

SOCIETY'S PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL WELFARE ACTIVITIES

- VINIMAY'S EXPERIENCE *

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Abstract

Whereas there are many large and small organizations which work for the under-privileged children, it appears that the potential contribution from individual volunteers is not being fully utilized. Vinimay Trust is the result of such individuals coming together to find methods of contributing their mite to the child welfare activities. This paper describes the methods evolved by Vinimay over the years to harness the potential of individual volunteers towards this goal.

1.0 Need for voluntary social work

In an ideal human society, the problem of children in distress will not exist. In an ideal welfare state, such problems will be minimal and the state will have a perfect and formalized system to take care of them, in which case the citizen's role will be almost limited to paying his taxes and obeying the law of the land.

Although the human society is evolving towards these ideals, it is still a long way from its goals. Under the present circumstances, one cannot expect that the governments of today will have the political will and financial resources to organize child welfare activities to the extent needed. Therefore, private initiative of sensitive citizens should play – and does play – a significant role in this field. We call this private initiative, 'voluntary social work'.

2.0 Voluntary social work agencies

Technically speaking, all social work activities which are not directly run by the government, should be called voluntary social work, even if such work is fully or partially funded and supervised by the government. The term Non-Government Organization (NGO) describes voluntary social work agencies more clearly. Thus, the work carried out by (a) large and small (private) institutions, (b) small groups and agencies, and, (c) individuals come under the larger definition of voluntary social work.

2.1 Social work institutions

By Institutions we mean those organizations which are run mainly through paid staff, which have well-established administrative structure, which come under governmental regulations as regards labour laws etc. The large magnitude of the problem of children in distress necessitates the formation of large institutions to take care of the problem.

Institutions have their own advantages: They have stability and continuity. Guided by their rules and regulations and work culture inherited from the past, institutions keep going on an even pace and are able to provide some minimum inputs for a fairly large number of beneficiaries on an assured basis. On the other hand, they suffer from bureaucracy and lethargy. They cannot adjust themselves quickly to changing situations or individual variations. While a good institution may efficiently manage the material inputs, it is usually inadequate in providing the emotional support to the children, which is more important. They tend to be impersonal and treat the children as groups rather than as individuals.

2.2 Small group organizations

Small Group Organizations come up usually to fill in the gaps left out by institutions or to remedy the ills of the institutional system. They are highly motivated, highly sensitive, quick to respond to needs of the beneficiary. Their output-to-input ratio appears to be much higher than that of institutions.

However, small group organizations are fragile; they depend on non-paid or nominally paid workers; (one possible reason for their high output-to-input ratio may be this large unaccounted inputs of manpower and materials); they depend on the energies and visions of a motivated few; they are easily affected by the interpersonal equations and personal problems of members. They usually cannot plan big and for long-term because of lack of administrative strength. It may be noted that when they try to remedy these shortcomings, they may tend to become institutions!

2.3 Individual voluntary workers – an untapped potential

The third, and a largely unrecognized sector of voluntary social work, is the individuals. The goodwill of individuals is of course being put to use by institutions, but mainly for material and monetary donations and occasionally for teaching, running of libraries etc. Small Group Organizations co-opt individuals for specific programs such as medical camps, surveys etc.

While the material and monetary contributions from individuals are sought after and well utilized by the organized sector of social work, it appears that the 'human resources' part of the individual remains grossly under-utilized.

Probably, the most important reason for this inability to integrate the individual volunteer sector with the organized sector is the fact that the individual volunteer cannot be bound by contractual obligations, unlike a paid employee, and he/she cannot quickly adjust himself/herself to the dynamics within Small Group Organizations. The individual volunteer may have different talents, back-grounds and also his own strong views on what is to be done and how. Thus, each volunteer has to be assimilated into the system individually and this will be very costly time-wise. These are daunting problems and new methods and norms remain to be evolved on this front.

3.1 Non-hierarchical Group

Vinimay, a group of voluntary social workers, has been experimenting on methods to harness this vast human resources available. The aim is to evolve a system which will incorporate the best aspects of institutions, small groups and individuals. This will enable a faster integration of the individuals with existing social welfare system.

In order that a very large number of motivated individuals – with diverse outlooks, talents, dispositions and potentials – should be enabled to work for a common good, the group evolved following guidelines for itself:

- (a) The group will remain non-hierarchical.
- (b) Activities will be designed and taken up by consensus and consent.
- (c) Individuals will get maximum freedom of action and choice of activities, including the choice of starting entirely new ones.

Before proceeding further, a point needs to be clarified. It may look a contradiction to say that Vinimay is a Trust and a non-hierarchical group at the same time. Vinimay started as a group of voluntary social workers in 1982. A few years later, when the need for a formal structure was strongly felt, a Trust was registered (in 1989) to ensure the smooth running of the programs of the Group. For its day-to-day functioning, however, Vinimay retains all the characteristics it had before the formation of the Trust.

3.2 Decision to work with an Institution

Vinimay began its activities by working for the children in a child welfare institution when it was invited by the institution to help the children especially in their school studies. This led to a fruitful interaction between Vinimay, the children and the institution. New activities evolved and a number of volunteers joined. As its human resources grew, Vinimay had before itself many options for its future course of action. Viz:

- (i) To start an independent program for needy children in community.
- (ii) To specialize in one sphere (say, education) and help many institutions in this sphere.
- (iii) To concentrate on one institution and take up as many activities as possible.

Vinimay chose the last option for the following reasons:

(a) Starting its own programs in community or spreading to many institutions will fritter away useful manpower in administration, co-ordination etc.

(b) Restricting to one type of activity will automatically restrict the type of volunteers who can join the group.

(c) The advantage of working for an institution are many: The advantages and shortcomings of institutions and voluntary workers complement each other. Thus a symbiotic

relation between an institution and a Volunteers' Group can be experimented upon. The institution provides the stability, the structure and a large part of materials and administrative needs. The volunteers' group provides the quick response, personal touch, emotional warmth and one-to-one communication. This symbiosis, if successful, will result in maximum results for the efforts of the institutions and the volunteers, and the child will get all the inputs that he should ideally get.

3.3 Methods of Working

Within the group: As mentioned earlier, the volunteers of Vinimay work by consensus. Monthly meetings are held to discuss programs and policies. Day to day activities go on by mutual consultations between volunteers concerned. This method of working ensures that the group avoids the short-comings and pitfalls of institutions and small group organizations.

- a) With the institution: Continuous liaison is maintained with the staff at all levels. The relationships are entirely informal; the group has no formal powers within the institution and wishes that it should continue to be so. Problems of children, individual or collective, are discussed with the authorities and the volunteer(s) find out in what way they can be of help. No action / activity is carried out without the knowledge and consent of the authorities.
- b) With the children: Vinimay volunteers work in close touch with the children. They join them in their work (in the kitchen etc.). Most of the activities of Vinimay are run on the 'small group principle' wherein only a small group of children are handled by a volunteer at a time. This ensures close and meaningful interaction between them and builds up mutual faith and friendship. These, in turn, help the volunteer to motivate the child for better achievements or for personality adjustments. To integrate and consolidate the activities, periodic programs are arranged where all children and all volunteers come together.
- c) Activities: For the purpose of this report, the listing of the actual activities of the Group is not important. However, they are given below for information:
 - (i) Educational: Running a study centre; tutorial help; sponsoring boys for coaching classes; providing stationery as needed.
 - (ii) Co-curricular: Reading room and library; visits to Nehru Science Centre etc.; personality development camps.
 - (iii) Recreational & Physical: Hiking trips; sponsoring boys for sports camps; running a play centre; development of children's park.
 - (iv) Health & Hygiene: supplementary nutrition; medical care; Yoga class; soaps etc. as needed.
 - (v) Youth welfare: Job placement, counselling, recreational programs etc. for boys leaving child welfare institutions.

3.0 Assessment of results:

The results of the experiments of Vinimay have been highly satisfying. A good rapport between Vinimay, the institution and the children has been established. It must be pointed out that Vinimay's success in this regard was mainly due to the fact that it worked continuously for a

long period of time in a given institution. This experiment of Vinimay has helped to get maximum benefits from the high-quality man-power of the volunteers. A visible improvement has been effected, we feel, in the outlook and personality of the children.

It should however be mentioned that a lot of adjustments on the part of the voluntary group and the institution will be needed if they are to work together. In our case, we can happily say that we could achieve this without any conflict through continuous consultations.

4.0 Suggestions

Based on our experience, we suggest that systems should be devised to encourage more such social participation in institutions. The following points may help towards this end:

- a) Both the institution and the volunteers' group should mutually respect each other and understand each other's problems and limitations.
- b) In addition, they should understand their own strengths and shortcomings.
- c) Through consultations and discussions, the two should define possible common programs as clearly as possible.
- d) The group of volunteers should be able to work constantly and for a long period of time.
- e) The institution should recognize the contribution of the volunteers and take their work seriously.
- f) The volunteers' group should work within the rules and regulations of the organization and desist from unsympathetic criticism or interfering in the administration of the institution.
- g) Formal training to the voluntary workers – such as the extra-mural courses organized by TISS – may help them to communicate with professionals better. This is being discussed within Vinimay.
- h) Institutions should orient themselves to encourage formation of such groups who can help them.

5.0 Conclusion

Vinimay started its experiment with the conviction that individual volunteers can play a more significant role in child welfare activities. To this end, a volunteers' group was envisaged which will be non-hierarchical with each member enjoying maximum freedom of action. One of the ways by which such groups can contribute significantly is to work along with an institution. The possibility of such co-operation has been proved by Vinimay's experience. Based on these facts, Vinimay feels that systems should be devised to encourage the formation of more such groups. Finally it should be mentioned here that what has been reported is only the present status of the work of Vinimay Trust. Vinimay is continuing to evolve and newer ideas and programs are constantly being discussed.

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