A Three-fold Theory of Social Change

and Implications for Practice, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation

By Doug Reeler, of the Community Development Resource Association, 2007

> *"I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity. But I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side."*
>
> Oliver Wendell Holmes

> *"Whosoever wishes to know about the world must learn about it in its particular details*
> *Knowledge is not intelligence.*
> *In searching for the truth be ready for the unexpected.*
> *Change alone is unchanging.*
> *The same road goes both up and down.*
> *The beginning of a circle is also its end.*
> *Not I, but the world says it: all is one.*
> *And yet everything comes in season."*
>
> Heraklietos of Ephesos, 500 B.C

> *"My eyes already touch the sunny hill,*
> *going far ahead of the road I have begun.*
> *So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;*
> *it has its inner light, even from a distance.*
>
> *and changes us, even if we do not reach it,*
> *into something else, which, hardly sensing it,*
> *we already are;*
> *a gesture waves us on, answering our own wave...*
> *but what we feel is the wind in our faces."*
>
> Rainer Maria Rilke

Contents

~

~

1. Who Needs Theories of Change?

1.1 The Need

We need good theories of social change for building the thinking of all involved in processes of development, as individuals, as communities, organisations, social movements and donors. The conventional division in the world today between policy-makers (and their theorising) and practitioners is deeply dysfunctional, leaving the former ungrounded and the latter unthinking.

Good concepts help us to grasp what is really happening beneath the surface. In the confusing detail of enormously complex social processes, we need to turn down the volume of the overwhelming and diverse foreground and background "noise" of social life, to enable us to distinguish the different instruments, to hear the melodies and rhythms, the deeper pulse, to discover that "simplicity on the other side of complexity." We need help to see what really matters.

As social development practitioners we need theory to help us to ask good questions, more systematically and rigorously, to guide us to understanding, to discovering the real work we need to be doing, primarily assisting communities and their organisations to understand and shape their own realities.

A theory of social change is proposed through this paper as one small contribution to a larger body of theorising. It can be seen as an observational map to help practitioners, whether field practitioners or donors, including the people they are attempting to assist, to read and thus navigate processes of social change.

There is a need to observe and understand the change processes that already exist in a living social system. If we can do this before we rush into doing our needs analyses and crafting projects to meet these needs, we may choose how to respond more respectfully to the realities of existing change processes rather than impose external or blind prescriptions based on assumed conditions for change.

1.2 Theories in Context

Economic and cultural globalisation, climate change, competition for markets and for strategic and scarce resources are forcing new complexities on all sectors of societies the world over. Yet entrenched structures and patterns of power are still playing themselves out in old managerialist and militaristic ways. We are in the thrall of a global economic and political system that is increasingly inappropriate and self-contradictory, unable to come to terms with itself. The most powerful are

at odds with themselves, neither able to comprehend the consequences of what they do nor the complexities of social change they become mired in, unable to respond, even in their own interest, threatening to lead everyone to ruin.

While millions have been lifted out of dire poverty in the last decade, particularly through the rapid industrialisation of Asia in the image of the West, these may be only temporary gains, with serious doubts emerging about the ecological and economic sustainability of this path. And global warming threatens to turn our development efforts into "sand-castles at low tide".

Many counter-trends can be found where millions of the most marginalised, on all continents, are becoming more threatened than ever as local sovereignty, diversity and eco-systems disappear under multiple forces of change that are not easily visible to them and seemingly out of their reach to influence. Social movements of all kinds – economic, social, cultural, political and religious – have developed out of these conditions and are burgeoning in opposition, with some promise but mixed success and with many facing cooption or suppression. There are some, North and South, pursuing intolerant fundamentalist and sectarian agendas which serve to deepen rather than to resolve the crises.

So while the world is globalising and homogenising in many ways, it is at the same time polarising in reaction. The most marginalised and voiceless in the South continue to pay the heaviest price for this.

Poverty is now being perceived as a large enough threat to gain the attention of the rich and powerful. Development is becoming a global Project. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and plans to roll these out have been taking centre stage in global and national development initiatives. A particular role for civil society is emerging:

> *"Civil society organisations (CSOs) are recognised as having access to and knowledge of those aspects of society that are being defined as 'targets for change'. Yet, in the power dynamics of the world CSOs are not seen as drivers of change but as potential delivery agents of solutions, of programmes and practices developed and promoted by those at the centre. There are a number of mechanisms now firmly in place (some subtle and some crude) to direct and control NGOs and CBOs towards fulfilling agendas other than their own."* [1]

The relationship between Governments, donors, NGOs, CBOs, growing legions of freelance international development consultants, private companies and even some social movements is increasingly being shaped by this trend of putting Projects to tender, paying people as service providers to achieve centrally determined outcomes. Development funding is fast becoming a marketplace governed by tender processes and business-talk.

---

1. Unpublished thoughts by James Taylor, 2007

The "development sector" of NGOs and CBOs, who struggle to be businesslike, is under renewed pressure to show results and justify its existence, to compete in this new marketplace. There are less and less funds for them from politicians who are looking for more convincing ways to put money into development that can quickly and easily display 'measurable impact'.

Enter the private sector, initially as suppliers of goods and services to development organisations, but now increasingly winning the tenders as prime service providers. The marketplace of development Projects has never been so clearly visible as it is today.

This projectization of development work has a deeper consequence. Short-term Projects are effectively replacing established organisations with temporary organisations that can be turned on and off, like taps. Organisations, that have become vehicles for Projects live under the same threat, the same taps. Projects are the casual labour of the sector, apparently low risk. This contrasts with indigenous organisations driven by their own needs, that can be resilient and can learn, adapt and improve and bring sustainability.

It is the season of accountability. Projects promise this. But over the past few years, almost every organisation or project I have visited is stressed with issues of monitoring and evaluation, anxiously shopping around for methodologies to measure and report on impact to satisfy donors. Adverts for M&E specialists abound as donors seek to further outsource this function to experts, robbing organisations of rich learning processes to which M&E should contribute.

Donors themselves face the same pressure to account to their back-donors, who in turn must report to their political masters (supposedly accountable to their electorate), who are, for good and bad reasons, asking harder questions and setting higher standards each year. In an age where the "speak" is becoming more participatory, bottom-up or horizontal there is, paradoxically, a strengthening of pressure for upward, vertical accountability to the North.

But as practitioners, donors and back-donors, we might want to ask ourselves more honestly whether the real reason we are struggling to measure and report on impact might be that as a sector we are simply not achieving the results we have promised each other when we sign Project contracts. Monitoring and evaluation methodologies that are centred on accountability, rather than on honestly learning from practice, will not bring us the measures or the value we want. In other words the problem is not effective measuring and reporting but effective practice itself, as guided by the logic of Projects.

It is ironic that the very Project approaches that donors insist be used for planning, monitoring and evaluating practice and impact, like Logical Framework Analysis and its cousins, have tacitly introduced an unspoken theory of social change that is often misleading and self-defeating. This theory of change is briefly described and critiqued next.

~

2. *The Current Conventional Theory of Social Change*

> *"If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail."*

<div align="right">

Abraham Maslow

</div>

The "Development Project" is by far the most dominant vehicle for conscious social change, used widely by donors, NGOs and governments the world over. Projects have become the almost unquestionable contracting and managing frameworks for social development practice. The most prominent format for Projects is the Logical Framework Analysis (Logframe) which has some cousins in ZOPP, Project Cycle Management (PCM), and other businesslike tools for managing practice, in particular for planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting (PME&R).

At a European Union sponsored logframe training workshop in the mid-1990s I learnt that the Logframe approach traces its lineage to the US Pentagon in 1945, created specifically to help the management of the Berlin Airlift in that year – a huge relief Project by any measure. As a military planning tool it migrated into government and business in the 1950s and was eventually picked up and fashioned into its present form by USAID in the 1970s and then carried to Europe by German donors, as ZOPP, in the 1980s, from where it spread widely across the development sector into international NGOs and down into governments and local NGOs of the South. It was introduced into South Africa by several donors in the 1990s on a wave of training workshops which have continued to the present. Despite heavy criticisms from a wide range of field practitioners, it and its cousins have survived and remain the dominant frameworks in the development sector for PME&R.

Created to help control the flow of resources, these frameworks have, by default, come to help control almost every aspect of development practice across the globe, subordinating all social processes to the logistics of resource control, infusing a default paradigm of practice closely aligned with conventional business thinking.

As such, Project approaches to change bring their own inbuilt or implicit theory of social change to the development sector, premised on an orientation of simple cause and effect thinking. It goes something like this: In a situation that needs changing we can gather enough data about a community and its problems, analyse it and discover an underlying set of related problems and their cause, decide which problems are the most important, redefine these as needs, devise a set of solutions and purposes or outcomes, plan a series of logically connected activities for addressing

the needs and achieving the desired future results, as defined up front, cost the activities into a convincing budget, raise the funding and then implement the activities, monitor progress as we work to keep them on-track, hopefully achieve the planned results and at the end evaluate the Project for accountability, impact and sometimes even for learning.

As an implicit theory of change and consequently as an approach to change, this theory unconsciously assumes that:

❑ Project interventions themselves introduce the change stimulus and processes that matter and are the vehicles that can actually deliver development. (Existing, indigenous social change processes, usually invisible to conventional analysis, are seldom acknowledged and are effectively reduced to irrelevancy – except where resultant active or passive resistance to change cannot be ignored);

❑ problems (as needs to be addressed) are discernable or visible to the practitioner upfront out of cause and effect analysis. Solutions to the core problems analysed can be posed as predetermined outcomes. (The use of logical problem trees is common, despite that fact that they are incapable of dealing with feedback loops and other complex systemic problems);

❑ participatory processes in the planning phase can get all stakeholders onboard, paving the way for ownership and sustainability. (This would be nice but people are seldom so compliant!);

❑ unpredictable factors, whether coming from outside or from within the Project, or even as the knock-on effects of the Project work itself are, at worst, inconveniences to be dealt with along the way;

❑ desired outcomes, impacts or results, sometimes envisioned several years up the line, can be coded into detailed action plans and budgets and pursued in a logical and linear way. In other words, if the planning is good enough the Project should succeed.

There are situations where some of these assumptions do hold, and so Projects can in some instances be right on the nail, the hammer that is needed. Conditions which are favourable for Projects are described in more detail in the next section.

But more often than not, particularly in situations where there is a greater need for development assistance, conditions do not allow for these assumptions to hold. The use of Projects where the conditions for them are not favourable can be profoundly counter-developmental and destructive for people and their relationships and lead to a real experience of failure and set-back, characterised not by crisis but rather by defeat.

Misapplied Projects can also undermine practice and relationships up and down the aid-chain. Inexperienced practitioners tend to be blamed or blame themselves and their lack of Project capacity for such failures and go for more training in Project Management, while more experienced practitioners pursue their own more appropriate ways of doing things but try to keep their donors happy in the belief that they are working dutifully

under the agreed Project Logframe.

Some practitioners have even said that Logframes are a useful tool for lying to donors. But in the end everyone is being fooled and missing vital opportunities to engage honestly and to learn about realities and think more deeply about possibilities. Many practitioners, including donors, do acknowledge the limitations of Logframes and other Project-based approaches but in the apparent absence of viable alternatives dub them "necessary evils". [2]

It may be that many Northern donors have experienced enough success with Project approaches in their own countries where conditions for them are more favourable, allowing them to feel confident that they have universal application. Yet, I have met field practitioners in the North who also experience problems with Project approaches in the more complex and usually deprived areas in which they work.

Many donors insist on Project approaches because they are not aware of alternatives and perhaps several are not aware of the power that Projects bring in forcing a narrow concept of change on situations where they do not apply. A less generous analysis might wonder whether some donors and practitioners find Projects to be ideal vehicles of control to impose their own visions of change on communities of the South.

But there is now enough experience in the development sector, and hopefully sufficient honesty, to take another look – a deeper look – at change processes themselves and what they ask of practice and how we lead and manage our work. There are viable alternatives, though they may still take some thinking through and may not present themselves as tools and frameworks to easily work with. Development and social change are deeply complex processes and we should be wary of looking for an overly simple set of tools to help us face the difficulties.

The theory in this paper proposes three distinctly different kinds of change which underpin most social processes of development, namely *emergent change, transformative change* and *projectable change.*

Understanding deeply and respecting what change processes already exist can help us to respond to and work with a deeper sense of reality, rather than its shallowly perceived set of problems and needs. In facing this challenge to observe what we are working with more deeply, we may then be able to develop more successful and measurable practices and impacts, helped by frameworks that enable us to more deftly manage our practice and relationships, including processes and systems for planning, monitoring, learning from, evaluating, rethinking and reporting on practice.

But where are the debates and discussions about how change really happens, where is the research and thinking? I have asked numerous development practitioners and donors from the North and South what their thinking and theories of social change are and for the vast majority it

---

2. Googling "logframe" and "necessary evil" on the internet throws up a surprising number of references.

is the first time that they have ever seriously engaged the question!

Field practitioners, whose own experience should yield rich insights for theorising about how change happens, seldom have or take the time to think about what they are doing, and so effectively allow donor thinking and implicit theories of and approaches to change to dominate their practice. Many donors do not even know they have this power and many would not want to wield it if they knew of the destructive effects that their insistence on Project approaches are so often responsible for. Instead of forcing their own default theories and approaches on the South should donors not be funding the thinking and theorising by practitioners themselves, their own authentic learning processes, as much as they fund the work practitioners do?

~

3. A Three-fold Theory of Social Change

In its parts the theory presented here draws from other theories of change. Like the conventional theory described above, these often assume that change has a particular character, associated with its theory. My attempt acknowledges the value of these various theories, including the conventional one, but seeks to bring them together into something that is more integrated, recognising the diversity of social change.

This theory was also developed out of practice and tested in practice, from working on numerous field accompaniments and learning processes over many years.

The three types of change articulated below are not *prescriptions* of social change but rather *descriptions* of different kinds of social change that already exist and are inherently a part of the developing state of a social being. If used to accurately read the nature of change in a social being then they suggest certain approaches working with change that are more likely to respond successfully to unfolding realities on the ground. But the first task must be to understand what is already there before anything is done in response.

3.1 Emergent change – "We make our path by walking it." [3]

"We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another; unevenly. We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present. We are made up of layers, cells, constellations."

Anais Nin

Emergent change describes the day-to-day unfolding of life, adaptive and uneven processes of unconscious and conscious learning from experience and the change that results from that. This applies to individuals, families, communities, organisations and societies adjusting to shifting realities, of trying to improve and enhance what they know and do, of building on what is there, step-by-step, uncertainly, but still learning and adapting, however well or badly.

This is likely the most prevalent and enduring form of change existing in any living system. Whole books, under various notions of complex systems, chaos theory and emergence, have been written about this kind of change, describing how small accumulative changes at the margins can

---

3. An African proverb

affect each other in barely noticeable ways and add up to significant systemic patterns and changes over time; how apparently chaotic systems are governed by deeper, complex social principles that defy easy understanding or manipulation, that confound the best-laid plans, where paths of cause and effect are elusive, caught in eddies of vicious and virtuous circles. Emergent change is paradoxical, where perceptions, feelings and intentions are as powerful as the facts they engage with.

Emergent change processes take two forms:

Less conscious emergent change.
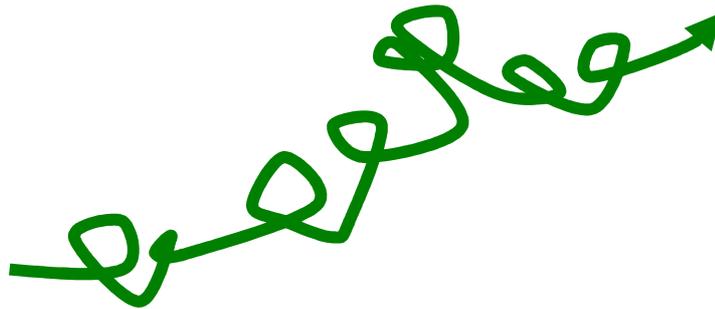
This kind of emergent change tends to occur where there are unformed and unclear identities, relationships, structures or leadership, under shifting and uncertain environments, internally and externally, with no crises or stucknesses being evident and being unfavourable for conscious development Projects. Being less conscious it may be less predictable, more chaotic and haphazard than more conscious emergent change.

More conscious emergent change.

Conditions for more conscious emergent change occur where identity, relationships, structures and leadership are more formed, the environment relatively stable and less contradictory. Conditions for emergent change can also materialise after resolution of a crisis (transformative change) or after a period of projectable change (described below). The conditions or even need for emergent change, rather than more organised projectable change, may stem from a number of factors – perhaps change fatigue after a period of transformative or of projectable change, perhaps to consolidate gains made or a need to grow more steadily, a step-at-a-time.

Less conscious emergent change, characteristically chaotic and still in formation and therefore most difficult to grasp, requires a reading of enormous respect and subtlety. Indeed the very act of entering and

observing a less conscious emergent situation can provide a centre of gravity – that the system has not yet developed for itself – that shifts the character of a community. Researchers or practitioners entering a community to observe or to begin a survey are often surprised and appalled by the expectations that get created by their presence, expectations that should be assigned to community leadership (not yet formed or recognised).

Reading more conscious emergent situations should, by definition, be easier as the social being brings its own more coherent understanding of itself to the relationship with the practitioner.

In either case, emergent situations ask for a working relationship with outside practitioners that can be characterised as *accompanying learning*. This is expanded upon as an orientation to practice in Section 7 of this paper.

3.2 Transformative Change – Through Crisis and Unlearning

> *"The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers."*
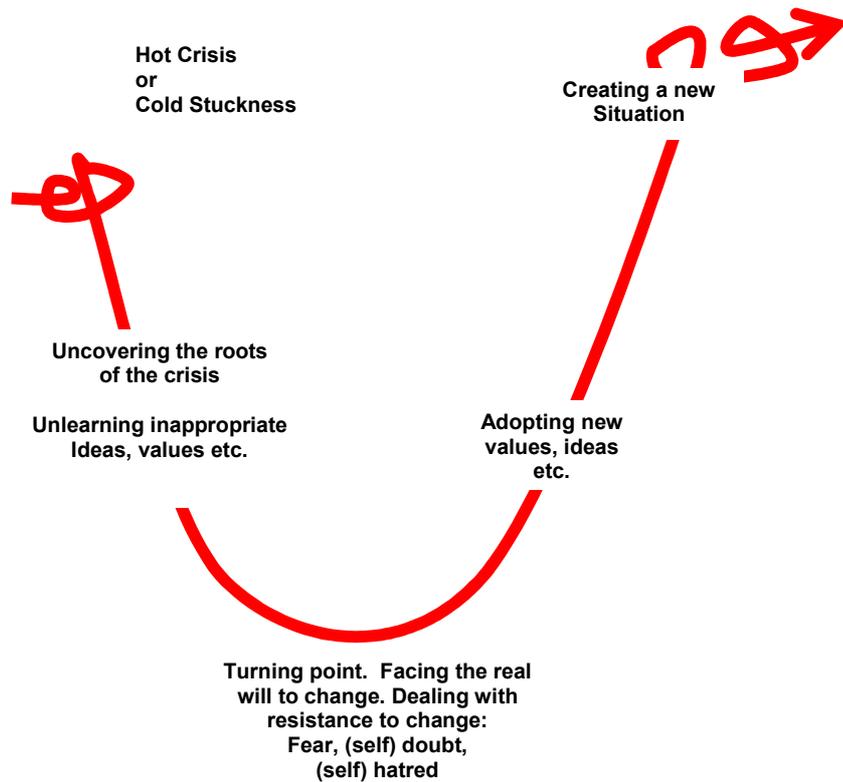
M. Scott Peck

At some stage in the development of all social beings it is typical for crisis or stuckness to develop. This may be the product of a natural process of inner development, for example the crisis of the adolescent when that complex interplay of hormones and awakening to the hard realities of growing up breaks out into all manner of physical, emotional and behavioural pimples. Another example is of a pioneering organisation growing beyond the limits of its informal structuring and relationships.

Crises may be the product of a social beings entering into tense or contradictory relationships with their world, prompted by shifts in external political, economic, cultural or environmental contexts. For example, farming communities in Caprivi in Northern Namibia were devastated in the late 1990s by the lowering of trade barriers agreed upon at SADEC, losing their traditional markets to a flood of cheap maize from across the Zambian border. Or teachers in thousands of South African schools in the late 1990s who faced crises of discipline when corporal punishment was suddenly banned by law.

Crisis or stuckness sets the stage for transformative change. Unlike emergent change, which is characterised as a learning process, transformative change is more about unlearning, of freeing the social being from those relationships and identities, inner and outer, which

underpin the crisis and hold back resolution and further healthy development.

**Hot Crisis
or
Cold Stuckness**

**Creating a new
Situation**

**Uncovering the roots
of the crisis**

**Unlearning inappropriate
Ideas, values etc.**

**Adopting new
values, ideas
etc.**

**Turning point. Facing the real
will to change. Dealing with
resistance to change:
Fear, (self) doubt,
(self) hatred**

A crisis or stuckness can come in many forms and expressions with deep and complex histories and dynamics. They may be "hot" surfaced experiences of visible conflict or "cold" hidden stucknesses which cannot be seen or talked about.

Left alone, crises do get unconsciously resolved over time, tragically or happily or somewhere in-between. But they can also be more consciously and proactively resolved through well led or facilitated transformative change processes.

For practitioners, understanding existing transformative change processes or change conditions demands a surfacing of relationships and dynamics that are by their nature contested, denied or hidden and resistant to easy reading. This reading can take time, effort and require patience and an openness to sudden shifts of perspective as layers of the situation and its story are peeled away. The real needs for change very rarely reveal themselves upfront. When they are revealed they can provoke real resistance to change and require the people to let go deeply held aspects of their identity, both collective and individual.

We can characterise the real work of working with transformative change as facilitating unlearning. This is also expanded upon as an orientation to practice in Section 7 of this paper.

3.3 Projectable change – Working with a Plan

"Without leaps of imagination, or dreaming, we lose the excitement of possibilities. Dreaming after all, is a form of planning."

Gloria Steinem

Human beings can identify and solve problems and imagine different possibilities, think themselves and their present stories into preferred futures, being able to project possible visions or outcomes and formulate conscious plans to bring about change towards these.
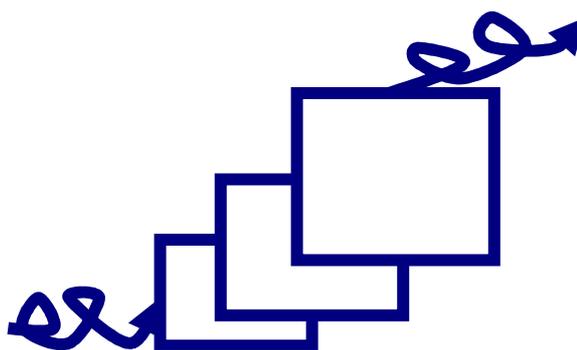
As human beings (in or out of the development sector) we pursue projectable approaches to our own development, individually or collectively planning and undertaking projects, from small to large. Projectable approaches, through projects, tend to succeed where problems, needs and possibilities are more visible, under relatively stable conditions and relationships, which are not fraught with crisis or stuckness. Where the internal and external environments, especially the relationships, of a system are coherent, stable and predictable enough, and where unpredictable outcomes do not threaten desired results, then the conditions for projectable change arise and well-planned projects become possible.

Two orientations where projectable change dominate:

❍ One is characterised by a problem-based approach, essentially identifying problems and seeking a fix. A broken tap is identified and a fix found. A problem-based approach works logically with plans from the present into the future.

❍ Another is characterised by a creative approach of people imagining or visioning desired results, not as a direct solution but as a new situation in which old problems are less or no longer relevant – a leap of imagination into the future. Rather than looking for a direct fix, a new source of water may be created or looked for, rendering the broken tap an irrelevant problem. A creative projectable change begins in the future, plans backwards to the present, devising stepping-stones to the desired results. The stepping stones may veer between being tightly planned or loosely described as the people discover their way, guided and motivated by the vision they have

created.

Of the three types and conditions of change, projectable change is possibly the easiest to read by practitioners and indeed by communities themselves.

We can characterise the real work of working with projectable change as supporting planning and implementation. This is also expanded upon as an orientation to practice in section 7 of this paper.

3.4 Interconnecting the 3 Types of Change

No unfolding situation contains an exclusive set of change conditions or one particular kind of inherent change process – there are always complex configurations. But certain conditions do dominate and can be said to support or even precipitate one kind of change or impetus over another, to hold the centre of gravity of development processes.

But one or other kind of change or change conditions can and do co-exist with and form a part of the more dominant processes of change. So, for example, a particular developing situation may be characterised as being in a dominant process of emergent change, yet in its parts there may be smaller sub-processes of transformative or projectable change.

Though a particular kind of change may be dominant this will still be subject to the conditions and character of other change forces. For example, a relatively stable community may feel united and confident enough to undertake a development Project but is uncertain of its relationships with local government. Under this uncertainty it might make sense for it to take the change Project forward carefully, with some sense of emergence, or to consider a succession of smaller Projects, rather than a grand Project for change, as relationships with local government stabilise. The same community may also find that some unseen crises are surfaced through the Project work and have to pause to deal with them as transformative change.

And of course, one dominant form of change paves the way for another to succeed it, as Heraklietos reminds us "...all is one. And yet everything comes in season."

For the practitioner this means that there is no simple reading of change processes and he or she will need to stay alive to the movement of change – a challenge to keep reading the situation and adjust practice accordingly.

~

4.   *Leading Ideas, Values and Purposes*

The theory presented here is connected to a number of leading ideas, values and purposes, chief of which are described below.

Purposes describe the less visible and more enduring aims and intentions common to most developmental approaches – like good leadership, trusting relationships, self-identity, vertical autonomy etc. – that need to be worked for as living conditions of the sustainability of the more visible outcomes of a developmental practice.

The leading ideas and values posed below express many of these deeper purposes in different ways.

4.1 *Leading Ideas and Purposes*

Development is a Natural, Innate, Intangible and Complex Process

In whichever state we may find people, they are already developing. They may or may not be developing healthily or in ways they like or are even conscious of; they may be inhibited to a point of stuckness in some places, but they have been developing long before development workers came into their lives and will continue to do so long after they have left. We cannot deliver development – it is already happening as a natural process that we need to read, respect and work with. That the will and capacity to develop may be hindered, half-buried or restricted, points to a primary purpose we face as practitioners: *to help people to more consciously free themselves of hindrances to their own development, to take increasing and willing responsibility for the course of their own lives*.

Development processes are complex and highly influenced by intangible forces such as tradition, culture and the living paradoxes of being human, of being moved by our emotions, often mixed and contradictory, of being motivated by our deeper intentions, often hidden and impermissible.

Not All Crises are Failures

In a world that is obsessed with vertical accountability we easily judge and label situations that appear to be in a crisis as dysfunctional, to be in a state of failure that needs fixing, as some problem that needs solving. Whilst this might be true in some situations, practitioners should be particularly interested in developmental crises, which unconsciously and quite naturally evolve, often as a social system grows beyond the relationships and capacities that hold it together. The individual crises of adolescence or middle-age cannot be described as failure, unless there is a

failure to adapt to the inner and outer changes they experience over time.

Take a pioneering organisation that grows in size and complexity beyond the ability of the pioneers to lead and manage, as they tend to do, by the seat of their pants, often quite informally and intuitively. The unavoidable and typical crisis of the pioneering organisation often manifests in a breakdown of relationships, of leadership legitimacy, of commitment, and signals the need and the opportunity to rethink its nature, its identity, structure or power relationships, its functioning and culture, which, once done, can give way to a new lease on life, a new phase of growth and development. Transformation requires and is borne out of the ripening and surfacing of crisis.

Simple Cause and Effect Thinking is Misleading

> *"In the physical world, one event can directly cause another. For instance, an earthquake can cause a tsunami. But in the human world... the issue is not whether causes and effects exist in some 'real world' but whether humans act as if they do. To that extent, causes do not precede effects, but follow them: after an effect is noticed, a cause is sought."*
>
> Dennis List

Experienced or perceived problems are a stimulus for change and give the appearance of logical cause and effect. For conventional "change agents" a situation of need is presumed to be underpinned by problems whose causes can be identified, where responsibility can be assigned and from which a solution can be sought. This cause and effect thinking, which works with the world of physical objects, simply does not hold in the world of the social which is characterised by complexity, ambiguity and paradox, some of which can be grasped but much of which remains unknowable. This suggests that when working with social change we may need to make plans based on the assumption that we will never have the full picture, or anything very close to it, that any plan is inherently flawed and that only through learning from more experience over time might the truth begin to more usefully reveal itself. What does this humbling thought mean for planning and contracting? How can we possibly manage relationships based on such uncertainty? We might wish that complexity and uncertainty were not so but we have to act as if it is!

Learning from Experience is the Basis of Freedom and Independence

From colonial to modern times social learning has been characterised by the suppression of indigenous horizontal and generational modes of knowing. In its place were brought vertical knowledge, the over-dependency on professional experts, like teachers, doctors, lawyers, academics and politicians. Indigenous knowledge has become hidden or lost and local experience rendered unimportant.

This is true, particularly for the impoverished and marginalised – indeed this dependency on the knowledge and capacities of others higher up the

social hierarchies, has been a key instrument of impoverishment and marginalisation.

Core to our intention and purpose must be assisting people to ask their own questions, to develop their own theories for themselves from their own and each others' experiences, in processes of horizontal learning. Without this independence of learning and thinking, any notion of indigenous self-governance or healthy social interdependence, indeed of authentic freedom, is impossible.

Power Lives and is Transformed in Relationships

We live, learn and develop within three differently experienced kinds or levels of relationships: relationship with self, interpersonal relationships with people we know and external relationships with the rest of the world, people we do not engage directly with, but who affect our lives and whose lives we may affect.

It is within each or all of these three levels of relationships that people are free or unfree. If we have self-doubt or self-hatred (not at all uncommon) we can become inhibited or unfree. A stuck, abusive relationship with a partner may be as great a hindrance to development as a lack of social opportunity or (relationship of) political oppression. These kinds of "unfreedoms" at the three levels of relationship mutually reinforce each other and add up to a recipe for entrenched marginalisation – the core arena of development interventions.

These three levels span the inner and outer experiences of human beings and so it is at these levels of relationships that we find the work of helping people to free themselves. Power is held in relationships, whether it is the struggle we have with ourselves to claim our inner power, or the power we have over others or the power we hold with others, or the power the State wields in relation to its citizens – without relationship power means little, it has no force, for bad or for good. If we want to shift power, we have to shift relationships.

4.2 Values and Purposes

Values express human qualities that must underpin human processes and give depth to our purposes. There are many but these three stand out:

- *Mutuality* is an observed principle of life that recognises the social and ecological interdependence of diverse living beings. Mutuality points to the purpose of connecting people, and the living systems they create and inhabit, to more of themselves, to more of each other. *Mutuality* with *equality* suggests more horizontal interdependencies with vertical independencies or autonomy (like indigenous self-government).

    For practitioners, *mutuality* encourages a value and quality of respect and solidarity that moves them away from being charitable development workers to people who link their own lives and destinies

as human beings to those with whom they work;

❍ *Freedom*, balanced by mutuality, is one of the deepest yearnings of being human and as such is both a condition of healthy change and a purpose. It is the value which must underpin both diversity and creativity at the heart of developmental change;

❍ *Equality* is another quality which, while recognising diversity, asserts that no human beings are of greater or lesser value. *Equality* qualifies freedom – my freedom cannot be at the expense of your freedom.

~

5.   The Challenges of Reading Change

All faculties and great sensitivity must be brought to bear in attempting to read the changing processes of people. These considerations and faculties stand out:

1. When we observe people, we are, in reality, observing people being observed and who are themselves probably observing the observers – we are effectively looking at mirrors through mirrors. Although "objective" observation of social processes is something of a myth, observation is not useless. The more an observer is trusted, the fewer mirrors there are. But we can approach in a facilitative way, helping people to observe themselves, to become conscious of who they are and who they are becoming.

2. The ability of practitioners to develop trusting relationships is paramount to successful practices of reading change. This allows people to take practitioners into their confidence, enabling them to see and hear what would otherwise be hidden. Sadly, relationship-building tends to be viewed by many practitioners, especially those under pressure to deliver results, as quick introductions and prep work for the "real work" of implementing Projects, rather than as a fundamental crucible for change.

3. The ability to work with biography and story is a strong alternative to simplistic analysing of cause and effect. The craft here lies in facilitating and eliciting the true stories or biographies of a social being, its drama, direction and movement. This is key to reading and working with reality, to know both the roots of the situation, its inherent change processes and change conditions and thus its potential for change – both for the practitioner and the people themselves to grasp.

    Contained in story is the narrative whole, where experience – life – is reflected intact, to be seen intact and out of which grounded consciousness can be formed and transformed. Without a sense of story, understanding becomes piecemeal, disconnected, ungrounded and misleading. Stories help people to reveal their knowledge, to acknowledge their experience and wisdom, to see the resources and resourcefulness they have but may have been blind to.   In developmental work stories and their role in the telling of the past and present and of creating leading images of the future, can become powerful processes for community consciousness and transformation.

4. The tools of analysts, used for scientific gathering, analysing and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data, are well-known and always useful, though not if they fall into the trap of simplistic interpretations of cause and effect.

5. The techniques of artists, the use of intuition, metaphor and image enables not only seeing but inseeing, or the ability to have insight into the invisible nature of relationships, of culture, of identity etc.

~

6.   Implications for Developmental Practice

6.1 Emergent Change Practice - accompanying learning

> *"The village is like a basket that has been broken and the pieces scattered. The pieces are still there but not everyone can see them. What has been broken can be rewoven slowly and gradually, but only by those who will take the time to stay close to the village people and build trust with them. I know for certain that this can be achieved, even though it must be done slowly and carefully. Eventually the village people are the weavers themselves and they carry the task forward further, further. The basket will be better than before, but first it must be something like the same."* [4]

Action Learning as Core Process

Where there are *less conscious emergent change conditions*, the challenge of a developmental practice is to work slowly and carefully, helping people to make conscious their relationships, their stories, the consequences of what their choices, actions or inactions might be and what future possibilities they hold. It is a process to help people to understand their (possibly emerging) identities, to grow and deepen their knowledge of themselves, their self-confidence, their dignity and their relationships.

This kind of work can be approached in many ways. Successful practitioners working with emergent approaches very often help people to understand their own experiences, old and current, including their stories or biographies. Through such processes people are encouraged to surface and appreciate their tacit knowledge and resources and in so doing help them to enhance these, to learn their way forward, step-by-step.

The conditions for *more conscious emergent change* flow most easily and can be productively worked with where internal and external relationships are formed and fairly steady, where issues of leadership and power are largely resolved or are not disruptive. This may well be after periods of change characterised by the other two types of change described below – an image of a fairly healthy social system consciously building on their

---

4. **"What Can Be Done ?"** by **Meas Nee**. An extract from his book *Towards Restoring Life: Cambodian Villages. 1995, Krom Akphiwat Phum, Battambang/OSB Australia* - A poetic story of remarkably respectful facilitation of development in deeply traumatised communities in Cambodia. Available on the CDRA website.

strengths over time, with the potential to bring balanced change that benefits the whole.

Good practitioners, including organic and respected informal leaders in communities, intuitively work with both these conditions of emergent change when approaching or working with an individual, organisation or community. They spend time to connect with the life of the people, to learn about what is really happening, or moving, what is possible or not, what hidden resources or resourcefulness exists, what stumbling blocks exist. They ask questions and help to connect people to each other, to bring to light what people have and can build on, building relationship, community and trust and laying the basis for more conscious change and continuous learning from their own and their peers' experience.

There are countless strategies and methods used by practitioners or leaders for approaching emergent change. Many have the *action-learning cycle* at the core – doing, observing, reflecting, learning, replanning before doing the next thing – in other words an approach that accompanies and seeks to enhance existing change processes and to surface potential through continual learning.

Some of the more developed strategies and methods often associated with emergent approaches include participatory action research, asset-based learning or indigenous knowledge-based approaches, appreciative inquiry, coaching, mentoring etc. Horizontal learning approaches (like community exchanges and other learning networks) are growing at the margins of the development sector and showing particular promise in cultivating collaborative learning relationships as a foundation for collaborative action in diverse circumstances. [5] Many of the more effective contemporary social movements are founded on horizontal learning relationships and networks.

Methods and tools are not exclusive to any particular change approach or practice but would be used in particular ways depending on the change circumstances.

Connecting Emergent Approaches with Other Kinds of Change

Working with the emergent change properties of a social system requires an emergent approach, an uneven, unpredictable process that continually

---

5   See *Horizontal Learning - Engaging Freedom's Possibilities* by Doug Reeler, from CDRA Annual Report 2004/2005 – www.cdra.org.za

re-invents itself, in situations where more conscious larger-scale Projects or programmes of change cannot yet find purchase.

It is possible, in community or organisation development, that small, modest projects may be surfaced and worked with under these conditions and contribute to emerging identity and relationships, but the dominant impulse for change will still be emergent. Large Projects, in emergent conditions, can very quickly instil over-dependence on the practitioner or donor who will be quickly looked to for leadership and so the more organic process of building community and authentic leadership – the basis for future sustainability – will be subsumed and possibly lost.

It may be that an emergent approach lays the basis or foundations for a good Project sooner or later, as identity, relationships and leadership forms are strengthened. It may also happen that an emergent change process reaches a crisis point or stuckness, whether internally generated as a natural outcome of growth or externally prompted by a changing context, necessitating more transformative change approaches, as described below.

6.2 Transformative Change Practice - facilitating unlearning

> 'Reformers mistakenly believe that change can be achieved through brute sanity'
>
> George Bernard Shaw

The U-Process as Core Process [6]

Transformative change processes are characterised not by learning, as in emergent change, but by processes of *unlearning* the deeper foundations of the crisis or stuckness, releasing the situation for new learning and *possibly* positive change.

While conscious emergent change approaches are underpinned by the *action learning cycle*, transformative change approaches are underpinned by their own deep archetypes. One of these we call the *U-process of change*.

Working with transformative change can only begin once the crisis or stuckness is ripe for resolution – where there is sufficient initial will, in the people and their leaders, to consider dealing with the problem.

---

6. The U-process was developed in 1970 by Glasl and Lemson - (see Glasl, F. 1999. *Confronting Conflict: A First-Aid Kit for Handling Conflict*, Stroud: Hawthorne Press). A different but related version of the U-process has been developed by Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*. Cambridge, MA, SoL, 2004. We still use the older and simpler version described here, but like the action learning cycle, the U-process is a change archetype that is as old as human development itself.

A conscious approach using the U-process will begin with the need for the crisis or stuckness to be surfaced and to be commonly understood by all involved or implicated.

The practice here is of surfacing the hidden roots, revealing the repeated patterns of behaviour, culture, habits and relationships that unconsciously govern the responses to the experience of crisis that people have. Further work requires bringing to light the deeply hidden and no longer appropriate values, beliefs or principles governing people's behaviours and habits – those that are real rather than the stated values and beliefs.

This is a process of re-examining and consciously facing what people have held to be true or important and choosing whether to change or not, of seeing the consequences of either.

This practice, as described this far, is well-known in approaches that seek deeper "attitudinal change". But there is another step, very often absent in theory and practice, where there is the need to deal with the *will* to change. The initial will must be there to consider change but finding the will to actually change is far more challenging.

Often this means working with resistance to change, most commonly rooted in fear of what might be lost, of doubt or self-doubt as to whether there is any real alternative that can be embraced, or of hatred, resentment or self-hatred, the residues of the crisis that needs to be dealt with. A period or process of grieving what has to be let go of by those whose identities have been vested in the past may be required. Resistance to change stemming from these things needs to be surfaced and dealt with before any real or lasting change can ensue.

Once resistance to change is faced and dealt with sufficiently and the will is freed, there is usually a release of energy, borne out of relief, that enables people to move on into a renewal process of re-founding their values and leading ideas, and then of imagining and implementing a different future – of resolving the future by creating a new situation on new foundations. This may become a process of either emergent or projectable change, depending on the conditions which prevail.

So the farmers who have lost their markets may need to unlearn their conservatism and fear of political reprisal to mobilise themselves to challenge the lowering of trade barriers, or to shift to different, less familiar productive activities, perhaps even to learn from their own more indigenous knowledge; the teachers who are no longer allowed to use

corporal punishment may need to let go of age-old attitudes and behaviours, particularly fear of losing control, freeing themselves to develop alternatives; and a pioneer leader may need to let go of his or her power and leadership style to enable a new kind of organisation and leadership to emerge, more suitable to a larger and more complex organisation

Connecting Transformative Change Approaches with Other Kinds of Change

Until there is sufficient experience of the crisis or stuckness, and therefore sufficient willingness to seriously consider a significant change by some or all the people involved, then the conditions for transformative change do not yet exist. In such cases this willingness has still to emerge, more hard experience to be learnt from. An activist intervention may help to "sharpen the contradiction" to force the crisis into the open from which transformative change may proceed. But the risk is there that the crisis is not mature enough and that the will is not yet there to face what has to be faced – indeed the prospects for change may be retarded by unsubtle activism.

Conventional development practices often lead to Projects being imposed on unstable, crisis-ridden or stuck conditions, leaving practitioners surprised by resistance or lethargy or the destructive competitive behaviour that emerges when Project resources are blithely delivered into divided communities, leaving them more divided and defeated by the experience.

However, where transformative processes do help to resolve crises, heal divisions, and bring to birth new kinds of leadership and cultures, we may well find fertile ground for imaginative development Projects of the type described below.

6.3 Projectable Change Practice - supporting planning and implementation

"A woman who works in an informal settlement as a community development facilitator goes about her work of organising the community in a different way. She does "house-calls", visiting individual households, meeting people face-to-face and getting to know them before trying to implement the action. She is trying to get a group in that community to start a savings club but, in her conversations with people, this is the last thing she normally brings up. In her visits she shows interest in the lives of people, she enquires after their children, the parents and does follow-up visits.

This is time consuming but she reckons that you have to get the basics right.

If you want to enter into a venture with people you have to know them – to use her exact words: "You have to know what is in their souls" and this, she says, you can only see by "looking in the eyes". The downside of this situation is that the development project of which she is a part is not happy. It wants results – it wants a savings club which is operating – it wants to quickly "foster the culture of saving" in that community. Her question to the group was: "How do I deal with this tension?"" 7

The Project-Cycle as Core Process

"It doesn't work to leap a twenty-foot chasm in two ten-foot jumps."

Anonymous

Projects have an important place in development work. As the quote above suggests, we can and do sometimes need to leap into the future, to plan and implement more boldly and imaginatively.

Conventional practice, often structured by Logframes, is dominated by a problem or needs-based Project approach. Commonly, practitioners, under the requirements of donors, devise detailed Projects up-front, inviting "beneficiaries" into consultative processes to gain a degree of ownership. The relevance of the solution, the stability of change conditions and the strength and capacities of the people involved may enable such Projects to succeed.

But all too often there is over-planning and enormous effort put into correcting deviations from the plan or justifying non-compliance with signed donor contracts. Under the best of conditions, given the difficulties of foreseeing consequences and unpredictable forces, large scale Projects are risky.

The source of the Project – its real owners – can have a great bearing on the appropriateness and success. Conventionally, Projects are conceptualised between practitioner and donor and merely customised through participative processes with the "beneficiaries". Essentially NGOs, or similar vehicles for Projects, make approaches to communities and a kind of shadow play begins. A participatory survey or needs analysis is done and you can be sure that whatever is being offered happens to match the priority need of the community who knows from the beginning what it is they can access if they demonstrate their needs in the right way. The community will make it appear so, for how else can they attract support and who can blame them for being so resourceful? The development of this capacity of communities to play the field is often the most enduring impact of our interventions.

Genuinely participative processes are possible using projectable change

---

7   A story from Measuring Development Holding Infinity by Sue Soal. A writing
    from the Community Development Resource Association's Annual Report
    2000/2001 .

approaches. Consider this account of practice by Meas Nee, a Cambodian development practitioner, writing about working with rural communities:[8]

> *"All we do is aimed at helping people to begin to think for themselves again... Whatever action comes from their conversations about their problems, we support it. They are ones who plan and think and solve problems for themselves. An idea will come up and in a few weeks time it will come up again. After a time they are pushing us to join with them to do something about it. Often an idea that begins like this becomes a Project which many of the village people join. So they move beyond numbness and a lot of options develop.*
>
> *I find that the bond between people is more important than rules suggested from outside. When a Project starts I like the members themselves to come up with rules and the committee to decide on only five or six. Later when there is a problem and a way is found to resolve it I like to ask, 'Have we learned from this? Is there something else we can add to the way we run the Project?'*
>
> *The first thing is to make relationships, not to make Projects. The major goal of the redevelopment of the community is to help village people to regain dignity and unity."*

The real challenged posed here is the humanising of project approaches. Externally brought projects, however participative in their bringing, often have a hard technical edge and culture that alienate. Projects need to live in the culture and context of people themselves in order to engage their full will.

Connecting Projectable Approaches with Other Kinds of Change

Vision-led Projects, not too tightly structured in detailed plans, do make space for both logical problem-solving and more creative work, for discovering the way to the desired future – call these outcomes. As such there can be a quality of emergence brought into a creative Project approach.

Where the weather is favourable, there is a power of intention generated by inspiring visions that can bring life and energy to unfolding process, real creative Projects that can mobilise people and work in surprising ways. The projected vision may not even be reached but it still gives guidance and energy.

Of course, Projects inevitably yield unexpected outcomes which can either derail the work or creatively redefine it – particularly if relationships with donors and other stakeholders allow it to. Project plans must always be seen as drafts, as work in progress. The minute they become contracted in stone they lose the ability to work with living

---

8. ibid.

processes and inevitably defeat themselves.

The conditions for projectable change may not exist in a given situation, but people may themselves insist on undertaking Projects. Supporting practitioners need to respect the people's wishes, but can still help them to learn from the experience and to be there when the need arises for other kinds of work, perhaps to deal with a latent crisis, or to take things more carefully, a step at a time.

~

7.   Implications for Learning, PME&R and for Donor Practice

> *"Not everything that counts can be counted.*
> *And not everything that can be counted, counts."*

<div align="right">

- Albert Einstein

</div>

7.1 For Emergent Approaches

In many ways the conscious emergent approaches of practitioners and the PME&R systems that they use to manage their practice are ideally and by definition indistinguishable from each other – the PME&R system is a part of the action-learning cycle that underlies the whole approach.

Initial planning by people themselves, accompanied by the practitioner, is necessarily tentative and may rely on an intuitive or lightly articulated sense of what is possible – perhaps enough to draw the support or agreement of donors. Planning and replanning are done as the need arises, as community resources and leadership emerge to take on the next step, as learnings are made which point the way to what needs to be done next. A more conscious focus may be to achieve particular outcomes, perhaps through "mini-projects" but the real work lies in emergent processes of building identity, relationships, leadership etc. that no project can predetermine or guarantee.

The reflective and learning processes, naturally a part of the approach and done both in the field with the people and back at the office, are the monitoring systems themselves. If appropriate, longer cycles and moments of reflection can be built into the process, culminating in bigger learnings, taking care of the need for evaluation.

To support this, donors and back-donors need an approach that provides resources for intuitively developed plans with broad outcomes, that trusts that something positive may emerge and is willing to invest in that possibility. Sophisticated needs research, PRA workshops and the collection of baseline data etc. may not help to reveal a reality that is still emerging. Connecting culturally, quite often less formally, and building trusting relationships to help people to surface some of what is possible and the next small step to be taken, may be much more fruitful than an emphasis on committees and formal planning and contracting processes. Whilst some degree of formalisation may be necessary, this must enhance rather than substitute for more subtle human meeting and contracting.

Core funding, which provides a ready resource to support whatever may arise, to trusted NGOs with a track record, is the most appropriate form of funding. Under emergent conditions of change, newer organisations who have yet to prove their practice may be best served by seed funding and

access to quickly tappable further funding as things progress.

However donors can and should insist that processes of action-learning (observation, reflection, learning and replanning) are consciously part of the change process and are carried out in appropriately systematic ways, and that reports to them should reflect these. A wise funder may ask, not just for edited (read "doctored") funder reports, but rather for access to the action-learning reflective reports of the practice that the practitioners develop or write for each other as part of their own practice. Ideally they may want to see themselves as real partners whose own relationship with the process of change is incorporated into the core action-learning processes, where honesty and quality of learning, the hallmarks of accountability rather than "proof of impact".

Donors can also be learning organisations and ought to be while they are themselves part of the landscape – they may feel invisible because of their relative absence from the field but their presence is always strongly felt.

These emergent paths are made by walking them in a landscape that will not yet support a tarred road. Success and failure should not be issues to judge viability and worth, as both are key sources of learnings and progress. The key measures of accountability would be evidence of thorough action-learning and, of course, financial probity. As far as impact assessment goes this should seamlessly be observed, reflected on and transparently documented as integral to the learning process.

7.2 For Transformative Approaches

The planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting processes of the practitioner or facilitator in a transformative practice is characterised by a constant and highly conscious reflective practice, intensive and in-the-moment reviewing, learning, rethinking and replanning of the process itself – PME on your feet. Sometimes this can happen closely with the people and sometimes on your own as temporary facilitator of the process, requiring a great deal of trust in the process by the people.

For the individual, organisation or community itself, specific outcomes are unpredictable beyond the resolution of the crisis, as a new situation arises only in the process of transformation. Neither emergent nor Project-based PME&R approaches will help.

Donors often interpret crisis as failure, usually of leadership, and are unwilling to invest in what they perceive as high risk situations. This is most unfortunate because it is in times of crisis that the most potential for transformative change and resolution exists, laying a basis for future sustainable growth and development.

Time frames and outcomes are unpredictable and thus donors need to design their support in such a way that it can provide resources as the needs arise, unframeable as they are in neat Projects. *Core funding* for trusted facilitating organisations is thus ideal.

Evaluations and reports to donors would necessarily be narrative and qualitative, telling the story of before, during and after the change process, assessing impact by the resolution of the described crisis, particularly of the less tangible capacities and relationships that are transformed. They may not be quantifiable but there is usually a rich story of change to hear from the people themselves, where impact can be very clearly felt and witnessed.

7.3 For Projectable Approaches

Classically the PME&R of projectable change approaches is characterised by Project planning, the conscious management of activities and regular, systematic monitoring against the agreed plan, its outputs and outcomes. Formal evaluation, at end of the Project cycle to account for the Project as a whole and to draw learnings for future or similar Projects, is common.

Different kinds of Projects, where appropriately applied and whether problem- or vision-led, will require different qualities and emphases in their processes of PME&R. A problem-led approach, necessarily based on simpler and more visible problems and solutions, like the building of a school or clinic, will benefit from well-structured plans and processes of monitoring and evaluation. A vision-led approach, which may have an element of discovering the way forward, will need to have more flexibility of methods and time-lines and a greater need for learning from ongoing experience and adjusting plans and even the vision itself, as the realities of putting a Project into practice are brought to bear.

However even problem-led approaches can benefit from regular reflective learning processes as part of the monitoring of activities. These need to be well planned and funded and not, as is often the case, regarded as a nice-to-have but expendable luxury.

Projects are made more effective when held together by shared values, clear contracts and negotiated responsibilities. However there is a danger if these qualities are led and managed by imposed practices and culture, usually of western managerialist origin. The "committee-fication" of development Projects tends to ignores indigenous or differently cultured modes of Project leadership and management. This can alienate people from Project initiatives and deaden the potential vitality of a development process.

Reporting, in a developmental approach to Projects can also be a distilled reflection of internal and field experiences and should insist that learnings are shared with others, horizontally and vertically.

Donors, responding to the need for Projects, generally feel on more comfortable territory. Things feel more controlled, especially where there is the promise of "specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound results" to report on to their principals, the back-donors. After all Projects do offer lower hanging fruits and are difficult to let go of as a way of working, even where obviously inappropriate. Yet it is quite possible that most development interventions can end up as Projects once

the foundations have been laid through emergent or transformative approaches. Indeed, it should be clear that the deeper work of emergent and transformative approaches in laying foundations of identity, of cooperative relationship and of leadership can also lay the basis for future sustainability of the impacts of Projects.

7.4 For Donor and Northern NGO Power

If a key purpose of development is to shift power in the world then an honest examination of power relationships within the development sector might be the place to begin.

Many Northern NGOs and resource givers, whether they do capacity development or not, like avoid the label "donors" or "funders" in favour of the more politically correct term of "partners", but this just serves to mask their power from themselves.   Donors can be more conscious of their power and the consequences and shadows of that power, rather than be embarrassed by them. In doing so they might find it easier to open more honest dialogues with recipients for exploring different approaches to giving and receiving money more developmentally.

There needs to be more open recognition that Projects, which by definition tie specified monies to specified activities and outcomes by specified dates, enable control by the resource givers that can undermine real ownership - unless the recipients have already found their power, in which case Projects are just a useful and convenient mechanism for resource transfers.

What are some of the alternatives to "partnerships"?

❍ Building real trust - for donors and NGOs from the North to take real time to visit, to learn and to build relationships with recipients, "to know what is in their souls".   This is a question of attitude and a question of time. In recent years the numbers of recipients per donor field officer has risen dramatically. One donor, who used to successfully manage +/-15 recipient relationships in the South, now has almost 50. In such scenarios Projects are the only way to handle such a workload and given the lack of time to build trust, Projects have become an ideal tool for managing mistrust. He admitted that he no longer knows what is really happening as most communications are now through Project reports, many of which he hardly has time to study. Pressures for cost-efficiencies make many field visits cursory and meaningless activities, undermining the development of more accountable human learning relationships between donors and recipients. The irony is that these cost-efficiencies are superficial and it is likely that more funding is wasted than saved over time. Reducing the case load of field officers is a critical path to a more efficient and effective donor practice.

❍ As mentioned before and linked to the point just above, core funding, within closer and more accountable learning relationships, is experienced by recipient organisations as most developmental,

enabling flexibility and initiative according to changing conditions on the ground.

○ Donors can see themselves as part of the learning relationships and cycles that need to underpin sustainable programmes – how else can they learn if they are not open to honest feedback from recipients? Building honest two-way learning relationships, which require real time in the field, may go a long way towards moderating the power of donors.

○ Donors need to re-examine their involvement in "capacity-building" as "partners" which can serve to amplify their power to more dangerous levels. How many "partners" on the ground will refuse or be critical of inappropriate capacity-building initiatives suggested by donors when it comes tied to their funding. For example, as described above under transformative change approaches, the challenge of development might not be a lack of capacity but rather a relationship of power that needs to be surfaced, "unbuilt" and transformed. Used inappropriately or by default, capacity-building can become another mechanism of control.

There are no easy answers to the tension between funding and capacity-building. Some developmental donors focus only on their practice of funding and then make available resources for recipients themselves to independently contract for capacity-development or process facilitation services from third parties. In many areas third-party services are not available and so donors create politically separate capacity-development units.

○ We can accept that there are power differences and not hide behind nice-sounding "partner" rhetoric which undermines honest dialogue. On the other hand many practitioners in recipient Southern NGOs can stop playing the moaning victims and start to find their courage to speak their minds and to help donors and Northern NGOs to understand the realities they face on the ground.

~

8. *Concluding thoughts*

It is the season of Projects, of big and sincere visions and great outcomes, yet the mood of the development sector is insecure. Projects are not working the way they were supposed to.

Yet our institutions are so deeply vested in this approach it is difficult to muster the courage, let alone find the time, to ask the difficult questions. Perhaps the frustrations and difficulties of making social change happen 'out there' have made us wary of facing our own need for transformation, of working with our own resistances. In which case we might serve the world better by doing something else.

Or we can choose to become more developmental, to build practices and supporting organisations that are structured around and thus accountable to the hugely diverse realities and possibilities of change *on the ground*. Of course there must be financial accountability, up and down, but accountability for impact, for the work itself, is a much bigger question that can only be satisfied through restructuring our relationships as practitioners around collaborative processes of honest learning from experience. This must include donors and back-donors, not as hard-nosed bankers of the sector, but as developmental practitioners in their own right.

We can also learn from the margins, the smaller maverick initiatives and radical experiments of the sector, where creative new forms of organisation and practice are emerging and are shifting or challenging power relationships in new ways.

Change cannot be engineered but can only be cultivated. Seeds must be chosen whose fruits not only suit the taste of the eaters but also to suit the soil in which they are planted, the conditions for their fruition. Processes of change, whether emergent, transformative or projectable, are already there, moving or latent, and must be read and worked with as natural processes inherent to the lives and cultures of people themselves. This kind of orientation, applied respectfully and skilfully, may indeed yield the impact and sustainability that is so desperately sought. Perhaps then our obsession with accountability may be allayed, not because we will have learnt how to better measure impact, but because we will have learnt to practise better, to read change more accurately and work with it more effectively.