Understanding Movements

About the Report

Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies (RNP) supports ideas, individuals and institutions doing ground-breaking work that enables a strong samaaj (society). The areas of work constitute a wide range spanning Access to Justice to Water. RNP has identified Active Citizenship, Climate and Biodiversity and Young Men and Boys as priorities.

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Introduction to Movements

A movement in its simplest form is an act or process of moving. For example, an object moving from point A to point B embodies a movement.

In the context of social change, there are multiple ways to move from point A to point B. The most commonly encountered approach in the modern world is a programmatic one. It is employed by social and private sector organisations and governments through scale programs, like the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan. There are also collective-impact-based approaches, which have a more distributed and networked way of approaching change. Lastly, there are movements, a particular kind of collective impact.

In the context of social change, a movement has:
- A diverse collective of people and organisations coming together as participants
- The shared intention to create wide-scale, transformational change focused on a social, economic, environmental, or political problem that guides the collective direction
- Distributed, shared and bottom-up action by multiple participants, including those at the grassroots

Many famous movements emerged in the face of pressing crises. Some examples are the Quit India Movement or Civil Rights Movement of the past and contemporary movements like the Arab Spring or #MeToo. However, movements are not limited to those that arise in response to a crisis that escalates through triggering incidents. Many others address latent, not urgent problems by applying the same principles. For example, Service Space is a global movement to unleash the innate spirit of generosity in people. YouthXYouth is another example of a worldwide movement focused on bringing back the agency of young people in their learning experience!

Movements are more than collective, confrontational action against oppressors in power. This view over-simplifies the complexity and leads us to think in terms of just bilateral dynamics. Many lasting movements take a more systemic view. To view movements more holistically, we must observe the relationships between the leaders, the participants, the organisations and the stakeholder groups involved. It is also worth examining who the leaders are, what they do, how they lead and most importantly, why they do it. It enables us to appreciate how movements work with a diverse collective to bring social, environmental or political change.

In their book New Power, Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms define New Power as "a current. It is made by many. It is open, participatory, and peer-driven. It uploads, and it distributes. Like water or electricity, it is most forceful when it surges. The goal of 'new power' is not to hoard but to channel."(2) By this definition, movements are a form of new power focused on bringing societal change.

Relevance of Movements

Movements are relevant when we intend to shift the field in which stakeholders operate. A movement often commits to **changing norms, attitudes and policies**. It builds a societal muscle in people to participate in this change process.

The approach may be most beneficial while **dealing with complex, adaptive problems** that have:
- Structural Barriers (policies, practices, resource flows)
- Relational Barriers (relationships, connections, power dynamics)
- Transformational Barriers (mental models, paradigms)

Given the depth at which movements create change, they are often time and effort-intensive. The rate of desired change is non-uniform and non-linear. The movement is influenced by serendipity as much as by precise planning and action.

The purpose of the movement, the nature of the problem and the length of the commitment are essential factors to keep in mind while leveraging movement-based approaches. Other questions movement leaders must consider are:
- Do they need to mobilise many diverse participants (in the range of hundreds to thousands) to bring about the change?
- Does a significant number of diverse participants recognise at least the symptoms of the problem, if not the root causes, and want to address it? If not, are the movement leaders willing to educate them?
- Do they have legitimacy with their participants? Do they have an authentic narrative and deep-rooted purpose for leading this work?
- Are they willing to engage with the participants to fuel their agency and initiative, often for many years and sometimes decades? Do they have the willingness to engage those on the fence and those who are opposed to change?
- Are they willing to accept sub-optimal or unexpected outcomes yet creatively leverage each outcome towards the underlying intention?
- Do their embodied values align with the purpose they stand for?
- Does their core group align on both the shared purpose for the movement and its evolving tangible outcomes? Is their core group willing to authentically embody and model this understanding in their efforts?

Defining Features of Movements

Power of Grassroots
Thousands of individuals with a shared understanding and intention are far more powerful than a hierarchical monolithic institution. It is why the best movements are built bottom-up. Nevertheless, engaging people in the ideas and principles of the movement and mobilising them towards action is back-breaking work.

It is not just about bringing people into the movement but building relationships amongst the participants. In movements, participants understand each other, even if they do not know each other. Therefore, extrinsic rewards do not drive them. Instead, their motivation flows because of the belonging and the relationships, which the movement creates.

It is not surprising that most movements often commence with small groups of people who understand one another and deeply care about the cause. This core group organises and mobilises the first participant-focused dialogue and actions, thereby creating the ripples that initiate the movement. Thus, while speed is vital, relationships take greater precedence in creating a lasting movement.

New participants may start with small, seemingly insignificant commitments but may grow in their contribution to the movement spurred by small wins and due to the support of their local peers. The leaders make it easy for participants to opt-in and contribute but constantly build the muscle of action and ownership in their participants. It pays rich dividends in the long run. Participants feel empowered to take autonomous, contextual action to respond to the situation in their context while staying true to the boundaries and principles of the movement.

Balancing Action and Learning at Different Scales
Movements that believe in "Go Big, or Go Home" are less likely to succeed than movements that work simultaneously at the local, national and global levels. They are more likely to attain small wins, learn rapidly from them and apply these learnings in other contexts.

Movement leaders carefully strategise and differentiate tangible short-term goals and actions at each scale to ensure progress. Each near-term action is aligned with the long-term vision. Yet, movements leaders take one step at a time to best adapt to changing circumstances, seize new opportunities and act on new learning and insights.

Given the duration and scale of many movements, the leaders must engage participants of different familiarity and experience levels and those representing different geographies and interests. Leading from behind in such a movement means fostering collaboration instead of competition between the diverse participant groups.

Defining Features of Movements

Leaders have to help such groups find alignment between their vested interests and the movement's shared purpose to harness their energy to impact outcomes at scale. It requires leading with wisdom and compassion and not absolute power.

Good movements operate with ecosystemic awareness. They keep in mind all the moving pieces and their interdependence. Depending on their organisational capacity and resources, they act and respond to global, national, and local knowledge and opportunities.

Once they have built the muscle for action among masses, they are opportunistic, often tapping into the momentum created and the attention generated by external events to deepen or widen their reach.

Multiple Sources of Leadership

Many successful modern movements may seem leaderless. But, in reality, they are full of leaders. Even the famous historical movements of the world had a plethora of local and national leaders despite having charismatic icons like Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr. or Mohandas Gandhi represent them globally.

The initiators must "share power, authority, and limelight, leading from behind while embracing a long-term view"(1) for the movement to thrive. The initiators often form the core group of leaders that define the principles and boundaries of the movement with the voice of all participant groups. This core group may evolve with the movement. Sub-groups of participants may self-organize based on purpose, role or geography, with people taking on leadership depending on their ability and willingness. The leaders of these subgroups complement the core group. They have the freedom to decide and act in their contexts to further the movement.

Changing Hearts while Changing Policies

Movements that target changing policy without changing hearts are less likely to succeed than movements that aim for both. People are at the centre of movements, and appealing to their human nature and needs can create a powerful, unstoppable force for change, especially if it connects at the collective level. Research by Erica Chenoweth, a Political Scientist at Harvard University, shows that success for movements becomes inevitable when 3.5% of the population participates actively in coordinated nonviolent action. It can snowball into widespread support, which eventually shifts public opinion and social norms.

Defining Features of Movements

Depending on their context and purpose, modern movements use a combination of traditional media, social media engagement, customised AI-based platforms, and one-on-one canvassing to create momentum for change. They simplify complex ideas and use story-telling so that they build awareness amongst participants of reality. They help participants reimagine possibilities by co-creating a vision of the future and moving them to act.

Dealing with Adversarial and Unlikely Allies
Great movements allow for healthy, generative dialogue amongst leaders to make the most effective decisions for the cause. Putting the ego and differences aside is essential for movements to thrive. No conflict is left unaddressed because doing so could create factions within the movement with varying and unpredictable commitments to action.

While dealing with external stakeholders or organisations, movement leaders see everyone as a potential ally and every opportunity to engage with someone as an opportunity to enlist them to the cause. Therefore, such movements do not create rigid stakeholder boundaries and are opportunistic in bringing onboard an unlikely ally. For example, a private corporation with the right intention and values may tap into its brand, resources, and organisational reach to spread significant awareness about the movement's cause.

Underlying these aspects is the movement leaders' ability to hold generative dialogues that are safe and rigorous. Such exchanges open up people's minds, hearts, and wills, expand the possibilities before them. They create common ground.

Diverse and Crowd-Sourced Approaches, Woven Together
Leaders of a movement prefer leveraging the wisdom and initiative of their participants, who may have the interest, experience, or expertise to reach the right solution, instead of offering the solutions themselves. They focus their energy on framing the problem, curating the participants with appropriate interest and ability, and catalysing them with the right incentives and motivation. They focus more on leading processes and practice such that the intended outcomes are made possible.

The emerging ideas may sometimes be independent and competing in nature. After testing each viable approach in one context, the leaders curate and disseminate learnings from implementing the idea with others in the movement.

Differences between Movements, Programs and Collective Impact Initiatives

Programs	Collective Impact Initiatives	Movements
Leadership Paradigm		
Management-based approaches with a focus on improving systems led by an organisation.	Management-based approaches with a focus on improving systems, led by a collective of organisations.	Movements transform the field in which political and management-based change happens. They bring together diverse organisations and stakeholders, including those not in traditional institutions or seats of power, in an adaptive way that 1) fosters openness in the minds and hearts of people towards a different future; 2) creates an enabling environment for fresh ideas to find footing; 3) encourages policy creators and system leaders
Direction		
Have specific organisational goals that can be achieved independently by an organisation. E.g. improve income levels of 1000 families	Have a common agenda that is impossible to achieve individually. It requires us to: assemble critical stakeholders, assess the data and facts of the problem, evolve a shared vision for change, decide the primary approaches and methods that will lead to the intended change. E.g. reduce poverty in geography Y	Have bold, shared aspirations rooted in the values and dreams of the impacted community and that are impossible to achieve with business as usual. E.g. Make geography Y the best place to raise a child.

Differences between Movements, Programs and Collective Impact Initiatives

Programs	Collective Impact Initiatives	Movements
Approach to Change		
Are focused on one or a few approaches to solving the problem.	Are focused on mutually reinforcing activities, which are meticulously planned and often delivered in a co-located or case management-based way.	See solutions as one of many and invite diverse perspectives of solving the problem, fostering creativity and co-creation. Multiple approaches of high leverage co-exist, which are occasionally independent and competing with each other.
Stakeholder Engagement		
While the community is consulted, the community does not have a seat at the table in organisational decisions. Engagement with the community is often focused on garnering support for the intervention. The impact is attributed to the individual organisation's effort, such that it reinforces their program narrative.	While the community is consulted in setting the agenda, the responsibility of action remains with the organisations involved. As a result, ongoing communication is often limited to galvanising stakeholders' support, building trust in intervention, and having meaningful meetings and dialogue among organisations in the collective.	At each stage of the change process, a movement brings together a carefully curated and diverse group of stakeholders, including those most impacted by the problem. The group participates in thoughtfully designed platforms that allow many voices to be heard and in shared activities that broaden ownership and commitment.

Differences between Movements, Programs and Collective Impact Initiatives

Programs	Collective Impact Initiatives	Movements
Planning and Learning		
Have a clear, well-defined, and often efficient path to attain goals. Conduct monitoring, evaluation and learning against metrics arising from the organisational theory of change.	Has a clear, well-defined and diverse set of complementary activities that drive the common agenda. Gathers a data set at the community level and across all participating organisations to maintain accountability and learn from each other's efforts. There is a risk of shared measurement not adding meaningful value in the absence of a larger frame for collective learning and sense-making.	Have an emergent path of action that embraces adaptability and flexibility towards a moving goal post. In addition to tracking a few critical data points, leaders sense and track strategically important shifts they observe in their ecosystems relevant to their intention and invest energy in collectively harvesting insights from them. It enables improvement of action and rapid evolution of the direction in response to changing environments. There is also a strong learning focus on improving the density and quality of relationships between participants.

Differences between Movements, Programs and Collective Impact Initiatives

Programs	Collective Impact Initiatives	Movements
Ownership of Action and Governance		
The organisational representatives lead the action. Organisational management decides actions and roles. Hierarchical accountability drives actions	Organisational representatives of the partners involved lead the action. A backbone* facilitates decision making and change with all partners. Collective accountability drives action.	Many diverse players support actions. A container** of participants co-decides actions and roles. A social contract drives actions.
Distribution of Work		
Assign people to static roles based on skill sets and qualifications. The organisation recruits and selects these people.	Assign people to static roles based on skill sets and qualifications. The partner organisation recruits and selects these people.	Roles are often dynamic, with the movement empowering people and organisations to contribute in multiple ways based on their choice, their strengths, and the movement's needs. The container recruits for the movement but people and organisations opt-in voluntarily.

Differences between Movements, Programs and Collective Impact Initiatives

Programs	Collective Impact Initiatives	Movements
Attribution of Impact		
The impact is attributed to the individual organisation's effort, such that it reinforces their program narrative.	The impact is attributed to the organisations that are a part of the collective and the collective itself. .	The impact is usually attributed to the community working together towards the change. In addition, the movement enables the discovery and dissemination of these stories.

*A **backbone** could be either 1) one or more organisations taking additional responsibility for planning the organising effort or 2) a separate entity that takes on the work of organising the collective. The backbone facilitates the process with the collective to ensure that the vision, strategy, funding and governance structures support the common agenda.

A strong **container enables its participants to "transform their understanding of the system they are trying to change, the relationships with others in the systems and their intentions to act."(9) As a result, it does not force commitment and issue directives. Contrarily, it infuses initiative and energy in the broader group by offering incentives, nudges, role modelling and creating an environment within which all participants feel supported to understand intentions more deeply and opt-in and take ownership of actions.

An Important Disclaimer:

- Programs, collective impact, and movements are complementary approaches to bring social change and are not in conflict with one another. The distinction is worth highlighting to understand how two organisations with similar visions and objectives may organise their efforts differently.
- While we distinguish between these approaches, organisations may see these boundaries as blurred and may draw from more than one approach in their design. For instance, many fellowships have a programmatic approach to develop their fellows and a collective-impact-based approach to galvanise their alumni's efforts. Instead of seeing each of these approaches as discrete modes of operating, it is good to visualise them as a spectrum on which organisations may operate.
- We observe varying degrees of consistency in applying these principles in collective-impact-based and movement-based approaches. Further research could help us understand and appreciate how these frameworks translate to implementation in different contexts in India.

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