Strengthening Civil Societies

What is the issue?

Citizen-led upsurges bring about change, but the gains are lost in sheer organizational dynamics.

What is the efficacy of civil society movements?

- Civil society movements apply considerable pressure on governments to change laws and re-allocate public resources.
- Loose citizens' movements are often more effective as advocates for change.
- History abounds with examples, The mass civil disobedience movement with which Mahatma Gandhi wore down the British Empire in India, and whose methods for changing public attitudes and government policies have been adopted by civil rights movements in the US and elsewhere.
- Recent instances are sighted with the Arab Spring citizens' movements in 2011 which upturned dictatorships.
- The nation-wide anti-corruption movement in India in 2013 which led to the downfall of the Congress-party led government.
- Civil society movements form to advocate for causes and bring about change in established systems.

What are the failings of the civil societies?

- Actions by groups of motivated strikers to disrupt governments, which inconvenience the masses, are not effective in the long run because they diminish public support for the organization and may even harm the cause.
- Such actions have lost public support for labour unions and sadly have dampened societal support for the rights of working people.
- Whereas participative movements can be effective instruments for advocacy for change, they are generally unable to produce the coherence required for implementation, this was the fate of the Arab Spring movements.
- Recognizing the need for stronger organization, the anti-corruption

movement in India spawned a political party, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) with a requisite hierarchy.

What is the role of civil societies in governance?

- Governments are expected to perform three roles: provide law, order and stability; deliver public services and relief; and catalyze the development of the society and the economy.
- Juxtaposed with this, civil society organizations perform three roles too.
- And just as political parties and governments need organizational structures to perform effectively, civil society organizations need appropriate organizational strategies too.
- Not-for-profit civil society organizations can provide public services, such as education and healthcare, they may also deliver charitable relief to people in distress.
- In delivering these services they can be effective partners of governments.

How structural changes can strengthen civil societies?

- The governance of catalytic civil society organizations requires power-shifts and mind-shifts that leaders of historically control-oriented and charity-oriented organizations are finding hard, but they must make these shifts if they wish to serve society well.
- Advocacy strategies of the civilian-led movements can be confrontational or persuasive, Confrontational strategies can be sharply disruptive and peacefully persuasive.
- An organization must choose its strategy, and it must develop suitable competencies for execution of its strategy.
- Business management can provide good role models here, and it is not surprising that as civil society organizations ‘scale up’ to deliver they adopt business-like practices of management and governance.
- Gandhi’s insight was that civil disobedience is effective only when it is mass, and the participants are seen to suffer personally, not merely cause pain to others.
- The role, catalyzing development of societies with changes in their social and economic structures, requires very different capabilities as Gandhiji had pointed out.
- In contrast, the approach taken by Japanese unions, where workers worked longer and harder to shame the management, produced more lasting respect for workers’ rights.
- Similarly, Gandhiji persuaded Indians to make personal sacrifices to show

their support, and not merely demand change from others.

- In the same vein, movements for the care of the environment are more effective when people are persuaded to change their own behaviors and consumption habits, not just demand actions by governments.
- Thus International civil society organizations must introspect on their purpose, the roles they should perform, and the competencies they require.

Source: Business Line

