

INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY OF VIKALP SANGAM

A REVIEW OF THE PROCESS IN ITS FIRST DECADE

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VIKALP SANGAM*

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT SETTING

“ Our history is hidden in the present day and our present day is history.”

wrote Abdullah Ocālan, prime ideologue of the Kurdish freedom Movement.

Year 2024 marks the 10th Anniversary of Vikalp Sangam (VS), a network of 95+ diverse organisations emerging out of a search for grounded alternatives to the current model of ‘development’ that is built on ecological destruction and rising inequalities.

Realising our visions, among other actions, includes a rigorous and diligent effort to build a comprehensive understanding of our unique history.

At the mark of a decade, it is a befitting time to look back at the network’s genesis, its objectives and the journey thereafter. With that vision in mind, we intend to document Vikalp Sangam’s Institutional Memory, to capture the Vikalp Sangam process, the unique insights and learnings of the members along their journey.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS EXERCISE

To understand:

- WHY was Vikalp Sangam instituted- what did it set out to do and how
- The structure of the network- its decentralisation process, the governing bodies, member constituents
- Articulation of the diverse visions of the network across its member organisations over the past decade
- How did the idea of holding Sangams come into being?- The different themes/kinds, the process of designing a Sangam
- Milestones and the key insights and learnings that qualify them. Determining achievement/impact in a qualitative sense.
- Laying out the network’s failures: what did it set out to do and couldn’t, challenges that haven’t been overcome.

METHODOLOGY

1

REVIEW OF ARCHIVES

A deep dive into the varied documentation that exists in the form of reports, videos, films, interviews, media coverage, handwritten/ typed notes, email/letter exchanges.

2

PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION

Interviewing a diverse set of people (their names are included in the Annexure) who have been a part of the network since the inception of the idea and those who kept joining at different stages.

The criteria for the interviewees to ensure diversity were:

- Their duration of association with the network, some right from inception and others joined over the course of the decade
- Their engagement across activities
- Sectors such as youth work, disability rights, education, environment and ecology, etc.
- Geographical areas

The Birth of a Network

Is an idea in the head of only one individual or is the idea in that individual's psyche a manifestation of a collective intention?

One of the initiating organisations of Vikalp Sangam, Kalpavriksh Environment Action Group (KV) had already been working on alternatives to destructive development, centralised governance of the commons, conservation and livelihoods, education and so on. There were other organisations and groups that were associated with KV and were on a similar inquiry and commitment to work on alternatives across sectors such as health, agriculture, social equality, and so on. These also became the initial groups that formed the Vikalp Sangam network.

"In 2011, I was at the Adivasi Academy in Tejgarh, Gujarat, talking to Ganesh Devy. He had just organized a Bhasha Sangam (Language Confluence) at the Academy with over a thousand participants from a few hundred languages. When he spoke about this, it struck me that perhaps we could consider such a gathering for all those working on alternatives to mainstream systems. I asked him what he thought of a 'Vikalp Sangam'; he was immediately enthusiastic and offered to host it at the Academy. Back in Pune, I quickly drew up a note and sent it to him to take the idea further," says Ashish Kothari, a founder of Kalpavriksh in his essay 'Vikalp Sangam: A Decade Of Exploration On Alternatives In India', November, 2024. ¹

From then on, he began conversations with other civil society organisations to gauge whether such an initiative is required and there was a collective need and an enthusiastic yes among the groups that were in conversations.

In early 2014, a few civil society groups came together for a brainstorming session in Pune and thus a network got birthed.

"It was before the Vikalp Sangam began, Ashish and I had some communication about what can be done further in this whole question of alternatives. That's why we first began the Alternatives Forum Pune. That is how we thought we should create a space, at least in Pune where a lot of people come in and work on alternatives. In the beginning, for a few years, it went very well, we used to meet every month, but now it has fizzled out. Later, when Ashish said that they are thinking of a larger initiative. I came to know about Vikalp Sangam and I was part of the first workshop we had in Pune where we got a lot of people from all over India. It was a 2-day meeting where it took a much more specific and concrete shape. I have been part of the process right from that time," says K.J. Joy, Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM), VS General Assembly and VS Facilitation Team Member.

The impetus behind the search for alternatives is rooted in the struggles of many people's movements, organisations and communities challenging the structures and systems of power such as capitalism, patriarchy, racism, casteism and such. These resistances are not enough and there is a need to envision responses to these dominant systems by not only unearthing answers from our traditional knowledge systems but also by imagining and creating newer ways of being. It calls for much more than band-aid solutions; it calls for deeper, fundamental transformations.

¹ 'Vikalp Sangam: A Decade Of Exploration On Alternatives In India', November, 2024, Ashish Kothari, 2024, (<https://vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-a-decade-of-exploration-on-alternatives-in-india/>).

What did we set out to do?

OBJECTIVES

1. Networking and Sharing

Taking stock of members' accounts, and looking at the evolution of VS activities, amongst the various objectives, networking is the one that has been met the most.

Networking sits even at the genesis of Vikalp Sangam as that is what enabled the coming together of the multiple organisations after deliberations and the shared intent of collaborating on something beyond their organisational boundaries.

At the risk of sounding obvious, this objective played a crucial role in the addition of new members of the network too.

“The first I heard about Vikalp Sangam was when there was a Tamil Nadu Sangam. I've always been trying to do all my work in networks. I very much believe in collective intelligence and peer-to-peer learning and I was trying to kind of weave different such organisations together. So, I was really happy to hear that there's this alive network (Vikalp Sangam) of like-minded organisations,” said Gijs Spoor, Social Entrepreneurship Association, VS General Assembly Member.

Sharing about the network has been carried out through different activities such as webinars, stories on the Vikalp Sangam website across multiple languages and geographies. A group of members came together to form what is called 'VS Ambassadors' for the purpose of doing presentations on Vikalp Sangam, its philosophy, vision, the network's activities and so on. Initially, these presentations were done by just one or two individuals which also prompted the forming of the group so that more people could articulate different aspects of VS based on their experiences and learnings.

Whether the sharing was happening through the VS Ambassadors or the webinars/stories, it was actively enabling the articulation of alternatives by various communities, civil society groups, policy-makers and so on.

One of the major activities that contributed to networking was the gathering of organisations called Sangams. Sangams act as a space where organisations across different sectors convene, share knowledge with each other, explore common ground to collaborate from and collectively envision meaningful alternatives to the dominant, extractive, inequitable socio-economic and political systems - and sometimes even constructively challenge each other with regard to weaknesses and gaps in work.

Sangam refers to the confluence or the meeting place of two or more water bodies facilitating material exchange. The 'Sangams' held by Vikalp Sangam hence are symbolic for the exchange of ideas, learning, articulations and visions. The first Sangam was held in 2014 at the Timbaktu Collective in Andhra Pradesh which was attended by representatives of 20 organisations and movements working diversely on community development, ecology, rights based issues, alternative politics and social development.

The Sangams have been critical spaces where a lot of networking has been happening. In the past decade, around 30 Sangams² have taken place across themes and regions and some Sangams have also taken deep roots and continued autonomously as its own process.

Though not all Sangams continued, some turned into longer processes such as Western Himalaya Vikalp Sangam, Youth Vikalp Sangam, and Well-being and Justice Vikalp Sangam.

² Reports on all the Sangams can be found here <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-reports/>

Western Himalaya Vikalp Sangam

In 2016, the organisations Sambhaavnaa Institute, Palampur, Jagori Grameen, Deer Park, Bir and Kalpavriksh, Pune held a mini-Sangam as preparation for a larger gathering across the Western Himalaya. A need to cast the net wider across the entire region was felt so that the Sangam could be more meaningful and enable richer cross-learning for the entire region. There was a belief that driven by collective ownership within the states of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, a longer process can be started rather than just a one-off event, to more effectively meet the objectives of the VS process.

Since 2016, there have been Western Himalaya Sangams³ in 2018, 2021, and 2024 and along the way the group also transitioned into being an autonomous process with its own organising and fundraising, though still informed by the national process and reporting to it. Changes in the political and administrative status of Jammu & Kashmir in 2019, into two union territories, also informed the evolving discussions in this period. A web platform called The Himalaya Collective⁴ that aims to be a network of change-makers & advocates for alternative development in Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand also emerged from the WHVS process.

Vision for Youth in the VS process

“I feel there’s been a lot of young people joining after YVS. There’s been a shift of energy in the way young people started showing not just in conversations but also other activities and spaces being held by young people. One vision that young people have more courage to claim space in larger circles and share our learnings and perspectives, not just stick to execution. Be able to revive our youth Vikalp Sangam process and hold it in the next two years,” shares Pankati.

Youth Vikalp Sangam

A Sangam theme that caught steam and went on to convene four times was the Youth Vikalp Sangam.

The objective was to create a space/confluence of youth-led and youth-engaging organisations to share alternative perspectives and practices to promote and enable young people to become effective facilitators of a new consciousness that connects self to society.

The Youth Sangam process also created ripples in other Sangam spaces where there were conscious efforts made to have as many youth as possible. Most Vikalp Sangam gatherings now have much more participation from the youth not just in attending the Sangams but also showing ownership in co-organising them.

“While organising the Youth Sangam one of the earliest conversations was about building diversity. Not just in participation but also within the co-organising team which led to the team consisting 12 people. Through the organising of the Sangam, one learning was that we also need to build the capacity to hold diversity of the group,” says Pankati Jain, Blue Ribbon Movement, co-organisers Youth Vikalp Sangam and VS Facilitation Team Member.

Process of organising a Sangam

Through the journey of organising Sangams collectively, the need to have a guidance document on how to organise a Sangam emerged. This has been an evolving document that kept getting refined with each Sangam. It covers details such as the duration of Sangam preparation, criteria for selecting the venue, tasks to be done before, during and after the Sangam and so on.

³ <https://vikalpsangam.org/western-himalaya-vikalp-sangam/>
⁴ <https://www.thehimalayacollective.com>

2. Research and Documentation

Documentation of transformative initiatives from within the communities, civil society organisations and individuals has been weak across India.

Vikalp Sangam has aimed to bridge the gap through action-research case studies, commissioned stories, films/videos, resources aggregating and publications.⁵

Some of the earliest pieces of documentation include ‘The Search for Radical Alternatives: Key Aspects and Principles’⁶, an evolving document first prepared in 2014 through the Vikalp Sangam process. In its 7th *avatar* now, it attempts to lay out some ideas towards collective search for pathways and visions that are real alternatives to today’s dominant economic and political system, taking us

towards equity, justice, and ecological sustainability. Originating from this note is an integral framework document called ‘Alternatives Transformation Format’⁷ that can be used as a self-assessment tool to gain more in-depth understanding of alternative transformations on political, economic, social, cultural and ecological fronts, and of the worldviews that underlie and inform such transformations.

One of the most notable documentations that was carried out by the VS as well as non-VS members was in the period of 2020-2022 under a series called ‘Extraordinary Work of ‘Ordinary’ People’⁸. This series documented examples of resilience shown by communities and organisations as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



3. Outreach and Visiblisation of Alternatives

India is rich with civil society organisations, movements and communities working on different alternatives thematically and geographically. Unfortunately, documentation and public awareness of such initiatives in India is poor. There are very few attempts to consolidate and present in a cohesive manner the range of these alternatives.

Vikalp Sangam Website

The suggestion to have such a website that is a response to the aforementioned gaps was made at Learning Societies Unconference in 2013. Thoughtworks, an IT group, offered to create and set it up free of charge. The website was launched at the Economics of Happiness gathering in Bangalore in March 2014 with a flash mob⁹.

Since then, the website has been a repository of stories of hope, human endeavour and showcasing of possibilities and now houses more than 2000

stories including perspective pieces. These pieces are categorised into 11 categories: Economics and Technologies, Energy, Environment and Ecology, Food and Water, Health and Hygiene, Knowledge and Media, Learning and Education, Livelihoods, Politics, Settlements and Transport, and Society, Culture and Peace.

Apart from stories, it hosts a wide sea of resources across these categories, videos on initiatives and films made by Vikalp Sangam.

The curator of the website refers to the Alternative Transformation Format and the Flower of Transformation to determine what can be published on the website and the kind of stories to be commissioned.

The website has also been an introduction to the Vikalp Sangam space for people who hadn’t heard of it before.

⁵ Many of the mentioned documentation and more can be found on the VS Website Outputs page: <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-outputs/>

⁶ <https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Alternatives-Framework-7th-Avatar-digital-v1.4.pdf>

⁷ https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/migrate/Resources/alternatives_transformation_format_revised_20.2.2017.pdf

⁸ <https://vikalpsangam.org/extraordinary-work-of-ordinary-people-a-series/>

⁹ Launch of the Vikalp Sangam Website <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrhdUOV0-Ro>

“So during Gandhi Fellowship times and when I was doing my own research in terms of my own exploration, when I was looking for initiatives, organisations, working on education and when I want to visit them and learn from. Somewhere during that period I came across the VS website and since then there’s been kind of a place which I would visit once in a while because there were a lot of hopeful stories and it introduced different models that were at that point of time very new to me.

And then even when we started Travellers’ University, I would go to the website once in a while, but mostly to read stories, but never read the

alternatives framework or anything like then,” says Ashik Krishnan, Travellers’ University, VS General Assembly Member.

One of the shortcomings that the curators have tried to consciously work upon is to publish as many non-English pieces as possible, yet it remains predominantly English and Hindi. Ongoing efforts are being made to include a diversity in regions, languages, and even the format of the stories (written or audio/visual). Submissions by the community members themselves are being encouraged.



4. Advocacy

A network like Vikalp Sangam is pregnant with deep transformative systemic interventions. One of the pillars of that is to influence and create shifts in the policies that affect the realities of the communities on the ground. Advocacy has entailed various tools and methods: issuing statements¹⁰ in response to injustices and current affairs, declarations coming out of the Sangam processes, policy recommendations emerging from documentation such as the above-mentioned COVID-resilience series, and people’s manifestos.

In 2019 and then again in 2024, during the period of the nation’s general elections, the network decided to put out a ‘People’s Manifesto for a Just, Equitable and Sustainable India, 2024’ which would play a role in informing citizens as also political parties, and government agencies, of what is required to create a just and equitable India. The use of these Manifestos is not limited to the general elections, but can be used as a compass for civil society organisations to reflect upon their transformative practices and keep

deepening and widening their actions.

One of the key principles in the statements and Manifestos that the Sangam has published is that there are not just demands to the State, but also commitments that Sangam constituent civil society groups are making.

While interviewing members of VS for this document, there were somewhat contrasting views on the realisation of this objective. While everyone agreed that more work could be done vis-à-vis advocacy, some were critical about it and others in awe of the work that has already been put in this regard.

More dedicated efforts are being made to strengthen the advocacy objective; for instance, getting a dedicated person on board to anchor it, help with developing policy briefs and also who is well-versed with media relations to take these advocacy outputs to a larger audience.

¹⁰ The full list of statements issued by VS are listed on the website <https://vikalpsangam.org/vikalp-sangam-statements/>

5. Envisioning

One of the misfortunes plaguing our times is that we have forgotten how to dream. Our ability to take a pause, get bored, get thinking about our future has been handicapped by the fast-paced machinery of capitalism.

Envisioning, hence becomes a very crucial objective for a network which is talking about a pluriverse of futures where the world is equitable and a place designed for all without exploitation.

Collective envisioning has been part of the network since the first sangam in 2014 that took place at Timbaktu Collective where Kalpavriksh presented a note called 'In Search of Alternatives: Key Aspects and Principles' for discussion. The note tries to articulate what encapsulates alternatives, what does resistance look like, what qualifies as transformative and it draws its knowledge from communities and movements involved in working on-ground. It suggests that alternatives are built on the following intersecting spheres: **Ecological sustainability, Social well-being and justice, Direct and delegated democracy, Economic democracy, Cultural diversity and Knowledge democracy.**

The note also became a compass in orienting the new members who join Vikalp Sangam and encourage enquiry within the organisation on where they fall on the intersecting petals of the Flower of

Transformation (created as part of the note). This is an evolving note that has gone through conversations with over 1000 people and is now in its 7th avatar.

“The piece of linking the petals together is in alignment with the Blue Ribbon Movement at least in principle and theory. That churning is on throughout. For example, how to be sustainable in the way we organise our events with zero wastage and no plastic,” says Pankati Jain, Convener, Blue Ribbon Movement and VS Facilitation Team Member, while explaining how they have been using the Flower of Transformation in their own context.

“We were only thinking about disability rights when we joined the VS process. After I became a part of VS, we started thinking about aspects of human rights too,” says Rajiv Rajan, Ektha and VS Facilitation Team Member

Over the years, in multiple ways, the Sangam design has also tried to incorporate visioning exercises where participants are invited to be audacious while dreaming of the utopian worlds that they would like to bring to reality.

Another publication that was audacious in its dreaming was the book called 'Alternative Futures: India Unshackled', a collection of 35 essays balancing a 'dream' of an ideal society along with grounded assessment of possibilities and pathways.

Internal Governance: Decentralisation of the Process

Before 2021, Vikalp Sangam had a Core Group that was making overall decisions and guiding the network. But there was a heavy dependence on Kalpavriksh as the day-to-day holder of the process, and repeated attempts by it to hand over to others had not worked. So for a collective orientation to run the network in as decentralised as a way possible, earthy¹¹ efforts were made in the Dehradun Core Group Meeting in 2021, with the creation of a Facilitation Team comprising several member groups.

At the Vikalp Sangam Facilitation Team Meeting held in July 2023, we tried to arrive at an optimum organizational design, mandate of roles and responsibilities, internal coordination and communication flow of the various Vikalp Sangam organs. An additional point in the discussion was that the 'Core Group' already consisted of several dozen organisations, and was therefore unwieldy. It was decided that the Vikalp Sangam Core Group becomes the General Assembly (GA). The Facilitation Team (FT) continues with its current mandate.



The following are the renewed functions of the two groups:

Functions of the General Assembly

Policy decisions, appointment of the Facilitation Team, approving nominations of the new members, vetting the Vikalp Sangam Statements and advocacy outputs, resolving disputes and redressing grievances, if any¹². Some of these procedures are still being formulated within their respective working groups who are tasked to come up with them.

Functions of the Facilitation Team

The main function of VSFT is to help or facilitate the implementation of the decisions taken by the General Assembly. It would work together on creating robust systems of communication, coordination, and management of the VS.

Reflections on the FT

“A lot of understanding of the VS values has come through the work in the Facilitation Team. For example, I have been working on brainstorming for guidelines of VS’s Funding Policy. It has expanded my understanding of the why of things. Having elders like Bablu, Joy, Ashish, Sujatha passing on their knowledge has also helped,” says Pankati Jain.

The transferring of knowledge from the elders of the space to the younger generation has been an ongoing inquiry as those who have been part of the network since early on have a much deeper understanding of the fundamentals of the process than those who join anew. What can be done to bridge those gaps?

Within the context of the Facilitation Team’s working and structure, a question that was raised by one of the young members was around the nature of work and roles played by the youth within the Facilitation Team. A lot of the work is admin and logistics-related with follow ups from members of the General Assembly and keeping a tab on the various working groups. There is a need of the younger members to learn through their experience about the deeper philosophies and ideologies of VS and take part in activities that would help build that understanding. This need is not fully met due to the limited time and bandwidth that is available to them which gets sucked by doing admin and co-ordination work.

¹¹ A term Ashish Kothari prefers to use over 'concrete'

¹² Procedures for the Grievance Redressal are still being formulated.

The celebration that is Vikalp Sangam





Key Milestones

Timeline

This timeline is strictly that of Vikalp Sangam as an entity and does not incorporate various influences that went into its making, which would be decades or even centuries old of human history - not to mention nature's inspiration.

2019

Wellbeing and Justice Sangam at Bangalore, Karnataka

Youth VS II at Bangalore, Karnataka

Peace Justice Wellbeing VS at Bir, Himachal Pradesh

Democracy VS at Bhim, Rajasthan

Launch of Global Tapestry of Alternatives

2024

Sessions at World Social Forum - including on proposal for a South Asia VS - at Kathmandu, Nepal

National Vikalp Sangam, Kachchh, Gujarat

2011

Ashish Kothari proposed Vikalp Sangam in discussion with Ganesh Devy

2018

VS for Peace in Central India at Tilda, Chhattisgarh

Health VS at Sitttilingi, Tamil Nadu

West Himalaya VS (WHVS) I, at Rakkar, Himachal Pradesh

2020

South Asia Bioregionalism Working Group began convening (based on recommendation from Democracy VS)

2020- Youth VS III held on-line (due to the Covid 19 situation)

2023

Pluralities Dialogue Bangalore, Karnataka

2014

A small group of civil society organisations met to brainstorm in Pune

First draft of the Alternatives Framework Note, to present at the first VS

Launch of the Vikalp Sangam website

First Vikalp Sangam at Ananthapur, Telangana

2015

Tamil Nadu VS at Madurai, Tamil Nadu

Ladakh VS at Leh, Ladakh

Maharashtra VS Wardha, Maharashtra

2017

Youth VS at Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

Kerala VS at Adoor, Kerala

Food VS at Bajju, Rajasthan

National Vikalp Sangam, at Udaipur, Rajasthan

2016

Bijali (Energy) VS at Bodh Gaya, Bihar

2016- Kachchh VS at Bhuj, Gujarat

2016- Himachal VS at Palampur, Himachal Pradesh

2016- Food VS at Muniguda, Odisha

2020-22

Extraordinary Work of Ordinary People- series of examples of Covid-19 resilience stories

2022

VS Dialogue on Spirituality in Social Justice and Well-Being at Bangalore, Karnataka

Youth VS Ecology & Politics of Ecological Movements at Bangalore, Karnataka

Celebrating Nas (Barley) at Ranbirpur, Ladakh

Indigenous and Community Worldviews VS at Dharmavaram Andhra Pradesh

2021

Creation of VS Facilitation Team

Ladakh VS on Food and Agriculture at Saboo village near Leh, Ladakh

WHVS II at Devalsari in Tehri-Gadhval, Uttarakhand

Offshoots

Over the years, with the diverse objectives that the network has been working on, many offshoots have taken birth and have continued to operate independently as part of the VS process.

Some of them started as working groups and evolved into full-on processes. One such strong process has been that of the South Asia Bioregionalism Working Group.



South Asia Bioregionalism Working Group

At the Democracy Vikalp Sangam organised in October 2019, there was some discussion on the need to re-conceptualise political boundaries from an ecological and cultural perspective. What, for instance, would decision-making look like if river basins, or mountains, or other contiguous ecosystems and the cultures associated with them (including, for instance, nomadism) were to be the focus? Could political constituencies correspond to a river basin, or a lake and its surrounds, or a mountain range? Such inquiries could be considered for regions within a country, or between current nation-state boundaries. There has been a realisation, in particular, that re-imagining the possibilities flowing from such inquiries, then working to create a movement for the realisation of such possibilities for South Asia as a whole, and also linking these processes to peace, are urgently necessary tasks. With the risk of climate chaos increasing rapidly, the well-being of people and nature in this region depends on society, state and markets working from a bioregional perspective. Hence the idea of creating a group that could work on these themes, issues, and questions.

Experience over the last many decades indicates that current political and administrative boundaries, both within and between countries, are often not suitable for decision-making that indeed leads to ecological sustainability and livelihood security. Existing political and administrative boundaries often cut across contiguous ecological and/or cultural landscapes, thereby disrupting the natural movement of wildlife and genes, as also the historical movements and links of communities (especially nomadic ones). So the idea is to rethink/relook at existing political and administrative boundaries, and consider transboundary or borderless or reconstituted approaches that respect Eco-Bio-Cultural linkages and contiguities. There is a need to understand, conceptualise, and advocate for such bioregional approaches, including to consider human-wildlife dimensions.

The group has so far come up with three reports, a process document that is underway and collaborated with ATREE, Bangalore on a course on Bioregionalism¹³.

¹³ <https://vikalpsangam.org/south-asia-bioregionalism-working-group/>



Vikalp Sutra

Another offshoot that had considerable on-ground impact was Vikalp Sutra that emerged from Vikalp Sangam aimed at linking other networks and collectives with a focus on the sustainable livelihoods' landscape of India.

It was a collective, non-hierarchical platform initiated in June 2020, to facilitate dignified livelihoods, workers' rights and economic democracy in India. It was a response to the severe economic crisis faced by vulnerable communities and individual citizens in the country, due to the Covid19 pandemic and lockdown.

It had different initiatives to facilitate the above:

Sutra AjeeWiki: It would serve as a space for collaboration of those who worked on dignified livelihoods

Sutra Vaani: A free and locally facilitated helpline for workers (especially informal/ unorganised sector) in livelihoods' distress. Sutra Vaani was

conceptualised by Vikalp Sutra, with its technology partner, Gram Vaani (which provided migrant workers a helpline support during the Covid19 pandemic induced migration, job and livelihood losses).

Sutra Mandali: A series of conversations with those working in the livelihoods space

Vikalp Sutra, as of now, is dormant as the anchors of the process were no longer available to take it forward.

“The challenges with Vikalp Sutra were not having enough resources to invest in building the technology of the platform and a team with technical knowledge that would actively anchor it. I have been contemplating on coming back and reviving Vikalp Sutra as soon as we can figure the next steps with the above challenges,” says Juhi Pandey, Social and Design Development professional who was anchoring Vikalp Sutra and has been the director of Khamir, Kutch.



Vikalp Varta

Vikalp Varta was an online dialogue series on alternatives for India during the covid times and beyond which started in April 2020.

A weekly dialogue series, it featured leaders of initiatives that were engaged in creating systemic alternatives, even as they were currently responding to the covid crisis. Twenty one dialogues ranging from art, collective commons, sustainable livelihoods, health and many more were the topics of discussion.

A sub-website was created to document the efforts and the process eventually faded out due to unknown reasons.



Global Tapestry of Alternatives

“At an International Degrowth conference in Budapest in 2016, I had proposed a Global Alternatives Forum, bringing together movements for radical transformation around the world. This idea gained ground over the next 2-3 years, and in 2019 the Global Tapestry of Alternatives was launched. VS is one of GTA’s ‘weavers’ (with other weavers in Colombia, Mexico, and South-East Asia), involved in mutual learning and collective action with other constituents,” says Ashish Kothari.

The Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA) is an initiative seeking to create solidarity networks and strategic alliances amongst all these alternatives on local, regional and global levels. It locates itself in or helps initiate interactions among alternatives. It operates through varied and light structures, defined in each space, that are horizontal, democratic, inclusive and non-centralized, using diverse local languages and other ways of communicating. The initiative has no central structure or control mechanisms. It spreads step by step as an ever-expanding, complex set of tapestries. Weavers are woven together by already existing communal or collective webs, building on already existing and new alternatives to dominant regimes. It promotes or joins regional, national and global encounters, when the conditions allow for them, as well as close and synergistic linkages with existing organizations, like the World Social Forum.

A Global Tapestry of Alternatives is about creating spaces of collaboration and exchange, in order to learn about and from each other, critically but constructively challenge each other, offer active solidarity to each other whenever needed, interweave the initiatives in common actions, and give them visibility to inspire other people to create their own initiatives. It could facilitate people seeking transformative change going further along existing paths or forging new ones that strengthen alternatives wherever they are, hopefully eventually converging into a critical mass of alternative ways can support the conditions for the radical systemic changes we need.

A small group of activists from several regions of the world has started the initiative and will help facilitate its loosely knit structure as it takes shape in different parts of the world. The initial set of Endorsers of this initiative (to which more are added as we go along) will be encouraged to help link the Global Tapestry of Alternatives with similar initiatives around the world.

What the Network set out to do but couldn't

One of the feedback from the first Sangam was to have Keynote Speakers for some sessions, who could be academicians, experts, and so on. This has been a recurring need across a few Sangams and related gatherings. The root of it has been to give space to and learn from 'experts' in a one-to-many setting as it is a rarity to have them in the space and therefore get as much knowledge sharing done from them as possible. This has been discussed by the co-organisers across planning meetings of various Sangams and has been decided against since it clashes with the value of Vikalp Sangam gatherings which want to focus on harvesting collective wisdom and question what one means by 'experts' too.

There have been proposals for some Sangams like the Media Sangam, education and learning Sangam, Urban Sangam, and various states not yet covered, but somehow not materialised due to the lack of initiative or follow-through from the original proposers.

There has been an expressed need to articulate organic urbanisation more in the Sangam process and to include issues of livelihoods of urban poor and their sustainability, which has not materialised across Sangams.

Relationships with and coverage of Vikalp Sangam's activities in the mainstream media has been weak. Some of the offshoots that started with great rigour lost steam along the way as the people anchoring them left the organisations and moved on to other things in life. Some of them include Sangam processes like the Alternative Economics, Energy, or initiatives like Vikalp Sutra, Vikalp Varta.

This also has been one of the challenges of the network. At any given point, only 50% of the members of the General Assembly have been able to remain active. There were two predominant reasons for that.

One being that the member organisations already are stretched on their bandwidth vis a vis time, energy and human resources to be able to contribute to one more process that may or may not directly corroborate with their existing activities.

Another reason is also that lack of orientation to Vikalp Sangam by the main contact point(s) of each member organisation, to other members within their organisations.

"Though I would've very much liked that a couple of more people participated in the VS process, it has not happened to the extent that I would've liked. During the Governing Body meetings, I report on the major events done by VS, the Statements put out. We also try to put up as much VS material as possible on our website. In 2024, when we decided to have the National Vikalp Sangam, I had suggested an agenda point in the governing body meeting. Where I shared my reflection that I have been participating in this without too many gaps and would be good to have more colleagues join the process. Everyone agreed that it's an important platform and we should be a part of this and there was a renewed commitment to be part of VS. My effort would be to get at least a couple of more people into the activities and see how it goes," highlights K.J. Joy.

Weaknesses have also included: inability to follow up strongly or adequately on advocacy initiatives; lack of local community members in the Facilitation Team.

There have been challenges in terms of making the space accessible to remote locations such as the North Eastern states¹⁹.

"We lack funds. We follow a self sustainable model, we run a homestay. But with climate change and its erratic weather, the road connectivity is too poor. Till today we have had to cross a bamboo bridge made by the Lepcha community.

VS should focus on state wise organising. We can do online meetings and let the affected people of the region speak. We are human beings; we get sad, we get angry, time and again we need to get connected for each other's moral support," reflects Mayalmit Lepcha, General Secretary of Affected Citizens of Teesta, VS General Assembly Member.

¹⁹ <https://northeastnetwork.org/nen-in-networks/>

Through the seasons, what has kept the Network going?

Listening to the sharing of the members during their interviews, a few themes emerged that explained why the members kept going.

Resonance with the values, objectives and direction of the network was one major determinant in what made people carry on and keep showing up in big and small ways.

This resonance also translated into shared intentions, strong connections, a sense of co-ownership of the process and a collective dream.

The network allowed them to dream of a collective space which is beyond their organisational boundaries and saw it as valuable in realising the utopian dream that they together began envisioning.

Despite the ideal desire and efforts to move to a completely decentralised way of functioning, there was still a lot of support and holding done by Kalpavriksh as an organisation that took care of the

fundamental functions that kept the network going and nourished. It took a lot of following up and nudging to keep the ball rolling even if others dropped it (unintentionally, of course).

Apart from Kalpavriksh, there were a few other member organisations and individuals who showed up consistently and kept at it without losing motivation and encouraged participation from others.

The culture of Vikalp Sangam has been a rich soil for personal and collective transformation.

“I first introduced the concept of disability as part of the 2014 Tamil Nadu VS. The group simply accepted the concept as I explained it and I think it is the only group to accept that as it is with proper understanding. This group of people have given me the best experiences of my life in terms of acceptance in the world and it has influenced me in various ways,” says Rajiv Rajan, Ektha.



ANNEXURE *Interviewees*

K.J. Joy

Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management
Pune

Ashik Krishnan

Travellers' University
Thrissur

Gijs Spoor

Social Entrepreneurship Association
Auroville

Kejal Savla

Blue Ribbon Movement
Mumbai

C.K. Ganguly

Timbaktu Collective
Anantpur

Rajiv Rajan

Ektha
Chennai

Pankati Jain

Blue Ribbon Movement
Mumbai

Sujatha Padmanabhan

Kalpavriksh
Pune

Mayalmit Lepcha

Sikkim Indigenous Lepcha Women's Association
Dzongu

Shrishtee Bajpai

Kalpavriksh
Pune

Juhi Pandey

Independent

Shiba Desor

Independent



Author's Note

The exercise unravelled jewels of insights into a decade-long network. Through the interviews and also as a member of the process since the past three years, one makes the observation that the Vikalp Sangam members are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the process and are committed to finding pathways on how to enhance and build on the insights for the next decade.

On account of the evolving nature of this document, the author commits to make it more thorough with more revisions including casting a wider net for interviews and review of existing material. If anyone wishes to be a part of this process or send in suggestions and/or comments, please reach out to Arnaz on arnaz.khan@gmail.com

Year 2024 marked the 10th Anniversary of Vikalp Sangam (VS), a network of 95+ diverse organisations that emerged out of a search for grounded alternatives to the current model of 'development' built on ecological destruction and rising inequalities.

At the mark of a decade, it was a befitting time to look back at the network's genesis, its objectives and the journey so far. With that vision in mind, we documented Vikalp Sangam's Institutional Memory to capture the Vikalp Sangam process, its unique insights and learnings of its members along their journey.

