

## The Why of Social Sector

What is the collective why of the social sector that encompasses all our individual why's? During my many interactions with the people in the social sector I see a pattern – most of us have solid reasons for our personal existence in this sector but very few have actively thought about the overall reason(s) of existence for the entire sector.

Since quite a few suggestions, comments and critique about the social sector keep flowing in from other actors, including the government, private sector, media and would be philanthropists, a better understanding of social sector's core purpose for existence will help us have a firm and clear stance and not get sidetracked. Mission creep is not something restricted to specific projects only; it becomes much more severe when it takes the form of value creep or purpose creep.

In his famous book 'Managing Non Profit Organizations', Peter Drucker mentions that the primary role of the government sector is to formulate and enact various laws and policies that allow the society to work smoothly. The role of the private sector is to provide variety of goods and services that people need. He then goes ahead to say that the primary role of the social sector is to create "changed human beings". So for a private actor, when a good is sold (commensurate with expectations) and payment is made, then the job is done. However, social sector has to delve deeper and look at how to change the way the members of the society think, act, cooperate and come to realize their potential. This makes social sector's role much exciting and at the same time much more difficult to achieve and assess.

I made the transition to the social sector in 2008, after a brief stint in the corporate world. The reasons for that switch were quite personal then. I wanted to pursue social impact instead of personal profit. I thought the work here would be intellectually more stimulating and emotionally satisfying. I was thrilled by the prospect of meeting a wide array of exciting people coming from various walks of life and also thought that this was an opportunity for a more enriching lifestyle – something that took me closer to nature and engage in a meaningful pursuit of leading my life. While the last 12 years have stayed true on all these accords and have been immensely satisfying, I must say that it was only relatively recently that I started thinking more deeply about the why of the entire sector, what is our need, what role are we supposed to play. As said earlier, although most people and organizations have their individual missions, in the absence of an alignment with a larger guiding framework anything and everything seems permissible, initially even desirable, ultimately leading to unfounded aspirations, scattered actions, persistent confusion and lingering dissatisfaction.

I suppose the title NGO that is (was?) more popular in India and NPO that is used more commonly in the USA alludes to the social sector's inner need to differentiate itself from the dominant source of power in that particular country, government being so in India and private sector being so in the USA. Although it's been suggested that we should underscore our for-purpose nature (instead of for-profit or for-power) that is still a vague notion unless we specify, at least in broad terms, what that purpose is going to be as it applies to the entire sector. On the other hand, our secular nature is something that differentiates us from most of the organized religions quite clearly and hence that confusion over identity usually does not come up.

These days many actors in the social sector, especially younger ones, do not like to identify themselves as someone engaged in “social work” as that sounds overtly sentimental and less professional. For someone like me with a background in computer sciences, this also poses a binary problem: if we are the ones involved in “social work”, what is it that all the others are doing, “anti-social work”? It almost reminds the famous quote by W. H. Auden, “If we are here to help others, I often wonder what the others are here for”.



The young people in the [NIRMAN Youth Program](#) that I work with prefer to identify themselves as ones involved in “social problem solving”, “social changemaking” and “creating social impact”. These phrases probably give the feeling of being involved in activities that are more rigorous, analytical and long-term in nature. Impact Sector, an often used terminology, also helps to denote the de-linking of profit as the primary motivation of work. Having said this, almost everyone in the impact sector usually has to struggle hard to assess and demonstrate their impact. The problem here lies at the heart of the very nature of activities and challenges that the social sector is engaged in that are difficult to measure than the bottom line. The intrinsically measurable nature of money could be one major reason behind the push for finding out cost-benefit ratios by monetizing social impact instead of trying to crack the fuzzy of say ‘changed human beings’.

But irrespective of the vocabulary that we might use for ourselves, the question that still remains is: **why social sector? I propose a six-dimensional overarching framework:**

1. **Serving the people** with essentials for life where markets won’t and governments can’t operate:



Reaching the most vulnerable sections of the society and providing them critical services is a crucial work of the social sector. Markets won’t do that as they are not profitable enough and governments typically find it hard to solve the last mile problem with quality due to the difficulty of getting capable and committed manpower and creeping losses. This is where social sector needs to play its role with the approach of ‘seva’. The present coronavirus pandemic brought to light various such necessities where it was the voluntarily inspired action by various social organizations and citizens that helped the vulnerable people, where government was finding it hard to coordinate its actions. Initiatives that operate with marginalized people in rural, tribal regions or urban slums are often working on this aspect. The important thing to be kept in mind while engaging in ‘Lokseva’ is that we are “doing service” and not “providing a service”. The latter fits the mental framework of private sector better. The former is the one expected of the social sector, something that Gandhi would refer to when he would urge to engage in serving the poor (*Daridra Narayana*) as equivalent to service to the God.

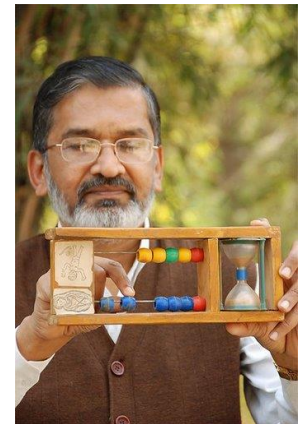
2. **Empowering people** and contributing to human development: Both private and government sectors tend to hold on to power – monetary or bureaucratic power – and concentrate it more and more in their own hands, keeping it away from the common people. They are usually not interested in the real human development of the people; instead want to keep them as consumers or voters or mere beneficiaries of schemes, without becoming truly powerful, autonomous and conscious citizens.

Thus, an important role of the social sector is to reduce this imbalance of power, to decentralize and democratize power, and to ensure human development so that people become empowered.

This is the essence of the real outcome of social sector as a changed human being.



3. **Experimenting and innovating** various social, scientific, technological, cultural solutions to pressing social problems: Being closer to community, not being constrained by red tape or the pressures of quarterly profits are some features that yield a special kind of agility and flexibility to the social sector organizations. It should be used for developing innovative pilots, creative experiments and personalized solutions to important social challenges. However the rigor of evidence must be established before claiming something as an effective model, else it might be misleading and ultimately hampering the credibility of this sector.



4. **Being a whistle blower** wherever there is injustice or oppression or corruption: Whether it's an individual activist or a group or a widespread movement, raising alarm bells and fighting for the rights of people, animals, environment is a crucial role of the social sector. This may involve, but is not limited to, taking a 'political stand' (not to do anything with party politics).



5. **Functioning as a channel of expression** for people's desire to contribute to community: Helping others in need is a natural instinct among people. A vital role of the social sector is to serve as an organized platform for a large number of people to be able to deliver and actualize this desire, whether its people who work full-time or part-time or volunteer their services or donate





money or become supporters of any other kind. By making it easy for people to fulfill their sense of responsibility and contribution to society, social sector institutions serve as vehicles of altruism. Celebrated evolutionary dynamics professor at Harvard, [Martin Nowak](#), has done pioneering work to show how cooperation and altruism [prevail](#) in nature. Out of the five major mechanisms proposed by Nowak, social sector is a great example of the mechanism of ‘indirect reciprocity’. By doing so, social sector performs a critical role for all those who invest their time, money and energy in this sector, and at a meta-level allows the spirit of altruism to spread.

6. **Upholding the values and morals** through actions and role models that elevate the society: Social sector entities might be involved in a variety of activities (*krutee*) but one of the most important aspect is the values (*vruttee*) that those activities promote. That impact is much larger and long term than the immediate benefits of the activities alone. There are quite a few values and morals that human society and civilization considers important (e.g. courage, sacrifice, benevolence, simplicity, justice, liberty, etc.). During the usual course of living, society often loses sight of these and thus needs a reminder from time to time. It needs role models of people, organizations and



actions that serve as a beacon of these values, restore community’s faith in these values, and elevate the moral height and aspirations of the public at large. This is why we need a Gandhi, a Martin Luther King Jr., an Anna Hazare or a Greta Thunberg. This also is a great opportunity and responsibility for the actors in the social sector regarding how they decide to live their lives and what sort of message they give through that. The work – life distinction or the professional – personal life

distinction that’s popular in the corporate sector (and now creeping in slowly in the social sector) is not to be viewed lightly. People in the social sector are held accountable (at least passively in the eyes of the community) also for their personal lives and the values they reflect. That also is a great source of influence. That’s why a 75 year old Anna who might not give eloquent speeches can still affect a large number of people with his simplicity, dedication and the message that he won’t give in to the corrupt and the powerful.

The above six overarching purposes are the *raison d’etre* for the social sector. They are cause agnostic, broad enough to encompass variety of initiatives and yet specific enough in the approaches to give us a pointed direction to think about our own work and the work of others in this sector.

India has a long history of state controlled economy and welfare. Since 1990, the forces of globalization and free market have also entered forcefully. The Indian social sector is frequently stretched between these two ideologies and often does not clearly know its position on this spectrum. It needs to reassess and solidify its philosophical foundation. The continuous mantra of ‘scale’ and ‘sustainability’ that the social sector grapples with these days is also an indication of wanting to become more like the government or the private sector. However we must question whether that’s the core DNA of this sector and should that be our primary aspiration. In a mammoth country like India any amount of scale achieved is inadequate from the perspective of reaching 1.3 billion. And the government quite

visibly keeps on showing the stark limitations of unmanageable scale. So then should achieving scale be the main motivation of our sector? If at all, we should aim for the scale of impact and not so much the scale of operations and infrastructure. In that light, the sixth dimension of influencing values and morals might be the best bet for social sector, instead of increasing budgets and multi-centric offices. For the other aspect of sustainability, a business is also sustainable only up to the limit that consumers keep on buying the products at a profitable rate. Today's performance is no guarantee of tomorrow's sustainability. A business has to keep on convincing consumers that it is worth paying money for the products or services. In case of the social sector, it has to keep on convincing its supporters (and beneficiaries when they pay up part of the cost) that it is worth donating money. So as long as organizations in both the sectors can keep income equal or more than the expenditure, they are sustainable. The stamp of (future) unsustainability is not for social sector alone. Even in the corporate world, customers can stop buying products, a rival can outperform a company and it can go bust in myriad other ways.

With the society around us changing so rapidly, social sector does need to reimagine and clarify its goal and investigate the role it would be playing to avoid the feeling of being lost. Instead of becoming more like the government or the private sector, it needs to reflect deeper about its own core purpose, its why. That's vital for our continued survival, relevance and success.



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*Note: This article assumes social sector / development sector / impact sector / civil society / NGOs / NPOs / social movements as entities falling in the same large bucket and to be used interchangeably.*

*An abridged version of this article appeared in Down To Earth and can be accessed at:*

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CLIMATE CHANGE

**'Changing humans': Why social sector exists**

Whistleblower, a channel of expression for the oppressed, innovator of scientific and cultural solutions — a social sector employee can don many hats

By Amrut Bang  
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