

## A quest for sustainability that is leading the social sector astray

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Photo: PTI

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Self-sustaining social interventions are elusive but too many aid agencies remain sold on this idea

Theories of change' and 'distanced vision', afflictions of the social and development sector, which I wrote about in my last two columns, are not the only such maladies. Let me pick on a third one: Sustainability. Here, the term has a specific meaning; nothing to do with environmental sustainability. The notion is that development and improvement should be sustainable in the community or area where it happens, without the need of continuing intervention or support from any agency outside that community. Basically, changes should be permanent. To understand the problems with this notion, let's consider two illustrations.

First, imagine a bridge constructed across a stream in a jungle. It will get weathered by nature and usage and will require maintenance. In a particular year of excessive torrential rain, it may require a lot more maintenance. And for this, an agency must have the network to deliver all that is required—materials, labour and machinery. Once a bridge is built, it does not remain in the same state forever without maintenance.

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Let's take the second illustration. After years of work in a cluster of villages, a non-government organization (NGO) manages to organize adolescent girls into groups that act as a bulwark of support and confidence for its members to tackle rampant patriarchy and exploitation. These groups are led by gutsy girls, who battle against early marriage, circumstances forcing girls to drop out of school, gender violence and more. The funder of the project is pleased by this development; it appears like a model of sustainable change, since the girls themselves have taken charge. The funder of the NGO withdraws, and their work stops.

What would happen 5 years after the NGO's intervention stops? Those gutsy individual girls are likely to have changed and been empowered forever; and will probably do good in whatever they do, wherever they go. But those clusters of villages are embedded within the larger society around. The forces of patriarchy are alive and kicking—in society and in the very same villages. How long will groups of girls battle these incessant onslaughts on their own? Life would take many of those individual girls somewhere else. Gradually, almost inevitably, the entire improvement would wither away in that community.

The bulwarks of girl groups require continuing support, much like that bridge. The NGO must continue in those villages. Its work may be different now, supporting rather than leading, while also ready to enhance efforts should the need arise. But present and ready to intervene they must stay, since no one can anticipate what may unfold through societal forces. What we can anticipate is that most of these dynamics will be of regression towards the status quo ante.

Is this too pessimistic a view of the world and how we progress?

That it's a realist view becomes clear when we consider the reasons for this phenomenon. And this is true of the entire swathe of developmental and social interventions. From gender and caste issues to education, health and agriculture practices and beyond. The explanation is not complicated.

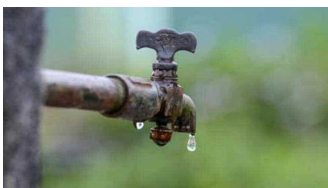
All such improvements happen in pockets—big or small. Entire societies or systems do not change in one grand leap or sweep. So, pockets of change continue to be dragged back by the rest of society and the system to its long-set ways and norms. This happens partly by the natural flow of things and inertia. Partly through systematic efforts by those who don't like such progress, who 'lose out' in some way, even if this loss is more psychological and social than economic. And equally by other deliberate efforts, including political, commercial, cultural and technological, that may be guided by conflicting ideas of progress, or may inflict unintentional collateral damage.

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None of this is a novel insight. But somehow in the social and development sector, this basic reality is ignored or underweighted by certain categories of key actors—mostly by funders and those who have ‘distanced vision’, and who often wield substantial influence. Perhaps they want to believe in the notion of sustainability because they want to move on. To some other area, or other work. That may be a justifiable desire on their part, but to rationalize it through the notion of sustainability is unreasonable and damaging to real progress.

Manthan, that ever-inspiring movie from 1976 which has inspired generations in the development sector, has one flaw—it ends on a misleading note. It suggests that the cooperative dairy in Semla sustains itself, led by Bhola, even as the ‘NGO wallas’ go away on a train. This is not the full picture. We know the formidable institutional structure that Verghese Kurien created—stretching from villages like Semla to the rest of the country. Which is what enabled the country’s Bholas to lead on the ground, together creating the marvel of Amul.

There can be no progress without permanent institutions on the ground—community based, NGOs, public institutions or other sorts. And these institutions require connections, nurturing and reinforcement from outside the milieu in which they struggle. Else, they can get overwhelmed. Unfortunately, there is no societal improvement that is sustainable on its own. Progress is a constant struggle—even to retain the few inches of gains made.

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