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# Cross-sectoral collaboration in the pursuit of social change: Addressing sex trafficking in West Bengal

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## Abstract

This field note explores how a hybrid social change organization based in India engaged in cross-sectoral collaboration with police and community-based sectors to address sex trafficking and advance both social change and service provision goals. Staff members successfully mobilized and engaged partners via insider tactics, ultimately improving the response of mainstream institutions to sex trafficking, while also strengthening individual services and community prevention efforts. An analysis of these partnerships offers transferable lessons on effective collaboration and the promise of an insider approach when mobilizing multiple sectors. Cross-sectoral collaboration may hold special promise for addressing complex social problems, like sex trafficking.

## Keywords

Cross-sectoral collaboration, hybrid organizations, India, insider tactics, sex trafficking, social change

Cross-sectoral collaboration is an increasingly popular proposal for addressing complex social problems. Cross-sectoral collaboration refers to efforts by organizations in two or more sectors (i.e. the state, nonprofits, business) that join their resources in order to achieve a goal that could not be accomplished by organizational actors in one sector alone (Bryson et al., 2006). While the promise of such collaborations is great, so are the challenges of sustaining and using them successfully. This field note presents a case study of the activities of Samaj,<sup>1</sup> an anti-trafficking NGO in West Bengal, India, that successfully used cross-sectoral collaboration to achieve both direct service and social change goals.

This field note focuses on two distinct collaborations: 1) an institutionalized partnership with West Bengal's police departments, which Samaj leverages to augment direct services to trafficking survivors and to improve the systemic response to human trafficking and 2) formalized partnerships with rural, community-based organizations, which mobilize communities to engage in trafficking

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prevention and response work. It further describes how an insider approach to mobilization can be used to foster mutually beneficial collaborations. In this case, cross-sectoral collaborations increased Samaj's ability to affect long-term change in mainstream institutions, as well as their ability to mobilize individual and community responses to trafficking.

Several sources of data contributed to this field note. The primary data source is 10 formal interviews with Samaj staff and leadership, including the founder, which were conducted between 2009 and 2011. These interviews focused on staff-identified strategies for initiating and sustaining collaborations with both police and community-based partners and the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each. The information from the interviews was grounded in the participant observation of the first author in Samaj's offices and shelter home and supplemented with information from Samaj's publications and archival documents.<sup>2</sup>

## **Sex trafficking and cross-sectoral collaborations**

Sex trafficking<sup>3</sup> stands at the intersection of two complex and globally transcendent social challenges: the sex trade and unsafe migration (see Jones et al., 2011; Pyle, 2001). Several push and pull factors perpetuate sex trafficking in India specifically (Gupta and Sinha, 2007). A major 'pull' factor is the demand for trafficked bodies for the purpose of sex or labor, a phenomenon deeply intertwined with societal norms around sexism and classism. Likewise, persons are 'pushed' into positions of vulnerability by poverty, unemployment, lack of education or documentation, and class, caste, racial, or gender violence and discrimination. For these reasons, many believe that the problem of human trafficking will never be solved via any single legislative or community intervention. Instead, interventions must target a multitude of factors at both individual and institutional levels.

## **The hybrid organizational form and an insider approach to reciprocity**

Hybrid organizations, like Samaj, are those that feature both direct service provision and social change advocacy as core commitments (Minkoff, 2002). One element critical to a hybrid organization's survival and success is access to institutions that offer resources like financial support and legitimacy (Hasenfeld and Gidron, 2005). Cross-sectoral collaborations may be a natural fit for these organizations, then, since they provide just that sort of access.

When collaborating with state-based organizations, such as the police, hybrid organizations with social change goals may find insider tactics – social change tactics that mobilize actors from within institutions in non-confrontational ways (Katzenstein, 1990) – particularly useful. Such tactics may lead to collaborations that produce mutual benefits for all parties. Four specific strategies are discussed: 1) occupation and indoctrination, 2) leveraging of moral authority, 3) leveraging of institutional power, and 4) building reciprocal relationships.

### *Occupation and indoctrination*

Schmitt and Martin (1999) call attention to the strategy of occupy and indoctrinate in their analysis of a rape crisis center. 'Occupation' refers to strategies wherein a social change actor partners to perform the work of another mainstream organization or government body. 'Indoctrination' refers to a form of advocacy in which social change actors pass on their understanding of a social problem

to another mainstream organization or government body, so that their viewpoint is adopted. Samaj's collaboration with the police is an example of the occupation and indoctrination strategy.

### *Leveraging of moral authority*

Organizations must be seen as legitimate if they are to convince actors from other sectors of their implication in social problems. One way hybrid organizations can build that legitimacy is by calling upon their expertise in one field (i.e. service provision) to buoy their legitimacy in another field (i.e. systems-level advocacy) (Minkoff, 2002). Samaj leverages the moral authority it gains from providing direct services to victims in order to enlist and sustain high levels of support and collaboration from the police sector.

### *Leveraging of institutional power*

Establishing institutional legitimacy with government may require social change organizations to make compromises regarding their ideal structures or strategies (Ferree and Martin, 1995; Minkoff, 2002). However, access to institutional resources is critical for sustaining social change work over time (Bagguley, 2002) and for the success of cross-sectoral collaborations (Bryson et al., 2006). This field note demonstrates how Samaj's collaboration with the police sector increases the organization's institutional power, thereby creating opportunities for Samaj staff to mobilize community-based groups.

### *Building reciprocal relationships*

Reciprocity is at the heart of cross-sector collaboration. Organizational leaders often begin partnerships precisely due to a benefit that can only be obtained through collaboration (Vangen and Huxham, 2003). Maintaining mutual benefits for all collaborating parties is critical for sustaining partnerships. This field note highlights the ways in which Samaj builds reciprocity into its cross-sector collaborations in order to sustain them.

## **Organizational background**

Since its founding Samaj has attempted to address trafficking from multiple angles, engaging in prevention and response at the individual, community, and institutional levels. Below is the history of each cross-sectoral collaboration and the associated social change goals.

### *Collaborations with police*

Many NGOs throughout the world, especially those that address violence against women, focus advocacy efforts on increasing police sensitivity via trainings for officers and legal advocacy for victims. Samaj engages in such efforts but goes much farther than most other organizations. In the early 1990s Samaj was primarily a direct service provider, operating a shelter home for trafficked girls and women. However, by pointing to a section of India's Immoral (Prevention) Traffic Act (PITA) that requires a female member of the community, or in some cases, of a government-sanctioned welfare organization, to be present during a raid and/or interrogation, Samaj staff convinced Kolkata<sup>4</sup> police to include them on raids of brothels. Samaj staff, having obtained knowledge of practices common to traffickers from the girls in their shelter home, quickly proved invaluable to the task of detective work by sharing knowledge with police before and during raids. Over time,

Samaj staff leveraged their knowledge of trafficking dynamics, along with their growing moral authority on the issue, to influence police work and build relationships that fostered reciprocal benefits to both groups.

### *Collaboration with community-based organizations*

In 1998, Samaj began collaborating with rural CBOs in an effort to *prevent* trafficking, in addition to responding to it. After identifying CBOs in the rural areas from which girls trafficked to Kolkata typically came, Samaj staff equipped CBO staff with the training, logistical support, and financial resources to engage local constituents in addressing the issues that make individuals vulnerable to trafficking as well as in identifying and interrupting trafficking schemes as they unfold. In these ways, the CBO partnerships offer Samaj opportunities to pursue both direct service and social change goals.

### **Mobilizing police via insider tactics: Strategies and outcomes**

Samaj's collaboration with police emerged in a way that did not challenge or condemn the state institution. Instead, Samaj staff engaged the police system from within, performing many police functions themselves, leveraging moral authority, and fostering mutual benefits for both parties. These strategies enabled Samaj to increase the capacity of police to interrupt trafficking activities and to intercept trafficked women and girls, both of which furthered Samaj's direct service and advocacy goals.

### *Occupy and indoctrinate*

Samaj occupied the realm of police work when it entered into a formal partnership with state police forces, not merely advocating for improved police activity, but actually engaging in police activity. Because Samaj staff had learned about the practices of traffickers and pimps from the girls in the shelter home, police gained invaluable knowledge from Samaj staff as to common methods for recruiting and concealing trafficked people, types of communities and individuals targeted, and trafficking routes. Police saw that the expertise of Samaj staff not only benefited victims, but also benefited police. This lent Samaj staff unmatched credibility and access to police officers, allowing Samaj to indoctrinate police with a feminist, structural understanding of trafficking and of the plight of trafficked youth and women. Today, Samaj accompanies Kolkata police on every raid of a potential trafficking site, and it provides formal police trainings to officers, students of the police academy, and national border officers patrolling boundaries between West Bengal, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan.

### *Utilizing moral authority*

But how did Samaj convince police to allow them such intensive access in the first place? The answer speaks to the power of reciprocity in collaboration. Police departments in Kolkata have been known to accept bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye to the sex trade in the city's red-light areas (Kotiswaran, 2008; Pardasani, 2005). Human trafficking, with its lucrateness and connections to organized crime, is a crime particularly conducive to escaping prosecution via bribes. With a Samaj staff member on hand during raids and arrests, the police could point to a non-partial witness who could attest that police officers on the scene refused bribes. The presence

of Samaj staff may have also deterred officers from accepting bribes in the first place. Finally, Samaj's work with victims during raids and during their subsequent custody ensured that a much larger percentage of victims testified against traffickers, increasing the police's conviction rate.

### *Implications*

While police in India often face criticism for corruption and turning a blind eye to violence against women, Samaj prioritizes non-contentious relationships with the police. Samaj's founder and other staff members stress this point, noting Samaj's choice to work with the government and not against them as an early one. They give a two-fold rationale: 1) they believe that NGOs are limited in what they can accomplish without the support of state institutions; and 2) they believe that it is the role of government to protect the rights of women and children. Although some might argue that this limits the social change activities Samaj can pursue, Samaj staff do not see this as a conflict of interest, because their vision of social change is one that takes place through the state and not by subverting it. From the perspective of Samaj, police collaboration furthers the NGO's social change goals. At the institutional level, traffickers face greater legal accountability. From a practice perspective, survivors receive more sensitive care during and after the raid on a brothel. Despite these benefits, collaboration is not without its compromises. For example, Samaj does not assist minor girls who are trafficked in repatriating until after the criminal case is prosecuted. Sometimes this takes so long that girls are never repatriated. This suggests that Samaj prioritizes the criminal case over repatriation – surely a goal of the police, but perhaps not always of the women they serve.

## **Mobilizing CBOs via insider tactics: Strategies and outcomes**

The success Samaj established with police, alongside its success with other government bodies and large funding groups, lent Samaj institutional power which the NGO then leveraged to pursue collaborations with rural CBOs. These partnerships fostered small but meaningful shifts in collective awareness while also expanding the services that Samaj could provide to trafficking victims.

### *Leveraging institutional power*

The primary incentives for CBOs to partner with Samaj are increased access to institutional players and resources. For example, Samaj has exceptionally strong relationships with police throughout the state of West Bengal. In many of the rural areas, the ratio of police officers to community members is largely inadequate. As a result of their partnership with Samaj, CBOs became better known by police and strengthened their own relationships with them. Additionally, some CBO leaders were drawn to the promise of greater recognition by both local and international NGOs and governing bodies, many of which had become a part of Samaj's network. In this way, Samaj not only acts as a bridge between CBOs and the formal sector, but also as a gatekeeper. It should also be noted, however, that Samaj only partners with CBOs that are not anti-government and are not blacklisted by the police.

### *Building reciprocal relationships*

While CBOs benefit from Samaj's large-scale networks, Samaj benefits from the CBOs' small ones. Samaj mobilizes CBOs to prevent and interrupt trafficking in two primary ways. First, CBOs

are asked to incorporate specific educational objectives into their work with children. These include general awareness of trafficking dynamics, tactics common among traffickers, functional literacy, and job training. Second, the CBOs organize and facilitate three separate monthly meetings: a mothers' group, a community group, and a meeting of the Panchayat, or village council. During these meetings, the CBOs provide education on the dynamics of trafficking and teach community members to identify trafficking and intervene when they see it occur. These services also help in the prevention of re-trafficking. Girls who are rehabilitated back into their own communities are also served by the literacy, trade, and life skills education offered by the CBO groups. Thus, via a single CBO partnership, Samaj gains access to an entire community network.

The following anecdote exemplifies the strength of this approach. When a young man came to a rural town in West Bengal recruiting girls to accompany him to Mumbai where they would be employed as domestic laborers, a store owner who had attended local CBO meetings on trafficking became suspicious and tipped off the police as well as Samaj. When several families agreed to the deal and the stranger left with their daughters, the police were able to intercept the group when they stopped at a nearby hotel. The girls were found already bound and hidden in chests inside the hotel rooms.

### *Implications*

Stories like this emphasize the need for actors to be mobilized at the individual *and* state level so that communities can be empowered to combat the problems that touch them. Samaj would not have been able to interrupt trafficking schemes like this one had it not been for the community networks already tapped by the local CBO. In these ways, collaboration with smaller CBOs greatly advanced Samaj's social change goals.

### **Conclusion**

Cross-sectoral collaboration offers a compelling strategy for mobilizing diverse actors in pursuit of social change goals. This field note reveals the way in which collaboration across sectors can be effective in advancing an organization's social change mission. In this case, Samaj's identity as a hybrid organization and their insider approach to mobilization were critical to their success. Specifically, as a hybrid organization, Samaj was well positioned to seek collaborative interventions that affected both individuals and systems. Samaj then leveraged its status and expertise as a service provider and, later, as an institutional player to affect change from *within* social institutions rather than outside them.

The insider approach was critical to engaging the police. In India and in many other parts of the world, police are often slow to fully investigate and prosecute violent crimes against women. Thus, many advocacy organizations engage contentiously with police in pursuit of their social change mission. Samaj, however, insisted on non-contentious engagement and demonstrated how the NGO's activities would further police goals, namely an improved public image and increased prosecution rates. This approach allowed them to affect change from the inside and may be transferable to other regions or social problems. This approach also allowed them to count the police as a partner, an institutional asset that facilitated the CBO partnerships down the line. Those partnerships expanded Samaj's reach, and reinforced their reputation as a key player in combating trafficking in West Bengal.

That said, an insider approach is not without its complications. The prioritization of criminal prosecution over individual repatriation, along with an unwillingness to partner with CBOs in negative standing with police, arguably narrows Samaj's scope. NGOs throughout the world can

likely relate to such a dilemma, especially those NGOs that have found their social change efforts thwarted by police resistance. NGOs may find themselves unable or even unwilling to partake in similar reciprocal exchanges with local police hostile to the NGO's cause. In some areas of the world the police may lack the will to stand up to traffickers, despite the efforts of organizations like Samaj to win them over. Nevertheless, this case shows that police departments might gain sympathy for an NGO's mission if they see collaboration as improving police outcomes.

One limitation of this case study is that data were collected primarily from Samaj staff. The authors did not have access to CBO staff and police due to geographical, cultural, and language constraints. Those interviews could have revealed more about the dynamics of collaboration. Additionally, care should be taken not to generalize from a single case study. Cross-sectoral collaboration may look different across regions and can take a variety of forms. Research should be carried out on different types of cross-sectoral collaboration, such as the approach of key stakeholders forming a single committee or the approach of creating a unified policy and identifying roles for each player. Organizations like Samaj may be key contributors to those more formal models.

However, this field note does offer lessons for how other organizations addressing sex trafficking may want to approach cross-sectoral collaboration. It shows that cross-sectoral collaborations like Samaj's can be valuable in advancing social change goals with the potential to mobilize a broad range of individuals in support of a specific social problem. Initiating and maintaining such collaborations may effectively improve the lives of individuals while advancing systemic change.

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## Notes

1. Name has been changed to protect confidentiality.
2. Examining these different data sources allowed a triangulation approach to be used, improving the validity of the findings (Yin, 2003). Two additional strategies were used to improve reliability. First, the second author was able to operate as a reliability check and provide detached observations as she was not engaged in fieldwork. Second, we confirmed our understanding of certain events and strategies with Samaj staff directly.
3. The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons defines trafficking in broad terms that acknowledge a process of recruitment, transfer, harbor, or receipt of person through force or coercive means.
4. Kolkata (previously known as Calcutta) is the largest city in West Bengal and a hub for human trafficking.

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