



Facilitating Social Change

Seven Questions that Keep Us Awake

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“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

Rainer Maria Rilke (1929)

"I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail"

Abraham Maslow (1966)

Social change does not begin with the ability to find right answers but to continually develop more powerful questions, out of learned experience, and from there to move forward. Often, as Rilke implores above, there are no answers, only continual questioning into the future.

Consider the question: *“How do we bring communities and government together into a co-creative relationship?”* The answer to this complex question is not only different for different contexts but in each of these contexts the response cannot be simply cooked up in a strategic planning session. The answer must be discovered through continuous cycles of doing, observing, reflecting, learning, and re-planning, each requiring its own process of disciplined questioning.

It is likely that the question itself will evolve, for example, to: *“How do we support communities and local government to prepare themselves for engagement?”* This is the practice of social change, alive and continually searching for better questions, able to meet the evolving intricacies and nuances of life.

This is not an easy stance to take in a world that demands answers in the form of thorough plans

up front, with full risk analyses and multi-year budgets, to be regularly followed by reports that speak to the contracted plans, proof that these were the right plans, if the funding is still to flow. Despite what might have been learned to the contrary. Of course the proofs will usually be counted by some clever method and with them a few easy and deceptive learnings to be shared and carried into subsequent cycles.

As we move from small charitable projects to more substantial and complex programmes of change it takes a certain humility to say “we don’t yet know,” to ask for the opportunity to question and experiment our way forward. To be creative. Who will fund “We don’t yet know”? Even pilot programmes are expected to succeed as examples of “best practice” rather than laboratories of change.

Yet without this humility and honesty we are unlikely to approach the future as learners and thinking practitioners and should not be surprised when the right answers (and impacts) continue to elude us.

How can we inquire our way effectively into an uncertain future?

This writing shares seven evolving questions and many other lines of inquiry that guide our work. The questions are:

1. What is social change and how do we approach it?
2. What is our primary role as development practitioners?
3. How do we see and work with power?
4. How do we work with uncertainty?
5. What social change strategies work best?
6. What kinds of organizations and leadership do we need to face the future?
7. How can we have conversations that matter?

Question 1

What is social change and how do we approach it?

Cause and Effect versus Flux and Constraint

“Cause and effect” analysis as an explanation of how things change, is useful for understanding the movement of inanimate objects and predictable technical systems. In such cases externally applied causes can be planned and are likely to have predictable and measurable effects or impacts. This is the science of physics and many people like it because it feels tidy, visible and accountable, or at least it has the illusion of being so, and so they apply it to social change projects, using Logframes and similar methodologies.

Inanimate objects and systems have to be externally driven or energised because they contain no innate life of their own. But people, social systems are animate, paradoxical and internally-driven beings, and do not act predictably to external stimulus. Thus how they change cannot be explained by logical “cause and effect”.

The concept of “flux and constraint” is more accurate and helpful. Living beings, organisations and social systems are always in a continuous flux of change, from within. But at the same time we are often stuck or held in a state of unchange. What holds us in a particular state is not a lack of flux but a series of constraints, internal and external, that when lowered will enable the flux, releasing potential movement, driven from within.

We are so focused on how and why we can change but little on why are we not changing,

what is constraining possible change, or what is holding us captive.

Despite our best-laid and funded plans people cannot be pushed to change as if they are pieces on a chess board, from this square to that square. Indeed to apply an external pressure for change is more likely to provoke resistance or further passivity. As Peter Senge observes: “People don't resist change. They resist being changed.”

If women in a community are stuck, seemingly passive, and unable to break out of dependence and subservience to the patriarchy, it is not because they are internally passive as a natural state, but because their will and capacity to change is held back by a series of constraints both internal (psychological and cultural) and external. If they can be helped to remove or lower these constraints they may be able to change themselves and their power relationship to the world. (See Franzetta, D. (2010))

Three Kinds of Change

In working with communities, organizations, or networks, before we ask, “How do we change things?”, we like to ask, “How are things already changing or how is change being constrained?” In this way we are able to acknowledge and work with the innate forces for and against change.

In our work we have identified three dominant kinds of change that people, communities, and societies tend to go through. (For a more detailed version see Reeler, D (2007))

Emergent change describes the day-to-day unfolding of life, of adaptive and uneven processes of unconscious and conscious learning from experience and the changes in attitudes and actions that result from that. This applies to individuals, families, communities, organizations, 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 successfully or unsuccessfully.

Emergent change exists most strongly in unpredictable and fluid conditions. These may be a result of external uncertainties like an unstable economy or a fragile political dispensation, or from internal uncertainty where things are fragmented or still in formation..

In peri-urban areas around Cape Town, like many cities of the South, rural migrants arrive every day seeking work, health services and

schools for their children. They gather and group on spare pieces of land, illegally occupying them. Some are connected through rural ties and some make new connections, for protection and support. They are emerging communities, still fragile and fractured and vulnerable to rivalries and exploitation. With time and experience leadership and a sense of place, trust and identity begins to form. Patriarchal and tribal rifts are still prevalent.

The Federation of the Urban Poor, built over time from organized shack dwellers, allied to the Shack Dwellers International, and supported by some NGOs, often begin work in such emergent communities through supporting women to form “daily savings groups” through which they elect trusted collectors (emergent leaders) to collect a small amount of change each day from each member. This provides a seedling foundation of local organization and leadership on which larger programs of change can be built in the future.

Transformative change. At some stage in the development of all social beings it is typical for crisis to develop. This may be the product of a natural process of inner development, for example, the classic pioneering organization reaching the limits of its family-like structuring, roles and relationships, stuck and unable to grow without a qualitative shift to a more conscious structuring and more systematic way of working, letting go of its informality and transforming the way it works.

Crisis may also be the product of social beings entering into tense or contradictory relationships with their world, prompted by shifts in external political, economic, cultural, or environmental contexts.

Crisis sets the stage for transformative change. Unlike emergent change, which is characterised as a learning process, transformative change is more about *unlearning*, of people letting go of those leading ideas, values, or beliefs that underpin the crisis, that no longer suit the situation or relationships that are developing.

South Africa is riven by conflict and protest. Every day in scores of townships residents block the roads and march on their local councils, sometimes violently, to protest the lack of service delivery (water, housing, electricity). They feel cheated and expect the government to deliver. But the government cannot deliver on its own –

its attempts at top-down delivery on the back of a bureaucratic infrastructure inherited from the Apartheid regime is failing amidst corruption and lack of capacity.

How easy is it to challenge the top down nature of the system and the assumptions that a passive citizenry must have its services delivered by an active government. Even the language of “rights,” so beloved of Development Aid, which separates “rights holders” from “duty bearers” encourages the conception that local government and community have separate interests, and feeds their mutual alienation. Is it not increasingly clear that the endless cycles of protest and failed delivery will not end until communities and government let go of these notions and of the way they see each other? They may then be open to discovering more co-creative ways of communities bringing their resourcefulness and initiatives to meet the collective resources and larger systems of support held by the government.

What can we do to help either side to begin to see past this fruitless cycle? What new attitudes and values become important, to meet the future?

Working with resistance to change is at the heart of transformation. In our heads we may know we have to change but deeper down we are held captive, frozen in the current state and unable to let go. Consider

Fear of losing power, privilege, identity. Fear of being hurt, or worse. Fear of the unknown that will disrupt what we have become used to, even if these are just coping strategies for what has not worked;

Doubt and self-doubt that they or I cannot be better or do what is required, that we and our ideas are inadequate, that we do not have the capability;

Hatred or self-hatred. The bases of many forms of racism. Where there has been conflict, abuse or trauma we can be consumed by bitterness, resentment and revenge or paradoxically blame or even hate ourselves for what we have done or not done or even what has been done to us. We are not worthwhile.

All of these block or constrain the will or imprison the innate flux of change. There are no easy methods for working with these deep resistances. In our practice we look for ways to surface and share them, to bring them to light,

either intimately or socially, to give them perspective, to enable them to be expressed. Through naming and verbalising comes the possibility of release, of freeing ourselves. Helping people to share their stories is a well tried approach, often cathartic for tellers and listeners. Simply asking ourselves and sharing what we fear, doubt and hate, and supporting honest answers and conversations is sometimes all that is required.

On the other side of fear, doubt and hatred we can find courage, faith and love. Good ideas for change are flimsy without courage and so central to our work is to encourage each other to face our fears. Certainty is the opposite of doubt but hardly possible in the face of unpredictable realities. And so faith in human beings to rise above the odds helps us to deal with doubt. And then love, one of the least spoken words in the books and workshops on social change, but without which little is sustainable or even worthwhile.

Perhaps its mysterious and transcendent nature is too difficult to express explicitly or the scientist in us remains wary of something that refuses to be measured and quantified. But there can be few transformations that are not centred on the transformation of the heart.

How do we work with doubt and faith, fear and courage and hatred and love more consciously in our practice?

Projectable or Vision-led Change. Human beings can identify and solve problems and imagine or envision different possibilities or solutions for the future. We can *project* possible visions or outcomes and formulate conscious plans to bring about change.

Where conditions of change, especially the relationships of a system, are reasonably coherent, stable, and predictable, and where unpredictable risks do not threaten desired results, then projectable change initiatives and well-planned projects become possible.

The fact is that many people in Development Aid Industry, especially those who control and are responsible for finances and resource allocations, tend to like Projectable Change approaches because they give the illusion of control and accountability, even when the conditions for projects simply do not yet exist. Indeed few situations of marginalization, impoverishment, or

oppression are projectable, by definition. Other work, often emergent or transformative, needs to be done before projects make sense.

The key is not to rush into any particular approach, but rather to observe what kinds of change are already at play and to see if there are ways to work within and out of these.

How can we build a sensibility to more accurately read the nature of change conditions and formulate approaches to change that can work with these?

Question 2

What is our primary role as development practitioners?

People have to be seen as being actively involved, given the opportunity, in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs.
Amartya Sen (1999)

The need for change in marginalized and impoverished communities the world over is widespread and vast. But the ability and resources of governments and NGOs to work with these needs, in helpful ways, are extremely limited.

This conundrum points to approaches that answer these questions:

- a) How can the limited capacities and resources of outsiders support the unlocking of hidden resources and resourcefulness in a community?
- b) How can neighbours stimulate change in neighbours, learning from each other, horizontally, peer-to-peer, community-to-community, municipality-to-municipality, so that positive change and development can spill over or spread, as does fire, no longer constrained by the limitations of government or NGOs.

In the Limpopo Province in South Africa the CDRA has been working with scores of self-organized women's groups who come together to see to the needs of their young children. The program is called Letsema (the Sotho word for a universal tradition of working together to reach a

common purpose). Until we started work with them they were stuck within their own worlds, unaware of their own interesting and useful experiences and capabilities. We supported them to start visiting each other in a series of horizontal learning exchanges, where they shared how they lived and worked, learning from each other's innovations and exploring new ideas together. From that mutual appreciation they were better able to see more of their own self-worth and develop some confidence to begin visualising a different future for themselves, in which they are active participants.

After the first several horizontal exchanges were stimulated and supported from the outside, they are now widespread, happening spontaneously and regularly without any external support.

Communities, who often appear to outsiders as needy victims, have reservoirs of hidden and potential capacities and resourcefulness from hard-learned experience that vastly outweigh what can be brought in from the outside. Once surfaced and validated by people themselves these are the seed-beds out of which change can be nurtured.

But most Development Aid Projects we have seen unthinkingly dump capacity-building, technology, and funding, onto communities, mobilised around the idea that people lack capacity, resources, and organization. Highly-planned, logframed, capacity-building Projects. And in doing so they further bury the hidden reservoirs of community potential.

And of course in burying what people have and know and bringing answers and resources from the outside, inevitably people's own will, confidence, and ownership are also buried and the projects continue to fail to sustain themselves once the capacity and resource bringers leave. Failure is blamed on the same incapacities and people are left worse off than before. This is the grand narrative of the Development Aid Industry.

We must recognize that people have been developing long before the Development Aid came into their lives and will continue to develop long after it leaves. The will to develop is innate, inborn. It is an inside-out and a continuous process. It may not be happening in a healthy or productive way in this or that community and it may be that its potential is blocked or buried by a series of constraints, but it is the only game in town to work with.

Development is already happening and as an outsider I cannot deliver development to anyone or indeed bring change to anyone any more than I can eat for them or cough for them!

In the Letsema Program we support the rural women's groups to bring their leaders together for five day workshops. These are not training sessions but development sessions where the women are encouraged to tell their life stories, to listen to each other, to experiment with asking better questions, to inquire into the power relationships they are caught in, and to build trust and solidarity between them. There is very little teaching, just the odd concept or two, and no fixed curriculum.

The workshop moves as the women suggest, increasingly facilitating themselves and setting the agendas. They are continually encouraged to reflect on themselves, to draw strength, forgiveness, and learning from lives that, without exception, are filled with experiences of hardship, trauma, sacrifice, initiative, and triumph. In a few days they start to look at themselves and each other differently, each a bit taller, their eyes filled with hope and courage and their minds with new ideas.

Do we have the patience and faith to support and let people to find and learn from each other in their own way and time?

Question 3

How do we see and work with power?

Power is held in relationships, whether it is the struggle we have with ourselves to claim our inner power, the power we have over others or the power we hold cooperatively 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.*

It is within each or all of these three levels of relationships that people are free or unfree. If in our view of ourselves we have fear, self-doubt or self-hatred we become inhibited, entrapped, 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 marginalization (and superiority of the other) – the core target of development interventions.

But the word or notion of “power” in many cultures is difficult to work with. In collective cultures power is often veiled and hidden behind seemingly collective processes, where those with power use their influence, experience, and ability to steer decisions in directions they like. To even suggest that there are power differentials and that they constrain development is regarded as disrespectful.

Power does strange things to the best of us. Those of us who do confront power directly often find that the harder we push, the more we struggle, the stronger becomes the resistance to change, the more we bolster the forces we had sought to weaken. Power is paradoxical and can seldom be approached in a straight line. Even non-violent struggles, that bring a moral force to change, have to walk a fine line to avoid becoming threatening in a way that provokes an unwanted backlash.

The corrupt and powerful, who are addicted to power and money, and fearful and dismissive of others, will have to be confronted with the truth of their destructive and self-destructive obsessions and fears, and either persuaded or toppled. Sometimes the powerful undermine themselves, blinded by their egos and often living in hiding or denial of their power, both protected and trapped by their security apparatus. How can we engage them in ways that do not burn down the whole country?

When the powerful are unseated by force, how often is their place taken by people who adopt the same behaviours, using the old regime’s repressive laws and institutions to secure their new regime? Or worse, rival pretenders to the throne rush into the political vacuum and new wars begin. It did not take long for much of the hopeful and unstoppable “Arab Spring” to degenerate into nightmare scenarios.

Clearly there are distinctions to be made. Some good people lose themselves in their new power and can be persuaded away from dysfunctional uses and be helped to change and share. But more often the powerful will only change when confronted by a crisis, a transformative challenge where the *perceived costs* to themselves of holding onto power are greater than the *perceived risks* of letting go. Calculating and

communicating perceived costs and risks may help to weaken the resolve of the dysfunctionally powerful. The fall of the Berlin Wall and Apartheid both happened when a point of sanity, beyond the unsustainable insanity, was reached and the regimes were able to see the writing on the wall.

Sometimes the head follows a change of heart. Sometimes the heart follows a change of the head. In both cases the will to change has still to be transformed. Fear, doubt, hatred.

Some would focus on building alternatives rather than confrontation:

“You never change anything by fighting existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”

R. Buckminster Fuller

But this choice does not always exist and can be naïve in many situations. Modern-day slaves cannot wait for alternatives to their bondage to develop. But as a part of a sustainable approach, developing alternatives can be critical. Facing climate change will require the development of alternatives but these will only flourish as viable investments when the causes of global warming are tackled and made more politically, morally, and financially costly than the powerful can stomach.

Question 4

How do we work with uncertainty?

Most of what is happening inside a change process is invisible not only to outsiders but also to communities themselves. We are all stumbling around in the dark pretending that we can see, imagining that we can find the answers, and desperately trying to create enough certainty to feel safe and in control, to show we are accountable.

So what do we do? First of all we need to recognize that uncertainty cannot be wished away and nor can it be brought under control by more planning. The mind-sets that frame the planning, monitoring and evaluation systems that shape Development Aid Projects usually emphasize control and accountability above learning and adaptation. To get the funding everything needs

to be thought through, activities and budgets agreed upon upfront and monitoring checks put into place to ensure that people do what they have promised to do. A little failure and some learning is tolerated but not too much. Miss enough targets and your funding is cut and you may get fired.

This is a killer problem for two reasons:

Firstly, the tendency is to do the big planning upfront back in the NGO or government offices, following the rules to get the funding, and then to sell the plans to the communities. But this pre-empts and undermines the most critical elements of sustainable development: authentic processes of community initiative, ownership, and the surfacing of vital and hidden resourcefulness. (If communities are recognised as resourceful will the NGOs need to bring so many resources and therefore get as much funding?)

Secondly, the promise and illusion of control and accountability that the logframed, bureaucratic Development Project brings undermines the thoughtful and continual adjusting of practice and plans, based on ongoing experience of success and failure, required to learn our way through complex conditions into an uncertain future.

How can we actually reward honesty about “failure”, and prioritise learning before and above accountability for results? To put accountability higher than learning is a sure-fire recipe for the corruption that plagues so many Development Projects. We know that in uncertain times it is only through honest learning, and the innovation this enables, that sustainable results become possible. This is not a new question and many readers are probably tired of hearing it. And therein lies the real question. Despite our doubts about bureaucratic accountability for results and the need we have for a learning approach, what keeps holding us captive?

We have also boxed our learning processes into dry and lifeless planning, monitoring and evaluation systems, outsourcing our learning evaluations to experts, effectively robbing the stakeholders of the one thing that may enable success: *the ability to learn our way forward through continuous processes of action learning.*

But it would be wrong to simply see learning as a way to better navigate complex change, or something that should occasionally or periodically accompany the work we do to

improve it. In our view learning is far more important than that: *social change is fundamentally a learning and unlearning process best met by a learning practice.* Indeed change, development and learning are virtually indistinguishable.

The challenge is to recognize and work with learning and unlearning in every aspect of a change program, to see in its DNA the spirals of learning that describe the reality of how we actually do learn and unlearn our way into the future.

There are three types of learning to recognize here:

Action Learning. Simply put this involves continual observation and reflection on experience, drawing learnings from those reflections, and building the implications of those learnings into future actions. Most NGOs I know, through their M&E systems try to draw learnings immediately from experience without deep observation and reflection, resulting in shallow and misleading learnings. Action Learning is a nuanced change process that requires a disciplined approach (see *Barefoot Guide to Learning Practices in Organizations and Social Change* - Chapter 12, page 159). This connects strongly to *emergent change* discussed earlier.

Unlearning. Sometimes, in order to move forward, learning does not help because we are constrained by ideas, beliefs, or attitudes that are too close to us to easily let go. Before we can continue to learn our way forward we have to pause to unlearn these things, i.e., how white people see black people, how men see women, how women see themselves. These prejudices have to be unlearned. But usually, unless there is the force or pain of a crisis, people are unwilling to do so. Fear, doubt, and self-doubt, as well as resentment, hatred, or even self-hatred are the predominant factors for this kind of resistance to change. Helping people to surface and face these can be the key work of social change. This connects strongly to *transformative change* discussed earlier.

Horizontal Learning. Since time immemorial people have learnt from each other, informally sharing stories and wisdom, trading innovations and recipes, teaching each other techniques and technologies, neighbour to neighbour, farmer to farmer, parent to child. This horizontal learning

has always been a powerful motor of social change.

If we want to work together collaboratively and fruitfully we have learnt to begin this by learning together, horizontally. The powerful housing and farmers movements of Shack Dwellers International and Via Campesina use horizontal exchanges at the heart of their mobilization and organization. In South Africa, as described above, the Letsema program uses horizontal learning exchanges not only to share innovations but also to build relationships and solidarity. (See also Reeler, 2005, for a fuller elaboration of horizontal learning as change method, approach and strategy).

Through horizontal learning processes, communities can stimulate and support change in each other, with minimal external help, with development spilling from village to village, or even of change catching fire as good ideas and innovations spread widely and generously by word of mouth, as they used to before modern times.

In the Limpopo province a group of 60-odd villages revived a traditional practice of meeting once a year for a seed-sharing festival. This had fallen into disuse since the agricultural industry, ushered in by government extension officers, began showing small farmers the modern way, creating deep and worrying dependencies on corporate-controlled seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. An awareness workshop by a local NGO on the looming dangers of genetically-modified seed finally tipped the scales and provoked the renewal of the old practice.

Now, at a different village each year, the farmers once again send representatives of each village to gather and congregate for several days, each bringing bags of their beans and grains to cook and taste and then to freely share as seed, with advice on how best to plant and grow. And all of this generates the revival of other cultural practices, of songs and dances and stories that express a renewed identity of community and interdependency (Reeler, 2005).

The question that we continue to ask is how can we gather support, including funding, for open-ended horizontal learning practices and approaches that, while they cannot guarantee pre-ordained outcomes, are able to prepare the ground for solidarity and creative collaboration and the authentic outcomes that emerge from these?

Question 5

What social change strategies work best?

In our experience there is seldom one strategy that is sufficient to meet the complex processes of social change. And quite often several consecutive or concurrent strategies are called for. Some of the different strategies are described or implied in the text above, but here I would like to spell them out more clearly: (adapted from Rowson, 2014)

Top-down strategies. Democratically elected governments, legitimately appointed leaders and skilled managers may find call to implement changes from above, particularly those that meet initiatives from below. Universal healthcare, sanitation, education, transport and communication infrastructure, police forces to combat criminality may all be top down initiatives. Of course how they meet the varied needs of communities and at what point they require community engagement from below must be considered, but there are valid aspects of social change that are legitimately and developmentally brought from above.

Bottom-up strategies. Of course sometime change begins from below, where stuck power above cannot move, whether in its own interest or because of external uncertainties. Marginalized and oppressed people must free themselves. Communities cannot wait for a collapsed local government to deliver water before it takes matters into its own hands.

Inside-out strategies. All sustainable change begins as an inward journey. Before people and organisations can free themselves from their oppressors they must free themselves from their own self-identification as powerless victims (and on the other side as controllers, saviours and experts). This is a kind of transformative change, of individuals and communities unlearning what they have held to be true of and seeing themselves with new eyes, before embarking on changing the attitudes and even the laws and practices of society.

Sideways strategies. This is closely connected to horizontal learning, as a powerful motor of change, where people connect across boundaries within and between communities and organisations, perhaps involving some unlearning, to create new communities to face

their problems and take advantage of new possibilities.

Do nothing strategies. Sometimes a situation needs the space and time to sort itself out, for a crisis to ripen, for the will to change to gain sufficient strength. We may need to spend time to simply observe to see if we do have a role and what that role might be. We should not assume that the kind of change that we can support is always needed or possible.

Complex or comprehensive change programmes quite often contain several of these strategies, running concurrently, or the one set of actions paving the way for the next. Horizontal exchanges (sideways strategies) have proven to have surprising success in creating foundations of learning and solidarity for collaborative or co-creative initiatives. Top-down or bottom-up strategies seldom succeed unless they provoke some transformative inside-out change in key actors.

But no planned strategy can account for the full story nor anticipate what will prevail. The complexity of change can only be met by diverse approaches that learn their way into the future.

Question 6

What kinds of organizations and leadership do we need to face the future?

“There are respected and good hearted informal leaders in every village I have seen. They have hopes for peace and for restoring the life of their village. If they recognise the same qualities in the community development workers who befriend the village they will enlist our help. They will begin to show us that there is a way forward despite the problems. If we win their respect we will be invited into their company. The changes that they can support are usually quite different from the changes that may be imposed by the district or the commune or the village leader.”

In this post-modern age the conventional and traditional hierarchical forms of organization and strong leaders, in all walks of life, appear to be less and less appropriate. Although this paper has addressed itself largely to the empowerment and transformation of the marginalised and oppressed,

much the same applies to people and organisations of the powerful, those at the centre, often stuck in their power, and needing to be freed from entrenched notions of their superiority. We are all trapped, wittingly and unwittingly, in this binary of leader and follower, boss and subordinate, oppressor and victim, playing out an old script that needs rewriting.

New organisations need to take account of a massive shift that is taking place in the culture and identity of young people. They are emerging en masse, informed and empowered by education, the TV, and the internet as never before, yet unwilling to meekly follow strong leaders. This has huge implications and challenges for conventional activism where a more politically sussed vanguard have relied on their authority, enabled by a disciplined solidarity in their followers, to manoeuvre and use as a force for change. It seems that young people are simply less willing to be herded around by anyone, more active but less tolerant, *easier to mobilise yet more difficult to organise* than ever before.

How do we work with people who don't want to be organised?

The world is starting to experiment with less controlling, more participative, less hierarchical, self-organising and networked forms of organization. But these are tentative. What is clear is that they are not so easily held together by formal structure and rules but rather by new kinds of relationships, values, understandings and new conversations. Their ability to be agile, to learn, is a determining factor in navigating an uncertain future.

A word on leadership. Leaders are only one form of leadership. Conventionally they are the dominant form. But increasingly, as people demand participation and joint decision-making, it is through conversations, in meetings and workshops, that leadership, *as a process*, is taking place. As this grows the role of leaders becomes more facilitative, paying attention less to the decisions and more to the quality of the learning and creative processes that lead to good decisions.

In the organization I have worked with over the past 18 years the idea of a particular “leader” always felt strange. Indeed for a number of years we had no one who was called “the Director.” People would call us and ask for the Director and the receptionist would reply, “Please hold on, I will see who is in.” Eventually we did designate

a Director because this answer was too disturbing for the outside world. However, leadership is essentially and mostly held in our monthly learning days, when we gather to reflect on the issues and experiences of the month to learn our way forward and to make important strategic decisions. The process is the leader.

How can we re-imagine leadership as intelligent learning processes, in many possible forms, to meet the complex and diverse challenges we face?

Question 7

How can we have conversations that matter?

How different are we from the conversations that we have with ourselves and with each other. In many ways we are conversations. If we were to stop conversing we would find that we would soon stop living. Human conversation, in human relationship, lies at the very heart of the processes of social life.

Good social change happens from good conversations. Almost all change takes place through conversations of one kind or another.

The first conversation is the one that each of us has with ourselves, if we allow it, between the different voices that live in our heads and hearts. We are, each of us, a community of voices. We are social beings, continually influenced by the people with whom we grow up and live. How often do we hear the voice of a parent, a friend or teacher pop up into our heads in response to a situation? We debate and argue with ourselves when faced with a dilemma, using some points of view of two or more of the influential people in our lives. Holding and allowing different voices can be a healthy thing because this working with diversity inside us helps us to prepare for and meet the diversity and complexity of life outside, to prepare for conversations with others. The second conversation is the one each individual has with another or others, engaging to chat, share, confront, resolve the issues of life, bringing the voices of each together. In doing so, and in issues of social change, we may or may not find common ground. But we are also changed by these conversations – we continually learn and unlearn, emerge and transform. To the extent that we do move closer together, we prepare ourselves for the third type of conversation.

The third type of conversation is the one we, as a community, have with others. It might be a group of parents engaging their children's teacher, or a community speaking to their councillor. What this conversation carries is social power and the potential to spark or pave the way for social change. When we speak of a new dialogue it is of conversations that change us, where we change each other and ultimately where we change the world.

As social change practitioners we must pay attention to each of these levels of conversation *as each level prepares people to engage at the next*. Multi-stakeholder conversations are often flawed and disempowering because there is unequal preparation as, typically, communities are pushed into processes with government before they have surfaced their own resourcefulness or resolved their own differences.

In all these conversation that involve change there may be those voices of fear, of doubt, and self-doubt, of resentment or self-hatred, of self-denigration or self-elevation, moving from individual to the group. How these are surfaced and met will determine whether the individual or the group are able to act, to find the will to be part of the change.

Out of the diversity of “voices” we find the richness of conversations, and out of our rich conversations spring the relationships, ideas and impulses for change. We are social beings and it is through our many voices in many conversations that we are most social. How authentic voices are brought, received, engaged with, and supported makes a world of difference to the quality of conversation, to human engagement, and to the contribution we each can make to processes of change.

Nomvula Dlamini (2013)

Concluding thoughts

As we look for better questions and answers in deeper conversations, we have to recognise that in the sheer complexity of being human and working with change, so much remains that is unknown and even more that is unknowable. Relying on experts and their upfront over-planning can no longer meet this reality of change. And so I have argued in this paper for diverse, collaborative, learning-based approaches

to change that can meet the complex and learning-based nature of change. Social transformation can happen in a simple conversation that leads to a change of heart. Or it can take decades of strife and hardship. So much hinges on the human qualities of questioning, observing, reflecting, learning, relating and conversing amongst the diverse roleplayers held by facilitative leadership. Up to a point several of these can be consciously acquired, and a few even taught, but not without the human trust and commitment required to carry and sustain them. How can these less tangible and less malleable qualities be seen, unblocked and cultivated? But we are all still in the thrall of obsessively detailed planning, monitoring, evaluation, and other technical systems and frameworks to manage and control social change, all

instrumental manifestations of our fear of losing control and power. This is perhaps our greatest challenge, to let go, not to leave, but let go of our fears, our need for certain success, for obsessive accountability, for controlled and orderly procedures, and to have more faith in our collective ability to honestly learn observe and our way forward in messy but creative and human processes.

For leaders and practitioners this change process comes from within, an inside-out freeing of ourselves from the constraints to good practice, the fears, doubts and ways of seeing that hold us captive.

How can we learn to see ourselves more clearly and honestly?

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