ANNEX

HOW CHANGE HAPPENS

HOW CHANGE HAPPENS

> There is nothing permanent except change.
>
> HERACLITUS, SIXTH CENTURY BC

In the 1780s some half-a-million African slaves were being worked to death growing sugar cane in British colonies in the West Indies. The idea that slavery was legitimate and 'normal' was deeply entrenched in public consciousness in Britain and the other slaving nations, and it was generally accepted that the British economy could not survive without slavery and the slave trade. 'If you had proposed, in the London of early 1787, to change all of this,' writes the historian Adam Hochschild, 'nine out of ten people would have laughed you off as a crackpot'.[1] Yet by 1807 the British parliament had banned the slave trade, and on 1 August 1838 almost 800,000 slaves throughout the British Empire became free when slavery itself was abolished.

How did such a momentous social change take place? Across the Caribbean, Latin America, and southern USA, a wave of slave rebellions challenged the institution of slavery, achieving their most notable success in the creation of the independent black republic of Haiti in 1804. But slavery was also challenged in the heart of the empire. A coalition of extraordinary and dedicated individuals formed, led by the Anglican deacon Thomas Clarkson and the parliamentarian William Wilberforce. They were backed by the Quakers, a radical religious group, many of whom were influential businessmen. The abolitionists used public

meetings, speaker tours, petitions, posters, and demonstrations in perhaps the first mass campaign that would be recognisable to today's activists. Over the next 250 years, their actions inspired mass movements for women's suffrage and for the right to form a trade union, and for numerous other struggles and campaigns that continue to shape the modern world and the lives and possibilities of its people.

Mass campaigning, however, is only one source of change. Not all change is consciously pursued: the inventors of barbed wire did not foresee that its impact on troop mobility would contribute to the horrors of trench warfare in the First World War. Nor is it achieved only by political activism. New technologies, from lightbulbs to the Internet; the demographic trends of ageing or urbanisation; the boom and bust of the commodity trade; the spread of literacy; and the slow grind of political change, punctuated by the sudden 'tipping points' of war and rebellion, all contribute to Heraclitus's vision of constant upheaval.

Nor is all change positive, of course. History is studded with collapses, pogroms, and disasters, many of which involve the same kinds of actors and dynamics as those changes normally deemed to be progressive. Indeed, the Rwandan genocide of 1994 could be seen as a particularly barbaric version of the combination of active citizens and effective states that so often drives national change. Sometimes what is most notable is the *lack* of change – countries, groups of people, or processes that 'get stuck' while the rest of the world changes around them.

The various actors in the drama can be studied to explain why change is absent as well as present. Change is intimately bound up with power. The many dimensions of power (power over others, power to act, 'power with' in the form of collective organisation, and 'power within' – self-confidence and a sense of legitimacy) determine the nature of the interaction between the different components of change. Power determines who wins, and how: peacefully or not, legally or not, enduringly or not. Achieving change is often about shifting the balance of power between different players, and positive change often involves shifting it in favour of poor people and their organisations.

How change happens is a central issue in almost every field of academic inquiry. Historians debate how National Socialism emerged in Germany. Economists investigate the drivers of economic growth. Sociologists examine the rise of radical Islam. Psychologists discuss the incentive structures that alter human behaviour. Geographers study the role of climate in the rise and fall of civilisations.

It is therefore striking that there is no academic discipline of 'change studies' (the work of Jared Diamond, such as *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997) probably comes closest to the genre). Instead, the development of independent academic disciplines over the past century has resulted in isolation and over-specialisation. Economists, for example, have learned very little from sociologists about human motivation, and generally maintain simplistic assumptions about human nature. Political scientists focus primarily on institutional processes, and rarely draw on the insights of social psychologists about the determinants of individual and group behaviour. Some disciplines have focused on quantitative research, and consider qualitative research to be lacking in rigour and objectivity. Others engage mainly with current, observable phenomena, and do not possess the long view encountered amongst historians. Experts in one discipline frequently find it impossible to penetrate the abstruse language or mathematical formulae contained in the journal articles of another.

The lack of conversations between disciplines has limited our understanding of how change happens. In particular, the 'development world' of government, academics, and NGOs has suffered from an over-reliance on the single and limited prism of orthodox economics to understand the nature and challenges of development, impoverishing its understanding both of real lives and of the processes that lead to change. These failings matter, because achieving positive change (such as pro-poor economic growth or ending discrimination) and preventing negative change (such as conflict or climate change) are central to tackling poverty, inequality, and suffering.

This annex sketches some ideas for improving our understanding of change. These have been used to analyse the various change episodes discussed in this book, notably the eight case studies that illustrate how change actually happens.

THE COMPONENTS OF CHANGE

A change process, whether at national or local level, typically involves a combination of four different components: context, institutions, agents, and events (see Figure 7.1).[2] Disentangling any change process into its components in this way can help to identify the different actors and processes involved:[3]

Context describes the environment within which changes take place. This can be the most important determinant of the nature and direction of change. Context includes:

- Demographic change: urbanisation, migration, ageing, changing family structures, shifts in the ethnic mix, etc.;
- Globalisation: constraints and opportunities arising from integration into the global economy;
- Environment: change in availability of natural resources, climate, etc.;
- Technological change: introduction of new technologies such as the mobile phone or GM crops, and the more slow-moving adaptation and dissemination of existing technologies such as electricity, vaccines, or the internal combustion engine.

Institutions: the organisations and rules (both formal and informal) that establish the 'rules of the game' governing the behaviour of agents. These include:

- Culture, caste, and religion: these to a large extent determine the common perceptions of what is right and wrong, what is socially acceptable, and what is 'normal' in areas such as gender roles, or the acceptability of protest and rebellion. The shifting tides of religious belief in particular are one of the most fundamental drivers of social and political change (as any glance at the evening news will confirm);
- Besides religious belief, the evolution of other ideas and knowledge determines what is seen (by both rulers and ruled) as normal, acceptable, or unacceptable. NGOs and policy makers talk endlessly about 'debates' precisely because, over the long term, such discussions shape the landscape of politics and power;

- Family structures;
- Formal institutions such as the civil service, the rule of law, etc.;
- Government systems: for example democracy, whether inclusionary or exclusionary, autocracy, military rule, etc.;
- The nature of the private sector (small vs large, national vs foreign);
- Patron–client networks.

Agents: organisations and individuals actively involved in promoting or blocking change. Examples include:

- Social movements;
- Political parties;
- Political and business elites, whether for or against;
- Military and police;
- Inspirational leaders;
- Social entrepreneurs.

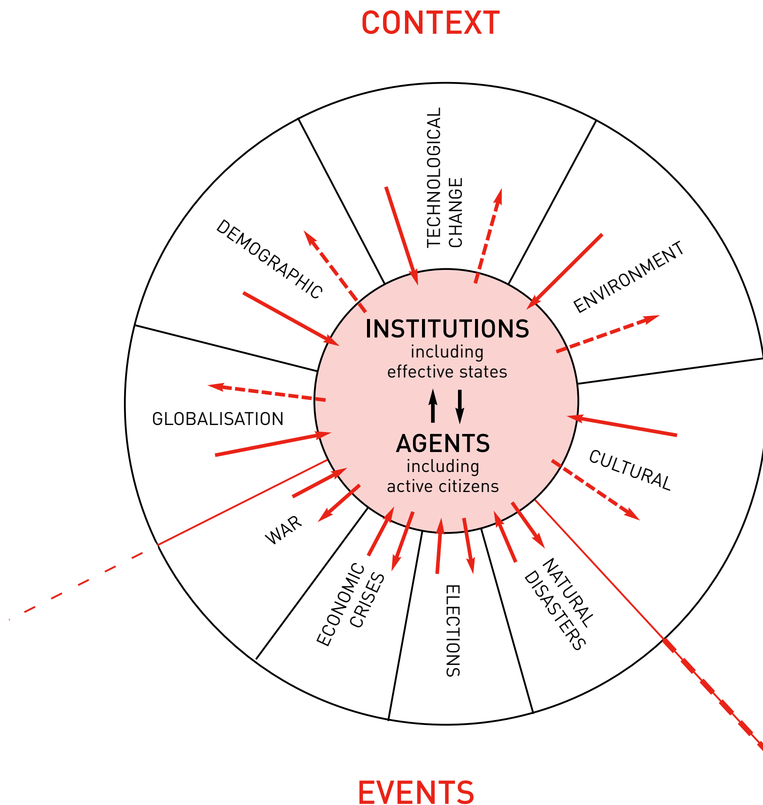
Events: one-off events which trigger wider change, such as wars, pandemics, civil conflict, natural disasters, or economic collapse. Elections and election campaigns are often catalysts for social and political change. At a local level, events such as marches and repression by authorities can be key catalysts to popular organisation.

These categories are inevitably approximate and the boundaries between them are blurred. 'Agents' overlap with 'institutions' when institutions become actively engaged in a change process: the civil service is both an institution and an agent, often being in the driving seat in blocking, or promoting, different kinds of change. Wars are often started deliberately by governments, while revolts and civil wars may stem from armed uprisings by previously excluded groups.

How does this framework link to the underlying theme of this book: that sustainable development requires a combination of active citizenship and an effective, accountable state? In terms of change components, active citizens are agents and an effective state an important institution. As Figure 7.1 shows, these two elements can be seen as an inner circle, surrounded by wider components of change such as context and events, which are less susceptible to political or public action. The dotted arrows between the inner and outer circles show that

institutions and agents have some limited (especially in developing countries) control over these contextual factors, while the solid arrows show that such factors have an immediate and important impact on institutions and agents. Understanding these wider components helps us understand the constraints and possibilities for building active citizenship and an effective, accountable state.

FIGURE 7.1: HOW CHANGE HAPPENS



THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

The components of change combine and interact, creating a complex pathway that involves peaks and troughs of activity and different combinations of context, institutions, agents, and events. Change processes are highly complex and unpredictable, but some of the following dynamics may well be involved:

Cumulative and sequential progress: Much change is slow and, from close up, may appear inconsequential. Over the longer term, however, changes such as the evolving notion of human rights, or attitudes to violence against women, have profound consequences. Moreover, change processes are sequences: one event or shift leads to another, creating a unique 'pathway of change' that is usually very hard to predict, but which can be analysed in hindsight. Often, citizens' organisations interact with states in an iterative fashion, pressing for and responding to reforms.

Chaotic change: Just as in the physics of 'catastrophes', some social and political change is discontinuous, as a series of factors move matters to a sudden 'tipping point'.[4] The process resembles an earthquake – the devastating outcome of an imperceptible build-up in pressure between tectonic plates far below the Earth's surface. The question for would-be 'change agents' is how they can get better at identifying (and influencing) such 'edge of chaos' situations.

More predictable change moments: On the spectrum between long-term, gradual evolution and catastrophic revolution lie foreseeable change moments. These include elections and the deaths of entrenched leaders, as well as processes such as post-conflict reconstruction, which typically offer a much greater likelihood of reform, but also a greater probability that reforms will be reversed and the country will slide back into conflict.[5]

Change often coalesces around inspirational ideas and individuals: Oxfam's programme experience in numerous countries attests to the importance of leadership at all levels. Leaders can give words and direction to broad discontent or to desire for change. Ideas and words can play a similar catalytic role, which is why campaigners and politicians devote such attention to what are often decried as soundbites and slogans.

Organisations often hold the key to shifting the balance of power: Organisation brings safety in numbers and strengthens the ability to influence change. Often the powerful are among the best-organised groups in society – for example, the business associations and political lobby groups set up by large landowners or firms. However, when poor people get organised, as in Tikamgarh (see page 146), they can transform power relations and trigger deep change.

Demonstration effects: At all levels, people's behaviour is powerfully influenced by their points of reference. At a global level, Hollywood exerts a powerful attraction on the minds of most of the world's cinema-goers, while the rise of China has emboldened many developing-country leaders to question the policies espoused by the 'Washington Consensus'. At a local level, change in one community or country often provides a source of inspiration (or alarm) to neighbours.

Change through price signals: Pressures for change are often signalled through changes in prices, which themselves are the result of action by governments and companies and the shifting tides of supply and demand. Such changes can be sudden, as with the jump in oil prices that triggered global economic chaos in the 1970s, or a gradual shift in relative prices that alters the nature of economic activity. Processes such as the response to climate change are likely to take place to a large degree through price signals.

THE POLITICS OF CHANGE

Many change processes require action from those in power. For campaigning organisations such as Oxfam, understanding how such action occurs is crucial in designing strategies to influence decision-makers. A key factor is the degree of pain involved in any given change. Whether a change is easy or difficult determines how much political heat it is likely to generate. A relatively painless change is more likely to be achievable through evidence and argument, whereas a change that seriously harms one group or another is less amenable to argument and more likely to be contentious and possibly violent.

Champions, shifters, and blockers: Most social and political change processes excite support, opposition, and apathy, depending on how they affect different groups and individuals. For any organisation

seeking change, neutralising opponents or winning over the undecided can be just as important as finding champions.

Alliances and coalitions: Most political change is messy, involving building and maintaining coalitions of often-disparate groups, many of whom may disagree on many issues. However, experience suggests that coalitions are often essential to gain the political and social critical mass necessary to effect change. Often the most effective are those that involve sympathetic officials and politicians within the state apparatus and 'experts' willing to challenge received wisdom on a given issue.

Pre-emptive reforms by the powerful: Systemic breakdown and revolution are comparatively rare. If simply blocking change does not work, governments and elites typically hold onto power by making the limited reforms necessary to adjust to the forces of change – be they social, economic, or political – without surrendering power. This is not necessarily a cynical process: genuine reformers within a government can acquire more influence because their proposals are seen to be in the interest of the party as a whole. Such reforms typically concede only part of the changes being demanded by their proponents, placing heavy strains on pro-change coalitions, who often disagree over whether to welcome or reject the reforms.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NGOS AND OTHER CAMPAIGNERS FOR CHANGE

How do the thinking and action of development practitioners such as the World Bank or bilateral aid donors (or NGOs such as Oxfam) match up to this analysis of how change happens? Much current thinking is characterised by a linear model of cause and effect, caricatured by one author as a 'project approach': '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.' [6]

Such an approach may work for specific tasks such as building a school or sinking a well, but it is ill-suited to describing or influencing the kind of chaotic and complex changes that often characterise development.

More broadly, NGOs abhor violence and suffering: indeed, reducing the prevalence of these is one of the main reasons for their existence. But recognising the role of, say, conflict in change need not require endorsing it. If the only change that NGOs can even think about is economic growth without Schumpeter's 'creative destruction' – innovation without risk and change without conflict – then they risk ignoring some of the most important drivers of change. A pale change model that considers only slow and painless progress can end up looking very much like support for the status quo.

Roman Krznaric points to several flaws in development thinking on change:[7]

Excessive reformism without politics or history: Most development thinking is essentially reformist, attempting to work within existing institutions and systems. It therefore ignores the possibility of sudden shifts, and struggles to understand the link between social and political upheaval and change. Development organisations limited to a reformist agenda would have found it difficult to support the African National Congress during apartheid because of its policy of armed struggle; liberation movements in 1980s Central America; or the more than two decades of illegal land occupations by Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement.

This raises difficult questions for our understanding of change. If we eschew violence in all but the most extreme situations, as most NGOs do, we remove from the equation one of the most omnipresent forces of change. Heraclitus believed that 'war is the father of all things'. Modern observers might not be so militaristic, but war is undoubtedly a major source of political and social upheaval, not all of which is negative, as the creation of the European welfare states following the Second World War demonstrates.

Within many development organisations there is often something of a divide, with staff on the ground in different developing countries having a sophisticated grasp of local politics and history (albeit often in their heads rather than on paper). However, this knowledge rarely makes it into the overall thinking of the organisation. One seasoned NGO observer noticed that, almost invariably, serious political discussions with staff around the world took place only in the restaurant or bar after the formal business of the day had ended.[8]

Ignoring the impact of sudden change and 'shocks': Shocks such as wars or natural disasters are perhaps the most powerful forces for change, and yet development organisations largely respond to them solely in terms of humanitarian aid, such as food, water, or shelter. These undoubtedly save lives, but ignore the opportunities for positive change created by such shocks. Major changes (both good and bad) that would normally take decades to happen may occur in the weeks and months after a war, disaster, or political upheaval. How could development practitioners respond more effectively to these 'silver linings' to promote wider systemic change (for example new laws and constitutions, political actors, movements for change)?

Lack of multi-disciplinary agility: Development practitioners tend to look at change through the lens of a single discipline. In 2006, when the World Bank commissioned an external evaluation of its research department, it appointed a group of 20 eminent economists, to the chagrin of the non-economists in its research team. Such disciplinary blinkers also afflict NGOs. This may explain why development advocates have a weakness for magic bullets – whether on the neoliberal wing, (de Soto's work on property rights, discussed on page 71) or on the left (popular participation, social movements).

Underestimating contextual limitations: There are an enormous number of contextual factors that affect change or are an obstacle to it. Development strategies tend to underestimate the importance of such contexts, and hence overestimate the possibilities for successful change. Sometimes advocates of change default to 'If I ruled the world' visions of Utopias, with little analysis of how such visions could be achieved given the existing distribution of power and influence. Such apolitical thinking can be self-defeating, swinging between feelings of omnipotence, frustration, and powerlessness.

Technological literacy: Science and technology are central to development (with both good and bad impacts). Debates on the use of IT, mobile telephony, intellectual property rights, technology transfer, GM, nanotechnology, and a host of other issues are only likely to increase in importance in the coming years. Nevertheless, many NGOs have a serious blind spot on science and technology, either ignoring them altogether or focusing purely on their downsides, as in the case of GM or TRIPS.

Disregarding the environment: Most development strategies fail to situate their approach within a sustainable development paradigm (see page 113). This will have to change to take into account factors such as climate change and the loss of biodiversity.

Overlooking personal relationships and mutual understanding: Development strategies display an overwhelming focus on individual actors, organised social groups, and institutions, with little acknowledgement that societies and institutions are composed of human relationships that are a potential locus of change. There is much greater scope for development organisations to pursue strategies that encourage mutual understanding, empathy, and trust by creating personal relationships between those who have and those who have not, and which contribute to changing the attitudes and beliefs of those in power.

DOES COMPLEXITY INVALIDATE THINKING ABOUT CHANGE?

If all change is unpredictable and complex, if we can never tell which beat of which butterfly's wing will trigger the hurricane, is there any point in trying to analyse unforeseeable events? One possible answer is, 'No': given such complexity, all international NGOs can reasonably do is to show solidarity with poor people and their organisations engaged in unpredictable struggles, accompanying them without trying to foresee the future or 'pick winners'. However, there are several flaws with this argument. First, 'solidarity' itself involves a choice: NGOs select who to work with and who to support as partners on the basis of criteria that involve implicit assumptions about what is important for development and how change happens – for example, 'the best path to change for poor people is through social movements'.

Second, because processes are complex it does not mean that they are entirely unforeseeable; indeed, modern washing machines are designed on the basis of mathematical theories of complexity. What it *does* mean is that a simplistic 'input–output' model of change is never likely to work. NGOs need to be more flexible, nimble, and willing to take risks and to experiment, even if it means failing more often than when 'playing safe'. In his book *The Bottom Billion*, Paul Collier proposes that large aid donors should adopt a 'venture capitalist' model, funding 20 initiatives in the knowledge that most of them will fail, but that in the one or two that succeed the results will outweigh the costs. This could equally well apply to NGOs – although they are unlikely to relish the comparison.

ANNEX: HOW CHANGE HAPPENS

1 A. Hochschild (2005).
2 See also DFID's 'Drivers of Change' work: www.gsdrc.org/go/topic-guides/drivers-of-change
3 There are many alternative frameworks for analysing change in more specialised areas, such as gender (see C. March *et al.* 1999), sustainable livelihoods (see www.livelihoods.org/info/info_guidancesheets.html), or markets. For a summary of frameworks for analysing political context, see R. Nash *et al.* (2006).
4 M. Gladwell (2000).
5 P. Collier (2007).
6 D. Reeler (undated).
7 R. Krznaric (2007).
8 Matthew Lockwood, personal communication.