

Nurturing Head and Heart to Combat Poverty: The PRADAN Story

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I am grateful to the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation for the opportunity to be here to speak with you. Ramon Magsaysay was a humanist first of all and it is an honor to be here in his land during his anniversary week.

I am not much of a public speaker and as an essentially intuitive person, am most comfortable in interactive dialogue. What I say here is therefore to bring you on board with me, with my journey as a professional and my work so that we can have a dialogue, in which I hope you would participate. I would quickly share with you my early years before I share with you my experience of Pradan, the organisation I have had some role in fashioning.

My Ignorance of NGOs and Development

India has always had a highly evolved civil society. Formally incorporated non-profits or NGOs as we call them perhaps constitute its largest and most visible segment and may now number a million or more; no one has a reliable count. We have had laws enabling incorporation of non-profits or charities for 150 years. With that background, it may sound ironic, perhaps even untrue, that I had not heard the term, much less encountered a NGO until I went to review one at the age of 31 in 1977. It is doubly ironic that this single encounter should have changed my life and given it a purpose I never imagined existed. But that is how it is.

Of course as a child I knew of the independence movement, of Gandhi and other stalwarts of our freedom struggle. There were freedom fighters among relatives, one of whom would tell us stories of how they would walk night and day to participate in a rally – often dozing away and subconsciously keeping track of the ditches on the road. My father himself was a fee-paying member of the Congress during the freedom struggle; he had the portrait of Gandhi engraved along with those of gods and goddesses on a wooden beam over the entrance to our house in the village. The buzz and glow of independence was still around when I was growing up as a child in a tiny village up in the Himalayas. Yet I had not a clue about what all this meant for my own life or career. Did I have a role in “development” or in “nation building”, a phrase I learnt much later, I did not know.

I have seen dire poverty from close quarters as a child. Though my own family never had to worry about food, clothing or shelter, and all seven of us siblings were sent to school and got college education, those who came to work in our fields were very poor and some lived sad lives. I remember a couple who had had 11 children, not one of whom survived even a year. Yet I never imagined then that I would spend a good part of my life nurturing an organisation that would work to improve the lives of such people.

I had my first encounter with what I later learnt to be “development” when I was about eight. The government had recently begun the Community Development Program. A development office called the Community Development Block had been created for a cluster of around 100 villages; in all there were about 5,000 such offices across the country. Headed by a block development officer, it had a team of technical specialists and village level workers. One such village level worker came to our village to teach us the technique of growing paddy nurseries on raised dry beds. While helping him lay out the nursery I remember being amused to see an ‘officer’ in neatly pressed clothes and shining shoes working with a shovel. While nothing much came of the nursery, my father would periodically talk of this or that “scheme” through which he would get new seeds, saplings of fruit trees, money for paving the walkway and building a bathing place in the village, etc. So, this to me was ‘development’ and was done by some government office, just as schools were run and roads built. And I never thought of working in such an office.

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Stumbling Into a Profession

Students good at math were expected to study engineering in those days – things sadly have not changed much – so I did, upon securing admission in an engineering college through a competitive examination. In a way, it was a prize earned for having done well in school rather than a choice made consciously. All I knew of engineers then was that they went around in jeeps, inspecting road construction, were kept in high esteem and seemed to have much authority. As I learnt more about what engineers did and became more conscious of my proclivities I decided against choosing the normal occupations for engineers in government and factories. Since I had to take a job to support my siblings in college, I chose to teach engineering in my alma mater; though I knew I would need a doctorate to get anywhere as a teacher, that would have to wait till my siblings finished college.

A few years later I won a national scholarship to study abroad and landed up at MIT in the US, to get a doctorate in engineering. The contrast between the US and my own country was simply unbelievable, overwhelming. A small group of us from my country would often discuss this and I became increasingly drawn towards issues of poverty and development back home. I gave up the idea of an engineering doctorate, winding up with a master's, and would have liked to study economics but did not have enough time left in my scholarship. So I did an MBA from Sloan instead to get some understanding of economics and making full use of the flexibility at Sloan, took some courses in development economics and returned home.

First Encounter with an NGO – Discovering Professionalism

Back in India I got a job in an organisation that specialized in introducing management techniques and systems thinking in government, public sector companies, cooperatives and other development organizations. That was closest to my newfound interest in development though I still did not know what someone with my kind of education could do to change things in villages and how assisting government would help. My first assignment there was to conduct a review of a community health project run by an NGO in western Maharashtra and to design an organisation to upscale it. This was my first experience of seeing highly qualified professionals, a couple, Mabel and Raj Arole, with MDs from Johns Hopkins, working in villages. In fact, this was my first experience of any professional working in villages, directly engaging with poor people; professionals and other people of authority always supervised the work of less educated subordinates who worked in the field. The Aroles had set up a small referral hospital in a small town that served as the market for surrounding villages where they worked, focusing on preventive and community health. They had developed a new approach of using village women as community health volunteers. These women, trained by the Aroles, were mostly illiterate but well regarded in their respective villages and were chosen by village people themselves. The Aroles who received the Magsaysay award in 1979 clearly had transformed the public health scene in about 100 villages that constituted the sub-district of Jamkhed, where all parameters of public health were distinctly better than in neighboring villages and the rest of the country. Nationally we still have not reached the infant mortality rates Jamkhed had achieved in 1977 and the overall nutrition status of children across the country is far worse even today than it was in Jamkhed in 1977!

What I saw in Jamkhed struck a chord, perhaps because I spent the first 17 years of my life in a village among poor people as part of my community. Perhaps that socialization, that sense of affinity with poor village people had not been overtaken by my education. It also gave an answer to the question doing rounds in my subconscious about the role of professionals like me in development, in transforming villages. What was different about the Aroles? After all, there were doctors working in other sub-districts in government-run primary health centers. What was different was the way they engaged with the people they served, with an obvious sense of oneness, of empathy. Yet, they steadfastly kept challenging what was irrational in existing health practices and behaviour in villages, having earned the right to do so through demonstrated interest and caring. It was this combination of knowledge and empathy – what I call head and heart – that I thought had led to their success. Professions are about using knowledge to

serve a social purpose; that comes from the definition of the word itself. Societies are human formations, not mechanical assemblies. One obviously cannot engage with human formations except by expressly being human, by showing empathy.

A couple of years later I had an opportunity to work in a watershed project in a cluster of villages. Headed by an unusual government scientist, P R Mishra, the project was trying to induce inhabitants to conserve their watershed, promising in return higher productivity through more availability of water. The project had a strong technical component concerning little dams, soils, plants, irrigation, etc. But it also required bringing together people with conflicting interests, changing established practices and norms, introducing the notions of equity and organizing people to take responsibility for management; it required human transformation. We were able to achieve these because Mishra displayed the same qualities as the Aroles, of oneness with village people we were working with despite our clearly different situations. The successful experience here further reinforced what I had learnt from the Aroles, that knowledge is needed but it does not go far in dealing with human contexts, especially the contexts of the excluded and marginalized, without bonding, without empathy. The question for me no longer was what professionals could do to change villages but how to get more of them to villages and create mechanisms where they would be effective.

The Birth of Pradan

The opportunity came when I began working with a foundation in the early 1980s and had the responsibility to develop a program to strengthen grassroots NGOs. I travelled to a large number of NGOs across the country. While most tended to be initiatives by individuals or small groups deeply concerned about poverty, rarely did any have professionals on board. And they had marginal impact on the lives of the people they wanted to serve and who were always welcoming of them. Interestingly, every one among the NGOs was keen to have professionals working with them and all were willing to pay them reasonable remuneration; they simply were unable to attract them. That is when I conceived the idea of Pradan, the organisation I have spent nurturing during the past 25 years of my life. The idea was to create an organisation to systematically induct and groom professionals to work in villages and provide them platforms to work from. Many of the NGOs I had already met would I thought be effective platforms for the professionals to work from.

As a donor my employer would only make grants and not provide services or set up organizations. I needed someone to set up an organisation and a constellation of people who would govern and guide it; I could then make a grant to get it off the ground. Heads of several NGOs I met had agreed to be the governance constellation. My explorations to find someone to set up the organisation led me to Vijay Mahajan. Vijay, 28 years then, had recently graduated from the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad. Prior to that he had studied engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi and worked for four years with a well known multinational. He had always had interest in grassroots development, had on his own visited a few well-known NGOs and had been involved in an interesting rural action-research project led by the founder director of his management school, Ravi Matthai. Vijay readily took to the idea and agreed to explore it further while simultaneously working with one of the NGOs I introduced him to. That is how Pradan was set up in 1983, as an Indian non-profit. I stayed back to finish a few other program ideas I was working on but was closely involved as an informal advisor and mentor to Vijay, in helping with linkages and knowledge inputs. For the first three years Pradan would only loan its professionals to work with other NGOs. Vijay himself worked in a large NGO that helped poor farmers develop land given to them under the *bhooadaan* movement led by Vinoba Bhave, one of the earliest recipients of the Magsaysay award.

Recruiting professionals turned out to be far more difficult than Vijay and I had imagined; it continues to be so even now in the context of the larger numbers needed. The main reason in my view was that working at the grassroots is not the “normal” identity of professionals and that unfortunately persists even now; the lower than market salaries and the difficult working conditions contributed only

marginally. The normative role for professionals is to give advice, supervise others and generally be in positions where they exercise normative authority from their supposedly superior knowledge and presumed sense of responsibility. A few who want to work at the grassroots with poor people branch out on their own as the Aroles and many others like them have done and continue to do. Others engaged in development join governments where they play the “normal” roles expected of professionals.

Four of Vijay’s classmates and a few others with a bit of grassroots experience joined during the first two years. Pradan instituted internships for students to provide them exposure to grassroots work. A couple of people came through this route. Efforts to recruit from professional colleges by courting faculty sympathetic to the idea were not very successful, nor were efforts to recruit through advertisements. A small breakthrough was made in 1985 when IRMA, the rural management institute set up by the National Dairy Development Board to train managers for milk cooperatives entertained requests from NGOs to let them also recruit their graduates. This provided a steady trickle and at one point Pradan was the largest employer of IRMA graduates outside the Dairy Board. Pradan chose to work on enhancing livelihoods of poor people, in part because of the dire poverty among the people we were working with and also because of the proclivities of the pioneers who joined in the initial years.

I formally joined Pradan in 1986. That is also when we began our own village projects, working with poor communities directly rather than only via other NGOs. The latter approach was discontinued in 1992.

Training to Work with Heard and Heart

We learnt a few things from the experience of the early years. Firstly that getting professionals on board in large numbers would require a far more vigorous effort than we had been able to mount so far. We realized that we would need to cast our net wider than to a few elite colleges as in the initial years. Secondly, that our education system, especially higher education system simply does not train people to be effective as grassroots development professionals, even in disciplines that are supposed to have a rural orientation, such as agriculture and social work. Educated people, including professionals far too readily jump to offering solutions rather than trying to understand the context in which poor people are. There is little reflection and no attempt to learn from the people. That is the classical extension paradigm and is ineffective with the historically excluded, isolated and marginalized communities; it works well only with those already in the mainstream of society and economy. We realized that we would need to systematically groom campus graduates as grassroots workers rather than putting to work straightaway. This in effect meant that human resource development would become as important for us as the organizational mission of promoting livelihoods. The goodwill we had earned, principally because we were putting professionals to work in villages, gave us the courage to take on this challenge. We even began informally calling ourselves a ‘rural university’ with villages as classrooms and the rural people and all our experienced professionals as faculty! And I believe we have to an extent become a rural university even though we do not and cannot grant a degree (that is a future project).

We created a separate human resource development unit and I myself took responsibility for it. A behavioral consultant, who continues to work with us to this day to refine systems, helped us design a year-long apprenticeship programme in 1994. Pradan would now recruit individuals with an MA level of education (16 to 17 years’ education in India) in any field of study only as apprentices; they become employees, designated as executives, and begin working independently in projects only upon completing the year-long apprenticeship.

To expand recruitment we trained every one with four or more years’ experience in Pradan as a recruiter and more keep getting trained as they gain the threshold of work experience. There are now 80 professionals in Pradan trained as recruiters. In teams of two, they go to one or two campuses each every year, taking time off from their regular work in projects. They administer a culture-neutral (non-numeric, non verbal) test to judge mental ability, two group discussions, and conduct an interview besides scrutinizing academic performance which must be consistently above average. We now recruit from 70 to

80 campuses every year. Beginning with 10 apprentices in 1994 we now get 150 apprentices every year. Apprentices receive stipends more than adequate to meet their living expenses.

The apprenticeship itself consists of mentored learning by doing, reflection and limited interactive classroom inputs. Each apprentice is placed in one of Pradan's 30 projects where there would be 8 to 12 professionals, working in a cluster of 100 to 130 villages to help poor people enhance their livelihoods. An experienced Pradan professional who has received four-week training, including an intense behavioural lab, is assigned as the Field Guide or mentor to each apprentice. There are about 50 trained Field Guides and more keep getting trained as they gain the threshold of field experience. Engagement in the field is structured and includes 15 days' stay in the home of a poor family in a village, a participative village study, small assignments to understand the impact of Pradan's work and tasks designed to learn various skills of working with poor people in villages. Apprentices periodically write reflective reports about their experience and discuss those with their Field Guide who would give them feedback. Three reviews are conducted through sociometry and those below a threshold of motivation to work with poor people are advised to leave. An apprentice is also free to leave any time; there is no obligation to repay the stipend and expenses Pradan may have incurred. Since working in villages is still not a preferred career for educated people with urban career options, we pay for all apprentices to go home for a week at the end of the first three months so that they can share with their family and friends their experience and buy some goodwill and support.

Pradan has professional development programmes that continue beyond apprenticeship, including programmes that groom people for their organizational responsibilities, such as recruiting, mentoring and managing programmes. The core, however, is the apprenticeship where the insights and empathy gained through personal encounters and the attitudes necessary for bonding with poor people are developed and practical skills needed to play a catalytic role in poor people's lives are learnt.

Nurturing Trusteeship

A tenet that has guided Pradan since inception is that as a helping endeavor that seeks to bring about transformations in individuals and communities, development work is a bond between two individuals; this is what I learnt from the Aroles. Each one of us engaged in building such a transformative relationship, such as building the self-confidence of poor people, educating or counseling, is a trustee of that relationship. That relationship or transaction while it occurs is not amenable to 'third party' monitoring. Now, an organisation as a human formation cannot be very different outside from what it is inside. Therefore, if people are to be trustees outside, they must be so treated inside. Several key features of Pradan, such as a collegial climate, flat structure, rotational leadership, democratic governance, etc. derive from this basic tenet. In a way, the head and heart combination is as important internally as it is in our work in the communities.

Internal governance in Pradan has evolved over time. Vijay stepped down as the first chief executive when he completed five years but stayed on for another four years. Succeeding him, I did the same and so on. A constellation of senior people, initially three and then seven, deliberated on policies and strategies during initial years. Presently, all professionals in Pradan automatically become members of a general council upon completing four years. They now choose a steering committee for a three year term (through sociometry rather than election) to function as the internal board and the chief executive is chosen every five years through sociometry. Pradan has had a retreat of all professionals since the very second year of its existence. A five day event, it is an occasion for reflection, sharing experiences and critiquing its own work.

Outputs and Outcomes

Over the years, more than 1,000 Pradan professionals have worked in villages for varying lengths of time. It now works with over a million people from nearly 200,000 families in seven Indian provinces. About 60 percent of them are from various ethnic tribes many of whom until a few generations ago depended on

hunting-gathering. Another 15 percent are from among the erstwhile untouchables or outcastes among Hindus. These two groups together constitute over a quarter of our population and are easily among the poorest. Both have historically been outside the pale of the mainstream economy and society. First and foremost, they need to be helped to discover their potential or agency to change their own lives so that they can claim what is their due and join the mainstream with dignity and pride. To stimulate such changes people need to go through positive experience. One needs to engage with them in a non-threatening relationship in a sustained way. This is where and how Pradan professionals begin and this is where empathy comes into play first of all. Pradan begins by organizing women from these families into small self-help groups around small savings and credit. As groups gain in strength and members gain confidence, they are facilitated to carry out a diagnosis of their resources and potential opportunities to enhance their livelihoods. Men also participate at this stage. Pradan would then help the families get the necessary skills, finances and know-how to take up new livelihood activities or enhance existing ones. The groups are federated into secondary and tertiary formations to strengthen a sense of solidarity. Over time, the groups also begin to take up issues that affect them as communities, such as access to services, etc. The experience of working together also helps women to work as cooperatives when they need to deal with the markets. There are now more than 11,000 such primary groups and several hundred cluster associations, federations, cooperatives and companies.

The poor people Pradan works with also have limited assets, mainly poor quality of land without irrigation; many have no assets. This is where the professionals' knowledge is primarily challenged, in creating robust livelihood opportunities from limited and inferior assets, owned by people with no skills and no education. Pradan pilots new livelihood ideas, demystifies technologies, downscales technologies and production systems to suit the contexts of poor people of limited resources and low risk thresholds. It extensively collaborates with the state, market and knowledge institutions and has made several landmark innovations.

Epilogue

There was much debate about the approach to be followed for India's development during the run-up to independence during the 1940s. Gandhi famously argued for self-reliant village republics. He felt that priority must be given to develop villages into self-governed republics without want, illiteracy, ill-health and superstition. He wanted to modernize the village and create a new construct of good life that the world would emulate. Modernization was indeed the theme adopted for India's development but without the village. We are the largest democracy and that has now been extended to local governance down to the village, but villagers do not have an effective voice in how their local school runs, if it runs at all. As education and educated people focus on abstractions and 'things' like technology, capital, goods and services, they keep getting more and more alienated from poor people. That is clearly visible in my country, now a power house of educated human resources and technology and is beginning to particularly matter as we now have the money to invest in village development and human well-being.

I believe Pradan has demonstrated one way of changing things around. In a small way, it has rediscovered professionalism as it was meant to be – a synthesis of head and heart, of feeling and purpose. It has demonstrated possibilities. I hope others will listen and join.

Thank you.