

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

THE STATE OF NONPROFIT AMERICA

LESTER M. SALAMON *editor*

Chapter 16 Highlights **DEMOGRAPHIC AND** **TECHNOLOGICAL IMPERATIVES**

Atul Dighe

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DEMOGRAPHIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL IMPERATIVES *

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"We are in the midst of a historically unique demographic, technological, and cultural transformation," notes futurist Atul Dighe, and this transformation has special implications for America's private nonprofit organizations because of their commitment to innovation, their vulnerability to shifts in other sectors, and their involvement in many of the fields, such as health care and education, where the pace of change is especially fast.

Dighe's analysis is part of a broader assessment of *The State of Nonprofit America* coordinated by Dr. Lester M. Salamon of the Johns Hopkins University and published by the Brookings Institution Press in collaboration with the Aspen Institute.

Changing Demography. Among the forces shaping the future of the nonprofit sector, perhaps the easiest to predict are the demographic ones. For one thing, America is being transformed into a "minority majority" country, with a majority of its citizens non-Euro-Americans by the middle of the 21st century. The extension of life expectancies is also producing a more complex generational mix. What is more, the whole concept of aging is in flux as the old paradigm of education-work-retire is being replaced with one emphasizing learn-contribute-reflect. Finally, family structures are becoming more complex, as the traditional two-parent nuclear family is increasingly replaced by a complex array of living arrangements, and as families engage in "outsourcing" to handle traditional family chores.

These shifts have immense implications for nonprofit organizations. Such organizations can play vital roles in creating community in a context of ethnic diversity. They also stand to benefit from the growing need for elderly services and family support functions, though the changing demographics seem likely to entice more for-profit competitors into these same fields. At the same time, nonprofits themselves must be prepared to deal with these demographic changes. For instance, organizations focused on single ethnic groups must learn to accommodate multi-ethnic identities, since, according to at least one projection, 21 percent of Americans will claim mixed ancestry by 2050.

Technological Change. In addition to demographic shifts, the pace of technological change also seems likely to accelerate further in the years ahead, posing additional challenges, but also additional opportunities, for nonprofit organizations. For one thing, the old "sage-on-a-stage" model of education seems likely to be replaced increasingly by a "distributed learning" model that has profound implications for nonprofit educational institutions. Similarly, new nanotechnologies seem likely to transform medical care, making it possible to implant devices that not only sense bodily malfunctions but initiate corrective actions automatically. Finally, the internet is increasingly facilitating new forms of social activism that can further empower nonprofit advocacy on a global level.

Nonprofits stand to benefit from many of these changes, but also have a responsibility to help shape and promote them and ensure that their benefits flow to those most in need.

Cultural Shifts. Important changes are also under way in the area of culture, in the way we perceive our world. For one thing, a dominant "learning culture" has come into being stressing the importance of knowledge and life-long learning and emphasizing the process of learning over the acquisition of a particular body of knowledge. Also important has been the emergence of a new population subgroup, the "cultural creatives," who differ from both the two dominant other subgroups—the "moderns" and the "traditionals"—by virtue of their emphasis on holistic thinking, social activism, globalism, and integrated practice—i.e., integrating the demands of the workplace with personal values and aspirations. Dighe believes that adherents to this new worldview are likely to provide the human resources to fuel the future growth of the nonprofit sector and he predicts their presence will continue to grow. It is imperative that nonprofits tap into the collective energies of this emerging population cohort.

Prevailing demographic, technological, and cultural trends thus hold important opportunities, as well as significant challenges, for nonprofit organizations, Dighe argues. But to take advantage of these opportunities, nonprofits must first understand the trends and then have the courage to respond boldly to them.

* Adapted from "Demographic and Technological Imperatives" by Atul Dighe in Lester M. Salamon, editor. *The State of Nonprofit America*. Washington: The Brookings Institutions Press, 2002. Published in cooperation with the Aspen Institute.

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Praise for
THE STATE OF NONPROFIT AMERICA

“The State of Nonprofit America gives us a much-needed assessment of one of the true treasures of American society – our private, nonprofit organizations – at a critically important moment in their development. All of those concerned about the special qualities of our society should read and ponder its message.”

– President Jimmy Carter, 2002 Nobel Laureate

“Tells a readable story of how a multitude of intertwined public and private trends – shifts in demography, public policy and attitudes, technology, the marketplace – have combined to shape today’s diverse nonprofit sector. Beyond reporting on how the sector has responded to past challenges, it provides provocative suggestions for changes necessary to promote nonprofits’ health over the long term. It is a welcome addition to the literature, and I commend this book to anyone interested in the special role nonprofits play in American life.”

– Dorothy S. Ridings, President, Council on Foundations

“Provides a revealing insight into the important role that nonprofit organizations have come to play in the effective operation of our publicly funded services. It makes clear why we must make this partnership work.”

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– Sara E. Meléndez, President and CEO, Independent Sector

“The State of Nonprofit America is an indispensable resource for those who seek to understand America’s nonprofit sector and the forces that are shaping it. So good, so complete, it is both immediately relevant and bound to stand the test of time.”

– Peter B. Goldberg, President and CEO, Alliance for Children and Families

Chapter highlights are from “Demographic and Technological Imperatives” by Atul Dighe, a chapter in *The State of Nonprofit America*, edited by Lester M. Salamon and published by the Brookings Institution Press in collaboration with the Aspen Institute.

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