



We are the world

Sindhanai brings networking opportunities to NGOs

September 2002: The hot Chennai weekend does not give the impression of being very happening. There isn't exactly a crowd thronging the neat lineup of stalls at the sprawling AVM Charities Hall in the city's arterial Radhakrishnan Salai. But Vidya Shankar, organizer and founder-chairperson of Relief Foundation, does not really mind.

"Yes, a larger number of visitors would help but we haven't really given priority to publicity. For one, we don't have the resources to enable that and there is only so much I can do. But mostly because the real purpose of this exhibition is to enable an exchange of ideas and sensitivities amongst the NGOs. That may not provide immediate or visible results but the benefits will be long-lasting and come in ways that cannot be pinpointed or predicted exactly." With neither the public nor publicity, *Sindhanai* (which means 'Thought' in Tamil) 2002, recognizes and encourages that rare and essential necessity for the social sector - networking.

Relief Foundation began in 1998 as an organization promoting the welfare of children in institutional care. Even while retaining that core competency, the organization has since consciously developed as a resource centre that facilitates partnership between the civil, business and government sectors. While the vision is to be the "most admired institution involved in ensuring that every child enjoys childhood to its fullest," the group hopes to achieve it through, "networking, partnerships, resource mobilization and the strengthening of family units." It is a rather unique and under-recognized perspective, one that deserves to be understood and emulated.

The NGO sector, all its good intentions notwithstanding, can be as blinkered and incestuous as any other industry or service. One high-profile organization which works for the disabled has very little interest or understanding of the needs of the mentally challenged - both of whom share rights under the same piece of legislation. An NGO working for children in Ennore, part of the very vulnerable North Madras area, can only rue and condemn the bad roads and other infrastructure in the far-flung port suburb but still does not consider networking with other organizations in the area to push for a solution with a stronger voice.

Many women's groups do not participate in children's issues and vice versa, even though their problems are often linked and overlapping. In one plush seminar organized by an NGO that sought the inclusion and mainstreaming of the marginalized, over a period of two days, plastic and paper were trashed in the most unforgivable fashion - cups, plates, posters and files so indiscriminately and extravagantly used that it was difficult to believe this was an informed gathering which stood for a cause - any cause.

Whenever coverage is sought, one often encounters this underlying insinuation : how can any cause be more important than this one - ours? We could be talking about the rights of the HIV positive or persons with disabilities or street children or gender discrimination or the neglect of the aged or any other pressing and worthy concern which deserves its 'right'ful place in society as a whole. The lack of mutual understanding is likely to spillover even when opportunities present themselves to work in unison for a greater common good. After all, when those who choose to care more than the self-driven society they wish to reform cannot be bothered to care about each other, is it any wonder that the population in general is apathetic?

At the Greenpeace stall in *Sindhanai*, one young activist - who did not wish to be named - said, "We are still new here, having set up office in July. An expo of this kind has been a good chance to interact with other NGOs working in the environment sector - and there aren't too many of those. We have been walking around, taking turns, speaking with so many other people - it is a good opportunity to build up goodwill and awareness. We have also had a good many student groups coming in as part of their field work and that too is a good chance to find volunteers, build contacts and spread the word, so to say."

At the TANPIC (Tamil Nadu Primary School Improvement Campaign) stall a volunteer has more positive things to add, "There really is constructive and real benefit. For example, we are interested in ensuring that quality education is made available across municipal schools in rural areas. Here (at *Sindhanai*), for instance, we have come across a group which adopts schools and after this initial exchange of ideas, we hope to keep in touch and benefit from each other's strengths."

Now in its third year, *Sindhanai* endured the fallout of recession this year, and corporate support was hard to find. Postponing the event to September so that the schools of social work could benefit and participate, organizing an effort which cost Rs. 2.85 lakhs in all, is an uphill task. A stall costs Rs.2,350 to put up but participants are charged only Rs.1,000 for their space. Unlike other expositions which are run on a commercial lines, like the recent one in New Delhi which pegged a stall at Rs.20,000 and still found

takers, Sindhanai's focus remains on staying accessible across all NGOs - high-profile, well-funded or otherwise. Says Shankar, "We have always been working independently, crying ourselves hoarse over our problems. Instead we must focus on the pluses and work together, drawing strength from our numbers and from each other. We are not just volunteers working for a particular cause, we are also individuals."

Distributing pamphlets, exhorting visitors, answering questions, selling products and exhibiting services, Sindhanai 2002 saw everything, including a notice from a AIDS awareness NGO which said, "Interested in acting? Join our street theatre." There are over 30,000 registered NGOs in Chennai alone, all of them having secured 80G exemption benefits from the Income Tax Department, some dormant, some functional, some successful and some about whom nothing is known at all. Says Shankar, "Just look at the amount of duplication involved - not just of money but of administration costs, quality manpower, awareness, visibility, credibility - everything." Sindhanai is giving the NGOS something to think about.

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