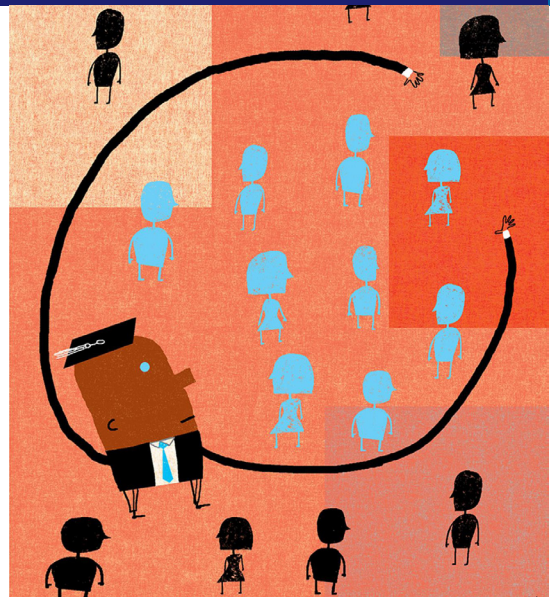




THE SOCIAL-CHANGE PROFESSIONAL:

The context and roles of the social-change professional viewed through the lens of professional-client relationships

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Introduction: alternative development approaches and the role of the social-change professional

Contrasting mainstream and alternative approaches to social-sector development

At least since the end of WWII, many societies have been struggling to create broader economic development, to improve the health and well-being of their populations, to reduce inequality of income, and to resolve widespread and persistent poverty in rural areas. Societies, states, localities and development organisations have employed a variety of methods to achieve these goals. For the most part, these methods have been characterised by the use of development experts to offer and, at times, impose solutions. In this article these traditional, expert-centred approaches to development are referred to as 'mainstream'.

Mainstream approaches to development target improved human development indices (eg income, health, production) whereas alternative development also emphasises the agency of those involved as a goal and value, and builds their capacity to effect social change. The traditional idea of development is to move marginalised people out of poverty, viewing them as beneficiaries of welfare, well-being and poverty-alleviation policies, and as targets of change. In contrast, alternative development views communities as dynamic promoters of social transformation, capable of altering their lives and that of others like themselves.

The role and nature of the Social-Sector Professional (SSP) in alternative development approaches: the emergence of the Social-Change Professional (SCP)

Alternative approaches view empowering community settings (such as groups, social movements and social sector organisations) as contributors to developing people as agents of individual development, community betterment and positive social change. Whilst expert help may have contributed to these improvements, the various instructive accounts of how life for many has been improved by purposeful initiatives indicate that these changes depended on the catalytic local professional. These professionals may be described as a person or a set of people who saw the needs and solutions acutely, and persevered, innovated, and involved local and outside participants in addressing these needs. In this paper these professionals are referred to as *Social Change Professionals* or SCPs, in contrast to 'social service' professionals. 'Social services' covers a great range of health workers, social workers, and community workers. Often these individuals play important care-giving roles, but these roles and the organisations they work with are not engaged in social change *per se*. This paper justifies the designation of a new type of professional within the social sector which, for clarity, we are calling the 'social change professional' (SCP).

Even though the SCP role and SCP behaviour are critical to alternative development, we believe that practitioner-scholars and academic researchers have not paid enough attention to defining the role and the skills needed to be an SCP. This paper takes a step towards addressing that deficit. We start by



introducing eight theoretical paradigms that we have found most helpful in illuminating aspects of the role. These eight paradigms bring together writing from diverse theoretical perspectives, and multiple different global settings; and address methods and approaches applied at a variety of system levels. We continue by identifying some of the common elements of the SCP role, and also the core skills and competencies that are stated or implied in the literature reviewed. In the concluding section of this paper we discuss the practical implications of our framework to focus additional research on the role of the SCP, to create training programmes and developmental experiences, and to enhance reflective practice.

Eight paradigms that can contribute to the emerging understanding of the role of the SCP in alternative-development models.

Each of the following paradigms has been informed by theories and models developed by a number of separate authors and practitioners. All of them discuss the participatory nature of the SCP-client system relationship as a central feature.

1. Conscientisation and radical theory
2. Post-modern streams of thought
3. The social learning (cognitive) paradigm
4. Reflective practice models
5. Person-centered therapy approaches
6. Groups, action-research and change theories
7. Participatory development and the new professionalism framework
8. Organisational development theory

The tenets of these paradigms and their interpretations for the role of the SCP are listed below.*

1. Conscientisation and Radical Theory.

This philosophy of education, associated with the Brazilian community educator, Paulo Freire, is derived from modern Marxist and anti-colonialist traditions in South America, and the work of psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, who wrote about the alienating effects of colonisation on subjugated peoples. In this paradigm, humanist educators work with people to engender a process of change by two basic approaches: (a) the people unveil the contradictions in their reality and, through praxis, commit themselves to its transformation; and (b) once their reality has been transformed, this pedagogy is shared in a process of liberation of others like themselves.

2. Post-Modern Streams of Thought.

This approach is based in community development (CD) theory of the 1960's but now updated to incorporate the perspectives of the post-modernist movement in social science. Key tenets of this approach include: (a) seeing community not so much as an object as an act of creating; (b) integrating the personal, the global and the local, thereby placing community in a holistic framework; (c) accepting different ways of knowing, doing and being in community development; and (d) recognising the techniques of power present at every level of the social body. These models emphasise the importance of developing a community narrative in a process that is internally transformative for both the community and the CD worker.

3. The Social Learning (Cognitive) Paradigm.

Founded on the work of the social psychologist, Albert Bandura, this paradigm posits that unless people believe they can produce desired effects and forestall undesired ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act. Such a self-concept enables those engaged in a process of self-development to influence the course of events, and to take a hand in shaping their lives. Collective efficacy (ie a group's sense of its capacity to complete a task successfully or to reach its objectives) is thus fostered through shared beliefs in the power to produce effects by collective action.

4. Reflective Practice.

MIT professor, Donald Schon, is one of the best-known advocates of this line of thinking. This paradigm posits the creation of a new breed of professional advocates working in the interests of the powerless client-victims of the expert professions, educating and organising them to defend their rights. Through a process of shared inquiry, clients shift from a childlike state of dependency to become active participants, emerging as a new breed of citizen-practitioners equipped to engage with the domains of experts. Reflective practice entails a new kind of relationship between the practitioner and the client, called 'a reflective contract'. In this relationship both the client and the professional are expected to develop knowledge and plans, reveal uncertainties from time to time, and reflect publicly on knowledge-in-practice.

5. Person-Centred Therapy.

This individual-level humanistic approach, originally identified with the psychotherapist, Carl Rogers, emphasises the client's self-understanding and encourages emotional expression. The focus is on the helping relationship between the counsellor



and counsellee, the goal of which is to foster more appreciation of, more expression of, more functional use of the latent inner resources of, the individual. Robert Carkhuff built on the person-centered approach to teach counselling skills systematically. He personalised the client's contribution to their own problem, by changing a hitherto unrecognised, self-defeating behaviour into the conscious problem to be solved, and then helped the client to identify appropriate and systematic steps to solve their problem. Client learning is seen in three phases: exploration, understanding and action. The helper guides the client by a four-stage process: attending, responding, personalising and initiating.

6. Experiential Learning and Change.

This paradigm draws on the work of Kurt Lewin, considered by many to be the father of social psychology. Lewin saw behaviour as a function of 'the lifespaces' of the individual including the totality of coexisting factors that represent a kind of topology of the person's experience of his/her situation. This paradigm is based on four principles that help guide the role of the change agent: (a) change, to propel and sustain itself, needs to be internally anchored within the community and the individual; (b) manifest behaviour is a function of perception of Self in interaction with his/her perception of their environment; (c) groups are the context for individual thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and actions; and (d) action research. This model has been very generative, and has evolved to incorporate newer concepts of adaptive change. The framework has been applied at individual, group, organisation, community and large-system levels.

7. Participatory Development and New Professionalism.

This paradigm draws on the work of Robert Chambers, considered by many to be the father of participatory development. New Professionalism respects, values and stimulates change by subordinated groups. These groups exercise agency, ie they do their own thinking, acting, and relationship-building to achieve desired goals. This approach necessarily entails a set of reversals in the system (ie a lessening of power and status, as the disenfranchised become more empowered and engaged on their own behalf). Writers in this paradigm also discuss the nature of the organisational vehicles necessary to facilitate change (also known as people-centred development). By facilitating social processes within large systems, NGOs can achieve influence far out of proportion to their financial resources or political authority. Accordingly, New Professionalism requires new roles and competences from NGOs and their workers.

8. Organisation Development (OD) in the Social Sector.

This paradigm focuses on the developing field of OD for social change organisations as a central concern, as pursued by David Brown. The practitioner of OD in the social sector adapts and enlarges the set of tools and practices that OD consultants have used for decades in more traditional organisations. However OD in the social sector problematises the context in which the client system operates, and sees that environment also as a target for change. The SCP thus needs to play a holding and bridging role vis-a-vis the client system and key environmental actors and organisations, in addition to playing a consultant role to the community-based organisations of the client system.

Towards a unifying framework for defining the role, ethics, and competencies of the effective SCP in alternative-development models.

Basic elements of the effective SCP-client relationship

We began this discussion by differentiating mainstream from alternative forms of development. Based on the paradigms studied we believe that there are four defining characteristics of the SCP's role within the alternative model.

- Goal Duality. As suggested at the beginning of this paper, the goals of the SCP's relationship with the client system are always dual: a) to empower the individuals, groups, and collectives with whom they are engaged, and b) to achieve the desired end-state improvements in indicators of development valued by these groups.
- Participation. The effective SCP-client relationship is always participatory where the sharing of power between the SCP and the client system is an essential component.
- Values Alignment and Mutual Trust. The effective SCP and the client system share core values that guide the relationship and the process. Ideally relationships of trust and mutual understanding between the SCP and client system are built up over a period of long-term engagement.
- Accountability. This characteristic includes awareness and deliberate mitigation of the asymmetry of power in the relationship between the SCP and the client system. It includes working with clients to mitigate this asymmetry between the client system and the broader social context, including such activities as holding agencies publically accountable and organising public protests.

Key attitudes that shape the effective SCP-client relationship

Based on the paradigms studied, the following five broad sets of professional attitudes and values emerge as essential:

- Valuing the client system. The SCP manifests values of empathy, humility, congruence, and unconditional positive regard towards the client system, and works to act in their long-term interest.
- Readiness to make reversals. The SCP adopts the interests of the vulnerable and subordinate groups, and acts in accordance with those interests and perspectives over, or at least equal to, those interests and perspectives of the dominant groups. The SCP actively rejects the practices of the 'elite' or 'normal' or 'dominant' social structures.
- Readiness to share power. The SCP is aware of his/her own limits and ignorance, and is ready to give up familiar sources of satisfaction, such as unquestioned authority, relative invulnerability and gratification arising from deference. The SCP is critically self-aware, and gives precedence to the client's worldview, cultural values, general perceptions, and articulations.
- Faith in the capacity of the clients. Change is not expected through verbal encouragement only, through the SCP leading from the front, nor through expert advice. The SCP places faith in the client's capacity for self-understanding and ability to make choices. The SCP starts where the client is rather than where the professional thinks the client should be. The SCP acts consistently with the belief that change is ultimately internally driven, and that the client is the producer and shaper of their own destiny and experience.
- Reflective and self-reflexive practice. The SCP develops a theory of action with the client system which draws upon their direct experience and the history of other groups acting in similar circumstances. The SCP supports the practice of action and reflection by the client community to bring about the needed changes.

General skills and competencies for the effective SCP-client relationship

We think that knowledge and skill areas that are common across paradigms are those that concern the process of change and transformation within the social, political, and psychological (both cognitive and affective) realms. Within the SCP role these change processes operate at multiple levels: individual, group, organisational, community, and broader social systems. These skills and competencies include the

ability to:

- Take a 'bottom up view' and identify with the client's understanding of the local context.
- Engage with theory, and to link the client's experience with theory.
- Build new knowledge from lived experience and other trustworthy sources.
- Understand the relevant larger societal structures and to see clearly and appreciate the techniques of power present at every level of the social body.
- Recognise the most important fault lines of tension and conflict relevant to the situation in hand.
- Understand the processes of efficacy and how they operate at the level of the Self, within and between individuals, in groups, and in broader collectivities.
- Catalyse system-change by actions that use relevant technical competence with social, political, and managerial skills in a balanced way.
- Act strategically to position the client system within a complex and dynamic setting so as to exert leveraged influence on larger systems, using skills in social analysis, coalition building, and facilitation of participatory processes.

Competencies and skills of the SCP that are relevant to work at various system levels

Some of the skills and competencies required of the effective SCP vary according to the level of the system in which the SCP is engaged. A description of the special skills and competencies that are particularly important for different levels of work are listed below.

- 1) The SCP, when working at the individual system level, must employ (a) relationship building and situation-exploration skills including empathetic listening, authentic communication, and expression of unconditional regard; (b) facilitation skills including helping individuals to conceptualise goals and actions, and developing the sense of self-efficacy required to create change; and (c) educational skills such as helping individuals to place their situation within the broader social context and to understand underlying power and social dynamics, and, ultimately, how their actions can contribute to transforming that context in positive ways.
- 2) The SCP who works with groups and collectives must go beyond an instrumental focus on effective group-functioning, and engage in: (a) dialogic encounters to break the culture of silence; (b) therapeutic processes fostering efficacy



and behavioural outcomes; (c) facilitating group development; and (d) participatory approaches with methods and processes that are adapted to local needs, priorities, and perspectives. Additional skills required at this system level include: group development and facilitation skills, the recognition of constraints from cultural and social perceptions, and the ability to facilitate group-learning processes.

- 3) The SCP who works with community-based collectives and organisations must know how to spearhead and foster the agenda of change, as envisioned by their members. To work with these complex-type organisations, the SCP will need: (a) intrapersonal skills for ongoing learning and effectiveness in ambiguity; (b) interpersonal skills that promote effective relationships and trust-development with individuals and groups; (c) general consultation skills such as facilitating effective entry, diagnosis, intervention, and assessments of organisations, and (d) the use of OD theory and skills to identify and deploy a range of organisational interventions.
- 4) The SCP will also need the collaborative investigation skills required to lead and teach action-research methods. The specific areas of knowledge and skills relevant here include: (a) facility with experiential learning approaches; (b) understanding the action research spiral; (c) the ability to generate valid information from action in the field; (d) the ability to facilitate group-learning from experiential data; and (e) the ability to incorporate lessons learned into new action plans and situational understanding.
- 5) The SCP will also need skills for holding and bridging roles across regions, levels and stakeholder groups. This is critical for sustenance of efforts by communities and their organisations. Required knowledge and skill areas include: (a) understanding when client concerns are part of a broader pattern, and taking actions to link clients to resources and allies who can help them; (b) bringing critical perspectives to key actors trapped in their own perspectives; (c) building visions, mobilising values and mediating conflicts amongst constituents; and (d) re-examining and reinforcing personal values and ideological commitments.

Conclusion

The SCP role in alternative development is a crucial one for building just and participatory societies, for helping people transform their communities, and for improving conditions of health, social, and economic well-being. This is true particularly throughout the global South but also in other regions and localities, and in wealthier and emerging economies where inequality is on the rise. So, there are powerful reasons to assert that the SCP role and its practitioners deserve greater study, positive attention, and greater investment.

In this analysis, we have shown that:

- (i) there are multiple perspectives on social change that grow out of the lived experiences in communities and individuals around the world;
- (ii) these perspectives have been described by various scholars and practitioners operating from diverse theoretical and disciplinary frameworks; and finally
- (iii) these perspectives can be usefully integrated in a framework that helps define the role and competencies of the SCP across multiple system levels.

As Kurt Lewin said, there is nothing as practical as a good theory. With a good, widely shared understanding of the SCP role and needed competencies, we can guide future research, improve training, develop new education and credentialing programmes, and help SCPs strengthen their own practices.

Indeed we look forward to a time when the SCP role and alternative development approaches are welcomed more into the mainstream. We hope universities and other educational institutions will offer more widely relevant and effective education for those who aspire to the SCP role. Furthermore, in the future, we hope that greater funding for alternative development approaches will be available. This, in turn, will make it possible for alternative development organisations to have better tools for the selection, training, and support of SCPs. All these goals are more likely to be realised if the nature of the role and the required competencies for the SCP are better understood. We hope this paper is a step towards this future.

BIOGRAPHIES

Nivedita Narain is a research scholar at the Department of Management Studies at the Indian Institute of Delhi. She has a post-graduate diploma in rural management from the Institute of Rural Management Anand in India. She also a Masters in Professional Studies in International Development Policy from Cornell University in USA. Nivedita is Programme Director in PRADAN, a professional rural development non-profit organization in India (www.pradan.net). She currently leads PRADAN's initiative to work closely with the higher education sector, to introduce Development Practice as a new profession in India. As part of this, Nivedita leads PRADAN's collaboration with Ambedkar University Delhi, and is Senior Fellow at the Centre for Development Practice. The main goal of this initiative is to strengthen the social sector through research, and the education and training of social change practitioners. She is on the board of non-profits and scholar programmes, and a founder member of the Institute for Group Facilitators.

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NOTE

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* Much fuller descriptions of these paradigms as well as an assessment of the relevance of each are available in an earlier version of this paper. For a copy of this document contact Nivedita Narain. The main sources for each paradigm are listed in the bibliography above along with a general bibliography.