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# Thinking about change for development practice: a case study from Oxfam GB

*Rosalind Eyben, Thalia Kidder, Jo Rowlands, and Audrey Bronstein*

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*Development practice is informed by theories of change, but individuals and organisations may not make them explicit. Practitioners may be unaware of the extent to which strategic choices and debates are informed by disparate thinking about how history happens and the role of purposeful intervention for progressive social change. In the past few years, some Oxfam GB staff have been creating processes to debate their theories of change as part of an effort to improve practice. In this context, the authors introduce four sets of ideas about change, with a discussion of how they have been explored in two instances, and some of the challenges emerging from this process. Through explicitly debating theories of change, organisational decision-making processes can be better informed and strategic choices made more transparent.*

KEY WORDS: Aid; Civil Society; Methods; Western Europe

## Introduction: why think about change?

*Question: How many Oxfam staff do you need to change a light bulb?*

*Answer: It all depends on what you mean by change.<sup>1</sup>*

To what extent do social forces beyond our control shape history? Can we change the future through purposeful intervention, including collective organised action? By definition, development practitioners must believe this. However, faith is not enough. We also need tools. These tools include theories that are tools with which to think. Even when we do not realise it, we are using theories every day in explaining social reality to ourselves and to others. These theories include explanations of social change absorbed through our education and upbringing; they may have become so embedded that we no longer question whether they are the most useful for our purpose, or if we are using them as well as we could.

Making explicit our explanations of change and sharing them with our colleagues may reveal that we are using different theories, or mixing and matching them in different ways. When we argue over strategic choices, much of our disagreement may be due to different but possibly buried ways of understanding how change happens.

Explicitness can encourage questions about why we favour certain explanations over others. Is it because a certain theoretical lens – for example, rational-choice theory – appears to help us best to understand any kind of societal process? Or is our choice of theory more subjective and influenced by our identity? Do we think that drivers of change depend on the context? How much is our thinking about how the world works learned from how we have been educated? And to what extent are our theories influenced by those with whom we work?

Thinking explicitly about the origins and uses of our personal and collective theories of social change may also help us to appreciate that those in whose interests we claim to be acting may have very different ways of understanding how change does or does not happen.

In the past few years, some members of staff in Oxfam GB (OGB), for example in the Programme Policy Team, have been exploring their theories of change as part of an effort to improve practice. In the context of this initiative, this article briefly introduces four sets of ideas about change. The second section discusses how these ideas have been tested in two real cases: the global labour-rights programme and the UK Poverty Programme (UKPP). The final section identifies some of the challenges emerging from this process.

## Conceptualising change

Staff have been exploring the following ways of conceptualising change:

- the innovation-diffusion model
- an ‘archetypes’ framework for identifying how purposeful intervention for progressive social change occurs
- complexity theories of societal change
- Western sociological theories of ‘how history happens’.

We briefly introduce each of these, in the sequence in which they entered the thinking of the Programme Policy Team.

### *The diffusion-of-innovation theory*

Oxfam GB’s Programme Policy Team started to explore ideas of change by first looking at Rogers’ diffusion-of-innovation theory (1995), which explains how an innovation – a certain behaviour or a technology – is communicated over time within a social system. This explanation is centred on individual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour. It assumes that change is adopted or resisted through the influence of different psychological types of individual within that system. This theory was helpful for encouraging thinking about how to make certain development interventions more effective (for example, agricultural extension services promoting new techniques) and for introducing new systems in an organisation. However, the team concluded that this theory was not always relevant in OGB’s work, because of its behaviourist and rational-choice assumptions, and because it ignored the issues of power and structural inequality.

### *The archetypes framework*

Nevertheless, OGB considered it important to continue developing theories of change. This would introduce greater rigour into programme design (inputs to outputs to outcomes to impact); allow for diversity of approaches by recognising a variety of theories as being relevant, depending on context and objectives; encourage thinking about power; share assumptions about

change across functions (campaigns, development, humanitarian operations); and improve political strategy.

With this aim in mind, members of staff have been exploring other ways of thinking about change relevant to OGB's work. They identified a number of ways in which social-change agents can bring about desired outcomes. They labelled these as 'archetypes', because it was suggested that they were shaping OGB's work without staff being explicitly conscious of the fact. Eight archetypes were identified:

- *The Ladder*: Change is achieved by allowing people to resolve immediate needs and gradually accumulate resources and voice.
- *Enlightened Elites*: Change is achieved by shifting the hearts and minds of people in power, either through self-interest or threat, leading them to make institutions and policies more responsive.
- *People in the Streets*: Change is achieved by building enough political pressure from below to ensure that institutions uphold their obligations and distribute power more equitably.
- *A Good Example*: Change is achieved by showing that 'it can be done'. Localised success creates belief and provides safety for individuals, institutions, and countries to follow suit.
- *Shock to the System*: Change is achieved when power structures can't cope, due to sudden collapse or natural disasters. Weakness of elites is revealed, and new institutions and/or leaderships emerge.
- *Follow the Leader*: Change originates from individuals who, through example and personality, inspire others to change their behaviour. Change is infectious, exponential.
- *The Power of Belief*: Change comes through widespread consciousness-raising that profoundly shifts how people understand their rights and the basics of human dignity. Values are at the core of social change.
- *Good Old-Fashioned Democracy*: Change comes through formal democratic processes (political parties, elections) and/or direct exercise of democratic processes through community-based participation (town councils, neighbourhood committees).

As the archetypes framework was broader, it captured more of the various ways of OGB's thinking about change than the innovation-diffusion theory, which was more limited and primarily related to the 'follow the leader' archetype. For each archetype, instances could be found of how it had influenced the kinds of project and activity that OGB was supporting. For example, the 'democracy' archetype shaped OGB support for strengthening local government in Peru; 'follow the leader' shaped a project to encourage bus drivers in South Africa to spread the use of condoms; and 'enlightened elites' informed OGB's promotion of corporate social responsibility.

By making these archetypes explicit, staff were encouraged to consider which archetype or combination of archetypes best fitted the particular context in which they were working. But the archetypes needed to be related more explicitly to concepts of power. The next two sets of ideas about change considered by OGB attempted to integrate power more fully into the analysis.

### *Complexity theory*

The 'shock to the system' archetype considers that change results from unpredictable rather than purposefully planned events. It contains the germs of an entirely different way of thinking about change, namely complexity or chaos theory.

Complexity theory posits that it is not possible to predict with any confidence the relation between cause and effect. Change is emergent. History is largely unpredictable. Organised efforts to direct change confront the impossibility of our ever having a total understanding of

all the sets of societal relationships that generate change and are in constant flux. New inter-relational processes are constantly being generated, which in turn may affect and change those already existing. Small ‘butterfly’ actions may have a major impact, and big ones may have very little impact. Complexity theory, first appearing in the natural sciences, has become increasingly popular, for example in management theory (Stacey and Griffin 2005), sociology (Urry 2005), economics (Ormerod 2000), and history (De Landa 1997), but has so far made only a few brief appearances in development practice (Groves and Hinton 2004). The current vogue of managing for pre-determined results to achieve greater accountability privileges linear cause-and-effect thinking over a more responsive ‘going with the flow’ programmatic approach (Eyben 2006).

Rowlands argued in an internal paper (2005) that the ‘complexity’ model of change is already implicit in some of OGB’s work with the organisations that it supports, and in the use of multiple entry points to some areas of work. It can be seen in plans which have enough flexibility to change in response to new opportunities and challenges.

One problem with most of the archetypes, if applied rigidly, is that they reflect linear cause-and-effect thinking and may encourage focusing on some specific approaches to programme delivery, to the detriment of building crucial underlying capacities that OGB needs in order to function effectively in creating desired changes in a complex, ever-changing world. Complexity theory encourages a sense of not being in control and leads to a focus on the quality of relationships. It lets us understand power as fluid and relational, embedded in relationships and behaviours, rather than static and ‘positional’ (attached to formal roles) or ultimately based on force – ‘power over’.

We return to the challenges posed by complexity theory to development organisations in the final section of this article.

### *Western theories of how history happens*

The Oxfam GB Programme Policy Team invited Eyben to help OGB to further explore ideas about change. With the UK Poverty Programme, she suggested considering how much of development practice is shaped not only by purposeful ideas of change (the archetypes framework) but also by implicit assumptions of ‘how history happens’. Arguing that the Western sociological tradition both reflects and has contributed to purposeful efforts by governments and civil-society organisations (CSOs) to shape the course of history, she identified five common theories of change.<sup>2</sup> As with the archetypes, for ideological reasons individuals and organisations tend to favour one or two theories over the others, as their ‘default’ models of change.

*1. Society changes as a result of the unintended consequences of aggregate actions by many individuals.* This explanation is based on the idea that change comes about by each individual making rational choices in pursuit of his or her own best interests. Thus what happens in society can be understood in its entirety by looking at individual behaviour, rather than considering issues of culture, power, and history. Belief in this theory implies creating an economic and political environment in which individuals are free to act. It is the classic liberal position, typified in policies such as meeting basic human needs through social safety nets; and removing bureaucratic restrictions and regulations – for example, on the development of small and micro enterprises.

Power is conceptually absent from this theory, because it is assumed that all individuals have equal capacity to make rational choices.<sup>3</sup>

2. *Environmental determinism and technology shape the course of history.* This theory – exemplified, for example, by Diamond (1999) – understands societal change as an interplay between environmental opportunities or pressures and technological development. It implies that ‘less developed’ countries now have to ‘catch up’ with more fortunate countries that have entered a virtuous cycle of technological change and progress. Many technical experts in aid organisations see the world in this way. This theory posits that in order to achieve positive societal change one must invest in environmentally sustainable technology development and in education.

In this theory, ‘power’ is seen as an unequally distributed resource: some countries, organisations, and people have more power to do things than others – ‘purchasing power’, for example.

3. *Different and/or new beliefs and values about what we do and what we know (culture) shape and change social behaviour.* A cultural understanding of societal change emphasises how individual and collective actions are shaped by the norms, values, and beliefs transmitted from one generation to the next, and that all these change through their interplay with each other, as well as by individual innovation. This theory emphasises the way people think about themselves and the world they live in, their view of the past, and how that shapes their aspirations for the future. It has much in common with the ‘power of belief’ archetype.

Culture can be understood as an instrument of power by which the knowledge, tastes, skills, values, and habits that are acquired in the course of growing up can be used to maintain and demonstrate differences in status that are seen as ‘natural’. Subordinate people may internalise and accept their inferiority. This theory understands culture as a conditioning force. It focuses less on education for technological development and more on transformational learning which liberates people from acquiescing in oppression and poverty. It asserts that if we think differently, we will find the ‘power within’ to act differently. Programmes such as ActionAid’s adult-literacy programme, REFLECT, are examples of this approach.

4. *Change is an outcome of purposive individual and collective action.* It is assumed that people have the capacity to change their lives. While recognising the forces of culture and the interplay of technology and environment, this theory assumes that these forces do not hold people prisoner. While some people have more power than others, there are no deep structures that constrain actions of the less powerful. Rather, power is fluid and shifting, giving actors the opportunity to contest, challenge, negotiate, and capture. Power is also understood in terms of ‘power to’ and ‘power with’. This theory maintains that a good way to achieve positive societal changes is to nurture and support organised groups and social movements that strive for such changes.

5. *Change results from structural contradictions in society.* Structure is about where and how people are positioned within a social order, for example in terms of class, gender, or ethnicity. That positioning (or status) conditions their culture, shapes their scope for action, and influences their access to resources. Central to the persistence of a certain social structure is the power of those who control more resources to transmit this advantage through the generations. Power is relational (‘power over’), and structure is shaped by history. On the other hand, these same structures of power can generate contradictions that lead to societal change. An example is the contradiction between women as mothers and women as part of

the labour force, which can lead to changes in gender relations and division of labour within the household.

This set of theories includes Marxist understandings of social change based on the concept of class conflict arising from the modes of production. Marxists see conflict between classes as the engine of social change, but many people in development agencies who do not see themselves as Marxists subscribe to much of the underlying theory, for example when identifying middle classes in developing countries as the progressive element that challenges existing feudal power structures. This theory advocates that a good way to achieve positive societal change is to expose the contradiction and speed up the crisis.

In conclusion, as we discuss in the next section, irrespective of what framework or set of theories we draw on, *the most important element in devising strategies is an explicit awareness of how we individually and collectively debate about change*. The classic Western theories discussed above, as well as the archetypes, are only particular ways of conceptualising change. They are often mixed and matched, and are not comprehensive.

## Exploring the concepts in Oxfam GB practice

This section describes two instances of the authors working with OGB staff to encourage more explicit consideration of the theories of change being used to drive strategic choices. The first concerns work on global labour rights, and the second concerns strategic planning for the UK Poverty Programme. Our focus in this section is on the reactions of OGB staff to being challenged to make explicit their understanding of how history happens, and the role of purposeful interventions.

### *Change theories and labour rights*

Kidder took the 'change-theory discussions' to a meeting of the Oxfam International (OI) global labour-rights team. The OI labour-rights team had struggled with the different strategies used by labour partners and alliances, as well as its own advocacy: strategies that were often disconnected, or worse, in competition for resources. The three strategies to improve labour standards were: (1) advocacy with national governments to strengthen and enforce labour laws; (2) international consumer campaigns to change the policies of multinational clothing companies; and (3) support for local workers' organisations and trade unions. In the meeting, the team agreed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each strategy to improve workers' conditions. The aim of the discussion was to make explicit individuals' assumptions about the effectiveness of strategies, in order to work together more constructively.

At first, participants affirmed their own strategies, and voiced their critiques of the others. This process clarified individuals' preferred theory of change, and made explicit the thinking or experiences behind the theory. For example, some staff working on consumer campaigns told of negative experiences with corrupt government officials, which informed their belief that it was often not effective to reform labour legislation. They emphasised the importance of addressing the power of corporations in shaping labour conditions. In contrast, some staff supporting government advocacy considered it unwise for workers to rely on voluntary consumer campaigns in other countries as a means to improve their labour conditions. These staff valued strengthening citizen/worker influence over their own governments. Some staff engaging with local unions affirmed that change is sustainable only when enforced at the worksite by strong workers' organisations, and that national lobbying and consumer campaigning have too often failed to empower workers.

By making explicit to themselves and each other their theories of change, labour-team participants began to recognise the relevance of each of the different strategies on which they had been separately working. The team then identified a few cases where different interventions had complemented each other.

Over the following months, drawing on the archetypes framework, the labour team recognised that they had been pursuing a fourth line of action through national labour campaigns supported by OI. Several national alliances had developed popular communications such as radio and television spots in an effort to change public beliefs about the rights of women workers. By early 2006, the global labour team proposed developing complementary 'change strategies' in certain countries, based on the hypothesis that the most sustained positive changes occur where several change strategies are implemented simultaneously. The concept of 'change strategies' had been fully integrated into the labour team's discussions.

Kidder and Rowlands also encouraged discussions about theories of change with labour organisations on joint visits with Intermón Oxfam staff in Morocco. The Moroccan Alliance for Women Workers' Rights had made 'labour-law enforcement' the central theme of its campaign, including many lobby meetings with Labour Ministry officials, as well as raising awareness about the new labour code among workers and unions. Alliance members were at that time debating an opportunity to join a multi-stakeholder initiative with international clothing retailers and employers.

To help to open up thinking, Kidder described other countries' initiatives where campaigning focused on corporations' practices as well as government legislation, or on using popular communications to change 'negative myths' about women workers' rights. With a simple diagram of four types of strategy to influence labour conditions, participants explored the reasoning and assumptions behind these various strategies, and the potential relevance of 'other' strategies in the Moroccan context. In so doing, Kidder explicitly avoided presenting the pre-established theories of change, but rather encouraged people to identify their own.

### *Preferred ways of thinking about change in the UK Poverty Programme*

The UK Poverty Programme (UKPP) was created in 1996, in response to the growth in poverty and inequality in the UK and the belief that OGB's experience of working with communities around the world could bring new perspectives and approaches to tackling poverty at home. Much of OGB's work in the UK is carried out in partnership with community groups, national organisations, central and local government, and so on. OGB also works directly to influence policy with reference to poverty reduction in Britain. In its re-visioning exercise, the UKPP was asking:

- What are we trying to change, and what needs to change?
- What change strategies are or would be most effective?
- What are constraints to the change?
- What is our role and added value in achieving this change?
- What are others' roles in achieving this change?
- What kinds of partnership would be most effective in achieving the change?

In that context, the UKPP organised two workshops for staff and partners, to encourage them to think about change strategies. Our aim with the first workshop was to discuss how, in the UKPP and other organisations, people try to make change happen; and to recognise that there are choices about how you do that, including stopping 'negative' changes or making 'positive' changes happen faster. We wanted participants to be more explicit about their assumptions and beliefs about change, so as to expand the range of possible interventions by identifying



actions based on theories of change. Participants, when introduced to the archetypes framework and the set of theories of ‘how history happens’, were warned that these were only some of many theories of change, and were told that they or their counterpart organisations might well favour others.<sup>4</sup>

Reactions from participants included being struck by discovering the differences that may exist between their theories and other people’s theories, noting how many assumptions we make that are not supported by evidence. One participant said it was enlightening to consider how differences in explanatory theories may be related to people’s jobs and the context of their work. A third said that the ‘ah-ha’ moment was her discovery that she had a preferred (default) option for understanding social change.

Concerning ‘how history happens’, most participants identified their default models as *Society changes through the development and adoption of new beliefs, ideas, and values* and *Society changes through purposive individual and collective action*. UKPP policy staff working on national lobbying noted the contrast with the current British government’s thinking, which appears to draw more on the first two sets of theories, namely *Society changes through unintended consequence of aggregate action of individuals seeking to achieve their own happiness*, and *Society changes through technological development*. This gave rise to the question: does successful policy engagement with the government mean starting by understanding ministers’ conceptual approaches?

To encourage such empathy, at the second workshop participants were asked to choose specific theories of how history happens – theories that did not reflect their own default assumptions – and to identify purposeful interventions based on them. Some had a hard time imagining interventions based on the market-led rational-choice model that they themselves could approve. Participants’ concerns with power and empowerment made this theory inherently unattractive. OGB’s methods of working and the values that drive it need to be incorporated into any discussion about strategic choices. A convincing theory of change is by itself insufficient for inspiring commitment and action. Values are just as (or more) important.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, others, while ‘instinctively’ preferring the theory that *Change results from structural contradictions in society*, discovered that strategies based on this theory were likely to be too radical for Oxfam GB. There was a tension between trying to view the issue through a different lens and thinking ‘outside the box’ – when this led to a set of assumptions and activities that did not fit OGB’s (non-negotiable) value system. Thus the exercise uncovered some difficult questions about OGB’s added value in terms of the strategies appropriate to its status as a registered charity, compared with others, such as political demonstrations, that it could not undertake but that might be more effective in achieving results.

It also led to questioning the investment of time and effort to achieve this depth of analysis. ‘*My brain hasn’t worked so hard for a long time*’, remarked one participant. In any initiative with multiple stakeholders – researchers, practitioners, and campaigners – the process of understanding change strategies will be time-consuming.

Had it been a mistake to ask staff and OGB partner organisations to reflect on their understandings of change while simultaneously being asked to contribute to reshaping UKPP’s country strategy? Although these simultaneous efforts were very demanding, we concluded that *critical reflection is likely to be more useful when it is grounded in practice*. It means turning routine activities into learning opportunities (Arora-Jonsson and Cornwall 2006).

The challenges of applying the theory to practice continued during the UKPP re-visioning process. It has proved difficult to create a direct application of the change models and archetypes to the specific programme choices made during re-visioning. However, as a result of the workshops, team members do appear to be more conscious of their own assumptions about change. On the other hand, we may continue to work with those models and assumptions

with which we are familiar. The UKPP is planning to revisit the change-models work in its review of programme strategy at the end of the first year of the new programme.

### *Lessons from these experiences*

When an individual or group favours a certain model of change, this preference may be based on good analysis of a particular context. Also, staying with the favoured model and not exploring others may be a cost-effective use of time and resources. The change model that relates to deeply held personal and organisational values also inspires the greatest commitment and energy from staff; this may offset the greater effectiveness that a different framing of the problem may achieve. A model of change might also be favoured because it fits best with the organisational mandate and ways of working. Thus the assumption that societal change occurs through political, sometimes violent conflict, is not a model that OGB could support. As one participant remarked, *'It is not a matter of what is thinkable but what is doable'*. How do we strike a balance between feasibility and expanding imaginative horizons?

### Challenges for development practitioners

Given these experiences in Oxfam GB, we would encourage more development organisations to spend time interrogating the theories of change that shape their policies and practice. Through making theories of change explicit and debating them, organisational decision-making processes can be better informed, and strategic choices made more relevant to the planning context. OGB's experiences also reveal some challenges, which we now discuss.

### *Being prepared to think differently*

Planning a discussion on 'change strategies' requires sensitivity, because some theoretical literature on change may be obscure for practitioners, or because practitioners may not be open to challenging individual or organisational assumptions. In addition, there may be a deeper level of resistance to thinking about change and to interrogating our tacit assumptions and values. Tony Klouda (2004) suggests that most of us do not have the freedom to act upon a fundamentally changed view of the way we understand the world, because it would threaten our sense of identity, our job, or our family ties. He argues that if we cannot, without extreme discomfort, take action despite a new consciousness, then it may be more comfortable not to change the way we think about the world and our place in it. Thinking about how any one of us may resist the introduction of new ideas because of the threat to our sense of identity is an opportunity to reflect on what change feels like for others whom we are urging to change.

In the UKPP workshops, the questioning of default models of change led to discussions about OGB's identity. Choosing one model over another is not a purely technical matter of which theory fits the context: rather, any model of societal change is political and value-laden. Oxfam GB is not a political party; nor is it a neo-liberal think-tank or a radical extremist movement. The value of peacefully changing power relations may be an important factor in opting for a certain model of change: as important as the specific outcome achieved. For example, when working with women's income-generating groups, promoting change based on a theory of collective action rather than on rational choice may not necessarily lead to an equally effective outcome in the short term, but the process could bring about a deeper and more lasting change in terms of women's empowerment.

Making explicit our assumptions about change helped us to understand that even among Oxfam GB staff and its counterpart organisations the world is seen in different ways. This

helped us to realise how much more that would be the case in dialogue with a more diverse group of development actors. This can be uncomfortable and difficult. The process requires investing in relationships, taking time, and practising empathy. It is an approach that runs contrary to current emphases on outcomes, which expect staff to deliver concrete results – not to engage in dialogue and reflection, the outcome of which is likely to be unpredictable.

Of the different models for thinking about change that we have been exploring, complexity theory is possibly the most difficult for development agencies. Using complexity theory requires looking at situations as dynamic, with more unknown information, more actors and potential partners, with less ability to set fixed targets or to devise long-term work plans. Complexity theory suggests an approach which seeks to make a difference by working through relationships, rather than focusing on pre-set outcomes.

### *Values and relations: emerging themes*

Our exploration of models of social change and their relevance for a development agency such as Oxfam GB has led us to identify two further themes. The first concerns the extent to which staff and partners' values and commitment to a certain approach to change should be taken into account when developing a strategy, as against planning on the basis of theoretically informed analysis. The second concerns the weight to be given to the quality of relationships, compared with delivering measurable outcomes.

Regarding the first theme, we suggest that the most potentially effective strategies may not be 'appropriate'. Strategic choices must fit the staff's personal and organisational values. In the language of Richard Bawden, effective action depends as much on insights informed by the meaning that people give to their lives as it does on observation and reason (Bawden 1998).

On the second theme, OGB is not unique among development agencies in experiencing tensions between commitment to principles of solidarity and the need to demonstrate observable outcomes. The results-based approach is linked to an idea of social change premised on linear cause and effect. A solidarity approach, on the other hand, lends itself to a complexity approach to change. Here, the impossibility of predicting that a particular action will lead to a certain outcome suggests that development agencies could work to develop long-term, consistent *relations* with selected counterpart organisations who are pursuing a social change agenda that is compatible with the agencies' own values and mission. Rather than aiming to achieve a pre-determined concrete change in which the partner is treated as an *instrument* of that change, the focus of agency effort would be to support that organisation's own efforts in what may be a rapidly changing local environment (Eyben 2006). Such an approach implies skills in relationship building and initially modest objectives. On the other hand, the flexibility required of organisations to implement such an approach can be disempowering for staff, who will be held to account for predefined objectives which require clarity and direction. A different set of staff competencies and organisational systems would be necessary to cope with this degree of flexibility, and the monitoring and evaluation procedures will have to be changed. While development organisations might in the end find themselves better equipped to support struggles for greater social justice, the investment costs in making such changes are considerable and go against current trends in donor requirements.

## Conclusion

How does change happen, and what can we do to make it happen in the way we would like it to? These questions are often debated among development workers. Nevertheless, aid agencies usually do not systematically explore them in their strategy and policy work. However, in a

variety of ways Oxfam GB staff have been attempting to do this. This article has examined some of the ideas of social change that are currently being discussed in OGB. We all have certain ways of thinking about change. There is considerable practical value in making them explicit. Sharing them with our colleagues and partners can lead to a mutual revelation that we may be thinking very differently. When we debate strategic choices, our disagreement may be due to our different, but possibly unexplored, ways of understanding how change happens.

In examining the sources of our ideas of change, so far we have only been drawing on theories and concepts that have been developed from Western European intellectual traditions. A major challenge is how to engage in dialogue with other modes of thought if we are to be more effective in working collectively with development partners for progressive global social change.

We have described and reflected on the two instances where we introduced theories of change and sought to link them to practical choices about strategy. Within a particular context, it can be helpful to identify various or competing organisational strategies and to name the implicit change processes behind these strategies. When done with sensitivity with individuals who may have deeply held beliefs or values concerning these strategies, this may increase openness and lessen resistance to new options. Such a process can lead to constructive, if difficult, debates about organisational identity and what is feasible, desirable, and effective.

Theories of change cannot be de-linked from values, passions, and beliefs. The concept of change that resonates most strongly with deeply held personal and organisational values is also likely to inspire the greatest commitment and energy from staff; this may offset a possible lesser effectiveness in comparison with a different model of change. If you only have a hammer, all problems look like nails. However, if it is a hammer that we are able to work with, there may be little point in persuading us to use a screwdriver. Nevertheless, by examining their preferred concepts of change and comparing these with the preferences of others, development practitioners can broaden the range of choices open to them; in so doing, they may well identify previously unconsidered strategies more appropriate to the context, while still consonant with their organisational identity and values.

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## Notes

1. A participant at the second Oxfam GB workshop on models of social change, 24 May 2005.
2. These were freely adapted from Parker *et al.* (2003) and elaborated in an unpublished paper written for Oxfam GB.
3. However, building on Rawls, Sen (1992) introduced into development economics the idea that we are not all born equal but rather some have more capabilities than others (in terms, for example, of health and educational status), and that lack of these capabilities constrains free choice and therefore results in less 'power to'.
4. For example, one workshop participant mentioned that his favoured theory of change is divine power.

5. Eyben was anecdotally informed that in an Oxfam GB workshop in another region of the world where the five theories of how history happens had been introduced to staff, thinking about change in any way other than through the fourth theory (supporting collective action) was firmly rejected because of the value that staff placed on it.

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