

# Maintaining effective micro-macro linkages

?Donor harmonisation is just a pretext for rationalisation?

Author: Evelijne Bruning< editor@contactivity.com>

**Rajesh Tandon claims that donor harmonisation is making his work more difficult. For his organisation, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), it means fewer resources and less influence internationally. Tandon has therefore reassessed his priorities and has decided to take his ideas elsewhere. As he explains to Evelijne Bruning, he is now focusing on those people he can reach ? and there are millions of them.**

*Dr Tandon, you and your organisation have worked on capacity development for more than 20 years. What has been your motivation?*

There really are two Indias ? the one that deals on the New York stock exchange, and the one that has remained largely unchanged for centuries. For the latter, PRIA is working to develop the capacities of millions of people to meet their own needs, and of the government institutions that can provide for them. We do that by building local collective leadership, so that communities can articulate their own needs and possibilities. We work at two levels: within the community, and with other development institutions. We aim to make the village councils and municipalities more accountable to their constituents. In India, many public officials are elected each year ? some 3 million in 2005 alone ? at least one-third of whom, by law, are women. For many of these women, it is often their first time they have held public office, so we help them. If you help people to find their voice, and to get it amplified, you must also help to sensitise the ears of those who need to hear them. If no one can hear them, nothing will happen.

*What needs to change to make your work easier?*

I am satisfied with our experiences and innovations on the ground. Our efforts to take the lessons learned up to the macro level are also going well. But I am much less satisfied with the level of influence we have to achieve results. We do not have enough weight, it would seem, to push for real change at the national level. The international donor community is not helping at all. Both donors and northern NGOs have changed. They used to focus much more on real partnerships, but now they just give us money and we have to do things their way. Some of them really think they know better, even pretending to be local NGOs. But how can that be, if their roots are not here! India is not a banana republic. We have enough capacity to do things ourselves, but our ability to influence international donors is just not sufficient.

*What do you think is the reason for this shift in donor attitudes?*

Policy shifts, like the war on terrorism, and new strategies. But perhaps the biggest factor is the currently pervasive call for donor harmonisation. This is nothing but a pretext for rationalisation; it's not necessarily a way to improve the effectiveness of aid. It just means that, under the guise of harmonisation, bilateral funds are now being diverted to multilateral agencies and international NGOs. Bilateral funds that were intended for India's development, mind you.

*What are you doing to influence decisions at the international level?*

PRIA believes that our first battle ground is India. We must deal with the problems here first, but in parallel we must act globally. But you cannot deal globally if you do not act locally. In view of recent international developments, particularly donor harmonisation, we have re-assessed our priorities. We now invest less time and energy attending UN conferences in New York or EU events in Brussels. There are now fewer resources and little impact to be had there. Also, frankly, I find there's too much cynicism, too much resignation. Too many people have let go of their dreams, their ideals. They have given way to extreme realism.

*Will it be impossible to change that situation?*

No, of course not. I have dedicated my life to change, and I will not give up now. But we must find new spaces elsewhere. At PRIA, we are now shifting our focus, and will work more closely with the media, and in education. We are working with academic institutes, teachers and students to expose them to new ways of understanding, so that those individuals who eventually go into government will know what they need to do. Change does not come about just by working directly with the poor. There's a vast range of other crucial linkages to work on in order to change things. We work with other NGOs, so we can create a multiplier effect, and with politicians. We use exposure visits, training, briefing papers, workshops and small meetings. What we really do is convene and design stakeholder forums where it's not us who speak, but the people themselves. We simply provide the platforms.

*Isn't that a very roundabout way to achieve change?*

Oh yes, perhaps. But we have found that making too much noise in the name of advocacy doesn't get you very far at all. You have to go about change diligently, consistently, sometimes with a hammer and tongs, at other times quietly and deliberately. You see, we use our public forums to sensitise people, but actual reform takes place almost invisibly. Our role is to open doors and to get people a seat at the table. They do the rest themselves.

*What have been the essential ingredients in PRIA's success?*

The crucial elements have been commitment and passion. We try to create safe settings in which people can take risks. But PRIA also needs resources. Preferably from donors who do not demand results displayed in a logframe yesterday. It's ridiculous, really. A large commercial firm does not expect its R&D department to meet targets like the sales unit does. In development, we can only apply those solutions we have found to work, but we spend most of our time finding them out. Funds for finding things out, however, are disappearing fast. Some donors can still be convinced, but that takes a lot of time.

The final key element in PRIA's success is our network. A large part of our time and energy at PRIA goes into sustaining our network, since if we don't sustain it, it will degenerate. How do we do that? It would take a week to explain fully, but the real key is people. It is essential to invest in people. Relationships are always between people, not between institutions. We must try to look after each other, even beyond the call of duty. And we have to have trust. We must keep creating opportunities for relationships to develop. Of course, a network must be purposive, not existential. You must keep an eye on the larger picture. And you simply must keep on pushing each other to deliver.

## Recent publications by Rajesh Tandon:

Voluntary Action, Civil Society and the State (Mosaic Books, 2002).

This book describes the evolution of voluntary organisations and civil society in India, providing insights into the dynamics of the relationship between voluntary action and government. It also identifies the emerging capacity challenges facing voluntary organisations in India. **Civil Society and Governance** (with Ranjita Mohanty; Samskriti, 2002).

This book explores the interface between civil society and governance in India, where democracy has travelled some distance, yet economic and social inequalities continue to divide its people.