

# Book Notes: 'How Change Happens' by Duncan Green

Oxford University Press, 2016, UK.

Book notes<sup>1</sup> compiled by Michelle Wanwimolruk, March 2018 for Michael and Suzanne Borrin Foundation. Most of the following text is drawn from the original book.

## Introduction

Duncan Green's book 'How Change Happens' is for people who want to change the world – 'activists'<sup>2</sup> and 'changemakers'. This is interpreted more broadly as people who want to make society better. This includes reformers inside the system (e.g. politicians, public officials), philanthropists, business leaders, community leaders, faith groups.

The book for anyone interested in how to make the world a better place.

People bring their own world views to questions of change. Do we prefer conflict ('speaking truth to power') or cooperation ('winning friends and influencing people')? Do we see progress everywhere and seek to accelerate its path, or do we see a quixotic struggle against power and injustice that is ultimately doomed to defeat? Do we believe lasting and legitimate change is primarily driven by the accumulation of power at grassroots/individual level and challenging norms and beliefs? Or by reforms at the levels of laws, policies, institutions? Do we want to make the current system function better, or do we seek something that tackles the deeper structures of power? The answer is 'all of the above'.

## PART ONE: A Power and Systems Approach

No amount of analysis will enable us to predict the erratic behaviour of a complex system, a Power and Systems Approach interweaves thought and action, learning and adapting as we go. The purpose of initial study is to enable us to place our bets intelligently. Crucial decisions come after that as we act, observe the results and adjust according to what we learn.

A Power and Systems Approach encourages multiple strategies, rather than a single linear approach, and views failure, iteration and adaptation as expected and necessary, rather than a regrettable lapse. It covers our ways of working – how we think and feel, as well as how we behave as 'change-makers'.

### **How we think/feel/work: four steps to help us dance with the system**

- Curiosity – study the history; study the dynamics and players
- Humility – embrace uncertainty and ambiguity
- Reflexivity – be conscious of your own role, prejudices and power
- Include multiple perspectives, unusual suspects; be open to different ways of seeing the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Book notes try to extract some key parts out of a book. It contains some rough notes and abbreviated sentences.

<sup>2</sup> A narrow interpretation of 'activist' would be people engaged in protest movements, on the margins of 'the system'. But Green actually means anyone who is a 'change agent' – people who want to make an impact, make a difference, to improve the world.

## The questions we need to ask (and keep asking)

- What kind of change is involved (individual attitudes, social norms, laws and policies, access to resources)?
- What precedents are there that we can learn from (positive deviance, history, current political and social tides)?
- Power analysis: who are the stakeholders and what kind of power is involved (look again – who have we forgotten?)
- What kind of approach makes sense for this change (traditional projects, multiple parallel experiments)?
- What strategies are we going to try (delivering services, building the broader enabling environment, demonstration projects, convening and brokering, supporting grassroots organisations, advocacy?)
- Learning and course correction: how will we learn about the impact of our actions or changes in context? Schedule regular time outs to take stock and adapt accordingly.

## Chapter 1. Systems thinking changes everything

People employ many concepts to think through how they make change ‘Systems’ and ‘Complexity’ are two of the most useful.

**System** = an interconnected set of elements coherently organised in a way that achieves something. It is more than the sum of its parts: a body is more than an aggregate of individual cells; a university is not merely an agglomeration of individual students, professors and buildings; an ecosystem is not a set of individual plants and animals.

A defining property of human systems is **complexity**: because of the sheer number of relationships and feedback loops among their many elements, they cannot be reduced to simple chains of cause and effect.

In complex systems, change results from the interplay of many diverse and apparently unrelated factors. Those of us engaged in seeking to make an impact, need to identify which elements are important and how they interact.

Baking a cake is a fairly accurate metaphor for the approach of many governments, donors/philanthropists, activist organisations. They decide on a goal (the cake), pick a well-established method (the recipe), find some partners and allies (the ingredients) and off they go.<sup>3</sup>

The trouble is real life rarely bakes like a cake. Engaging a complex system is more like raising a child:

Instead, parents make it up as they go along. And so they should. Raising a child is iterative, an endless testing of assumptions...a constant adaptation to the evolving nature of the child and her relationship with parents and others. Despite all the ‘best practice’ guides...child-rearing is devoid of any ‘right way’... What really helps parents is experience (the second kid is usually easier), and the advice and reassurance of people who’ve been through it

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<sup>3</sup> Analogy often used: baking a cake is a simple problem, or simple context; sending a rocket to the moon is a complicated problem or complicated context; raising a child is a complex problem or complex context.

themselves – ‘mentoring’ in management speak. Working in complex systems requires the same kind of iterative, collaborative and flexible approach.<sup>4</sup>

Systems are in a state of constant change.

Rather than thinking of strategy as a single plan built on predictions of the future, we should think of strategy as a portfolio of experiments that competes and evolves over time.

### **Crises as critical junctures**

Change in complex systems occurs in slow steady processes such as demographic shifts, and also in sudden, unforeseeable jumps.

‘Events’ that disrupt social, political or economic relations – can open the door to previously unthinkable reforms. E.g. Hurricane Katrina accomplished in a day with Louisiana school reformers couldn’t do after years of trying.’ Within 19 months the New Orleans public school system had been almost completely replaced by privately run charter schools.

We must understand the ‘windows of opportunity’ provided by events as critical junctures when our long-term work creating constituencies for change, transforming attitudes and norms and so on, can suddenly come to fruition.

### **The world is complex – so what?**

Many change-makers are, above all, doers, keen to change the world, starting today. They instinctively reject the first lesson of systems thinking: look hard before you leap. They get itchy with anything that smacks of ivory tower ‘beard stroking’ and worry about ‘analysis paralysis’. In the development arena, donors often accentuate the penchant for short-termism by demanding tangible results within the timescales of project funding cycles.

Duncan Green’s advice is to take a deep breath, put your sense of urgency to one side for a moment, and become a ‘reflectivist’ who should ‘map, observe, and listen to the system to identify the spaces where change is already happening and try to encourage and nurture them.’

That said, another lesson of systems thinking is that you cannot understand and plan everything in advance. We need to switch from being architects or engineers to becoming ‘ecosystem gardeners’.

Combining these two lessons makes for some surprising principles:

- Be flexible: You should be willing to shelve the current plan in response to emerging events. Be alert to signals of change.
- Seek fast and ongoing feedback: If you don’t know what is going to happen, you have to detect changes in real time, especially when the windows of opportunity around changes are short lived. Develop acute antennae and embed them in multiple networks.
- Undertake multiple parallel experiments: Change-makers hate failure. No one wants to think they’ve wasted their time on failed projects. Compare this risk aversion to a venture capitalist who backs ten projects knowing that nine will fail, but he or she will make enough money on the tenth to more than compensate for the rest. With a venture approach you spend less time and money designing the perfect plan, and instead pursue a ‘lean start-up’ based on best guesses about what will work.

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur Sweetman and Jun Zhang

- Learn by doing (and failing): In a complex system, it is highly unlikely you will get things right from the outset, or that they will stay right. You have to be ready to learn from failure. What have we learned during the course of any given effort?
- Identify and discuss your rules of thumb: When the US Marines go into combat (an archetypal complex system), they use rules of thumb (stay in contact, take the high ground, keep moving) rather than using a detailed 'best practice guidelines'. Change-makers do too but these often remain tacit and not questioned, tested or improved on. Make them explicit and review them regularly.
- Convene and broker relationships: Bring dissimilar local players together. Effective convening and brokering requires understanding who should be invited to the table. Which players have, or could have, their hands on the levers of change? Provide them with a space for dialogue outside their home institutions can encourage them to think in new ways.

### **Positive Deviance**

The starting point is 'look for outliers who succeed against the odds'. But who is doing the looking also matters. If external 'experts' investigate the outliers and turn the results into a toolkit, little will come of it. Need to facilitate those most directly affected by an issue to look for such outliers and adopt those changes.

For any given problem, someone in the community will have already identified a solution.

### **Conclusion:**

We need to become better 'reflectivists', taking time to understand the system before (and while) engaging with it. We need to become less arrogant, more willing to learn from accidents, from failures, and from other people.

## Chapter 2. Power lies at the heart of change

'Empowerment' – the driving force behind Amartya Sen's definition of 'development as the progressive expansion of the freedoms to do and to be' – is one of the buzzwords in social change discussions.

However, most people shy away from the word to which the term derives: 'power'.

Most evident and most discussed form of power is what we might call 'visible power': the world of politics and authority, policed by laws, violence and money. It gets bad press, conjuring up images of force, coercion, discrimination...But visible power is also necessary to do good, whether to implement enlightened public policies or prevent acts of violence by the strong.

Change-makers seeking social change usually focus their efforts on those who wield visible power – prime ministers, CEOs etc. But there's 'Hidden Power'. Hidden power describes what goes on behind the scenes: the lobbyists, the corporate chequebooks, the old boys network. Hidden power also includes the 'shared world view' of what's considered sensible or reasonable in public debate.

*Hidden power is why **amassing research and evidence** is rarely sufficient to change government policy.* Discussion of the facts usually takes place parallel to a shadowy world of competing narratives that have little basis or interest in evidence.

As important as 'hidden power', and certainly more insidious is 'invisible power', which causes the relatively powerless to internalise and accept their condition. In the words of French philosopher Michel Foucault,

'There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, which each individual will end up interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer.'<sup>5</sup>

Invisible power often determines the capacity of change movements to influence visible and hidden power. It shapes the belief systems about what is 'normal' or 'natural', leading some groups to exclude themselves.

'Empowerment' seeks to alter invisible power. Because the targets of such efforts are the inner lives of individuals, cultural initiatives and mass media can be important tools.

### **Power and change**

Contemplating the gamut of visible, hidden, and invisible power that supports the status quo can be dispiriting, inducing feelings of helplessness before the Leviathan. However, there are also other ways of thinking about power, as highlighted by Jo Rowlands:

- *Power within*: personal self-confidence, self-worth, self-knowledge.
- *Power with*: collective power, through organisation, solidarity, joint action.
- *Power to*: meaning effective choice, capability to decide actions and carry them out.
- *Power over*: the power of hierarchy and domination.

The 'power over' of police, courts – like visible power, is actually essential to 'do good'. This power over can help guarantee security. Must be subject to checks and balances.

Access to justice by poor communities can turn the law from a bulwark of the status quo to a driver of social change.

### **Power analysis**

Power analysis tells us who holds what power related to an issue, and what might influence them to change.

Power analysis can help us identify and select a more appropriate course of action, and a wider range of potential allies. You need to map all the players and actors, and then discuss:

- **Alliances**: What combination of likely and unlikely allies will maximize the chances of success? A traditional partnership between activist organisations, sympathetic individuals in government, or joint approach with private-sector companies, or other?
- **Approach**: What is most likely to influence the target individuals and institutions whose support is needed to bring about change? Does the barrier to change lie in laws and policies, or in social norms, attitudes, beliefs? Or is the issue rooted in conflicting interests and thus requires political mobilisation to demonstrate clout?
- **Events**: Is change most likely to occur around a specific event (e.g. elections, death of a leader, an economic crisis)? How do we prepare for and respond rapidly to the opportunities (as well as threats) created by such 'shocks'?

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, p. 155.

Such power analysis reflects a strategic mind-set which prizes results, as opposed to what might be called a 'principled' mind-set that prizes 'speaking truth to power'.

Speaking truth to power is seldom effective without a subtler understanding of the distribution of power and the potential for change. Similarly, by exhorting politicians simply to show 'political will' and do something that will lose them votes or power, we abdicate our responsibility to find a way to enable them to support the change we seek.

### **Why change *doesn't* happen**

Although this book is about 'how change happens', often the important question is "Why doesn't change happen?" Systems can be remarkably resistant to change.

To understand why there is inertia, an 'i-word', let's look at three other 'i-words':

- *Institutions*: management systems and culture within institutions can be powerful obstacles to change.
- *Ideas*: conceptions and prejudices held by decision makers. E.g. In Malawi, researchers found that ideas about the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor – led leaders to believe redistributive policies make the poor lazy. Despite the overwhelming evidence for the effectiveness of cash transfers.
- *Interests*: 'It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.'

Subtle and pervasive force field of power that links and influences everyone present. No matter the political system, power is always present. As the joke from the Soviet era put it: 'Under capitalism, man exploits man. Under socialism, it's the other way around.'

Studying and understanding the force field of power is an essential part of trying to influence change. Though largely invisible to the newcomer, power sets parameters on how social and political relationships evolve. Who are likely allies or enemies of change? Who are the uppers and lowers in the relationship? Who listens or defers to whom? How have they treated each other in the past?

Many of the success stories in human progress – universal suffrage, access to knowledge, are at their root, a story of the progressive redistribution of power.

### **Chapter 3: Shifts in Social norms often underpin change**

Social norms = the explicit or implicit rules specifying what behaviours are acceptable in society.

Norms come in all shapes and sizes – social, legal, moral – they appear fixed, but norms are a continuously evolving system. Even law – the most codified, formal subset of norms – is constantly changing.

Anyone interested in bringing about change should surely pay close attention to the way such norms are established and evolve over time. However, we often prefer to focus on the tangible – laws and policies, spending commitments. We want to measure our impact and thus prove our effectiveness. But neglect of 'invisible power' is a big mistake. We can still focus on the tangibles, but norms should lie at the heart of our deeper understanding of how change happens. And the norm changes we contribute to are likely to be our greatest legacy.

## PART TWO: Institutions and the importance of history

In systems terms, history reveals how different institutions emerged and evolved to reach the structure, culture and practices we see today, offering useful insights on how to influence them. History inspires a healthy acceptance of pluralism.

History also provides a kind of temporal positive deviance: by studying the historical outliers on any given issue, we get new insights and ideas.

History reinforces both curiosity and humility – an antidote to the hubris of change makers.

### Chapter 4: How states evolve

See book.

### Chapter 5: The Machinery of Law

Beyond the set of rules enforced by litigation, the police and the courts, the rule of law includes legal procedures that prescribe how state officials do their work and laws are implemented. The law also has a broader role: it encapsulates what we expect of our society and at the same time it contributes to delivering on that expectation.

The law matters for a country's development. Because social, political, and economic change alters the distribution of resources and power, creating winners and losers. A biased legal system will increase the potential for violence and exclusion, while a fair and effective one can harness the participation and voice of diverse groups to achieve a more consensual resolution of conflict and a smoother ride for an evolving society.

#### **The law as a driver of change**

In theory, the law protects rights, imposes duties, and sets a framework for the conduct of almost every social, political, and economic activity. It endeavours to guarantee justice, promote freedom, and provide security.

But as the French writer Antole France caustically observed:

‘The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread’<sup>6</sup>

In practice, the law reflects disparities of wealth and power: money can hire the best lawyers; white collar crimes always seem to get off more lightly than blue-collar ones; hidden and invisible power work their magic.

Public Interest Litigation (PIL): but not all PILs are progressive. Plenty of industry lobbyists use the tactic too.

When legal systems work for poor people, they can transform the lives of multitudes. For example, in Bangladesh, a 2008 Supreme Court ruling confirmed the citizenship rights of thousands of Urdu speakers still living in camps since 1971 War of Independence. This allowed them to obtain identity papers, formal jobs, the vote and passports.

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<sup>6</sup> Anatole France, *The Red Lily*, 1894, Chapter 7.

The courts are one of the few institutions that has stood up to autocracy. While South Africa didn't have a constitution or bill of rights, South Africa's courts did have the power to interpret legislation, which they used to blunt some of the more notorious apartheid laws.

### **The law as a system**

Like many institutions that at first sight appear fixed and monolithic, the law is a system in constant flux. Interpretation of laws evolve, the weight assigned to customary law evolves.

In what some lawyers call a 'legal social justice revolution', progressive lawyers around the world recognised that the law is not an immovable institution, and began the slow process of harnessing the law to promote human rights, equality, and to address privilege and discrimination.

As a result, the law has evolved from a musty, rigid defender of the status quo (especially those aspects that reinforced power and inequality) to an active player in creating and recreating the society in which we live.

### **Chapter 6: Accountability, political parties, and the media**

For Francis Fukuyama, accountability means that 'the rulers believe that they are responsible to the people they govern, and put the people's interests above their own'

Accountability is the glue that constitutes the social contract between citizen and state.

### **The media and accountability**

States may see the world through the eyes of the law, but politicians often see it through the eyes of the media, and not just any media.

The media can echo, amplify, or substitute for citizens' voices. Governments monitor (often obsessively) their popularity, detecting unrest and threats. Media provides a form of feedback loop to 'what the people are thinking'.

Governments and politicians good at using the media. In the 1990s, Peru's secret-police chief Ivan Montesinos systematically bribed all the democratic checks and balances in the country – the opposition, the judiciary, a free press. Once he had fallen from power, some enterprising scholars managed to get hold of and compare the bribes he paid for different targets. They found that bribing a television channel owner cost about 100 times more than a judge or politician. One single television channel's bribe was five times larger than the total of all opposition politicians' bribes. By revealed preference, the strongest check on the government's power was the news media.

Many activists place huge hopes on the power of 'new media'. But tech-savvy activists often overestimate social media's importance.

The media is a complex system, whose behaviour varies over time and place, according to politics, history, culture, technology. For activists learning to 'dance' with that system, it means finding out how the media works in any given setting, learning its language, timetable and incentives.

**Transparency and accountability initiatives: Case study on theory of change of an NGO: Twaweza** (NGO). Twaweza believed that boosting poor people's access to information could make government more accountable on things like poor schools across East Africa. They took the idea to scale – advertising on 40 million school notebooks. Seen as challenging, large scale innovation.



Trouble was – it wasn't working. No evidence that the information was registering with citizens on any scale and less triggering increased citizen action.

Importance of examining the assumptions and conditions that underlie all theories of change – 'looking at the arrows'. All time, favourite cartoon on how change happens shows two boffins in front of a blackboard, with equations to the left and right, and in-between the words 'then a miracle occurs'. Twaweza's theory of change was:

'citizens get information about bad services → citizens take action to improve them'

In between, i.e. the arrow, lay the unexplored 'miracle':

Inside that simple A → B theory of change, lay a whole sequence of assumptions and conditions: Do I understand the information? → Is it new information to me? → Do I care? → Do I think it is my responsibility to do something about it? → Do I have the skills to make a difference? Do I have the sense of efficacy to think that my efforts will have an impact?

Conclusion

All too often a gulf divides the words of those in positions of power and responsibility from their subsequent deeds. The gulf is partly the result of the workings of ideas, interests, and institutions, and a reflection of the way power is distributed in society.

Political parties, the media, and social accountability initiatives are vital parts of systems of accountability that can be used, and strengthened, to close the gap.

Chapter 7: How the international system shapes change

Chapter 8: Transnational Corporations as drivers and targets of change

(See book for these two chapters)

## PART THREE: What activists can (and can't) do

Much quoted phrase 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has'.

These words have inspired generations of change-makers but always leave me with mixed feelings. If we focus on 'committed' and lose sight of 'thoughtful' we fall into trap of thinking that change comes from a noble and pure band of brothers and sisters, willing to go up into the mountains or onto the streets. I don't think that's how change works.

JK Rowling satirises that kind of 'committed' campaigning in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, when Hermione sets up an 'Elf Liberation Front' to free the house elves who serve the wizard community. The house elves were horrified – no one had asked them if they wanted to be 'liberated', which to them looks very much like being unemployed. Hermione didn't consult the elves; she merely assumed she knew what was right for them.

A thoughtful power and systems approach emphasises **humility and curiosity about the system** we are seeking to influence. Passion is essential of course, but it must be tempered with critical thinking. And we must engage with those most affected at the sharp end of a problem. (i.e. Hermione should have talked to the elves!)

## Chapter 9: Citizen activism and civil society

See book.

## Chapter 10: Leaders and leadership

I have come to believe that leadership is central to any understanding of how change happens. Leaders operate at the interface between structure and agency, striving to leave their mark on the institutions, cultures, and traditions in which they live and work. We need to identify, support and work with progressive leaders.

This is not just about politicians.

Many leaders get things moving, but leave the finishing to others. The art of leadership lies in finding ways to move forward (or more frequently to inspire others to do so) within the circumstances of the moment.

Leaders understand the role of symbolism

Leadership, power, and systems

Mandela was an expert navigator in a complex system, forging personal or political alliances with erstwhile enemies. Like all good leaders, he could 'see' how power is distributed and fought over in society, and spot opportunities to seize and shape the tide of events.

Training and supporting leaders should be an attractive proposition for donors. Why not emulate the few schemes, such as the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, that identify and back outstanding leaders? Or offer work experience, internships, or teaching opportunities for students with potential to become tomorrow's progressive leaders.

For those of us who have a deep commitment to egalitarianism, words like leadership seem to elicit mixed feelings. We prefer to build the capacity of organisations rather than invest directly in individuals with high potential. Acknowledging and supporting the crucial role leaders play in how change happens is a vital step in amplifying the voices of groups that currently go unheard.

## Chapter 11: The power of advocacy

Some definitions:

Advocacy is the process of influencing decision makers to change their policies and practices, attitudes and behaviours.

Campaigning: usually refers to mobilizing the public or influencing the public's attitudes and behaviours.

Lobbying is going directly to policy makers to get them to do something in particular.

Tactics employed usually fall somewhere along a continuum from sitting down with those in power to help sort out a problem (at the 'insider' end) to mayhem in the street (at the 'outsider' end). Five points: cooperation, education, persuasion, litigation and contestation.

To make change happen, you need to combine insider-outsider tactics, recruit 'unusual suspects' as allies.

Advocacy has lifted much from the field of advertising, since it is, after all, a form of salesmanship. An essential lesson is to craft the message to fit the audience. What we say to a finance minister may not work for a parliamentarian or allies like health professionals, nor the general public.

We need to stand in the shoes of the people we are trying to influence and view the world as they do. Empathy is critical if we are to build a bridge to people who see the world very differently from ourselves.

The messenger is often as important as the message. Government ministers listen to other government ministers, business people listen to other business people, more than a researcher or campaigner.

### **Coalitions and alliances**

One of the skills of a good advocate is knowing how to construct effective alliances – and to distinguish powerful engines of change from soul-sapping talking shops. Interesting things happen when unusual suspects join forces.

### **Insider vs outsider tactics**

Systems thinking suggests that both play important roles. Outsiders keep important issues live and fight to get new ones on the table. They work in public. Insiders, on the other hand, take issues forward into the necessary fudges involved when turning ideas into policy.

Unsurprisingly, outsiders often think insiders are sell-outs, while insiders view outsiders as politically naïve purists.

We need both and the balance between insider and outsider tactics varies over time.

## **PART IV: Pulling it all together**

### **Chapter 12: A Power and systems approach to making change happen**

One of more recent buzzwords is **'theories of change'**. People will earnestly enquire 'what's your theory of change?'. You're in trouble if you don't have an answer, although I find replaying 'I don't know, what's yours?' useful.

The 'Power and Systems Approach' is one such theory of change.

Theories of change articulate and challenge our assumptions and acknowledge the influence of wider systems and actors.

Realisation that linear thinking (if we do X, then we will achieve Y) is often a wild goose chase.

Better to view a theory of change as a compass not a map, a dynamic process rather than a static document. Will allow for assumptions to be regularly challenged and updated.

For those who want to make an impact, contribute to social change, **be wary of:**

- Lure of top down – whereby philosopher kings from universities and think-tanks contemplate and derive the perfect theory without actually talking to anyone on the ground. It is rare for experts to show interest in poor people's<sup>7</sup> own theories of change.
- Toolkit temptation. Natural instinct is to proliferate a toolkit and best-practice guide and provide a single right answer to change.
- Demand for evidence of quick results and value for money. It is much easier to 'prove results' by assuming the world is linear, reinforcing the 'if X, then Y' mind-set. In complex systems it makes much more sense to be accountable for what you have learned and how you have adapted to it.

The need to demonstrate results in order to obtain funding, also pushes organisations to work on issues where such islands of linearity<sup>7</sup> are to be found (vaccinating kids, distributing mosquito nets), rather than ones that may matter more (women's empowerment or fighting corruption) but are harder and more expensive to measure.

### **A power and systems approach**

A theory of change should expand the range of approaches rather than narrow them down.

We can use a 'Power and Systems Approach' theory of change in two main ways:

1. Looking backwards: exploring past stories of change or no change. PSA helps to broaden the kinds of questions to ask. The importance of unpredictable events and accidents: arrival (or loss) of champions in positions of power, unexpected changes in laws, policies, crises, and scandals.
2. Looking forwards – a Power and Systems Approach acknowledges that we can't anticipate those critical junctures. But 'fortune favours the prepared mind'.

Using a Power and Systems Approach also means:

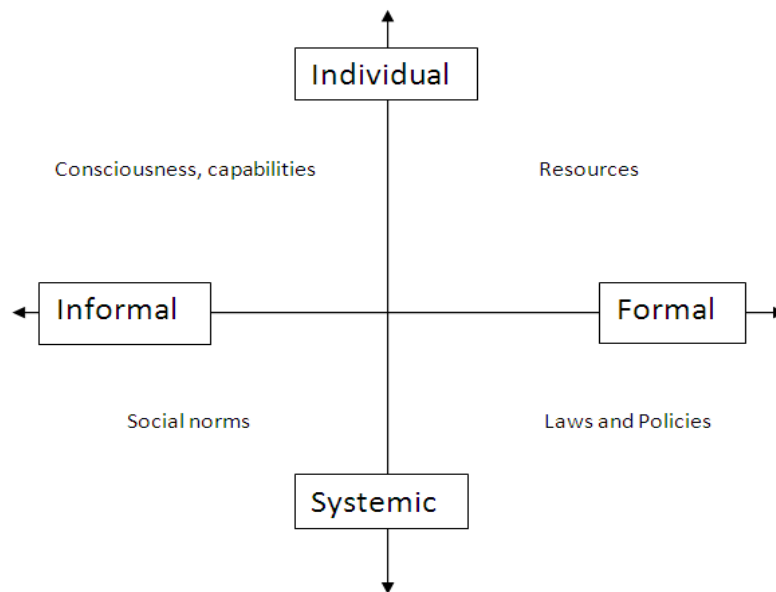
- We're aware of characteristics we need to cultivate to flourish in complex systems:
  - curiosity
  - humility
  - self-awareness
  - openness to a diversity of viewpoints.
- We need to nurture a genuine curiosity about the complex interwoven elements that characterise the systems we are trying to influence. (It's easy to see what we are looking for, but much harder to notice and register the unexpected.)
- Curiosity about the system needs to be laced with humility and self-knowledge. We don't and can't have all the answers. We need to include a more diverse range of people and viewpoints in any given discussion.
- We need to recognise that 'we' are not lofty, disinterested observers. We make decisions based on our default models of the world and assumptions. We are wielders of power in our own right. Power flows within our networks, influencing our relations with people.

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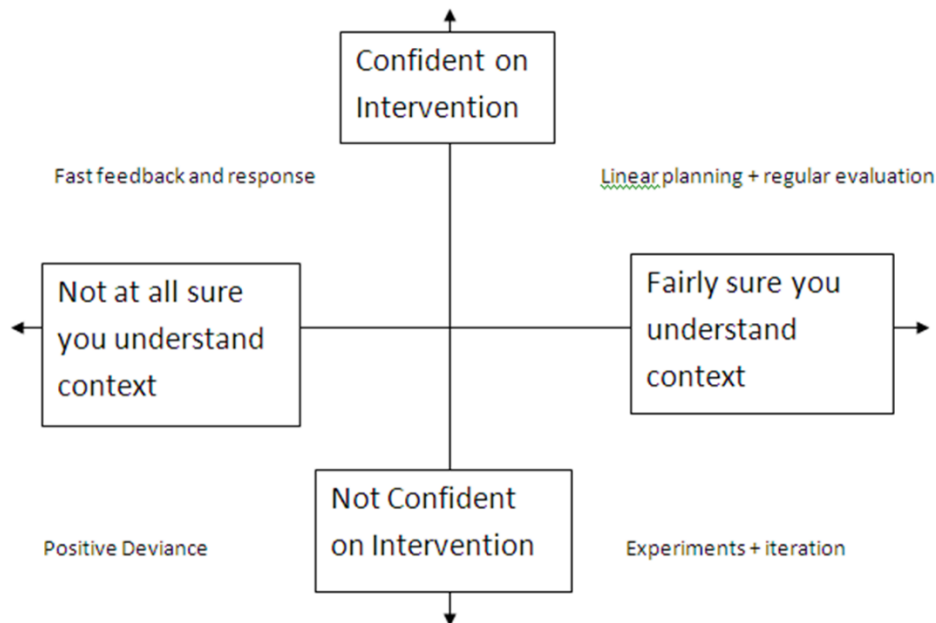
<sup>7</sup> Green is talking in international development context, so his 'poor people' is a shorthand for those living in developing countries in economic hardship.

Using a Power and Systems Approach as a Theory of Change, suggests questions we should ask and keep asking about the system, our theory of action and our method for learning:

- What kind of change are we talking about?** See domains of change figure below from Rao, Sandler, Kelleher and Miller.  
 Consider nature of the institution in question: scale of informal to formal.  
 Consider locus of change sought (ranging from individual to systemic).  
 We typically neglect thinking about the left-hand side – the informal world.  
 Change processes will flow between different quadrants.



- What precedents are there that we can learn from?** Are positive changes already happening somewhere in the system (positive deviance) and we need to find and encourage them? Are there existing tides in the local political and economic context likely to help or hinder the desired change?
- Who are the stakeholders and where do they stand?** Whatever the issue we are thinking about and seeking to change, everyone involved will be linked by a subtle and pervasive force field of power. Need to identify the players (both individuals and organisations), and how they relate to each other, who or what they are influenced by. Need to also identify the different kinds of power in play.  
 A power analysis should stimulate ideas for strategies for engaging. It should dissolve monoliths into turbulent networks full of potential allies as well as opponents.  
 A power analysis disaggregates power, exploring the role of 'power within', 'power with'.
- What kind of approach might make sense for this change?** The how and the what. Below framework acknowledges that not every change is complex, sometimes you do just need to vaccinate kids.  
 Figure below source: Adapting your strategies to the system: Adaptive Management Workshop, USAID Workshop.



**What actual strategies are you going to try?** Tactics can be equally varied: building alliances, seeking quick wins to gain momentum; dividing and neutralising opponents, winning over agnostics. Since no amount of upfront analysis will enable us to predict the erratic behaviour of a complex system, a Power and Systems Approach interweaves thought and action, learning and adapting as we go. The purpose of these initial exercises is to enable us to place our bets intelligently.

**How will we learn about the impact of our actions and changes in the context?** A Power and Systems Approach encourages multiple strategies, rather than a single linear approach, and views failure, iteration, and adaptation as expected and necessary.

Learning as we go requires good feedback systems, which could include regular time outs to take stock on what has changed in the context, and what is/isn't working, to more technological approaches such as using 'big data'.

Analysis of the system is not a one-off upfront engagement, but a continual process of analysing and reanalysing the context.

Essential lesson of working in systems and thinking about power: ***that we have to make it up as we go along.***

#### Implications to think through:

- Have we got a mix of risk-taking, rule defying mavericks and planners and project implementation types?
- Will risk-taking be applauded or criticised?
- 'Command and control'? Generally best not to command and control. Not insisting on slapping your brand on every project or document makes it easier to engage in multi-stakeholder initiatives. **'Convening and brokering' exercises that bring together unusual suspects in search of new ideas and solutions.**
- Make accountability for learning as important as accountability for results. Keep asking 'What have you learned'

### Additional points for funders:

- Money is power. Funders can exert significant influence over the ability of change-makers to adopt a power and systems approach.
- Of course funders are often change-makers themselves, both through the way they allocate cash and negotiate with recipients, and through their own roles as influencers.
- Funders' standards regarding results and reporting: Is the funder willing to accompany a grant recipient as the organisation navigates complex change process, which changes in both direction and expected results, or does it insist, 'This is the plan we funded, stick with it?'
- Funders should think of themselves as 'ecosystem gardeners'. They should sow greater diversity to encourage innovation and resilience.
- This book actually grew out of 'good donorship' – DFID was funding a 'venture capitalist' theory of change, involving multiple parallel experiments and the expectation was that many of them would fail.

## Conclusion

Progressive change is not primarily about 'us' – change makers, people who want to make the world a better place. Progressive change occurs when people and communities take power into their own hands; or there are shifts in technology, prices demography; or sheer accident can be far more important than the actions of would-be change agents.

That said, change-agents do play a crucial role.

We must get to know the players – both our targets and allies, whether they work for the state, the private sector, or civil society organisations – how they see the world and how we can work with them. We have to understand the underlying force field of power that links them all.

We will have more impact if we are prepared to take risks, try new uncomfortable things, question our own power and privilege, and acknowledge and learn from our failures.

Amartya Sen brilliantly captured the meaning of human development and human progress:

'the freedoms to be and to do'.

As change-makers we can support this.