

September 2020

MOBILIZING IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19

DVN 2020 ANNUAL MEETING



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Objectives

The facilitator was invited by Dasvandh Network and Ik Manzil leadership to organize a dialogue that focused on identifying how COVID-19 has impacted individual Sikh organizations and their ability to do their work. The facilitator was encouraged to recreate the space that the retreat usually provides to organizational leadership - to collaborate and brainstorm in sangat - particularly around the effects the pandemic is having on organizational projects.

Given this, the facilitator organized the conversation around (1) identifying community and organizational needs, (2) discussing how the constituency of the community has changed through the pandemic and which community members are most vulnerable and in need of organizational support, and (3) redirecting organizational labor towards a model of abundance and moving with the opportunity of change that the pandemic has provided, rather than fall into a scarcity mindset of forced change or precarious conditions.

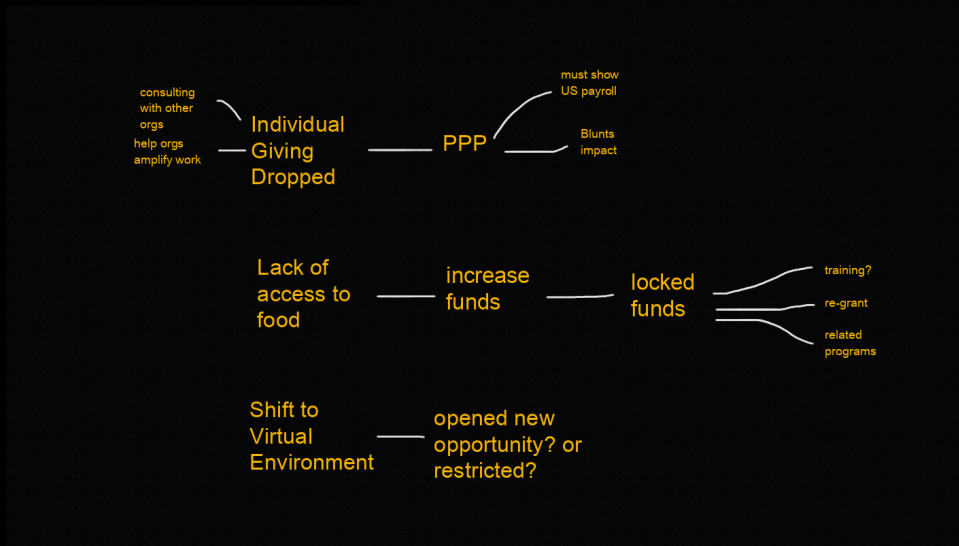
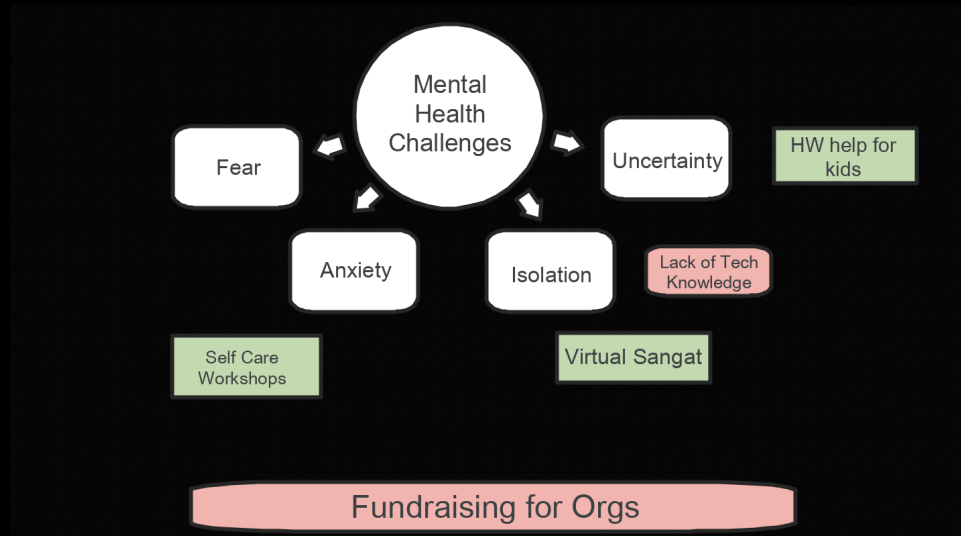
Goals

In approaching the conversation through these avenues, the facilitator attempted the following:

1. To recenter organization leadership on community values and needs that the pandemic has illuminated
2. To reframe the pandemic as an opportunity for change, not retrenchment, as a way to reframe community work in relation to the community members most in need or ready to connect
3. To reimagine purpose and possibilities for Sikh organizational work through the lens of future-making rather than crisis response

Mental Maps

In the first 15 minutes, participants were broken into two groups and asked to identify key values and actions that have driven their COVID-era community engagement. *Mental maps available [here](#).*



Opportunities & Setbacks in Transition

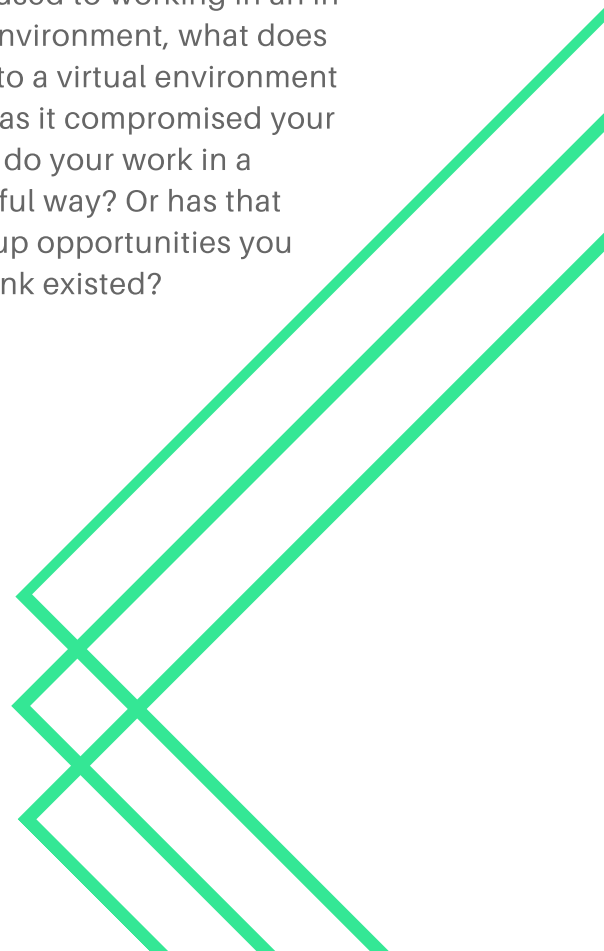
Food banks, virtual sangat, an openness to possibilities & shortcomings

In both small group conversations and large group share out, participants resonated around two points: the obvious impact on previous projects and working conditions and the new opportunities for growth, change, and connection that were perhaps long overdue.

One participant reflected, "**I look at this time as a jump start for change that otherwise would have been very difficult.** All levels of organizations, family dynamics, gurdwaras...we're out of norm already so it becomes a catalyst and a huge opportunity to jump to the next level."

Acknowledging this possibility for transformation on a personal, professional, and community level, participants posed the following questions:

- How can we leverage each others' knowledge & expertise to build a new Sikh organizational world?
- If you're used to working in an in-person environment, what does the shift to a virtual environment mean? Has it compromised your ability to do your work in a meaningful way? Or has that opened up opportunities you didn't think existed?



Virtual Sangat

Participants cited the beauty of being able to cultivate and build sangat virtually – and the possibility of it being a crutch in our own Sikhi.

Organizations have been quick to jump into the world of Zoom and virtual programming to connect with sangat. While SikhNet already operated a primarily online platform and network, Sikh Coalition was able to launch two full weeks of summer workshops. Khalis Foundation has used its Sundar Gutka mobile app to remind the diaspora of crucial COVID safety guidelines and received more funding than it ever has before to run food banks; United Sikh Movement has transitioned most of its programs online, holding regular keertans and gurbaani veechar for the general public. All of these programming opportunities have allowed organizations to address mental health challenges that have arisen with the pandemic, bridging the gaps in regular in-person community outreach with chances to connect the diaspora globally.

However, as one participant reminded us, virtual sangat as a solution to loneliness and isolation (pandemic-induced or otherwise) cannot replace our relationship with Guru Sahib. Sikh organizations can consider how to facilitate the resources and knowledge to allow each Sikh to continue on this journey, using their work to address barriers to wellness, safety, and livelihood so that each Sikh is fully supported and able to journey on their path towards Guru Sahib.



Struggling to Connect

While virtual sangat might have opened the doors to some, there are many more still being shut out.

The primary concerns for organizations whose work is in-person and local, or at least domestic, were the sangat members who are not being reached by new virtual programming – particularly elders and low-income individuals or families who do not have internet or virtual tools readily accessible. For organizations who work internationally, there was a large concern with an inability to travel to regular trainings and meetings, and a similar barrier of being unable to connect with community partners in areas with unreliable internet access.

There was a hope in the openness that individuals and communities have had towards trying out virtual platforms – while it has not been easy, people have been more ready to move outside their normative means to make things work. However, the concern remains that not all previous constituencies are being included in this new world of Sikh organizational work.

Adaptation

"I don't feel the human race is built to move back - we adapt and move forward."

Regardless of what happens post-COVID, and post-election, participants shared we should use this as a chance to be better prepared for another crisis - whether that be environmental, political, or social. "What are the unknowns the future holds that our organizations can think through and have infrastructure prepared so we don't have to scramble the next time around?"

Being proactive also comes from the new avenues of connection and learning - the accessibility to community conversations makes it so that those who don't usually have a voice now do. Including these voices in our conversations will help us be better prepared for all the facets of community experience that could unfold.

Addressing Individual Needs First

While participants are organizational leaders, the impact of the pandemic on personal livelihood is inevitable. This must be reckoned with for the wellbeing of participants and the longevity of Sikh organizational work.

In the final 20 minutes, participants opened up to the vulnerability that Brené Brown identifies as "the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose."

Reflecting on the anger, confusion, and hopelessness that the pandemic has awoken in most people - especially those who are deeply impacted by, and vulnerable to, the ongoing pandemics of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy. Sharing with each other their experiences of exhaustion, fear, and uncertainty, participants encouraged each other to lean on Gurbaani and Gurmat to find peace and a path forward in the face of relentless oppression and violence. They vocalized the loneliness and vulnerability that comes with being a leader in the community to which one belongs as it often makes it impossible to share their deepest fears and concerns with many around them. These factors combined with the unhealthy work culture that capitalism produces (on top of the non-profit industrial complex) have led to some necessary questions:

- Is this the work I should be doing right now? What openings can I address?
- How do I ensure I'm addressing larger systems of oppression while being realistic and tangible with my organizational goals?

Overall, the sentiment was that our current methods and pathways are not working for wellness and sustainability - the pandemic is the portal to make change for ourselves and our community for good.

Future Workshop

Addressing a culture of burnout is critical for the longevity of community organizations.

To build off of the important closing thoughts on building community and support amongst organizational leaders, I recommend directly addressing issues of burnout through a future community organization workshop. Below are my suggestions of experts who would be excellent facilitators for Sikh organizational conversations on burnout and wellness:

1. Kulpreet Singh, [South Asian Mental Health Alliance \(SAMHAA\)](#)
2. Shuranjeet Singh, [Tarakī Wellbeing](#)
3. Rapinder Kaur, [Art as Therapy](#)
4. Jasmeet Chagger & Maneet Chahal, [Soch Mental Health](#)

We are not created to live in a cycle of grief and fighting. We are not created for scarcity and trauma.

Please do not internalize the exhausting "fight and battle constantly" narrative. You can rest. Rest and slowing down is a political protest too.

Thinking Structurally, Acting Locally

"When you're in the battle, it's protective for mental health to act in a way where you have a say in the process."

The closing reflections reminded participants that, in order to maintain this work longterm – beyond addressing the unsustainable tendencies that are built into advocacy and non-profit work – we must think about the structural and systemic oppression that each organization addresses. Staying rooted in the reality that we cannot solve everything, nor do we have the power to do so, will maintain a healthier framework for advocacy work in the short and long term, pandemic era or not.

ਮੇਰੇ ਹਰਿ ਜੀਉ ਸਭੁ ਕੇ ਤੇਰੈ ਵਸਿ ॥
ਅਸਾ ਜੋਰੁ ਨਾਹੀ ਜੇ ਕਿਛੁ ਕਰਿ ਹਮ ਸਾਕਹ ਜਿਉ ਭਾਵੈ ਤਿਵੈ ਬਖਸਿ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

My beloved Vaaheguru, everything is in Your power.
I have no power to do anything at all.
As it pleases You, You forgive us. ||1||Pause||

- ਸੂਹੀ ਮਹਲਾ ੪, ਅੰਗ ੭੩੬