Integral to their charisma is the ability to build trust through a personal alignment to their stated values. The correlation between these profoundly self-organized (and ultimately organizational) values and the individual is best exemplified by Gandhi. His life was his message, embodied in an ascetic lifestyle and symbolically represented in his simple possessions and activities (wearing a loincloth, spinning wool).

Howard Gardner and Emma Laskin’s exploration of leadership, *Leading minds*, discusses this personal alignment to values: “The ways in which leaders conduct their lives – their embodiments – must be clearly perceptible to those whom they hope to influence” (1996, 8). The key to their charisma is the ability to build trust through a personal alignment to their stated values in what Gardner and Laskin call “a process occurring and recurring within and between the minds of leaders and followers” (ibid., 18).

Symbolism is a particularly powerful and important notion in Indian leadership, as exemplified in the Gandhian tradition. For example, the action of spinning wool symbolized independence and self-sustainability. In Gandhi’s hands, it represented a synthesis of new ideas, the aspirations behind those ideas and the call to transformative action.

There are numerous current examples of charismatic leaders who are internationally prominent, like author and thinker Vandana Shiva and Medha Patkar, leader of the

³ Interview with Professor S. M. Michael, Mumbai, February 2002.

movement against the Narmada Dam, as well as examples of leaders with national prominence such as M. S. Swaminathan or Rajinder Singh.

Charisma's Dark Side: The Succession Issue

Charismatic leadership also has its dark side. The respect, legitimacy and power of the individual charismatic leader can result in near absolute domination and governance where no one questions the leader's authority. There is a tremendous irony in many organizations where the external objectives of social justice are not matched with internal democratic structures and processes. This tension between the inner and outer faces of organizations is particularly damaging because the nature of working in communities requires empowerment of staff.

Charismatic leaders are not necessarily dictatorial by nature; rather, they often are so central that the organization is seen as being "owned" by them. As leaders of emerging organizations, their development mirrors that of the organization. In the new organization there are fewer assets, tangible and intangible, to risk, allowing space for experimentation and learning. The leader-founder is the metaphorical tree that has grown strong over time by weathering the storms.

Have the defining experiences that shape the leadership development for the next line of leaders been filtered by the presence of a charismatic leader? The combination of the undemocratic inner face of some organizations with the succession issue results in next-generation leaders that are limited in their capacity to lead. In some cases, the charismatic leader has not sought a strong, younger cadre because of a perceived threat to his or her own leadership position (Fowler, 2000). When sheltered trees are suddenly exposed to winds that they were previously protected from, the tree uproots and falls over.

Another important aspect of charismatic leadership is the question of succession – a distinctive phenomenon in India, and one that represents a very different conceptualization of organizations. Instead of taking control from the charismatic leader or the old guard, emerging leaders break away to form organizations of their own – but with the support and encouragement of the organization they are leaving. The organization is regarded as temporary. This contrasts with the Canadian experience,

reflected in the case of a large, established organization where emerging leaders, early in their careers, were often presented with a leadership challenge for which they might otherwise have considered themselves unprepared. This challenge would take the form of an invitation, extended by a mentor who had spotted their leadership potential. The emerging leader was thus led to feel a sense of gratitude both to the mentor and to the organization, and this tended to promote a continuum of leadership for the organization.

With high turnover of staff and limited leadership exposure for the second and third line, the external linkages of the organization have often remained with the founder-leader. Will foreign funding commitments, which tend to be relationship-driven, change dramatically when the relationship with the founder-leader no longer exists? Will the nature of this funding change? Or will the changing dynamics of the Indian economy, with the emergence of a middle class, reduce the relevancy of foreign funding due to increasing emphasis on domestic funding sources?

Gradual abdication of leadership lets others fill the space, learn from experience and take risks. In a scenario where leaders are overburdened, working against significant challenges to civil society, this is perhaps easier to prescribe than to carry out. There are, however, examples of experiences that have helped to change perspectives. Ambujakshan, the founder of Kerala Dalit Panther, offers this reflection on the change in his style after a participatory training experience in 1996: “I began to look upon the co-workers as equals – became more of a democratic leader who recognizes everyone’s individuality and talents and promotes the participation of the entire team. Previously, I was dictatorial in nature, now I have started involving others in the decision making process” (Tandon and Dwivedi 2001, 26). More importantly, this scenario suggests that leadership development is a much more deliberate process and a necessary focus for emerging leaders in India.⁴

⁴ There is an important distinction to be made between leadership development and management development. The McGill-McConnell leadership program focus was the ability to anticipate, understand, adapt and respond to ongoing changes. There is a framework for questioning, exploration and the creation of new knowledge. Management development is more specifically geared to the practical skills, processes and procedures required for managing.

Artists, Professionals and Right Action

As India's voluntary sector organizations developed and institutionalized, they required people to focus on the management and administrative functions, resulting in a large intake of professional staff into the sector in the mid-1980s. (The process of institutionalization is explored in greater depth in Part Two.) This supported the enhancement of various organizational efficiencies through measures such as recruitment rules, structures for salaries, technical competencies and systems for documentation. This is a logical development as organizations grow.⁵ However, the relationship between the new professionals and the charismatic leadership often leads to conflict. Many young Indian professionals entering the sector have found it difficult to be accepted into their organizations because of tensions between their own professionalized approaches and the traditional concept of self-sacrifice.⁶ This is important for the succession question, as the organization's external linkages – including relationships to funders – often remains in the hands of the charismatic founder-leader.

There is a danger, however, in oversimplifying the distinction between a charismatic leader and a professional manager. It is not true that professionals do not dream, or that charismatic leaders cannot become capable managers; the difference stems more from dominant qualities, approaches and perspectives. Patricia Pitcher and Parker Palmer offer some interesting insights and nuances that help us understand some of the dimensions and tensions inherent in this question.

Patricia Pitcher divides leadership styles into three categories: artists, craftsmen and technocrats. The artist is the imaginative, intuitive and inspiring leader. The virtues of craft, authority, discipline and tradition inform the trustworthy, stable and wise craftsman. The technocrat is characterized by determination, intensity and an uncompromising meticulousness. For the technocrat, reason should dominate emotion (Pitcher 1997, 13–16). We can draw some parallels between Pitcher's distinctions and the distinctions between charismatic leadership and professionalism. Charismatic leaders parallel certain "artist" traits, such as vision and emotion. On the other hand,

⁵ Several interviewees noted this as a benefit to the voluntary sector.

⁶ One of the impacts was that many young people with skills left NGOs to work for funding agencies or as development consultants (see Mahajan 2000, 11).

professionalism does not fully equate with Pitcher's "technocratic" style, though there are overlapping qualities. In a private-sector example, Pitcher describes a succession from an artist-leader to a technocratic leader in a major insurance company. This change in leadership brought a range of changes to the company's business and how it was managed in the name of efficiency. Put simply, there was a rapid deterioration and destruction of this huge company after a legacy of significant growth and diversification. In terms of this example's relevance to Indian organizations, it seems that elements of the charismatic leadership style may be essential; it may even be important for these organizations to find ways of sustaining these elements.

Parker Palmer's notion of *right action* centres on the idea that contemplation is not distinct from action but rather is inextricably bound to it.

Rather than speak of contemplation and action, we might speak of contemplation-and-action, letting the hyphens suggest what our language obscures: that the one cannot exist without the other. When we fail to hold the paradox together, when we abandon the creative tension between the two, then both ends fly apart into the madness. (Palmer 1990, 15)

In this sense, action is more than movement; it is discovery, expression and a re-formation of the self within the world. Contemplation too is a discovery. "It is any way that we can unveil the illusions that masquerade as reality" (ibid., 17). These spiritual aspects of Palmer's ideas have particular resonance in India, because of the deeply spiritual character of Indian culture and society. There is a high level of integration of spiritual belief into everyday life that appears to be quite different from Western culture, where spirituality is more personal, internal and often compartmentalized from other facets of life.

Palmer describes two types of action: instrumental and expressive. Instrumental action is a "means to predetermined ends" suggesting that the "only possible measure of such action is whether it achieves the ends at which it is aimed" (ibid., 23). This win-or-lose paradigm embodies the style of character of the professional or, in Pitcher's language, the technocrat. In a world of limited resources and infinite needs instrumental actions are with us, and will remain with us. The danger arises when the desire for success alone defines the choice of action. Given that the path is often not clear in the voluntary sector and we are functioning in a world that is increasingly complex and changing, failure,

learning from failure and taking the risks that may result in growth are essential to leadership. This, for Palmer, is *expressive* action. “An expressive act is one that I take not to achieve a goal outside myself but to express a conviction, a leading, a truth within me. An expressive act is one taken because if I did not take it I would be denying my own insight, gift, nature” (ibid., 24). Expressive action is less concerned with the outcomes but, paradoxically, is more likely to achieve real ends. This appears to be very much the case with leadership in India where action is taken because it aligns with values and is seen as important to do.⁷

Artist leadership is very much about expressive action. This raises more questions about the transition of leadership. Could professional managers, whose intake into the sector is essential as organizations grow and institutionalize, stifle the voice of right action? The next section looks at the dimensions of the institutionalization process and explores the importance of growing and learning in these organizations.

⁷ Our conversations in Canada are all too often preceded by the question, “Is it fundable?” There is something to be learned from the Indian style, which says, “If it is worth doing, I will do it with a faith that the supports will follow.”

2

Organizations Growing and Learning

Just as the charismatic leader has essential qualities in India, so does the organization. For charismatic leaders, the organization is a platform from which they promulgate a certain story (Gardner and Laskin 1996, 8). Nonetheless, the organization's design and development necessarily shape its responses to different objectives and contexts.

The sheer number of voluntary organizations in India results in an immense diversity of scale, activity and origin. A survey done by the Charities Aid Foundation identifies the number of organizations registered under the Federal Contributions Registration Act at about 18,000 (plus another 4,000 that have received temporary status). If you add all voluntary types of organizing, such as community-based organizations and people's movements, there is an astounding figure of one million organizations (CAF 2000). Some organizations work at the grassroots level in activities such as women's empowerment, rural development, health, education or economic development. Others are working across a region, or locally to address issues of multiple sub-sectors. There are also support organizations for training, research, policy advocacy and education. The ideological framework of any given organization can also influence significantly its interpretation of the external context, accordingly as it is noted in the Gandhian, Marxist or JP movements, or in a religious base, or has been developed by a set of professionals, such as medical doctors or engineers.

The organizations that emerged from these movements in the post-Emergency period were fuelled by the passion of their leaders. Over time, they have developed their own structures, assets, governance and image. Their capacity-building efforts have included strategic planning, organizational management and resource development. With organizational growth comes an increase in scale. Edwards and Hulme argue that scale for organizations can be achieved through operational expansion, by working with government, through advocacy and through support of grassroots movements (*Earthscan reader*, 68–69). The visibility and autonomy that scale brings allows the organization to

exert influence at a policy level. Tim Brodhead argues: “No authentic development organization can operate without a ‘theory’ directed at the underlying causes of development” (ibid., 123). Once organizations achieve a certain scale, they are able to advocate with policymakers, as autonomous agents within the framework of their “theory”; and this ability to promote their theory is crucial for transformative interventions. For example, two major Gujarat-based NGOs, the Aga Khan Rural Support Program and N.M. Sadguru Water and Development Foundation, are working in four districts of Gujarat and two districts of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The project areas are known for their environmental degradation, overuse of groundwater resources, deforestation and distress labour migration. The overall objective is to increase household incomes and to reverse environmental degradation through the development of water resources structures, irrigation systems, watershed development, forestation and the construction of biogas plants. Vijay Sardana, former CEO of the Aga Khan Foundation in India, suggests that its relationships with the governments of Gujarat and Rajasthan were critical to the success of this project. The capacity to interface and influence government policy, he remarked, was as result of the scale of these large NGOs. These organizations likewise tend to mirror, to some degree, the regional systems of government; and this leads to a shared language, which facilitates the building of trust.

Government and NGOs in India tend to be suspicious of each other. Governments are responsible for the frameworks in which NGOs operate and, notwithstanding their predicted decline in the age of globalization, still are central to the provision of key societal supports such as education, health and agriculture. In this light, NGOs would ignore the structures of government at their peril (ibid., 56). In a contract delivery relationship, organizations with a certain institutional size and composition interface with government as partners, while smaller organizations are regarded as subordinates. There are many NGOs involved in the implementation of government development programs. While these contracts have improved the capacity of the organizations to obtain resources, acceptance, and even visibility, the peculiar insider-outsider relationship often has a mixed effect on an NGO’s ability to bargain with the government. There is a loss of perspective for many NGOs that are caught in this project delivery cycle, and an organization may well find itself accused of “selling out” its values in exchange for service delivery contracts, at the expense of social transformation – limiting the organization’s capacity for holistic intervention and fragmenting and even undoing its most valuable efforts.

If we return to the language of Part One, the contract cycle binds organizations to instrumental action. Contract delivery becomes largely directed at the symptoms of development rather than strategic interventions directed at root causes. Short-term evaluation tends to legitimize government and NGO contracts that produce quick, visible results. Certainly there are important cases, such as disaster relief, where quick and visible results are essential. However, the complex processes that are increasingly impacting large numbers of people require *right action*, aimed at understanding and changing these processes. Paradoxically, if NGOs mirror the government in scale and speak a common language with government, this could limit expressive action. The tension here is that institutionalization and structure, which appear to be necessary conditions for the scale and autonomy required for policy influence, can also lead to instrumental action as the dominant mindset. Thus the challenge for the design of organizations that are scaling up is somehow to sustain the nascent qualities of expressive action with the advantages of size.

Two Examples: Pratham and SEWA

Let us take a more detailed look at two organizations that have been able to achieve some qualities on a broad scale, while maintaining the flexibility and willingness to learn that characterize emerging organizations. Pratham began in 1994 with UNICEF support and two college professors working together on the issue of universal education. While the challenges to urban education were growing, the funding of schools was not working as expected, while the emphasis of government initiatives was on rural education. This unique organization developed its own processes and dynamics and has grown to serve 100,000 children per day. The Pratham goal is “every child in school and learning well.” The structure of this organization combines the flexibility of a movement and the discipline of a project. What Pratham learned is that a simple and easily implemented framework allowed for the replication of Pratham elsewhere. The strategy of mass scale replication, without the burdens of massive finances or know-how, was essential to the sustainability of the initiative (Wazir 2000, 234).

Pratham identified core strategies for the development of the organization. They set about to build partnerships with different sectors seeking both a diverse board but also representation from leading Indian corporate houses, providing expertise and funding

supports (Chavan, 2000). They built an internal structure that parallels the levels of the municipal education system. This helps to facilitate the movement of feedback or policy decisions throughout all levels of the education system. “The Pratham network of functionaries and volunteers interact with the municipal machinery at various levels from the municipal commissioner to the school teacher in order to plan, monitor, analyse, and change the existing system all the way from data management to teaching methodology” (Wazir 2000, 234). At the program level, Pratham seeks to ensure that the child is supported at home, at school and in between. There is ongoing support to local education programs and monitoring to encourage local ownership. Programs associated with the municipal school system are demand-driven, and are implemented only if school principals and teachers want them. Pratham promotes trust through a process of joint design and implementation with municipal schools and local community members.

Pratham’s growth strategy is to design projects in a loose framework that gives people room to apply creativity; this provides flexibility in implementation and in the development of relationships. Although Pratham has resisted developing a highly bureaucratic organization, certain positions are designed to mirror the government structure. This alignment helps to facilitate the communication flows with government and within Pratham. This close alignment to government has earned Pratham respect. On issues where it differs from the government, Pratham pursues change collaboratively. For example, when the Government of India proposed an amendment to make education a constitutional right, Pratham reprinted the bill and forwarded it to numerous agencies with comments aimed at strengthening the quality of the legislation.

Madhav Chavan, co-founder and Executive Director of Pratham, wonders why people often associate NGOs with an inability to work on mass scale. He argues it is possible, but voluntary work on a mass scale requires an open organization, which welcomes people to join the work at different levels, locations, and under different terms. For an open organization, a broad policy framework is necessary for people to identify with and then take local action, applying their own local innovations in a creative manner. Ownership of the project emerges when people apply their own initiatives and nurture its development. Chavan writes: “Even at the program planning stage, the persons in charge of designing and implementing the program develop its various components with a minimum requirement to refer back to the Executive Group. They are only restricted by

budgets, expected outcomes, and time. This leads to tremendous individual initiative and energy” (Pratham Mumbai Education Initiative).⁸

Another example of an organization that blends scale and expressive action is the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), founded in 1972 as a registered trade union in Ahmedabad. SEWA began to fight for the rights of women workers in the city who were self-employed in various small enterprises such as block-printing or vegetable vending. As a labour movement, a co-operative movement and a women’s movement, SEWA’s two principal goals are full employment and self-reliance; by working to help its members establish income, food and social security supports, thus promoting individual self-reliance and decision-making ability.

SEWA, like Pratham, combines grassroots work with macro-level policy influence; both levels of intervention, in fact, are central to their strategy of poverty removal. Ela Bhatt, the founder of SEWA, argues that “to fight poverty and injustice, collective organizational strength is the pre-condition.” The premise of this analysis is that poverty is connected to both the economic and social structures of society. For example, the barriers to entry into labour and product markets are linked to gender, caste and class. SEWA addresses this structural poverty by giving women access to credit and raw materials, thus helping them to advance their economic position and to gain control over their own income. This process combines social, economic, and political mobilization. Bhatt writes: “The interrelated nature of these structures emerges very forcefully in our daily work. In dry rural areas for example, the provision of drinking water is closely linked to the capability of women to enter the labour markets, so that when we try to intervene to link the embroiderers with markets, we find that we have to deal with the Gujarat Water Board on better drinking water schemes for them.”

Edwards and Hulme talk of scale achieved through a grassroots connection, and the positive impacts on development policies, resulting from the proliferation of people’s movements and the vertical and horizontal networking of such movements, as disadvantaged people are stimulated into group action impacting the local situation

⁸ For further information on line on this and other Pratham initiatives, see the list of contacts at <http://www.pratham.org/nowus/trustees.php#e>.

(*Earthscan reader*, 64). SEWA membership gives visibility to the agenda of workers' rights:

We were engaged in making lives and livelihoods viable of 900 salt workers, 10,000 bidi workers, 45,000 artisans, 50,000 street vendors, 140,000 landless, 2 lakh loanees. Ideas acted in numbers. That certainly brought their visibility. A strong impact showed on the women themselves in terms of confidence, on the government in terms of our outreach. The politicians recognized their constituencies in our numbers. Therefore, the communities, the government, politicians took us seriously. Our words carried weight.

A grassroots organization that unites into a movement can shape national policies and politics. SEWA's success influenced the creation of a National Commission on self-employed women (Rose 1992, 264). In the National Commission report, *Shramshakti* (1988), the need for co-operatives, health care facilities, literacy, and asset building capabilities is documented. Additionally, Ela Bhatt was the first woman appointed to the National Planning Commission, where she was able to influence change in the orientation to the planning development model to focus on generating full employment, including self-employment and home-based work.

The Lens of Complexity

How is it that Pratham and SEWA can blend qualities of scale, learning and flexibility? In trying to understand how expressive action is sustained in organizations that have extensively grown, we may look to several models based on complexity theory, the study of complex adaptive systems (CAS). A CAS is any set of connected or interdependent "agents" and the patterns of relationship between them – how they are sustained, how they self-organize and how outcomes emerge. CAS require diversity for sustainability, adaptation and information. They are also based on distributed control, meaning that the outcomes emerge from a process of self-organization – an unpredictable but creative pattern of interrelationships between the agents. At the same time, there are attributes and capacities of the whole that are not explainable by the capacities and attributes of the individual agents (for example, how a school of fish can collectively respond quickly to a stimulus or threat).

Pratham was intentionally built as a complex adaptive system. As described by Madhav Chavan (2000, 84),

It was clear to us from the very beginning, when there were just ten of us struggling to build Pratham, that in a few years we would have to manage an organization of several thousand part-time or full-time persons. In order to grow fast, it was important that decision-making about setting up of activities was decentralized. But, this decentralized decision-making was around certain non-negotiable centrally decided common criteria.

In the language of complexity, this is the use of *minimum specifications*: a set of basic rules and requirements that are determined to be absolutely necessary, leaving everything else to the creative evolution of the CAS. This is demonstrated through the replication of the Pratham model, which has not actively been pursued by Pratham, in three cities and seven geographical areas consisting of about 600 villages (Chavan 2000, 104).

SEWA also demonstrates the application of minimum specifications with its core goals of full employment and self-reliance. The innovation of SEWA overall is its ability to bring together specific grassroots agendas and link these together under the common platforms of the women's, labour and co-operative movements. This link between local agendas and common broad platforms suggests another complexity lens: *chunking*, in which CAS is built by starting small, experimenting to get pieces that work, and then linking the pieces together. New interconnections may bring about unpredicted, emerging behaviours. SEWA is able to respond to the needs of members with innovative projects like SEWA Bank, a micro-credit lending institution, and Video SEWA, a program that teaches women videography as a means to document and share their stories. SEWA responds to the very local and specific needs of women working in a particular industry and context – for example, vegetable vendors in Ahmedabad. Within these local actions there are common threads aimed at social and economic change, and which are part of the broader policy change initiatives.

Pratham's relationship to government focuses on the central objective of "every child in school and learning well." The interaction around this issue leverages the diverse competencies of Pratham, the municipal school structure, as well as Pratham's corporate partnerships. The shared interest in the issue, combined with the willingness to engage, brings these various capacities to bear on the central issue. Peripheral issues are not taken up, as effort remains focused on the central question.

Another aspect of complex adaptive systems is the *generative relationship*. In a generative relationship certain characteristics promote the development of innovative ideas and actions. Brenda Zimmerman and her colleagues (1998, 155–6) characterize these four features as:

- Aligned directedness (agreement about areas of interest and direction)
- Separateness (differences and diversity of ideas and competence among agents)
- Tuning (interest in and ability to engage in recurring interaction)
- Action Opportunities (the ability and willingness of the agents to engage in joint action – to do more than talk)

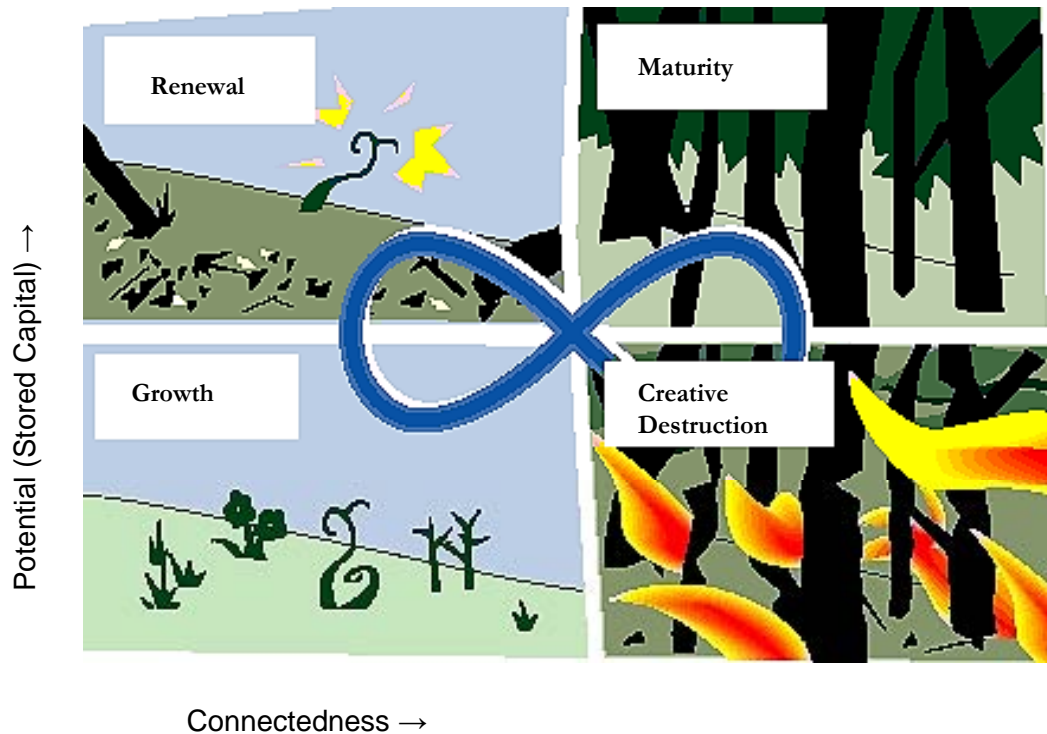
We see this in Pratham, where shared interests and building of trust allow them to work closely with the government educational system. Pratham must invest substantial efforts to maintain and develop this trust. They do this by focusing on relationships with individuals, rather than regarding the government bureaucracy as a monolith. The result is input and policy change within the system, as well as the supports necessary for implementation.

A final image from complexity science, the *eco-cycle*, provides further food for thought about learning and renewal in organizations. Zimmerman and her colleagues use a metaphor drawn from forest ecology to highlight a cycle that is also necessary in human systems – one that includes “creative destruction” as a natural element of a healthy organization. As organizations mature, the entrepreneurial processes eventually settle into more established procedures, such as strategic planning and control systems, to streamline efficiencies. If we think again of the forest metaphor, the colonization of available space eventually leads to a more stable relationship among organisms. In the forest, the seemingly destructive occurrence of a fire is actually the catalyst for new growth (Zimmerman et al. 1998, 172–75; see Figure 1).

Might we see the departure of a charismatic leader, while painful in many ways, as an example of creative destruction that supports new organizational learning? The second half of the eco-cycle is called the “learning loop.” Perhaps succession is an opportunity

for the institutionalization of emergent qualities into organizations by embedding learning into organizational systems and structures.

Figure 1. The Eco-cycle



SOURCE: <http://www.plexusinstitute.com/edgeware/archive/think/index.html>.

Succession cast in this light is not about finding a new cadre of charismatic leaders. Many organizations are growing and taking on the range of institutional characteristics that are part of the maturing process. In an organizational environment of complex linkages and structured systems, strong managers are a necessary requirement. Succession, therefore, calls for the development of governance structures that will embody the charismatic qualities of vision. Under the founder-leader, boards are often built based on the individual relationships of that leader resulting in a limited sense of board identity. “The form and functioning in many South Asian NGOs is inadequate from the perspective of

accountability. Where the board is ‘sleeping’ or invisible, the full spectrum of governance functions cannot be performed properly” (*Earthscan reader*, 218).

Within a rapidly changing context and complex operating environment, the process of learning is one of both retrospection and action, or as Parker Palmer would say, contemplation and action. “Right action boards” re-enforce strong reflective and interpretive processes, in which the board and senior management work in partnership on organizational learning. With succession triggering a stronger emphasis on governance, the diversification of board members to fully represent the strategic interests of the NGO becomes imperative. Boards are the wisdom holders in an organization. Michael Edwards and Gita Sen argue that there is little evidence that NGOs put their core value into practice or that they are even clear what these core values are (*ibid.*, 38). The link between values and actions is critical in generating legitimacy. In a decentralized or “open” organization there is an even greater need for an alignment of its inner and outer faces. This is an organization which values its employees as partners, fights discrimination, practices internal democracy and uses its organizational power in liberating ways (*ibid.*, 47).

3

The Shaping of Civil Society

At some level, organizational development in pursuit of enhanced capacity for social transformation is mirrored in the emergence and development of the voluntary sector as a whole. This section will explore the convergences and will look at some characteristics of the voluntary sector in the rapidly changing context in which these organizations operate. Finally, we will examine some of the drivers that may shape the development of voluntary sector identity and institutions, if and when the time is right.

The Indian voluntary sector emerged and grew in reaction to the perception that the State was not responding to the country's development needs in an era when the State was dominant. Transnational aid during this era was largely a mechanism for achieving political objectives. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, international development transformed from a Cold War instrument directed at bolstering relations with "free world" governments to a seemingly more legitimate vehicle for development. At the same time, with the shift to the right of the United States and United Kingdom in the 1980s, the market was seen as the central engine for growth. This market-oriented perspective, known as *structural adjustment*, brought an increased responsibility for citizens and citizen organizations in the face of growing pressure from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Alan Fowler argues that the domination of these institutions evolved from tighter loan conditions formulated under uniform policy, resulting in "stifled choice, a search for situation-specific alternatives and local ownership of development processes" (*Earthscan reader*, 242).

No developed country except Sweden has ever met the 0.7 percent of GDP target for funding developing countries. And the contribution amounts are in decline and are increasingly more complicated. The Government of India recently paid back its low interest debt to Canada and ended the bilateral funding relationship declaring that Canada's funding was too complicated. Does this threaten or enable greater accountability? Is this a catalyst for voluntary sector emergence?

We are now in the age of primacy of markets. The global phenomenon of government withdrawal from social provision and privatization of many social services has opened a door that many NGOs have been called on to walk through. This raises the question and tension between an enhanced role for civil society resulting in improved services and justification of filling the gap from reduced government in the social sector. In Part Two of this paper, we saw that the need for policy level influence is critical to a strategy of social transformation; yet many organizations are limited by a dependency relationship to government contracts. Because contract delivery tends to be locally focused and symptomatic in approach, there is a reduced ability for organizations to discern and act on systemic or global issues. This is not to say that local interventions in a variety of areas such as water, food, health or education are not critical; rather, the ability to connect these local issues to the broader context is more important than ever for leaders and for organizations.

There is also increased interaction directly with the private sector, in the form of collaborative relationships, funding relationships and advocacy with respect to corporate policies and actions. In the case of the international boycott aimed at persuading Nike to treat foreign suppliers more fairly, the growing collaborations between Northern and Southern NGOs were largely fuelled by advancing communication technologies. This dispute was resolved through the creation of an independently monitored code of conduct, an example of trans-national business collaborating directly with NGOs. Another occurrence is the creation of NGOs and social programs spun out from private sector companies – legally separate, yet closely aligned with the parent company and its objectives. There are also hybrid versions of this, such as the collaboration of Eicher Group, a tractor and machinery company, with a local NGO to run a private school, which largely benefits the children of employees. At the same time, the company is supporting the NGO in bolstering the local government schools, which many employees' children also attend.

In Canada, globalization is largely seen as an *opening*, characterized by trade liberalization that provides access to markets and global technologies, bringing the world closer. The Indian scenario is quite different. Here globalization is more commonly viewed as a *closing*, and trade liberalization is seen as an assault on the cottage industries that so many people rely upon for income. The phenomenon of Americanization that often accompanies globalization is frequently seen as a threat to cultural security. Yet

India could be said to be poised, in many ways, to reap many benefits from entering the global exchange. According to *The Economist* (“The plot thickens: A survey of India’s economy,” 2 June 2004), trade reforms in the 1990s pushed India’s economic growth to become one of the fastest in the world. Those who stand to benefit most are India’s growing middle class, who now have growing access to goods and rising standards of living. Yet how this growth may serve the poor is questionable. The common metaphor of “a rising tide lifting all boats” falls short, as globally we see increasing gaps between the wealthy and the poor. Henry Mintzberg turns this metaphor on its head, arguing that the poor live not on boats but in the lowlands, which tend to get washed out when the water rises.⁹ “This is not just a power shift from public to private/civic interests . . . but a deeper and more complex process in which large numbers of people see their position systematically eroded by economic, social and political forces which work to the benefit of a small proportion of the world’s population” (Edwards and Sen 2002, 38). This scenario suggests unsustainable inequities and insecurities, and increases the need for voluntary organizations to act in an integrated fashion to provide the necessary local relief and broad policy level influence. Where macroeconomic growth is seen as a precondition for the eradication of poverty, the role of the voluntary sector is to influence the shape of economic growth so that the fruits of development do reach the poor.

The response of civil society in a globalized world is not clear. Nancy Gaikwad argues that “We are in a state of saturation: all sectors are facing a kind of helplessness. When the struggle of imperialism was on, the goal was clear, focused. After independence there was a focus on development and struggle against the state mechanisms.”¹⁰ It seems that leaders, organizations and the voluntary sector as a whole are grappling, as is civil society throughout the world, to make sense of various aspects of globalization, liberalization and privatization. Not only is the context unclear, but by their very nature NGOs function in an environment of ambiguities, for example, they can be accountable to donor trustees in one country while working with people in communities of another (*Earthscan reader*, 209). Add to this the sheer heterogeneity of the voluntary sector, coupled with its size, and we have a scenario open to a wide range of divergent interpretation, analysis and action. As David Korten points out: “The cacophony of competing voices within an

⁹ See Mintzberg’s lecture “Beyond Selfishness,” at <http://www.mintzberg.org>.

¹⁰ Interview with Nancy Gaikwad, February 2002.

active civil society can be deafening” (1995, 96–97). In a speech commemorating fifty years of the voluntary sector in India, Rajesh Tandon characterizes the sector as one that separates rather than unites itself: “We have an uncanny ability to find ways to divide ourselves. We disagree on approaches, perspectives, styles, ideologies; we disagree on whether our work at the micro level is morally superior to the work at the macro level. We try and find more differences and disagreements within the fraternity than to organize ourselves collectively to address the pressing problems of our society.”(Tandon 1998).

Integrating Voices

The challenge, then, is to understand how such diversity can be embraced for change rather than fuel divisions within civil society. The diagram below illustrates the interrelationship between the degree of structure of an organization and the level of institutionalization of the sector within which it functions.¹¹ Figure 2 diagrams this configuration of the sector in a form analogous to the Stacey Matrix for Complex Domains.¹² The vertical axis indicates the position of organizations according to the way in which they see themselves, from emergent and adaptive to institutionalized, structured and planned. The horizontal axis shows how organizations relate to the domain by indicating the degree of institutionalization.

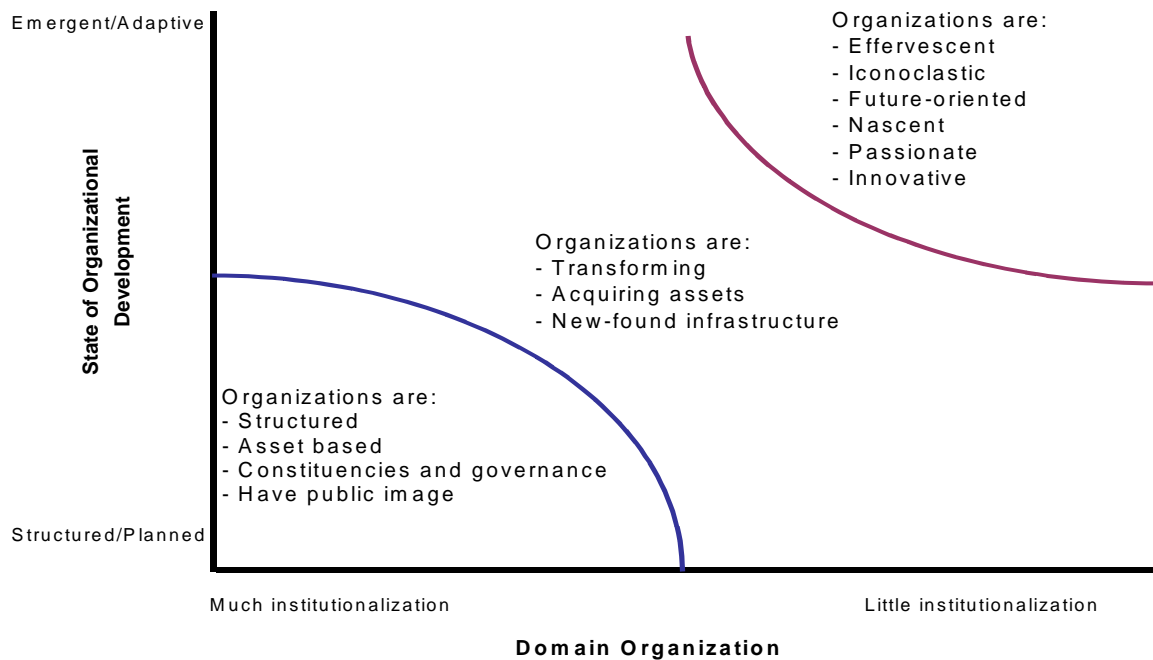
The figure suggests that the most structured organizations in the sector are also the ones acting within the most institutionalized and inter-organizational arrangements; the most emergent, effervescent, innovative organizations act in the zone of least

¹¹ These two models – “Characterization of the Domain of Voluntary Sector Organizations” (Fig. 2) and “Integrating Voices into Policy Dialogues” (Fig. 3) – represent the work done by the McGill-McConnell Team Innovative Project (TIP) on Leadership (Cameron Charlebois, Jane Humphries, Pauline Mantha, Marc Langlois, Jamie Gamble, Sandra Schwartz and Joanne Crichlow). In the TIP analysis, the challenge facing the national leadership of the Canadian voluntary sector was the weakness of its capacity to capture all of the voices of this very diverse community and bring them to bear in a coherent policy dialogue with government. The task was one of defining means and strategies of effective communication between those actually dialoguing with government and all the voices calling out for progressive national policies. It is applied here to help inform an understanding of organizations within the diversity of the Indian voluntary sector.

¹² The Stacey Matrix for Complex Domains is another lens of complexity. It examines scenarios based on their degree of certainty and agreement. Simple situations are those with high certainty and high agreement while anarchic situations are those with low certainty and low agreement. The middle zone is referred to as the zone of complexity.

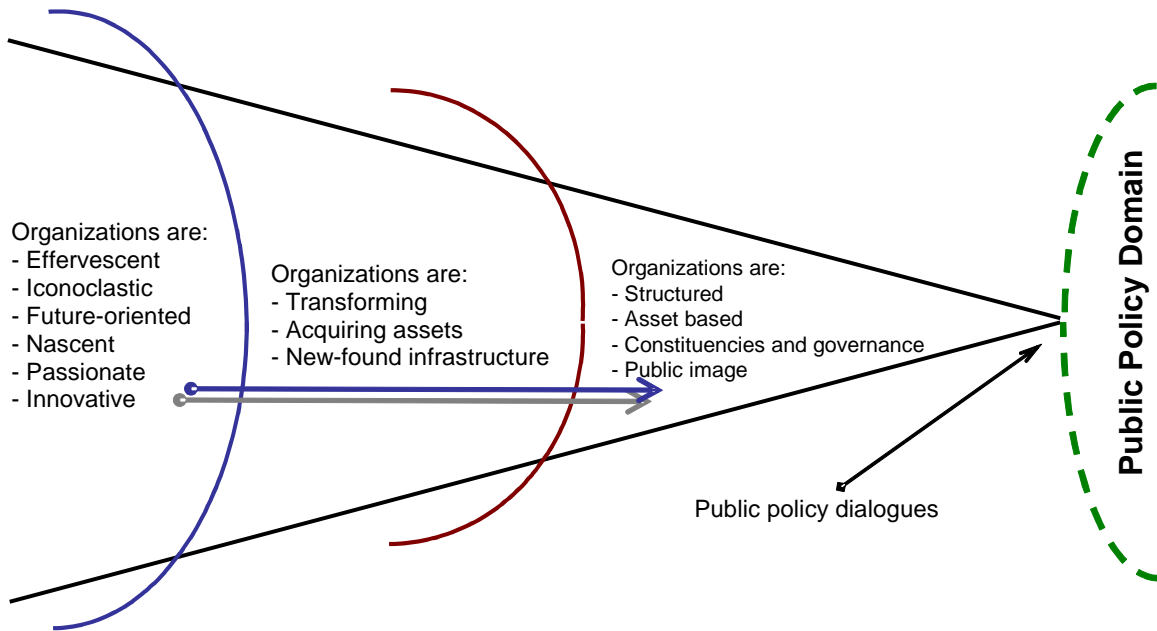
institutionalization. This would follow logically from the fact these latter organizations have fewer resources, share fewer cultural similarities with others in the domain than their more structured sister organizations, which have assets, rigid governance structures and likely constraining relationships within their respective domains.

Figure 2. Characterization of the Domain of Voluntary Sector Organizations



It also follows that organizations from widely different parts of the sector will have difficulty communicating with each other. This poses the challenge for the voluntary sector leadership as illustrated in Figure 3, namely, to bring all voices into the policy dialogue process by methods of appropriately constructive engagement.

Figure 3. Integrating Voices into Policy Dialogues



Activity that includes voices from the fringe has the potential to introduce processes of creative destruction. In the eco-cycle, this idea is represented as a sunny spot, where light breaks through the forest canopy, generating new growth. In the voluntary sector this “new growth” is the encouraging of new perspectives and activity more closely grounded to the constituencies served. As mentioned, SEWA and Pratham are examples of organizations that appear to have achieved this interaction internally. They contain a range of characteristics that span the continuum of the model and demonstrate qualities of both a movement and an institution, and thus are both structured and emergent.

In the eco-cycle, the healthy forest is that which has elements of growth, maturity, destruction and renewal simultaneously – a condition called “patch dynamics.” Just as a forest demonstrates patch dynamics, so does a vibrant and robust voluntary sector. Figure 2 points to innovation at the grassroots. Indian examples of innovation take various forms such as new regulatory models (e.g. joint forest management), local technologies (e.g. treadle pumps) or programs (e.g. self-help savings and credit). The coalescence of

grassroots innovations and voices with the scale and influence of more established organizations becomes even more important when the agenda is less clear. Diversity is a strategic advantage enacted by leveraging the patterns within the heterogeneity of the sector. Of particular note in India is the decentralization of decision making to the local level with the Panchyat-Raj system. Here we have not only grassroots innovation but also grassroots influence, suggesting even more the importance of integration of local, national and international advocacy efforts, in which “the ability of civic organizations to form alliances around clearly defined public-interest agendas gives them a distinctive role as catalysts of value-based social innovation – defining, articulating, advocating, and building constituencies for positions that may eventually find their way into the political mainstream” (Korten 1990, 96–97).

Relationships among Organizations in the Voluntary Sector

Within the voluntary sector, the ways that organizations relate to one another is almost as diverse as the number and nature of organizations themselves. Fevord-K is a group of rural development organizations, which share membership in a state-level network in Karnataka. Member organizations identify and advocate on relevant issues and organize training that is of shared interest to members. This network’s formal governance structure includes a board and executive and a democratic membership, supported by a small staff. Rather than operating as an autonomous organization, it serves as a platform for member organizations to work together. Fevord-K is noted for its positive relationship with the government as well as for its connection to various grassroots movements. This situation is unique because networks, like many organizations, are often driven by charismatic individuals and the sustainability of the network is limited to that individual.

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) functions as a support agency combining expertise in education and training with participatory research methodology to support development in local self-governance, civil society and participatory development, and sustainable industrial development. They are supported by several regional partners, which tend to be NGOs operating at a state level. CAF (Charities Aid Foundation) promotes the visibility of the sector and is working to develop sources of domestic revenue for charitable activity. It is able to channel funds to rural regions (often because of the affinity of the donor, who may be from the area but is now working in a major

city). PRIA, CAF and similar organizations are the closest thing in India to a national organization because of their multiple regional connections. These regional partnerships tend, however, to be unique – specific to a given organization and often reliant upon the personal connections of its leader. They are not present in every region. This is a very different scenario to Canada, where NGOs operate across the country through national and provincial offices.¹³ Many have also forged strong ties to aid international organizations or research partners internationally.

The Canadian voluntary sector recently experienced a national convergence as demonstrated in the creation of the Voluntary Sector Roundtable and the Voluntary Sector Initiative.¹⁴ A crisis provoked this crystallization of the voluntary sector. There was a critical need to respond to emerging and potentially threatening questions regarding the regulatory framework in which voluntary organizations function as well as larger questions of legitimacy and accountability. In a scenario of decreasing government support and increasing challenges to the sector, the need for mechanisms to effectively interface with the federal government was clear. While this has been a positive sign of the self-awareness of the Canadian voluntary sector, the criticism of this process is that the focus of the VSR and VSI has largely been within the institutionalized end of the domain of voluntary organizations. The fact that there were genuine attempts to integrate a wider representation suggests that such broad integration is a formidable task.

An Unclear Future

It is difficult to discern if the times and conditions are right for the development of national sector identity in India. Cultural and language diversity are significant barriers. The public institutions and systems within which the sector operates, although drawing

¹³ One of the challenges for Canadian NGOs is the gap that often separates local from national offices – a perception that the national organization is out of touch with the regions and is pursuing a different agenda.

¹⁴ The Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) is a joint undertaking between the Voluntary Sector Roundtable (VSR) and the Government of Canada. Its long-term objective is to strengthen the voluntary sector's capacity to meet future challenges, and to enhance the relationship between the voluntary sector and the federal government so as to serve Canadians. The VSI channels human and financial resources into seven priority areas: capacity, volunteerism, legislative and regulatory framework, research and information management, public awareness, public policy and federal government/voluntary sector relations. The VSR "began in 1995 to bring about collaboration in the voluntary sector on issues of common concern" (see <http://www.vsr-trsb.net/main-e.html>).

on elements of ancient traditions and from the legacy of the British Empire, are only fifty years old, and much of the voluntary sector is even more recent, emerging twenty years after independence. Even today, India's institutions of civil and public society are still taking shape; what will be the impact of this formation occurring in the era of globalization? It appears that all sectors are converging in this global era, suggesting that the relational capacity of the voluntary sector to interact within itself and with the public and private sectors is more important than ever. Many organizations within the Indian voluntary sector have firmly established international relationships. How might this perspective be brought into the shaping of a national identity if and when such convergence occurs?

What is the impact of a voluntary sector that takes shape in the shadow of a state system that is largely viewed as corrupt and inefficient? The prevailing view is that the state has acted more as an instrument of personal gain than that of public good (Tandon 1998). Furthermore, the current social climate seems to have a growing divisive nature, largely along religious lines and seemingly motivated by political objectives. Could attempts to crystallize the voluntary sector's national identity and framework polarize the sector? Or is it even more important that the voluntary sector consolidate its strength to counter the negative impacts of the failure of the state?

Various voices within the Indian voluntary sector have expressed a desire for greater public awareness of the sector as a whole, in order to counter public misperceptions fuelled by certain scandals that become the focus of media attention. It is not in the nature of Indian voluntary organizations to promote their many successes and impacts. In part this is due to the difficulty of measuring the intangible impacts of their work; but it also relates to a sentiment that the needs are so great that resources cannot be diverted to activities like marketing and promotion. The result is that the public image of the voluntary sector can be negative, or, more commonly, absent.

Public awareness is also crucial for the development of domestic funding sources. India has a rapidly growing middle class, and there are many questions about how to connect them to the needs of the poor. This is of particular interest to critics of the system of international aid. There is a suggestion that the development of support constituencies would further the legitimacy of organizations and the sector.

How might institutional development of the Indian voluntary sector look at some future date, when energies converge in this direction? Although the process will almost certainly be highly emergent, with no identifiable locus of control, our insights from complexity theory may be helpful in the shaping of such an evolution. Without being prescriptive, the following proposal of three “minimum specifications” is intended to contribute to the discussion of how best to strengthen the sector through this process.

A highly decentralized system that can bridge the diversities and inconsistencies is appealing for a system as diverse as the voluntary sector in India. One example is the Mountain Forum, an innovative global network composed of thousands of people, professionals and organizations concerned with sustainable mountain development and conservation. The Mountain Forum’s purpose is to “provide a forum for mutual support and the exchange of ideas, experiences and peoples to raise mountain issues on local, regional, national and international agendas and to promote policies and actions for equitable and ecologically sustainable mountain development” (Cooperrider and Kaczmariski 1999, 78–79). From this forum, an innovative global network has emerged without any centralized structure that supports highly connected discussion and knowledge sharing across sectors, continents and cultures.

From this dynamic and creative process, we can draw the first minimum specification, which is the *use of appreciative language and approaches*. David L. Cooperrider and Kathryn Kaczmariski, in their work with the Mountain Forum, observed that “where appreciative learning is alive and diverse cultures of inquiry are connected to another through an opportunity frame, relationships grow and meta-culture expands” (ibid., 79). The language of appreciation embraces the plurality that is evident in chaotic systems, and emphasizes metaphor and narration to promote rather than bury diversity.¹⁵

A key element of the current scenario is the increasing relational quality of the voluntary sector to the other sectors. With voluntary organizations now pursuing public agendas like government and self-financing in the markets, or private sector companies delivering social service contracts, we see examples of how state, market and voluntary sectors are converging. Alan Fowler’s work on what he calls the “fourth position” looks at

¹⁵ Also interesting in this area is the work of the Coady Institute on taking the “asset-based community development” work of John McKnight to an international context (see Mathie and Cunningham 2002).

development organizations positioned as civic innovators and social entrepreneurs rather than users and distributors of subsidy (*Earthscan reader*, 20). Although grounded in civil society and maintaining its values-based roots, these organizations would play the roles of negotiators between the sectors, validators of compliance, watchdogs and innovators in the public interest. Within the dynamics of this new world order, this fourth position points to a second minimum specification: *convening*. As a convenor, the voluntary sector is positioned to bridge the other sectors. “In doing so, the challenge is to help others to see how non-governmental development organization (NGDO) values, expressed through human rights, are relevant to everyone in terms of responsible global change, long-term institutional viability and local to global stability and sustainability” (ibid.).

The advocacy role of the sector is essential to policy influence, and in turn, to social transformation. The Integrating Voices model (Figure 2) reveals that the interface with policymakers tends to take place at the institutionalized end of the spectrum, while innovation tends to occur at the grassroots end. When the voices of the sector can be integrated, their influence multiplies. Conventional notions of integration, however, are not necessarily appropriate. The sector needs, at any given time, charismatic individuals founding new organizations, effective organizations consolidating and scaling up, and established organizations deconstructing elements to stimulate innovations. The strength of “patch dynamics” is the interplay and interaction of all quadrants of the eco-cycle. Thus the third minimum specification is to *sustain and embrace diversity*. The challenge is in learning how to distil, from this rich diversity, patterns that can be leveraged for change – rather than in seeking the lowest common denominator.

4

Conclusion

Many Indian voluntary sector leaders emerged during the birthing stage of their respective organizations, which provided a platform for risk-taking and exploration. Now that these organizations are more institutionalized there is a perception that there is more at stake, and risk-taking is itself at risk. Not only is this exposure to risk important for leaders to personally develop, in the era of mounting challenges, the risky arena of expressive action is a necessary response to the increasing inequities of our world. This requires an explicit acknowledgement of values, something that can be seen as an inherent strength of Indian culture and society. There is a danger, however, that these values in action could be lost in the increasing professionalization of the voluntary sector, and in the entrenchment of the language and perspectives of the market within the sector. This calls for a strengthening of governance in Indian organizations in order to sustain the strong link between values and action, and integrate valuable learning processes into organizations.

In all this, we are looking for a leadership that can work from local levels to the global arena. How fast can the global reality be taken to the grassroots level, and vice versa? This is leadership that can integrate the multiple realities of all sectors and steer organizations through the complexities of this environment. Vijay Mahajan suggests the leadership of the future will come from outside of the NGO community – that the mainstream is the best place to learn (Mahajan 2000, 36). We can hope for two things: first, that new people will come into the sector bringing their passions and knowledge into action for positive and transformative change; and, second, that as the voluntary sector's identity strengthens it will become part of a new mainstream representing an integration of voluntary sector values into Indian (and global) society. The civic identity of the voluntary sector can thus fully bring to bear its innovations, its integrated but diverse voice and its collective resources to shape an agenda of social transformation.

This paper paints a picture of a voluntary sector in India with formidable challenges in an era of significant transitions, both in national and global terms. It is most interesting to

speculate on the range of possibility within the Indian voluntary sector – at times overwhelming in its diversity, yet often remarkably inspiring. Within this great diversity, it seems that for each example, there is an equal and opposite example. Here we return to Parker Palmer when he quotes the physicist Niels Bohr: “The opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth is another profound truth” (Palmer 1990, 15). It would seem that India is a country with many profound truths. A voluntary sector that can capture and integrate this diversity stands to be a powerful force for change.

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Electronic Resources

Henry Mintzberg’s lecture “Beyond Selfishness” is excerpted in audio and video formats at the author’s Web site: <http://www.mintzberg.org>. The site includes various texts of articles, stories and a bibliography of Mintzberg’s writings.

Information on SEWA and women’s empowerment can be found at <http://www.wiego.org> and <http://www.sewa.org>.

Society for Participatory Research in Asia. <http://www.pria.org>.

Society for Participatory Research in Asia Pratham can be found at <http://www.pratham.org>.

For information the Voluntary Sector Roundtable and the Voluntary Sector Initiative, see <http://www.vsr-trsb.net/main-e.html>.