
DEVELOPMENT OF HUMANE ACTION (DHAN) FOUNDATION, TAMIL NADU

M Vasimalai is an agricultural post-graduate with a management degree. Inspired by Gandhi, his involvement with development started after a period of proactive reflection, while working with ASAIFA about land redistribution in 1984. Subsequently, he worked for six years with Pradan on micro-finance. He along with some other members then created Dhan Foundation in 1997.

The Foundation is committed to creating, supporting and connecting people's institutions that are proactive and last the test of time. Its work is guided by the deep-rooted conviction that communities can act for themselves, decisively and equitably, if provided space and support. In supporting people's institutions, the only role that Dhan plays is ensuring equity, transparency and cleanliness of values and practice; to include legitimate concerns of marginalized people. Care is taken that these institutions are owned by the poorest within communities; and draw upon their earlier organizing wisdom evident in already existing community structures.

This faith in collectivity underlies Dhan's unique ease in allowing different organizations – professional and people's institutions – to emerge and relate to each other. The systems and processes developed are simple without undue

focus on alienating technocracy. A noteworthy characteristic about these systems and processes is the degree of attention given to detail, and their simplicity of approach that does not alienate people with complicated technology.

Vasimalai says that the work of Dhan Foundation since the beginning has been a dream run crossing all his initial expectations. In 1997, Dhan originally started work with savings and credit groups, involving 25,000 families. Today, it has become a complex set of professional institutions including the Tata-Dhan Academy for training development professionals (set up through a grant received from Sir Ratan Tata Trust) and people's institutions working with thematic focus on insurance, savings and credit (hived off into another organization known as Kalanjiam Foundation) and tank water federations. Currently, the number of people's groups is 16,000.

Dhan Foundation functions collectively with its sister institutions through a matrix that allows vertical goals and horizontal content linkages. Two decision-making bodies ensure their cohesion: the strategic forum – that sets purposes and perspectives, composed of eight program leaders and the executive director; and the consultative forum of selected individuals of middle



Vasimalai (with glasses) in discussion with farmers



Mobilizing support for the Vayalaga Movement



Meeting of a SHG group

management to discuss ground issues and plans that feed into institutional perspective. Other collective spaces ensure institutional inclusion and belonging such as creating working groups and regular retreats. People are encouraged to speak openly and seek each other's support in sorting difficulties. Reviews are not linked to salaries. Role models demonstrate the human values that Dhan Foundation stands for – so that this is experienced rather than just spoken about.

A crucial reason for Dhan's success according to Vasimalai is the culture of being focused, creative and working hard. Developmental professionals in Dhan are reflective and emphasize feelings and expression. The Foundation places priority on their well-being and invests time in identifying and nurturing them. Thus, people who are part of the Foundation work with the poor, not just as a job but as a way of life. Full faith is placed in the worker about his work in

the community. While this means that they may make mistakes, they also understand the reality of the people they work with.

Being a development professional involves entering and transforming a community over many years. For this, clarity of purpose and professional roles are critical; both to work together as well as to understand complex and often contentious issues. Professionals are encouraged to evolve and devolve their work roles, undertake leadership roles and to do work that will retain their interest to prevent monotony. Mentoring and continuous and complementary team support help in these transitions.

One of the critical challenges that Dhan faced during its inception was to retain the focus on long-term goals – essential when creating a strong institution. When adequate attention was not given to human relations and resources were over-emphasized, groups came together for short-term

benefits; leaving the collective over time.

Another reason for the success of the Foundation, according to Vasimalai, is the consistent institutional support from the Tata Trusts, initially from Sir Ratan Tata Trust, and now also from Sir Dorabji Tata Trust who is supporting them for Rs. 30 million. In particular, he points to the shared understanding about diverse, autonomous and sustainable institutions as well as the emphasis on the dignity of human beings.

Vasimalai contends that the work of the Foundation is his calling. He remains completely engaged with it irrespective of immediate consequences. Looking back, he says that this lack of ambiguity in understanding the purpose of the work and his own role in it was critical in ensuring its continuous growth even beyond his own plans. And it continues to provide daily enthusiasm to see what will happen further.

This ease of acceptance of both, people and tasks, however humble; as well as the will to be led by the collectivity is evident in the culture of the organization. Vasimalai reminisces that he learnt the dignity of labour during his childhood in a large agricultural joint family with strong community values. He was expected to do different kinds of work like all others within the family; without treating one as higher than the other. And it is this learning that has proved invaluable in guiding Dhan.

Vasimalai's simplicity of conduct is repeatedly referred to as a critical strength of the organization. He remains continuously honest, transparent and patient; and accessible to all the people in the Foundation without barriers. This accessibility is ensured by his own willingness to delegate power and responsibility and in creating systems that are open and supportive.



Tribal women at Kalanjiam rally

In looking to the future, Vasimalai points to the presence of a strong second line of leadership (the current program leaders) already inducted into the democratic decision-making process and

committed to community well-being. Further, a critical focus of the Foundation is on the capacity for institutional self-renewal irrespective of individuals over generations.



Dhan Foundation - leading the way

