

**MYRADA**

*Rural Management System Series*  
*Paper - 11*

No.2, Service Road  
Domlur Layout  
**BANGALORE 560 071. INDIA.**  
☎ : 5353166, 5354457, 5352028  
Fax : 091 - 80 - 5350982  
E-mail : myrada@blr.vsnl.net.in  
Website : <http://www.myrada.org>

## THE SOUTH ASIA PARTNERSHIP

# A SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES

**INDIA PAPER**

Aloysius P.Fernandez  
September 10, 1987

---

---

### PART I

There is a thread that runs through the history of South Asia Partnership - a search for alternatives. For new systems to manage the transfer of resources, for new institutions to nurture relationships among voluntary agencies and among peoples' groups, for new equations that question and sometimes threaten traditional power groupings; for new understandings of emerging movements and institutions in South Asian countries as well as in Canada.

This search opened new horizons; it has its share of risks (upon which perhaps this paper will focus) as well as its consolations. It is motivated by a vision which has to be periodically refurbished if it is not to be eclipsed by the pressure of day to day demands from administration, from pulls and pressures that may seem more relevant in the short term or to which SAP<sup>1</sup> may feel it is to succumb in order to survive and gain favour. A vision is not an achievement; it cannot be quantified in terms of dollars, rupees, takas<sup>2</sup>; in terms of projects funded and budgets spent; it, to use a popular phrase 'non-viable'; and from this flows the risks. A vision has to be supported. One cannot mount an expedition to climb Everest without support. Once on top, the advertisement on your shirt and gear, the demand to address conferences all over the world will bring in the funds, but not before. These are the risks of a vision; it makes you dependent for funds, for favour. And yet it is the soul without which SAP would be dead; without which the expedition to conquer a mountain will never be mounted.

The history of relationships between Canada and the South Asian countries has been characterised by common perceptions and shared concerns. The fifties and sixties were marked by major collaborations and transfers of technologies, mutual efforts to maintain peace in the Congo, Korea and Vietnam; mutual support in areas of policy with a bias

---

<sup>1</sup> **SAP** - South Asia Partnership

<sup>2</sup> Takas - Bangla Desh currency

towards the poor and oppressed - The Colombo Plan and recently the Africa Fund. This underlying commonness has survived disagreements and even wars.

SAP is based on this commonness. It is unique in that it has to cope both with the complexities of a South-south dialogue and the fragility of a North-South partnership. The latter relationship has in turn to cope with the pressures of managing funds. This is particularly true of SAP Canada which is a channel of funds unlike some of the National SAP councils, like India, which till today has managed to avoid playing this role because it believes that it will impinge on its image as a facilitating institution and project that of a power broker - a role that tends to suppress alternatives rather than to respect and support them.

Yet funds have to be transferred; there is no way to make a search viable. And the initiators and managers of the South Asia Partnership can say with a degree of pride and in all honesty, that the transfer and use of funds has been true to Canadian and South Asian traditions. Unlike several other instances where funds from the developed countries have been used to disrupt linkages among the developing countries or to exaggerate differences and division, the funds transferred through the South Asia Partnership have been utilised to build bridges, deepen mutual understanding and bring committed people together to overcome a common problem - poverty. To quote the annual report of SAP (85-86). Amplifying on the brief submitted to the Canadian Government which was conducting a review of foreign policy "they (SAP Canada representatives) stressed that South Asia represents not only a developmental challenge for Canadians and their Government, but an opportunity to strengthen and explore many rich relationships between different sectors of society for the mutual benefit of Canadians and South Asians". This quotation enshrines a vision on which SAP survives.

The goals of SAP repeatedly highlight the words 'support, strengthen, encourage, build linkages, share'. The significant features to my mind are 'the building of linkages' and 'sharing'. Linkages cannot be supported without a degree of sharing.

Sharing does not mean that every one participating in LEAP has to drink mineral water because one group understandably needs it. It means giving up ones predilection to share rooms with a compatriot and to live with others; it means responding to the limitations of fellow travellers who come from a society that is just different; where vehicles are driven with the horn, where noise is at a premium; it means subscribing to the basic tenets of decent living and not using the hosts room as a common dustbin. It means that the 'host' must make allowance for delays, breakdowns and other eventualities which result in late arrivals, and not punish people by denying them breakfast for coming late. The relationship must be based on 'empathy' which is characterised by sensitivity, ability to listen and respond, to be open or transparent, to give of self, to desist from drawing ones boundaries and establishing territory; to put the other and the last first both as persons and as institutions. To quote from the minutes of the SAP Canada Board "there is a need to go beyond promoting our own agencies. We need to advance development in South Asia"

(May 20, 1987) - and may I add "in Canada as well". This goes beyond the transaction of mobilising and channelling funds, an operation that has the tendency to obscure, not to increase transparency, to develop a relationship of donor and donee not of partners, where an object is given, not oneself, where the pressure to extend ones sphere of influence needs to be controlled by the willingness to cooperate and over-lap.

Will the move to handle funds for the Social Forestry programme in India without a policy on the subject and to become a coordinating agency channelling funds in Sri Lanka enhance SAP's image as a growing funding mechanism or as the inspirational source of alternative strategies to provide people with a fuller and more humane existence?

SAP's direct involvement in the Sri Lanka programme is a special case for reflection. It was a laudable effort to ensure that the Canadian Government does not establish a direct funding relationship with NGO's; but has the SAP structure taken over? Is this an appropriate substitute for the direct relationships that Canadian Volags have maintained with local counterparts - or is it a *tertium quid* which is neither here nor there? Or was the decision a compromise and the best one negotiable in the circumstances?

It is most encouraging to read that the SAP Canada Board of Directors (Meeting May 20, 1987) discussed this issue extensively not only from the administrative implications but more on the impact this move would have on SAP's basic concept and vision.

With growing institutionalisation - which characterises SAP - the need for empathy increases. With new people guiding SAP and sharing responsibility to make it run, the need to share the vision is imperative. SAP developed and grew from the experiences of people which were similar and which made empathy possible; besides, their links had a long history. While the demands of institutions may require periodic if not regular turnover, it has its risks. These are even more pronounced in SAP where the wealth of shared experience and oral tradition played a far greater role in its early history than written and documented material.

True institutionalisation is inevitable; it is idealistic to expect the initial enthusiasm to be sustained without it; but the risks are there. Will it assist or foster the development and emergence of alternatives or become frozen in one pattern, will it continue to build bridges or begin to start staking out its territory; will it resemble a mini- UN institution that has a bureaucracy spread all over the world but waits for instructions from headquarters; will the members of the National Councils continue to be inspired by the initial vision and guide the organisation or will the bureaucracy take over as it does in most countries?

The move to register SAP in India is part of this institutionalising process. But de-linking SAP from its hosts which are operational will tend to give SAP the image of a funding agency which in India has a culture and relationships that tend to make it more vulnerable, less responsive to emerging pressures from the field and guided more by pressures and policies from above and outside the country. Given this development it may be appropriate

for SAP to consider increasing its capacity to achieve goals it has set for itself which go beyond the management of projects. For example :

1. To encourage interaction among volags within the country both to gain from an exchange of experiences as well as to unite to exert pressure and mobilise public opinion when required to change policies and practices biased against the poor or to develop alternate/new strategies and programmes which are more effective and relevant.
2. To become involved in strengthening regional/state groups of volags and in fostering such groups at the District level and below.
3. To build a resource base of skills and facilities which would support volags especially those who are small and who have chosen alternate and new strategies to overcome poverty and oppression. Such a base would be able to relate with similar efforts abroad and in the country which are concerned with similar structural issues that govern relations between North and South as well as among the countries in South Asia. SAP Nepal is thinking, I am informed, about an institute which can fill this role. Care, however, should be taken to staff such institutes with people who are not only academicians but who have also had field experience.
4. To raise funds within the country not only from the Government (here India has gone ahead and SAP has no role to play) but also from the general public (here SAP can assist in India as well as in other South Asian countries where there is a significant number of well-to-do).

These are areas where SAP could search for, support and initiate several alternatives.

But some questions need to be raised. Will these objectives be achieved only by enlarging SAP's organisation or should SAP encourage other volags (large and small) to add these dimensions to their work? Or does the strategy have room for both alternatives?

**LEAP** : This is a programme that has contributed to SAP's objectives that go beyond project management. There are however certain indicators that should encourage us to search for alternatives. The pace of the programme at times puts the participants in a pressure cooker - with the safety valve jammed. In the last experience each of the 3 vehicles carrying LEAP participants covered approximately 4000 kms. during 16 days. There is a broad spectrum of difference among participants regarding back-ground experience, language, expectations and interests. The Canadians (atleast most of them) should have been given at least a week to settle down and get acclimatised before the programme began. It may be useful to consider organising in-country LEAPS, before

participants for the cross country programme are selected. It may be useful to consider "mini-leaps" where a few participants of one country spend a longer period in another. In such an experiment, greater care and attention can be given to each individual and a programme can be designed that will be more appropriate to the person's needs. One of the most interesting and mutually useful exposure programmes was the six month stay in MYRADA of a Canadian student sponsored by HI DA.

These alternative strategies which are required to cope with the present situation where volags are represented by participants ranging from 20 to 70 years old; with differing ideologies and backgrounds. The older participants have arisen from movements - Independence, Gandhian - and from church related development institutions; next come those who grew out of the radical movements of the early seventies and lastly there is a large group of young people who have entered the Voluntary Agency field for a variety of reasons but who have little experience of movements and even of field work. On the Canadian scene, the era of the ex-clerics and ex-cusos is past or passing; those still in development have moved upwards into positions of authority and policy making; they had the benefit of extensive field exposure before they stepped into development administration.

#### **A FUNDING MECHANISM :**

Granting that SAP will continue to be involved with the management of project funds - an operation that at present absorbs a major share of time and attention - can SAP not turn its attention to alternatives systems of credit management at the level of the people who we call "beneficiaries" - term that reduces the responsibility of managing ones resources to a garland of gratitude when the donor appears.

The entire thrust of SAP's attention as regards funds is on the "delivery system". If attention is given to the management of funds at the other end it is restricted to utilisation certificates and audits. What about working to evolve rural credit systems that are an alternative to the money lender and the Banks which do not cover all the credit requirements of the poor (leave alone the problems involved to mobilise loans). MYRADA has given attention to this area of alternative rural credit systems which the poor can manage. NABARD has come forward under its rural development programme to support these rural credit systems. MYRADA is not alone in these efforts, but in India there are just two or three others. SAP could foster and encourage these alternate credit systems.

One cannot do better than quote from the SAP Evaluation Report to conclude this part. No doubt the report has had an impact on SAP's performance during 1987 and as a result several of its recommendations are being implemented; but its comments are valid.

"Projects are not part of a larger strategy or even of a larger vision thereby reducing substantially their potential impact ..... lack of context or strategy ... of direction gives way to the imposition of mechanical rules to

guide the work: one year funding; one-time funding; arbitrary limits as to budget size; limited period of time.... The project machine syndrome is only a symptom of deeper causes. There is no longer a vision shared by those involved in SAP... The weakness in the overall vision, of strategy and of leadership permit the unbridled growth of the easiest thing to package and produce: repetitive, unimaginative projects of the least controversial nature.... Not having their own development plans to guide them, the Asian counterparts let themselves be unduly influenced by that they think Canadian agencies will support. .... the partnership is at times reduced by mutual acceptance of each other's weaknesses. When critical judgement and trusts are confused with criticism and blind faith, it is extremely difficult to exercise leadership... to the degree the currency of partnership remains dollars in a one-way exchange, we have not moved very far along the path of resolving the inherent donor-recipient relationship and its inherent attitudes of dependency".

There are several instances of partner organisations threatening to leave SAP because the 'project machine' does not produce enough or is not large enough - SAP India's ceiling of Rs.200,000/- for example was one such issue that caused such a reaction. Let us have alternatives for threatening to leave: If SAP's vision is not refurbished; if the commitment to this vision is not increased; if partnership does not become a major thrust; if sharing is not the basis of relationship. These are the alternatives. When will they begin to have an adequate impact on all SAP partners and on policy?

---

---

THE INDIAN SCENARIO

These comments will deal specially with the relationship between Government and volags (or between volags and non-voluntary agencies - otherwise called Government).

There is ample evidence to indicate the Indian Government's policy to involve volags in its anti-poverty programme. This willingness to involve volags is not based on any adhoc decision by interested people in Government (of which thank the gods there are many); it has become an integral part of policy and planning in every Government Department. Both politicians and bureaucrats are aware of the presence and the programme of volags; true perceptions of their nature and role differ; but a great deal of thought and discussion has gone into this relationship. The basis of which has been enshrined in the Seventh Plan document.

The Government's policy has been backed up by action. Institutions sponsored by Government but with adequate independence and volag representation have been established (CAPART, National Wasteland Development Board) to deal directly with volags. They provide a forum where both Government and volags feel free to meet. (As an outsider I can speak with some degree of objectivity - I am not on any CAPART committee). Care has been taken by the Government to post officers who have an understanding of and appreciation of volags.

Not a day passes without one Minister or the other referring to the role of volags. At the meeting of Chief Ministers in Delhi in September '87 to assess the drought situation and to plan an adequate response, several Chief Ministers mentioned with appreciation the contributions of voluntary groups.

Yet there are risks - as in every other sector. I could compare volag experience to a person before an elephant : Sometimes the volag stands in front and is garlanded, at other times, the volag is below and in danger of being trampled upon. There is often a third situation where the volag feels both garlanded and trampled at the same time. This can happen because of several reasons - the large bureaucracy for one. It may be interesting to record for example that the Government through CAPART is providing funds for programmes involved with organising of the poor and oppressed where issues of injustice concerning land rights, dowry, the place of women in society are debated on and follow-up action taken. Yet such involvement could create problems with the Ministry of Home Affairs - this is a situation where the volag feels both garlanded and trampled upon. There are other situations, however, where the volag has failed to differentiate between 'political' action which is the fundamental right of everyone and 'party politics' which relates to the political system. There is also evidence to show that several voluntary workers have a leaning towards party politics. This is where their images becomes blurred, and once in this arena they are vulnerable, as the forces against them are far more experienced and often ruthless. The dividing line is thin, but it has to be maintained if a

volag is to be effective at the grass-roots where its role will always keep it at arms length from those in power. The right to become involved with the problems of one's fellow citizens is a fundamental right; no Government can give it or take it away.

There are other risks as well. To quote from an editorial in "The Times of India" of September 30, 1986. Reacting to the attempt to set up a code of conduct and a National Council of Volags through an Act of Parliament the Editorial says: "At one level, it would seem that the Government has now realised the value of voluntary effort in rural areas and that it wants to tap it for developmental effort. But there is a catch in this proposition.

In its overzealousness to disburse developmental funds through voluntary agencies, the Government seems to be ignoring the fact these agencies also represent a form of unorganised dissent and opposition to its own policies and that this role is at least partly responsible for their effectiveness. Therefore, to the extent possible, voluntary agencies need to keep their distance from the state machinery if they want to remain effective. While the Government may gain legitimacy for its rural development efforts by involving voluntary groups, for many of them it could virtually be the kiss of death. At the practical level too, the proposed moves (to establish a code of conduct) seem fairly unnecessary. Voluntary agencies already work within a plethora of controls. There are enough rules and regulations to govern their activities and in fact each ministry in the Government has a standing committee to oversee the disbursement of funds to the voluntary sector. Additional controls are therefore bound to be resisted by voluntary agencies. And if the agencies that do not have the requisite "professional competence" or are not "explicitly committed to secularism, socialism and democracy" are neither eligible for state funding nor to be members of the proposed council, then how can these very instruments be used to control their activities? If the Government really wants to encourage the work of rural voluntary agencies, it would do well to withdraw the tacit support it has been giving to these ill-advised moves".

A particular school of intellectuals finds a "four-fold confluence - multinationals, the corporate sector at home, foreign Governments and local regimes" to which a "fifth set of actors" is added - "The World Bank", IMF, UNDP, FAO" - who this school thinks have discovered in "the NGO model a most effective instrument of promoting their interests in penetrating Third World economics and particularly their rural interiors which neither private industries or Government bureaucracies were capable of doing ...." .... these agencies have created and supported large NGOs which together have exercised control over the Voluntary Sector. "The centralising trend initiated by large NGOs is exhibited not just in large scale dairying that is penetrating the rural areas in more and more regions but also in the even more vast terrain of forestry, dryland farming, wasteland development and other new avenues of colonising the vast hinterlands of village India and tribal homelands. (Quotes from "The NGOs, the State and World Capitalism" by Rajni Kothari).



Though one may not agree with this analysis or with the implied conclusions, it is worth recording here because these intellectuals do have an impact though in a restricted area. Their role is useful, provided others realise their limitations and do not present them as the Source of Truth.

If volags are to do the job, besides the flexibility and commitment which are their primary features they need to absorb:

1. elements from the simple life styles of genuine Gandhians.
2. the ability to organise the poor to exert pressure on vested interest - characteristic of the radicals.
3. the institutional stability of the older churches.
4. professional skills of the new entrants into the volag world.
5. appropriate management and accountability systems.

Asking too much? not enough if volags are to meet the challenge and meet it in time!

Volags in India are increasingly aware that it is not adequate to improve the delivery system of development; neither is it adequate to extend this system into hitherto underdeveloped areas. Equal if not more effort is required at the other end - to build up the capacity and resources of the people so that they can develop their own management skills and evolve appropriate rural systems to mobilise, manage and control their resources.

It is not enough therefore to make them aware and to organise; them; they have to move further if they are to establish self-sustaining institutions for their continued growth.

A Volag infact derives its strength from its ability to reverse the process of learning, management and communication. The source and base of this process is often called "people's participation", a much abused term, or a term which is used all too frequently today without analysing its content and meaning. True, there is no single or absolute content or meaning; each volag develops its own concept and strategy of people's participation. Unlike most religions which draw inspiration from a single source, volags write their own Bible on people's participation and it develops not from above but from below. Its source is not a definition established by someone up there, but the real listening to, the empathy with and respect for people, their problems and suggestions. Their success is not assessed by targets fixed from above. The official blueprint gives way to a learning process in which leadership and team work from below play the major role. Hence, the "feedback" that the target setters and blue printers demand from below, is really the "feed"; the process is reversed. This is where volags step out of the Government's sphere of influence into an area where the official network cannot operate. The importance of people's participation as the key to all anti-poverty or minimum needs

programmes has been accepted officially, but it is questionable whether the official system is flexible, resilient and honest enough to absorb the consequences of this acceptance. Once again each experience will differ from the other. The volag needs to develop not only a strategy to make the official system, especially at the interface more open, flexible and responsive. To adopt a rigid position that all that Government does is against development of the poor is to close all doors to constructive dialogue. It is finally the poor who suffer as a result of our ideological pride.

To conclude, let me answer a few queries that are often raised regarding the relationship between Government and Volags in India:

1. Is the present situation conducive to volag growth? Yes, it is, and the proof is that the number of volags is growing. India is a democracy which is the basis for the development of volags - in turn strengthens the democratic system. What gives me confidence that India will remain a democracy is not the fact that the constitution enshrines the values and institutions of democracy but the all pervading ethos of Indian culture where there are no dogmas; no one has a monopoly on truth; all are partially right and partially wrong. Indians do not shake their heads from side to side to say 'no' or up and down to say 'yes'. Both messages are conveyed by a combination of movements which only another Indian can decipher. This is the underlying ethos which Hinduism has supported and nurtured. True the weakness of this culture is in its social expression of caste where it unexpectedly becomes rigid. There are today forces which are adopting absolute postures but these are reactions to the policies and expressions of other minority religious groups and have much to do with the changing socio-economic status and new political forces. In this emerging situation, volags will be watched; much depends on whether they are religious or secular; whether they are using a religious platform to further their interests. Volags must preserve at all costs their secular and non-communal image as well as avoid the temptation to subscribe to absolutist ideologies.
2. Is Government control increasing? It is - but there are several areas in which this control is exercised. In the area of finance management not only have controls increased but these are being implemented and monitored. This is a good development and volags must not only be accountable but the culture in the organisation must be open as regards finance matters. This is essential for their health and credibility and if they are to recruit and keep young committed professionals. In the area of political action (organisation of the poor - non-party politics) the Government is supporting volags. True there will be conflicts with some departments of Government in this area but this conflict can be contained and managed by effective volag cooperation at the State and Central levels. The larger volags are able to cope with this conflict and they need to support the smaller ones.

3. What is the position regarding foreign funds? Does it affect the national image? Sometimes people give me the impression that only volags receive foreign funds. Last year nearly 1000 contracts were signed with foreign firms which bring in foreign funds, technology and representatives and strengthen the 'five star' culture of this country. Besides the bilateral agreements signed by the Governments also bring in the same resources. This is not a feature particular to India; it is common to every country in the world-funds slosh across every national border; however, in most cases, it is a two way flow. The same is true for technology. Why does this not affect the national image or pride?

As far as funds are concerned - in developed countries they not only flow in but also out. The currency of the country is strong; it has value outside; and this value is in turn based on the strength of the economy. It does not affect America's pride or image even if it is the worlds largest debtor.

The image of dependency that foreign funds create therefore can be removed if the country's economy is strong and there is value for its currency outside its borders because there is a demand for its goods and services. India is moving in this direction. As far as technology goes, India has the capacity to manage, adapt and absorb this technology.

If therefore foreign funds and relationships are to be accepted certain features and developments are required :

1. Indian volags must be accountable - and seen to be so.
2. They must mobilise local resources.
3. They must develop a relation and an image of partnership with volags abroad - they have a great deal to offer to others and also the capacity to receive.
4. They must develop an organisational culture that is open, professional (in terms of required skills) and at the same time committed and creative - constantly searching for alternatives which are more appropriate and of which the people have greater control.

To be genuinely Indian, SAP India must foster these objectives the trends are already visible but on the one hand they need support and on the other, any development that tends to obstruct or hinder their progress must be rejected.



nk