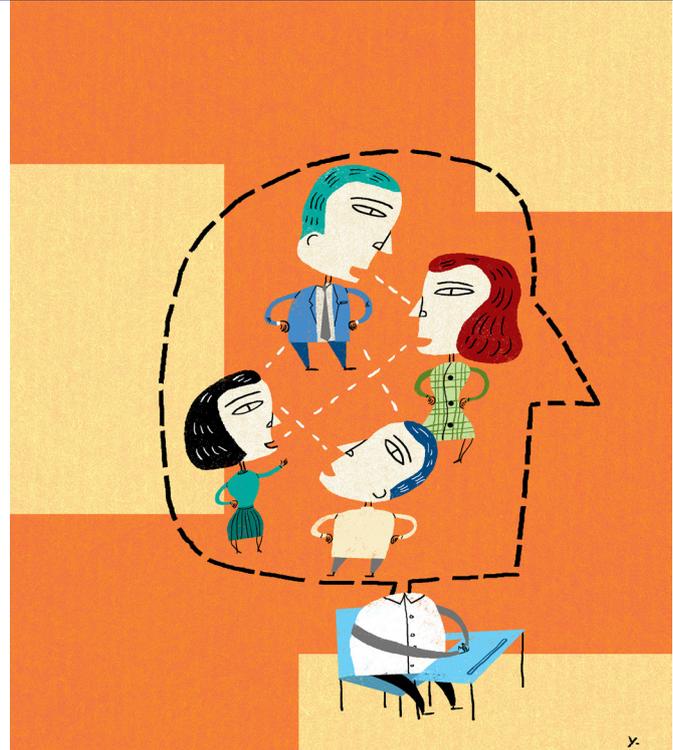# Reflective Practice in Social Change:

The Case of PRADAN, one of India's most promising large anti-poverty NGOs

PART I: Core Questions for Social Change Practitioners

Rolf Lynton and David Kiel

I have been on the road much of the past few months - about 20 days every month since May, doing some assignments that take me to the poorest parts of India. There is so much poverty and even today one can so easily find villages where no one older than 10 has ever been to school and can comprehend the 'official language' of the State government. Poverty, ignorance about not just the extent but more importantly about the depth of it are all so widespread and for no comprehensible reason at all. Modernisation and the 'new institutions and paradigms' it has spawned seem to have so alienated us...

I look forward to meeting you when you come in January. Please give my regards to Ronnie and take care. Best, Deep

(Email Communication from Deep Joshi to Rolf Lynton, October 19, 2010) [1]

1. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CONVERSATION

This article is intended to be the beginning of a conversation about how one species, at least, of social change practitioners works, thinks, and reflects. This installment is the first of two, perhaps three essays on this topic. We start with a robust example of what we mean by 'social change' and then propose a series of principles and definitions. In our second installment (to be published in the next edition of this journal) we will return to the case to discuss three particular interventions, their results, and what the practitioners learned. We will end our conversation with the broader implications for how social change practitioners can and should help institutions become learning organizations - but we argue that, first, we have to help ourselves to be better action-learners. The context for the conversation is PRADAN, one of India's most respected NGOs for economic and social uplift. The specific challenge that PRADAN faces is how to grow from assisting in the development of 80,000 new livelihoods in India's poorest villages to one million or more by 2017. PRADAN took up this challenge in 2007 and the practitioners in this story have been working on it ever since.

In the light of it we want to explore several core questions embodied in the title of this on-line journal. We also hope to stimulate discussion on issues and questions like these:

- What is (all?) social change?
- What is involved in having a practice in the applied behavioral science field that aims to facilitate social change?

- To be involved as a practitioner of social change involves building and sustaining 'path-breaking, counter-cultural institutions' - often/always?
- Does being involved in such innovative institutionbuilding of this drastic order require practitioner innovation as well? (Perhaps the term 'innovative' is an understatement of what is required? Maybe 'experimentation' would be more apt?)
- How do we support each other and the institution in experimenting/innovating in the midst of helping large-scale change?
- It seems to us that social change practitioners are often in a territory where the map has not been written; while the direction is clear, the eventual outcome will only develop detail by the doing. True?
- To be a practitioner of social change involves diligent recording, reflection and learning as you go. How can this be done well/manageably when, at times, practitioners may feel overwhelmed by the work itself?

All along, we hope that readers will respond to us with questions and comments to this series of articles based on their own experiences and reflections on these and related issues. So - who knows? - that may lead to a third installment in this series.

We also aim to illustrate and experiment with one method of supporting reflection of a particular and potentially reproducible kind. We call this method the learning pair or reflective partnership. Here one partner is the practitioner who is engaged in the project, and the other is the listener and responder, a sounding board for reflective learning. So we offer this essay and the one that follows as a "play within a play" on the theme of reflective practice.

1.1 An Introduction to PRADAN - an innovative institution for social change in "ten percent poorest" rural India

PRADAN, now three decades old, focuses explicitly on making the poorest of India's rural poor agents of their own rise up from poverty. Its goal is to help poor families develop 'new livelihoods' defined as income-producing additions to subsistence living. In addition, income-producing activity further connects families to their villages and beyond to the wider world, and leads to more widely active and fulfilled lives.

This self-agency theme makes PRADAN's work essentially different from an external aid agency which puts new livelihoods (or facilities) into the village. Evaluations overwhelmingly show that villagers lose interest in, stop maintaining, or get into disputes over, this external agency of 'aid'. [2]

Women are the main carriers of this strategic change. In most villages and families they are new to agency of any kind beyond the household and that of child rearing, yet these women are also the most eager, ready and able to devote time to new endeavors. PRADAN helps them form Self-Help-Groups (SHGs), the basic building block for this development. So empowered and supported, women start new activities and also become more influential in their villages. Beyond adding to family income and fostering

the self-respect women gain from being earners, these changes also lead to their broader social and political involvement.

At the last count, PRADAN works in some 600 development 'Blocks' in over 100 'Districts' across North India's seven states. Women's SHGs there meet regularly to discuss common concerns, help each other, and access micro-loans. In increasing numbers they link up into federations of SHGs to share effective practices, develop new economic initiatives, and influence official policies. PRADAN staff nurture the villages in self-determination and self-management, and they transfer technical skills. Then staff move on to other villages.

In 2010 PRADAN spent about four hundred million rupees or about $8 million USD. (Taking prices into account, this $8 million spent in rural India has, of course, several times the purchasing power of that amount in western countries or even in fast urbanizing India.) During its 2009-10 fiscal year PRADAN's 300 staff helped an additional 99,000 families develop new livelihoods. [3] In 2006 PRADAN won India's first NGO-of-the-year award.

To American eyes, PRADAN's model has a VISTA or Peace Corps quality to it (ie that of a long-term community service assignment) and, in fact, PRADAN, dates from the same era and is founded on similar thinking. PRADAN recruits new graduates from universities with specialised degrees - usually Master's - in relevant technical areas like agriculture, forestry, water management, engineering, and business organization. However, unlike the two-year VISTA or Peace Corps assignments, many staff make a career with PRADAN.

Pay is a living wage that increases only with seniority, irrespective of position or function. As a result, staff can shift roles as needed without financial consequences for themselves or for PRADAN. This low pay runs counter to India's burgeoning economy and its many openings to high-paying professional positions and, for many recruits, also upsets the expectations of their families. After a year's apprenticeship to examine their suitability and commitment, PRADAN posts new recruits to a local 'team' so that they can immerse themselves in chosen villages and, with access to a 'field-guide', contribute and learn all they can.

PRADAN staff work very independently but their team meets regularly to review and plan. Team leaders are 'long-timers' in PRADAN, and they and the more senior leadership are the key practitioners in this account.

1.2 An Introduction to the practitioners

Deep Joshi, whose quotation heads this paper, is the creator and forever practitioner-in-chief of this story. He founded and arranged the start-up funds for PRADAN as a program officer with the Ford Foundation-in-India in the early 1980s. He became its second executive director when the first left to create BASIX, India's pioneer bank for micro-credit. In 2009 he won the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award for Asia "for his vision and leadership

in bringing professionalism to the NGO movement in India, by effectively combining 'head' and 'heart' in the transformative development of rural communities" [4], and in 2010 received one of India's own highest public honours. Currently he serves PRADAN as a consultant.

Rolf Lynton, long-time consultant to new institutions in India (and elsewhere) and co-author of this paper, has known Deep and PRADAN's early executive directors since its beginning in the 1980s. For the past five years, he has been PRADAN's external consultant in India every winter, and is in year-round correspondence with it. Here, too, as in many other assignments, his wife, Ronnie, has been his constant colleague and sounding-board-in residence. Ronnie also led the program on writing case studies for senior staff to use in PRADAN's own staff development programs.

All along Deepankar Roy has been PRADAN's much-used local consultant-on-call. He has advised on system-wide and technical issues, and has identified consultants for team development and interpersonal skills training. He has also been Rolf's leading colleague there.

For the duration of the five years of Rolf's consultancy the key planner and ongoing point-person for Rolf's and all related consultancy work was Nivedita Narain, Director for Human Resources, herself the pioneer of women's SEGs.

PRADAN is, in fact, a community of practitioners for social change, for all 300 staff have made a long-term conscious commitment to end rural poverty and to learn and grow in their practice and in developing the PRADAN organization.

1.3. An introduction to the authors.

The paper is based largely on the work of Rolf Lynton, an emeritus member of NTL and long-time social science practitioner, aided mightily by his highly accomplished wife, Ronnie Lynton. Rolf and Ronnie have a long, compelling and still on-going history of involvement in development work especially in India, but in other countries as well.

David Kiel has been engaged in this project as a discussant and chronicler over these years, and now as a co-conceptualizer of this paper. He has not been directly engaged with PRADAN. David is also a social change practitioner and NTL member but his clients are mostly in North Carolina. David is currently the Steward of NTL's Research Community of Practice, and works in the Center for Faculty Excellence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This account of the PRADAN adventure is Rolf's, but David and Rolf have thought together about how to shape it, and about the issues it raises for discussion. [5]

As mentioned earlier, David and Rolf are writing this article self-consciously as a 'learning pair', or as 'reflective partners'. Their goal is to explore the possibilities for how learning from experience can be enhanced when practitioners team up to report on an important social

change effort, with one party the outside observer and the other the internal actor.

1.4 The challenge to PRADAN and the experiments and innovations that were required to meet this challenge

Driven by PRADAN's commitment to end rural poverty, encouraged by funders who supported this work, and with two decades of experience and 80,000 new livelihoods actually on the ground, PRADAN's leaders decided 'to go to scale'. What they meant by this remained to be determined.

In 2007 they asked Rolf to help them think through this challenge and develop the organization for it. Multiplying more than ten-fold to a million new livelihoods by 2015 became the first target. The very next year they increased the target to 1.5 million to be achieved by 2017 by reaching out to other NGOs for help in developing the additional half-million livelihoods [6].

To undertake such an expansion required many innovations and experiments for an organization that had laboured hard to establish effective patterns and ways of working over more than two decades. These innovations and experiments included the following:

1. **Seeing systems change.** An initial challenge was to visualize just what the new, expanded PRADAN might look like and how relationships with its much larger world would change.

2. **Expanding into new territories.** A second challenge was to expand into new states and regions where PRADAN lacked historical ties and where conditions on the ground were different from those in the regions and states it currently served. To expand into new areas also ran counter to the original preference for, and practice of, recruiting and placing staff in their own state and language areas, and so also near family support.

3. **Accelerating village empowerment.** Staff now had to be ready to move to unfamiliar places, traditions and social arrangements, and into different language zones, including the tribal areas. These regions occupy much of India's mountainous and forested center and include the very poorest, least accessible and most severely marginalized villages. Some of these villages are also among the most restive and violent in the nation. Expansion severely tested the original mandate for staff to involve themselves directly in village life and do whatever they could in an open-ended fashion. As PRADAN aimed to expand significantly the number of villages served by 2017, the process of empowerment and self-help needed to accelerate. This imperative led PRADAN to adopt schemes to recruit villagers to do more and more of the hands-on technical tasks. Then, with growing experience and in ever-larger numbers, the villagers took over the very tasks that staff, technically and managerially trained as they were, found most satisfying.

4. **Super-sizing.** The greatly increased size of PRADAN, itself, posed a challenge. Multiplying PRADAN ten-to-fifteen times was bound to affect the nature of what it did, but how, and to what effect? Toyota's recent drive to become the largest car-maker globally, observers say, led quite promptly to its recent damaging safety problems. Could PRADAN still be a highly respected award winning organization when it reached 'X ten'?

5. **Implications for the practitioners**. In order to be successful in 'going to scale' PRADAN, as an institution, had to adapt, and adapt quickly to these and other challenges. How would the consultant team work with PRADAN's team leaders and senior leaders to increase the likelihood of this rapid growth having the hoped-for outcome? What applied behavioral science-based practices and approaches would prove helpful and in what ways? We will return to these questions, but first we want to explore the larger context of 'practising social change' of which PRADAN is one exemplar.

2. CORE QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED.

2.1 What *is* 'Social Change'?

What do we mean by 'social change'? Taken literally it is a neutral term, one that merely distinguishes physical change from social change, or change affecting groupings and societies from change affecting individuals alone. Yet we mean something much more. We mean - and we think this is implicit in the understanding of the writers and readers of this journal - intentional efforts to change society in progressive and positive directions. That is the intent; each effort is then to be judged by its actual results and consequences.

We hold that 'progressive change' is fostered by particular organizations, strategies, and approaches that grow out of impulses for a more equitable, just, democratic, sustainable and harmonious society. Such impulses, are present in every country on the planet, and are also everywhere embattled. Not everyone likes this kind of change. For some it is too populist, too unruly, too secular, too impractical, too idealistic, and too destructive to the immediate and long-term interests of current religious, political, social, ethnic, racial, gender or geographic groups in power. So 'social change' is always controversial, contested, sometimes contentious and often morally complex.

In India, the second largest nation, social change involves tackling problems of poverty and the widening income disparities; of oppression of women; of historic caste and color; of tribal discrimination; of the sidelining of the rural by the urban; and of linking otherwise isolated villages and communities in a humane and empowering relationship to the broader regional, national, and global economy.

2.2 How does one '*practise* social change'?

The term 'practise' here has a special meaning. It certainly includes the everyday meaning of 'repetition with the aim of improving performance', but it also includes the notion of 'professional practice' as in the practice of law and medicine, two of the most venerable professions, or the practice of social work or psychotherapy and other newer professions. In addition, practising social change involves formal training that draws on the insights and methods from sociology, political science, anthropology, history, religious studies, organizational behavior and other disciplines, and it highlights the importance of 'the conscious use of Self' - in the same way that teachers in the classroom, lawyers in the courtroom, doctors in the consulting room, and actors in the theater use (or should use) 'Self' in their work. Hence there is a need for practice - and a need for colleagues 'to practise with', and for clients 'to practise on' (behalf of). In the current case, we have Rolf and Deepankar as practitioners in center stage, and there are various groupings of PRADANites as immediate clients and co-practitioners, plus David as listener/prompter/recorder/reflector.

2.3 With **whom** does one Practise?

Learning the violin requires solo practice, tennis requires two people to practise, and a doctor or lawyer may 'practise with' a firm but practises 'on' or on behalf of clients - individuals, families or groups. The OD-consultant practices typically with a clearly-bounded client (eg a bank, a school, a city government) or performs a known service (eg team building or strategic planning).

An organization of social change practitioners practise both "with and on" (behalf of) major normative change as their core mission, like righting historic wrongs by creating more equitable social relationships, preserving the peace, improving the health and prosperity of populations, or working toward sustainable environmental stewardship. And not only does such an organization want to improve the functioning of society in this matter but it also wants to change the way it thinks and behaves with respect to it.

So while all human organizations have normative dimensions embedded in their mission, culture, policies and practices, for institutions like PRADAN norms are at the core and quite explicitly so, and they also require deliberate and highly interactive relations with the wide world 'outside'. UNESCO and Save the Children are two other well-known examples: they have missions and outside relations which are dramatically different from those of the Forbes 100 corporations or of major government organizations like the US Air Force or even school education or food distribution programs that serve one child or family at a time and leave unplanned any wider effects.

In our terms then, practitioners of social change are professionally trained change agents who often work with those particular kinds of institutions whose mission is explicitly to bring about progressive social change in an identified society or set of societies. PRADAN is clearly such an institution, working as it is to change the way a society thinks about and deals with rural poverty. It is also working to change the way the rural poor themselves live their individual and communal lives. (In fact it might be said that a reciprocal and self-reinforcing pattern of changes between the way society thinks and the way the poor themselves think and act is the ultimate desired outcome.) Other positive values (greater efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, harmony, clarity, quality of working life etc) that may be the explicit goals of other types of change organizations are here byproducts at best. Change in the way society thinks and behaves must be understood as the central task of these kinds of institutions.

2.4 What is the **special nature** of social change practice and social change practitioners?

Often these social change oriented institutions are operating in uncharted territory. They are constantly experimenting and innovating and so they are less bounded, and have to be more 'open' then those organizations which are operating in fields where 'whats', 'whys', and 'how tos' are more generally known.

Their practitioners also have to be, themselves, innovative in how they work and how they relate to the wider world. It follows that they have to keep attuned to new and emerging needs, and to design and use fresh approaches and methods. They may also urge and conduct practical experiments: they see a need, they address that from their training and experience no doubt, but with a sense of perception sharpened and made more acceptable by their continuing presence with the institution. This inspires trust in the perception about what will help and what all can expect from their experimental next steps. They can see how far earlier plans were implemented, whether or not sought results were accomplished, and where things went awry in some way. Practising social change then is an extra exciting, challenging and even engrossing occupation.

An implication of this formulation is that the social change practitioner needs to be 'in it for the long haul'. The practitioner needs to be prepared 'to stay with it'; to see that the normative intention is maintained and accessible; and to continue to contribute to adjusting direction and/ or helping with next steps. Even when he/she acts in consulting mode, he/she is more committed to actually seeing results than the work of consulting usually implies.

Such practitioners are also to 'be with' key players and so understand and to some extent absorb the culture and think with leaders there from the 'inside'. They can see and adjust; they have proximity to the events on the ground; they are connected to, and care about, the people and the leaders with whom they work.

Last but not at all least, there is one more characteristic of practising social change that needs to be highlighted. Given the long time-spans and the extra-great complexities of counter-cultural purpose, innovation and ranging large scale, reflection upon practice assumes extra great importance and needs to be recorded well enough in order to facilitate learning. The practitioner is committed to the idea that thinking, generating new insights, and sometimes writing for fellow practitioners and for scholars is essential to build the art and a craft of social change. Louise Diamond's reflection on her many years of experiences in peace-making in Cyprus in the first issue of this journal is a good example of what we mean and, within NTL alone, we could identify many other such social change practitioners [6].

3. A LOOK AHEAD TO PART II.

In our next installment we want to talk in greater depth about what practitioners do, and how they think and learn. We discuss three significant interventions Rolf and Deepankar led over five years to help PRADAN achieve its ambitious goal of multiplying its impact ten-to fifteenfold times in ten years. These three interventions might be described as:

1. Practical Visioning
2. Strengthening PRADAN as a Learning Organization, and
3. Building Internal Support Systems for innovation.

The practical visioning effort involved engaging the top team in mapping the enlarged environment and going out and actually changing PRADAN's relatively limited one-way relationships with key external stakeholders into ongoing sharing and collaboration. The learning organization intervention involved Case Writing, an approach pioneered to teach Harvard MBA's, which was adapted to help PRADAN's mid level leaders identify, explore, and learn from their key experiences in going to scale. The third intervention involved practitioners working to develop the stronger and more continuous supports that PRADAN needed for its expansion, and illustrates the wide-ranging flexibility that practitioners need for this work.

By exploring what worked and what did not work in these interventions, we will model what the reflective practitioner has to do as matter of course, ie learn from experience. We will also address the big question: Why do we social change practitioners not reflect more, learn more, share more, and therefore become the better helpers we could all be? We will conclude with suggestions about how, by working together, social change practitioners can, in Gandhi's words, do more "to become the change we want to see."

BIOGRAPHIES:

Rolf Lynton

Rolf Lynton is now based in North Carolina. In his long career he has been Professor of Public Health and of Preventive Medicine at the University of South Carolina where, from 1974 to 1977, he was the founding Dean and Department Chairman. For five years he was team leader of the HRD project with the Ministry of Health, Government of Indonesia. He has been Johns Hopkins University USAID senior advisor working with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in India; Director of Aloka, an international training center for community development workers; and chairman of the International Association of Applied Social Scientists. Earlier he worked with the field research unit of the British Institute of Management, the European Youth Campaign based in France, and the Harvard Business School. He has authored many books and papers, has worked as a consultant with many international agencies, and is a member of the NTL Institute and one of the founders of the Indian Association for Applied Behaviour Science (ISABS). He continues to work with two NGOs in India engaged with creating non-farming livelihoods in India's poorest villages, most through local women's self-help groups.

David Kiel

David Kiel is the Leadership Coordinator for the Center for Faculty Excellence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel, where he works to create opportunities for faculty leadership development across the campus. A member of NTL since 1998, David became steward of the NTL Research Community of Practice this year. The main goal of the Community of Practice is to encourage practitioners to do more to reflect on their work and generate useful applied behavioral science knowledge about individual, group, organizational and social development for use by scholars and practitioners alike. Those wanting to become involved in this effort should contact David by email. David studied organizational behavior at Yale University and received his doctorate from the UNC School of Public Health in 1974. He has taught organizational theory, design, and management courses at the graduate level at three public universities and has published articles and book chapters on a variety of organizational topics. An organizational consultant in private practice from 1985-2010, he developed long-term consulting relationships with organizations involved in community and economic development, legal systems

NOTES

1. Deep Joshi who pioneered PRADAN thirty years ago is on the prime minister's advisory committee for anti-poverty programs and recent recipient of the international Magsaysay Award and of high public honors in India. His discouraging assessment comes sixty years into India's independence, past the initially live Gandhian ethos for village development, quick legislation to limit land holdings and outlaw social distinctions, major national programs and a Ministry for Community Development, and, recently, guaranteed work at minimum wage for 160 days a year for all. All along streams of surveys and studies of village life and anti-poverty projects also continue in India and around the world.

2. "See for example, *Foreign Aid: What Works and What Doesn't*?"By Nicholas Eberstadt, Carol C. Adelman \ AEI Online \ (October 2008) http://www.aei.org/outlook/28842

3. The financial statements for 2010 may be accessed at http://www.pradan.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=109&Itemid=88

4. Go to http://librarykvpattom.wordpress.com/2009/08/04/deepjoshi-wins-magsaysay-award-2009/ for more information about Deep Joshi and the award.

5. Together Rolf and David have experienced at least two phases in their professional and personal relationship. During the 1970's David was Rolf's student and then junior colleague. Since the 1990's, David and Rolf have lived in the same town and enjoyed a collegial relationship centered on common interests and shared projects.

6. "The Healing Power of Social Change," Louise Diamond, *Practising Social Change,* Issue 1, P.4-8 (2011)

November 2011