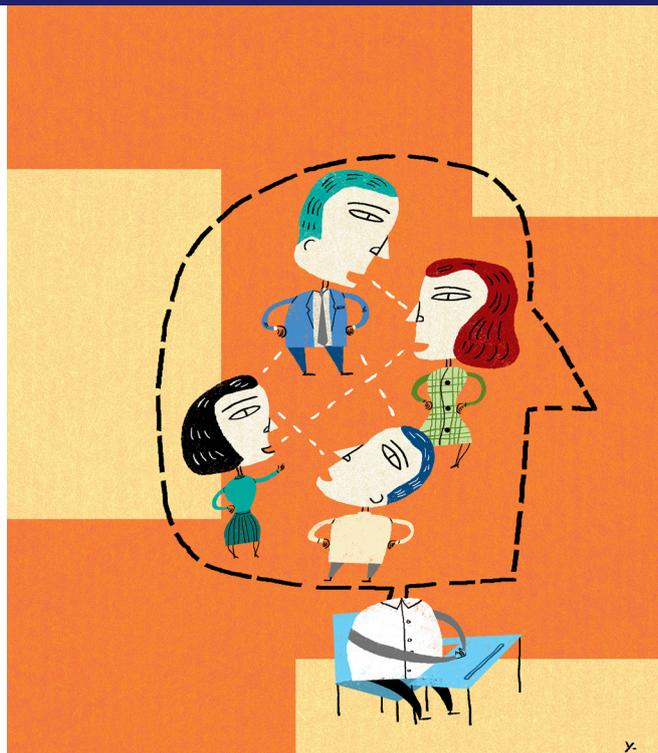# Three Interventions for "Going to Scale" to Address Poverty in Rural India: Reflections on Social Change Practice

David Kiel and Rolf Lynton

When the pond is dug, the moon shines on it.
When the floor is swept, the dust clouds roll over it.
When one begins to act, obstacles arise.

Zen Proverb

Reflective Practice and the Challenge of Social Change

This is the second installment of a three part series of articles exploring the questions implied in the title of this Journal, *Practising Social Change*. In the previous article we set out our ideas about what constitutes social change and social change practice. [1]

Our premise is that social change practitioners are actually best understood as conducting 'informed field experiments' in the service of positive social change. The experimental nature of social change makes the practice very engaging but also very challenging. Since they are going *together* into unknown territory, social change practitioners and their entrepreneurial clients must be very resilient and resourceful and require unusually high levels of trust for the relationship to bear the strains that accompany large scale change.

The 'field experiments' draw on our applied behavioral science (ABS) education, training and experience. However, we are often testing new approaches in institutions that are themselves innovative. The experimental nature of the practice underscores the need for systematic learning from experience and raises the questions of how these 'field experiments' are best recorded, reviewed, and used to guide future practice. In this article we show how practitioners reflect on and learn from practice and, along the way, generate important insights about the nature of social change, of innovative institutions, and of reflective practice itself.

The Institutional Context

The institution that provides the context for this exploration is PRADAN, one of India's most respected NGOs. For over 30 years now PRADAN has worked with the 10% poorest of India's rural villages in a unique partnering way. By placing highly trained professionals in villages, and developing a social and economic infrastructure through the work of women's Self Help-Groups, PRADAN has helped families and whole villages toward economic self-sufficiency, greater resilience, and self-empowerment. [2]

In 2006, encouraged by its past success and confronted with the huge need of India's rural poor, PRADAN decided to expand the number of families served ten times by 2015, ie to one million families across North India focusing on the 'poorest of the poor'. Soon after, the date and aim – and approach - were quickly revised upward to add an additional 500,000 livelihoods by 2017 collaborating with collegiate NGOs.

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mostly in India since the mid-50s but now US based, has had ties to PRADAN from its very beginning. At PRADAN's request in 2006 they teamed up again to assist PRADAN for this expansion. This account is the result of dialogue between Rolf and a long-time US colleague, David Kiel. David is not directly involved in the project, but shares its framework for understanding institutional change and reflective practice. [3]

We will discuss three key interventions over the five-year period. In retrospect they can be called: Visioning for 'Going to Scale', Strengthening the Learning Organization, and Building Mid-Level Support. We will close with some lessons learned and questions posed for social change practitioners.

The First Intervention: Visioning for 'going to scale'

"Begin with the end in mind", we are advised [4]. There is much behavioral science research and writing that supports this proposition. Not so often, however, has visioning as a method for planning been paired with other ABS approaches such as mapping the organizational network of the organization, and then taken into the field through conversations with potential partners.

This 'going to scale' visioning began with a 2-day meeting at PRADAN's Delhi HQ of its executive committee of 13 State and HQ program directors (PDs). Rolf and Deepankar asked this senior team to *foresee*:

> What would PRADAN have to be like at over ten times its current size - the institution as a whole with processes and staffs of that new order of magnitude? Also what agenda of work, and what phasing and pacing does that suggest, starting now…?

Rolf and Deepankar followed this exercise by asking the PDs to map the resulting network of *outside* relationships that the expansion of this order would call for. They also asked them to describe who would be in the network, and what those relationships would be like at their best. First:

> What relationships matter most, are really essential to PRADAN's functioning even now? E.g., banks, markets (for what new livelihoods?), universities and technical institutes for recruiting staff, political and media connections, ministries at State and Union levels, corporate, governmental and international funding sources etc.

The network mapping became a visual exercise with arrows drawn to indicate the flow of initiatives between the partners and the PRADAN of the future, as well as among the outside stakeholders and groups. It led to a discussion of how current 'rivals' could be turned into collegial institutions, how 'helping' relationships with villages could become more dynamic and interactive, how links with universities could become denser, which relationships offered the best promise for needed funding growth, and so on.

The PDs then paired up and planned to meet in the next two months with some accessible members of key stakeholder groups to talk about the expansion, discuss how the relationships should evolve, and how ongoing contact could be deepened. The PDs also added a day to their next bimonthly meeting to report and discuss their findings (and also their second thoughts).

Rolf and Deepankar facilitated this de-brief. To the PD's surprise and pleasure, the external stakeholders, without exception, had warmly appreciated being asked to discuss PRADAN's major expansion and generally supported it. Indeed, yes, they would welcome a more sharing relationship, one in which the outside stakeholders could raise questions and propose next steps and priorities. Within PRADAN, meanwhile, in just these two intervening months, 'PRADAN 2017' had already become a standard referent across the institution, so immediate was the internal excitement and acceptance of the project of 'going to scale'.

The PDs then also considered the changes that this new way of visualising outside relationships called for in the ways PRADAN currently operated. They identified habits to 'unlearn' and new and more open, interactive approaches to try. Proposals ranged from opening some regular meetings and internal discussions to key external stakeholders, and to look for opportunities to join formal and also social gatherings outside PRADAN. So encouraged, and having collectively explored the implications of this ambitious expansion, PRADAN's leadership then went to the board of trustees and got approval for proceeding with the envisaged ten to fifteen-fold expansion of families served.

Looking back, what PRADAN senior staff probably gained most from this visioning intervention was the encouragement from key people and organizations in PRADAN's world to 'go for it'. It helped the leadership group acquire the confidence that comes with a clear, consensually held vision. They used the vision to guide further planning and actions, and for 'future mapping' with their closest colleagues, so they too understood the broad direction.

The question we will pursue later is one of reflective practice and sharing learning: *When practitioners hit upon a successful intervention, like the one described above, how might we best generalize their experience so it can be tried and tested in other situations?*

The Second Intervention: Strengthening the Learning Organization

The ambitious goal of increasing operations and impact ten-fold and more posed some institutional dilemmas. For example, PRADAN had a policy of recruiting and keeping professional staff in the areas they came from - who knew the local language and customs and also had family ties there. Besides providing these built-in social supports, this policy also facilitated their contacting, showing, teaching, and empowering villages to undertake and

sustain new enterprises. But expanding PRADAN meant going in new areas, so also greater mobility of staff, and also more rapid transfers of responsibility of ownership to the villages. These and other changes in the culture and practices of PRADAN were not easy to implement.

After dialogue with PRADAN's leaders and others, Rolf and Deepankar suggested a case-writing and teaching program with key area staffs for rehearsing possible options for acting and supporting colleagues in foreseeable new situations. [5]

This focus on actual concrete decision-demanding situations, the consultants believed, could help the most exposed supervisor-planners to identify and focus on specific leadership challenges related to the expansion, and could encourage critical and creative thinking about how to meet them. With PRADAN in the throes of rapid expansion, it would help staff pay the detailed attention to crucial events and record them, and so help make the whole institution into more of a 'learning organization' altogether.

As it infolded, the case program involved two cohorts of 20 senior staff who also regularly trained new recruits and staff at various stages. Each program had three phases of five days. Phases one and two focused on case research and writing. These phases were separated by a month so participants could select one or two situations, record them, and send them to program faculty for comment and revision. (Typically they chose situations they were directly involved in and thought to be of potentially wider and lasting interest.) By e-mailing both ways, some drafts received several revisions and so were actually ready for discussion-in-the-rough in the second phase. This experience with participants' interest and competences then served also to identify the best candidates to include in the case-teaching workshops - the third phase.

On these early outcomes of the case program's first two phases Rolf reported this:

> Quickly exceeding all consultant expectations, was the eagerness with which these experienced participants (took to the process)… At the end of the two case research-and-writing programs 47 drafts were in hand - twice the expected - and 30 cases were close to ready for use in sessions in PRADAN s regular programs. Many … draft cases were on … outstanding and often unresolved institution-wide issues. e.g., abiding impasses and dilemmas in entering (and leaving) communities; female-male relationship (issues, occasioned by) women's greater freedoms and new competencies (fostered by PRADAN) ….; normative changes required by PRADAN's decision to expand fast into new states and language areas; high demands on the tribal village and on producer co-ops that PRADAN staff had helped develop; matching the output demands and schedules from funding bodies with the more fluid dynamics of sound community development; …. and more. [6]

So the cases developed there were put to regular use quickly in the apprentices' and staff training programs. PRADAN's training methods and designs quickly showed influence from the participatory approaches modeled in the case program sessions (e.g., leaders held back from responding to individual comments and let the discussion proceed in an all-to-all pattern.)

This early promise, however, did not herald progress with making PRADAN as a whole into more of a learning institution. No new cases were added or more case instructors developed. Nor did detailed recording of crucial development steps and impasses as PRADAN expanded become the normal basis for decision making and policy making as the consultants had hoped.

So this is an example in which the consultants' 'field experiment' produced only some of the hoped-for results. The question we will return to later is, if we want learning organizations to develop in the service of social change, how may we best develop the supports and incentives that are needed in addition to the initial intervention(s)?

The Third Intervention: Mid-Level Training for Institutional Expansion and Development

PRADAN's thirty-plus team leaders (TLs) are pivotal to keeping the widely scattered work maximally coherent and accountable – PRADAN is active in all seven states across North India and has a Program Director (PD) for each State. TLs are therefore chosen and placed with special care. Each is responsible for helping his or her team of up to ten 'executives' at any stage of their highly varied work in their designated area of villages scattered over several blocks in a district (average population of 2+ million). Each also oversees how the apprentices who are attached to his/her area for field training are actually developing. Even in calm times the TL's role is exacting and requires creative responses – and it is often also frustrating and discouraging. With the major expansion it became even more challenging, as, for instance, more and more funders and States had to be satisfied with their particular demands.

Yet while the demands and pressures on the TLs increased, their support from the PDs and HQ thinned out, for *they* became more and more engaged with exploring and funding additional projects and with designing, agreeing and establishing new mechanisms and procedures for the fast expanding institution. So the TLs, in their crucial every-day role, were left more and more on their own just at the time when they were also burdened with the extra planning and reporting on target performance, as well as with the overall uncertainties that go with rapid expansion.

All this - easily understandable but also dangerous – had led Rolf and Deepankar at the end of the previous winter's work to urge instituting a special program for Team Leaders which would focus on how to handle their role at this particular juncture.

To fit best into the TL's prevailing work and travel patterns, Rolf and Deepankar proposed a program of two 4-day sessions three weeks apart. In line with usual PRADAN practice, participation was optional and the TLs who opted in identified their particular learning interests. The responses immediately indicated practical concerns, such as time management, accounting, managing meetings, dealing with conflicts, and interacting with the central office. So these became the stated program content.

The actual program became quite different. As they assembled that very first morning, the TLs *real* need – and joy - was with talking together with their peers, many of whom also long-time colleagues. No matter what the *stated* topic or the allotted times for it, heart-felt and obviously topical needs surfaced to shape the sessions. Participants' pent-up demand for dialogue and colleagueship to arrive at best next steps for priority day-to-day and longer-term issues drove the agendas.

So Rolf and Deepankar shifted from facilitating 'content-based' sessions to facilitating the TLs efforts to build more robust and continuing contact among themselves, ie, local networks in the first place and then also national ones. So the TLs, instead of discussing ways to run team meetings better and the other issues they had initially proposed, spent the time on how to become more and more continuously engaged with each other in mutual support and communication, and how to overcome the practical obstacles of time and space to make this happen. By the end of the first four days they had detailed decisions to:

- Travel to the other's district to sit in on each other's team meetings and stay an extra day to process it together afterwards.
- Arrange with HQ for TLs to meet together for an extra day or two (in conjunction with the annual meeting of all PRADAN staff, so at little extra cost).
- Identify geographical clusters of team leaders so HQ could deal with TLs in units for many communications and requests, instead of individually.
- Video any regular team meetings scheduled in the interim and bring the CD to phase 2 for discussion and learning together.

These decisions were implemented quite smoothly. Eight videos were completed and four were discussed in phase 2. The discussions confirmed that TLs were quite ready to be observed by their peers and welcomed their advice and support – clearly enhancing a growing a culture of mid-level collaboration in PRADAN. [7]

So, the program all originally thought should be a program to enhance leadership skills, changed spontaneously into an experiment in self-organization. The broader question for reflective practice then might be: *How do we practitioners use 'unexpected results' from our interventions to learn about the new realities of the institutions clients work in, educate others that need to know about these realities, and help them take useful action on the basis of new, shared understandings?*

Reflections on the Practice of Social Change

In this section of the article we want to revisit the three interventions discussed above to look for further learning from these experiences. The provisional 'lessons' we found take different forms: *a prescription* for how a successful practice may be more broadly replicated, *an observation* that a result that was looked for in one intervention, surprisingly occurred as a result of a different intervention; and, finally, *positing as a broad principle*, the kind of organizational culture needed for successful large-scale self transformation. We see these different kinds and level of insights as all legitimate and valuable products of reflective practice. [8]

1. Visioning the future network for a scaled-up PRADAN: How to decide to go forward with major organizational change?

The leaders of PRADAN and its organizational partners gained practical clarity about where PRADAN wanted to go in the future and how relationships with key organizations might change and grow. This in turn raised institution-wide confidence to set about the internal and external changes the expansion called for. This process had positive results and suggests an approach that others might consider in similar circumstances. *It is a more intentional and systematic, yet still action-oriented, 'look before you leap' approach to planning change that takes into account the whole organizational network that must work together to bring about the large scale change intended.*[9] The key steps in the process include:

- Once a new vision is first developed, map the network of key stakeholders who are essential to making the change happen.
- Test the vision in conversations with key current stakeholders and also potential new stakeholders in a systematic way, but expeditiously, within a set time frame.
- Include in these conversations how the current relationships would best be developed to support the envisaged change, and what they should look like at the end of the process.
- Include these conversations in reaching the firm 'go or no go' decision on the major change.
- If the decision to go forward is 'yes', then fine tune the proposed direction and make detailed modifications with the key external stakeholders.
- If 'no', then leaders might discuss how the lessons learned might support a different approach to addressing the needs that motivated the original proposal.

Creating the learning organization that can support scaled-up development: what are practical ways to achieve this?

The idea that organizations of the future must be learning organizations became current with Peter Senge's book The Fifth Discipline. But how to accomplish this? The case development and teaching program experience showed

that participants engage enthusiastically in paying detailed attention to concrete complex situations like those they know well and that, with guidance and support, they can develop many cases and also facilitate case-based teaching sessions. This approach made PRADAN's training more relevant and, more generally, also showed practical approaches to "training for transformation" in which the content is not a set of 'how to's' but the discussion of real, well-described dilemmas and situations that members encounter in their work of promoting major social change.

Rather than developing 'best practices' in such emergent and experimental situations, this method develops the critical thinking, organizational analysis, and skills leaders need to work through problems and issues through as they arise. In short, it serves better for turning leaders into social change practitioners, equipped to react to novel situations with their own 'field experiments'.

Beyond that, however, these practitioners' hopes for making recording and case writing *a system-wide habit* were not met; it flourished as a training intervention with a set time and dedicated resources, but it languished as normal ongoing institution-wide practice.

Yet, to the contrary in the third intervention, when team leaders developed video tapes of their meetings to share with peers, they actually produced 'cases' on their own and invested a lot of time in the stimulating reflective practice that case sessions promote. *Does this suggest that, when the timing of events, technology/methods of recording, territory for reflection, and relevance of the task are all in place, then reflective practice and producing good data for it is seen as a good investment when, at other times, it might be denied support? Perhaps reflective practice can benefit from recognizing these system-wide 'teachable moments'?*

Building an organizational support system for going to scale: What kind of organizational culture is needed to support large-scale change?

Several years into the expansion, Rolf and Deepankar saw that that the team leaders were now the critical resources who needed special support. Senior PRADAN leaders agreed. The response was to provide additional 'leadership skills training' that the TL's themselves requested.

However, once assembled, the TLs changed the agenda sharply to organizing themselves for continuing like-with-like support, finding ways of dealing jointly with HQ, and trying out best ways for continuous mutual aid, contact and support.

This experience highlights the likelihood that institutions undergoing major transformations create new demands *at every level*, and that there is a risk that interactions *between levels* get crowded out, narrowed, and strained. Each level becomes so preoccupied with coping with the

new conditions and adjusting and safeguarding their own roles that they lose/loosen connections with others. And the easiest consequence is to short-change their dealings with those 'below' them in the hierarchy. So, just at the time when the 'lower' levels are feeling the greatest need for guidance and support in their novel circumstances and tasks, they are deprived of them and feel 'deserted'. This in fact might suggest that there will be predictable organizational crises in organizations that are 'going to scale'. [10] The old way of thinking about the training needed (eg 'develop core skills of management and communicating') does not promise at all well for repairing the organizational rifts and/or for creating the continuing peer support needed to cope with, and accomplish, major institutional change. Fresh thinking and new ways of organizing and empowering the various levels of the institution are needed to address the challenges that flow from 'going to scale'.

It is important to emphasize that in PRADAN, the prevailing conditions *already favored* TL's acting on their own behalf and their new self-organization to evolve. PRADAN's *whole culture* was highly participative, so its top leaders and also funders could be expected to tolerate even major shifts of agenda and priorities, even welcome them, on the understanding that it was important to be maximally responsive to the 'conditions on the ground'.

Similarly the program participants could also be quite confident that the facilitators would welcome their initiative and change the program (and, the forceful alternative, would not have to sideline them and take over again). That these facilitators (ie Deepankar and Rolf) already had close involvement with PRADAN's leadership and development over many years made them part of this same culture and so they could readily work with the real needs of the participants (and not even think of trying to thwart them). *Does this experience suggest that a collaborative, participatory culture which permits, even encourages self-organizing is necessary, or at least preferred, for large-scale social change organizations to be able to deal with the adaptations required by order-of-magnitude growth?* [11]

Concluding Questions and Reflections

In this case we have illustrated the emergent and experimental nature of both the situation of the institution (aiming for a ten-fold expansion) and also the emergent and experimental nature of the interventions the practitioner team proposed and carried out. This experimentalism is not rooted in a lack of experience or training. PRADAN, for its part, had succeeded in helping India's poor on a large scale where others had failed. The consultants in this case are highly skilled and well connected to the organization. The experimentalism is rooted in society's real need for pioneering work.

So it is perhaps not surprising that the interventions discussed here sometimes had unanticipated and unintended consequences. Some exceeded the

practitioners' expectations, as when PRADAN's Executive Committee took their fresh vision into discussions with key stakeholders. Other expectations were first exceeded and then disappointed, as when the case development and teaching program was a success as a series of workshops but then failed to become an on-going practice and institutional norm. Another time, a planned training morphed into an unplanned but apparently much needed self-organization of team-leaders to support new practices. What are we then to make of untidy reports like this of institutionalizing major change and development?

First, that uncertainty and unpredictability come with the territory of social innovation. Institutionalizing large and complex social change involves many internal actors in the lead institution and also external stakeholders. All of their reactions and interactions will not be predictable. 'Tried and true methods' may not produce expected results under these circumstances. Yet, through reflection on these 'field experiments', we can produce good ideas for improved practice, and insights into the nature of organizational innovation; and it can help us to learn more about the essential nature of the processes of large-scale institutional and social change.

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 change, environmental policy, and educational reform.

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NOTES

1. Reflective Practice in Social Change, "Rolf Lynton and David Kiel, *Practising Social Change*, P. 11-16, Issue 4, November, 2011

2. PRADAN's website may be accessed at: http://www.pradan.net.

3. David Kiel is the Leadership Coordinator at the Center for Faculty Excellence at UNC-Chapel Hill. For more information go to: http://cfe.unc.edu/about/kiel.html. David and Rolf have conceived this series of articles as an experiment in reflective practice where one member of the writing team (David in this case) is not directly involved with the situation under study.

4. This advice is given in Steven Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Practical methods for organizational visioning are to be found in *Preferred Futuring*, by Lawrence L. Lippitt (Berret-Kohler, 1998) and in *Future Search*, by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, (Berret-Kohler, 2000), also see: Brews, P. (2005), "Great Expectations: Strategy as Creative Fiction," *Business Strategy Review*, 16:4-10.

5. Harriet Ronken (Ronnie) Lynton, played a major role along with Rolf and Deepankar in offering the case writing and teaching program. Ronnie is a former professor at the Harvard Business School and is also the author of histories and novels, most on Indian themes.

6. This is cited more fully by Rolf Lynton in Chapter 18, of *Training for Development*, Third Edition (Sage).

7. Barry Oshry, wonders in his book *Seeing Systems* (Berret-Kohler, 2007), whether "alienated 'middles' can become a powerful system" (p.156). He goes further to argue that only when the middle level of the organization becomes empowered can the typical organization begin to evolve creative solutions to its current challenges. That seems to be what has happened here.

8. See David Kiel's discussion of The Continuum of Inquiry in *Practising Social Change*, p. 25-28, Issue 1, (2011). He describes 1) reflection to guide practice in real time; 2) reflection to define issues and refine interventions that can be used in multiple settings, and 3) reflection to help understand the nature of human systems in general.

9. See Rolf Lynton's discussion of the Predictable Crises in the Life of an Institution at http://www.knowandlead.com/IDCP/what_we_mean.html, adapted from *Facilitating Development*, Rolf Lynton and Udai Pareek, editors, Sage Publications, 1992, p. 310.

10. See Rolf Lynton's discussion of the Predictable Crises in the Life of an Institution at http://www.knowandlead.com/IDCP/what_we_mean.html, adapted from *Facilitating Development*, Rolf Lynton and Udai Pareek, editors, Sage Publications, 1992, p. 310.

11. There is a long-time discussion among organizational theorists about whether organizations will be more efficient and resilient as mechanistic or organic systems, whether contingency models are better frameworks for shaping systems or 'one best way' approaches. This has been further enriched by the concept of self-organizing systems and complexity theory. The current case suggests that emergent, organic, and self-organizing metaphors may be most appropriate for describing PRADAN as it 'goes to scale'.