Analysis 5

Choices made by social workers in running their organisations

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Introduction

This chapter draws from my book *A Guide to Building Effective Development Organisations*. In this chapter I look at the specific choices made by the social workers in setting up and running the organisations through which they gave shape to their dreams for the society. In a majority of the cases, the social workers were also central to (if not the founders) the formation of the organisation. In almost all the cases they are quite central to the functioning of the organisation, whether they are the founders or not. The choices pertain to choice of the domain, the extent of donors' influence, choice while expanding the scope of the work, etc. Readers may benefit by reading the above-mentioned book which elaborates on the pros and cons, as well as implications of these choices, on the functioning of the organisations.

The choices that I look at are the following:

- Did the social workers take up a domain based on demands of the community or did they choose thinking it was their pre-ordained duty? In the above book this choice is termed as between being community-driven and 'brown man's burden'
- Did the social workers follow an agenda they set on their own or by pressures from donors?
- Did the social workers grow the work by geographic expansion or by deepening engagement with the same community?
- Did the social workers undertake a holistic development or did they focus on and specialise in a thematically focused task?
- Did the social workers work on a 'rights-based approach' or did they follow a 'service delivery route'?
- Did they work with the state or despite the state?

The choices

The following table sums up the choices made by the social workers profiled here. I offer explanatory comments only when I feel there is likely to be a confusion or a doubt. This is done in the next section.

Choices made by social workers and their organisations

Social worker	Community-centric or bringing in new agenda	Own agenda or donor-driven	Expanding geographically or deepening engagement	Holistic development or thematic specialisation	Rights-based or service delivery	With the state or despite it?
Akeina	Community	Opportunistically chosen own agenda	Deepening	Attempted holistic but largely livelihoods	Service	With
Anil	Community	Own agenda	Deepening	Thematically focused	Service	With
Ashif	Community	Own agenda	Deepening	Thematically focused	Rights based	Despite
Ashis	New agenda	Combination, opportunistically chosen	Expanding geographically	Thematically focused	Service	With
Chingmak	Community	Own agenda	Deepening	Holistic	Service	With
Eklavya	Combination	Own agenda	Geographical expansion	Thematically focused	A combination	Despite
Jameela	Community	Own agenda	Deepening	Thematically focused	Service	Despite
Johnny	Community	Own agenda	Deepening	Holistic	Service	Both in part
Madhukar	Combination	Donor-driven	Geographic expansion	Thematically focused	Service	With
Mamoon	Community	Own agenda	Deepening	Thematically focused	Service	With
Osama	New agenda	Own agenda	Geographic expansion	Thematically focused	Service	With
Pramod	New agenda	Own agenda	Geographic expansion	Focused	Service	With
Prithibhusan	Combination	Combination, opportunistically chosen	Deepening	Holistic	Service	With
Rajesh	Community	Combination	Deepening	Holistic	Service	With
Sarat	Community	Combination	Deepening	Focused	Service	With
Sarbani	New agenda	Own agenda	Neither	Focused	Service	With

Sudhir	Community	Own agenda	Geographic expansion	Focused	Rights based	Despite
Suresh	Community	Own agenda	Expansion	Focused	Service	With
Vandana	New agenda	Own agenda	Deepening	Focused	Service	With
Vivek	Community	Own agenda	Both	Holistic	Service	Both in part
Yogesh	Combination	Own agenda	Deepening	Focused on health	Service	Both in part

Assessment of choices

Community-centric or brown man's agenda? The question whether an NGO's choice is to work on community-centric agenda or work in response to the perception of the brown man's burden is a forced one. Most social workers evolve a combination. They surely cannot become relevant unless they respond in some concrete measure to the community's needs. To that extent their work is community-centric. And being educated, enlightened and concerned about community's well-being, they introduce more appropriate ways of life to the community in respect of their domain. A doctor will surely need to cure people suffering from diarrhoea; but he will be failing in his duty if he does not advocate good practices about hygiene and sanitation. The question is which of the two dominates and whether the new practice sought to be introduced is wholly foreign to the ethos of the people. Most of the social workers have chosen to work on felt and articulated needs of the community. This sounds very fair and rational to me since they take to social work out of a sense of compassion and solidarity. Yet a new agenda, that is, an agenda that has not emerged out of felt needs of the community, is brought in as the social worker feels it would be useful to the community.

Ashis brought in a new agenda of responsible crop production in his work. This did not emerge out of felt needs of the community. He chose it opportunistically, to reap the advantage of the international responsible crop movement and to initiate sustainable agricultural practices. Eklavya works on helping communities cope with floods. But he combines it with exercises such as providing Ecosan toilets and using solar energy to supply drinking water - solutions to problems that people did not articulate directly. In the case of Jameela, the issue of early and undesirable marriage of Muslim girls has not been articulated by the community. But the need for helping victims of sheikh marriages and other forms of exploitation to lead a respectable life is clearly a felt need. While development organisations need to bring their management up to speed, they sure had not articulated their need for internet. Hence the agenda of Osama and his team was derived from global developments rather than articulated by the community. Prithibhusan started his work primarily on a strongly felt community need of flood rescue, relief and rehab. Later he took up the task of integrating technology in education, something that is so far from the

community's worldview that it could not have been the community's demand at all. In the case of Sarbani, she works with homeless mentally ill patients. They are not only lonely and neglected, they are shunned by the community as well. Looking after them as she does, the demand could not have come from the community. A similar comment is applicable to the case of Vandana Gopikumar.

Own agenda or donor-driven agenda?

Most of the social workers profiled have been consistently following an agenda set by themselves. They have been opinion leaders and influencers on donor policies, rather than being governed by donors' policies. It is true that some of them have opportunistically used trends in the donor world for the benefit of the communities they served. During the initial period, the scope of their operations was limited and they needed to make sure that their nascent organisations survived. So, as Madhukar did, they took up programmes suggested by donors. Once comfortable with both their own niche and their standing, they started consistently following their own agenda and influencing donors to support them.

Expanding geographically, thematic focus and holistic development

Two separate issues are linked in this discussion. So far as geographic expansion as a way of growth is concerned, the spread is a little more even. There are quite a few cases of social workers who preferred to expand geographically. It can be hypothesised that ambitious social workers who are committed to a set of widely relevant thematic activities tend to expand geographically. For instance, if my capacity as an expert providing prosthetic aids far exceeds the demand from a particular region, it makes sense to cater to more areas than to learn and provide different services in my present location. On the other hand, if my focus is the well-being of people in, say Dindori district, then I will first concentrate on their livelihoods. Then I will work on the education of Baiga children, then on health services and then on protecting forests and preventing soil erosion. The interventions will be confined to the district and chosen one after another as my resources increased and needs became apparent. The first case is driven by thematic competence, and the second by commitment to people of a locale.

Rights-based or service delivery

Of the social workers profiled here, 18 have preferred to work in the service delivery mode. This perhaps reflects the choice of those profiled (and by implication Tata Trusts' preference, since Tata Trusts grantees dominate the list) than the personnel in the sector per se. In some sense this dichotomy has a conceptual overlap with the sanitised-contested

domain dichotomy as discussed adequately in the previous chapter and hence it does not merit further discussion. Most service delivery oriented social workers turn to the state for resources. Alternately the state considers them facilitators. Certainly regulatory clearances are required from the state in quite a few thematic areas e.g. seeds production, landscape planning, child protection, welfare of mentally ill patients. Naturally service delivery oriented social workers have been working with the state, gently influencing the latter towards more people-friendly policies. Social workers working in the main on rights-based approaches have by force got to work on an issue chosen by them whether the state supports them or not; that is despite the state.

Making of these choices

A combination of factors shapes the choices social workers make on the matters discussed above. Some of the factors that I can glean from a reading of the profiles are:

- Personality of the people and their beliefs: An emotional person is quite likely to become deeply attached to the people s/he begins work with; then their well-being becomes the soul guiding factor of his/her work. Such a person may choose to remain rooted in one chosen geography and deepen his / her engagement with the same people rather than applying his / her skills to a larger set of people. Chingmak for instance, isrooted to the remote Tuensang district for such a reason. These orientations are likely to be reinforced by the institutional framework in which they work. For instance, Johnny works within the framework of an institution that focuses on a certain geography of Bissamcuttack. So his primary work remains within that area while he 'grows' by allowing his expertise to be transferred via training and mentoring to others. On the other hand Ashis did not feel the emotional compulsion to remain confined to Jhabua where he began his work, but saw fulfilment in applying his skills over wide areas.
- Self-perception of their strength: This question is about comparative advantage. If I am very good at resource mobilisation and collaborations, but wanting in internal management, I am likely to find a colleague torun the organisation while I do the boundary spanning and look for new opportunities. A second line would thus automatically emerge. But if I look at the organisation as an extension of my own persona, feel supremely confident about myself and a shade dismissive of others, I could become a banyan tree and the decisions would all be mine. Did something along this line happen in any of the cases profiled here? Readers may form their own judgment.
- Their assessment and conditions of resource availability: While it sounds appropriate that social workers must choose an agenda relevant for the communities they work with and not be swayed by donors' directives, the hard reality is that resources are often available only for certain activities. Donor world has tended to be

unpredictable, with the agenda often developed thousands of miles away in a British or an American university. But if one is starved of resources and has mouths to feed, it is academic to focus only on own or on community agenda. Strategic behaviour and sagacity lie in presenting the organisation's agenda in a manner that aligns with donors' agenda and to use available resources to meet donors' objectives as well as community's needs.

- Their own sense of their calling: Each person comes to a view about his or her calling. This view develops as one evolves in life. Neither the available funding opportunities nor the range of problems of the target community may make a person change course if s/he does not think they match her calling.

Where do they go from here?

The choices presented and discussed above are about past decisions. Where the social workers, their organisations and most importantly their work would go from here is an interesting question. Social workers as persons would go through their life cycle as all people do. I am quite optimistic that their clients and the society at large will ensure that they have a comfortable life as they advance in age. Having proved their capability and credibility, their way forward is a matter of their choice and not subject to external forces. Going forward in their career paths is strictly a function of their own self-perception, their sense of calling and their beliefs.

However the same cannot be said about their organisations or the work they have done. Organisations are going concerns. Staff may work with reduced elan as they advance in age, their aspirations grow, infrastructure needs replacement, etc. Yet being completely donor dependent, the organisations can never be assured of their continuity. Institutional and organisational sustainability may be a donor fetish but few organisations can be assured of this. Unfortunately even the most promising and highly performing social workers have to spend more and more time in resource mobilisation as their organisations become larger and mature. Given the changing nature of the donor world, they need to become flexible about their agenda and territory. The sustainability of the work in turn depends on the relevance of the work to the specific physical and social situation. There is a story about an ardent social worker who worked tirelessly for legalisation of widow remarriage. After years of his efforts, the government did pass a law. But he, his organisation and all their work suddenly became irrelevant! Such would be the positive outcome of someone's work, though he would be rendered redundant. I am not implying that society must always remain so full of problems that social workers and their missions will remain relevant. The point is, the exercises of social workers have no inherent assurance of sustainability. The social workers need to reinvent themselves and change the course of their work to remain relevant to their objective of helping the needy.