



Do not depend on the hope of results... you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself.

*The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters* by Thomas Merton, 1993

# Theories of Change

Concentrating on the truth of the work

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He who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may cast.

Leonardo da Vinci<sup>1</sup>

Whenever a theory appears to you as the only possible one, take this as a sign that you have neither understood the theory nor the problem which it was intended to solve.

Karl Popper<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In 2016, after the launch of the *Barefoot Guide 4: Exploring the Real Work of Social Change*, the CDRA convened and facilitated a group of twelve practitioners for six sessions of a “Theories of Change Learning and Study Circle”, supported by KEPA of Finland, at the CDRA Centre in Woodstock, Cape Town. The aims were:

1. To explore and learn from various practices and their theories of change, that come from the participants’ actual practices;
2. To develop various methods of surfacing and “seeing” theories of change;
3. To study a variety of well-known theories to see what light they throw on current practices.

In the process, this group of twelve shared a good variety of social change practice stories, and then as a group we tried to draw out the explicit and implicit theories within and around these. It happened in an open and collegial learning atmosphere and process, peppered with some poetry to balance the cerebral nature of the task and encourage both ethical and creative avenues for conversations.

We explored the struggle of domestic workers to claim homes for themselves and their families in a middle-class suburb of Cape Town, where they have lived and worked their whole lives. We gained insight into the hopes and despair of organised grandmothers facing the onslaught of HIV/AIDS in their township, struggling to keep their initiative relevant in the face of changing treatment and funding. We followed the fortunes of a group of eighty-six prominent elders trying to intervene into a stuck relationship between fed-up township dwellers and the City Council. We were appalled by the attacks on foreigners and intrigued by complexities of the dynamics of xenophobia and the paradoxical, humanising

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<sup>1</sup> The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci, translated by Jean Paul Richter (1888), I - Prolegomena and General Introduction to the Book on Painting

<sup>2</sup> Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* (1972)

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energies it unlocked in multiple stakeholders to both stop and prevent it in future. We heard the stories of a peace witness and mediator in the #FeesMustFall campaign waged by working class university students struggling to afford to study in a system still needing to decolonise its westernised and apartheid cultures and practices. We empathised with community development practitioners, who, as outsiders, are looking for an empowering contribution in complex and complicated environments. We also ‘journeyed’ to the south of Sudan, where a mountainous society of ancient peoples are struggling to protect themselves and thrive, facing a murderous regime intent on denying their existence and stealing their lands.

Around these stories, we asked “what is our practice here, what is the real work?” and the question of “what are the theories and thinking behind what we do?”

This paper does not summarise or distil from the six sessions, but rather uses the experience as an opportunity to draw questions and insights and to further explore and provide comment on the phenomenon of *Theory of Change* that has become quite fashionable in the development world, positing some insights into its value and use.

## Why have theory?

In the last decade or so, some of the social development practitioners and donors we know have moved beyond conventional business-minded Project-based approaches. They have sought conscious theories of change to help them to understand how change happens, and to conceive, test, navigate and adapt their practices through the complex present into the uncertain future. Their intention is that these theories might make more visible and intelligible the deep and misty complexity of change in human society and our ecosystems. Some have even looked more widely than their own fields, embracing related theoretical disciplines of psychology, history, economics, biology, organisation, anthropology, design, media, education, health, theology and many others. They have broken out of siloed disciplines towards more whole systems thinking and theorising, exploring and integrating the observed linkages and interactions (relationships) between various elements that constitute the system. Action learning-based and more open programmes of change have started to replace short-term Projects. Exploring different theories has helped them to consider different kinds of questions and understand unusual connections and possibilities.

Since its inception, the CDRA has encouraged the development of “thinking practitioners”, who see themselves, not as implementers of project plans conceived on spreadsheets in policy-makers’ offices, but as facilitators who support social actors to initiate and actively shape and reshape their own practices of change, using continuous learning cycles of experience and theory.

“We need good theories of social change for building the thinking of all involved in processes of development, as individuals, as communities,

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organisations, social movements and donors. The conventional division in the world today between policy-makers (and their theorising) and practitioners is deeply dysfunctional, leaving the former ungrounded and the latter unthinking. Good concepts help us to grasp what is really happening beneath the surface. In the confusing detail of enormously complex social processes to discover that “simplicity on the other side of complexity”, we need help to see what really matters.

As social development practitioners, we need theory to assist us to ask better questions, more systematically and rigorously, to guide us to understanding and discovering the real work we need to be doing.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, it is not just about having this or that good theory, but rather about the *process of theorising*, and making use of several theories, of continually observing and reflecting on reality and thoughtfully learning and finding fruitful ways forward.

But in the dominant industry of Development Aid, with its plethora of funded projects, *Theory of Change* has become the new and fashionable template to be used for the purposes of planning, control, accounting, and compliance, to shape and then honour funding contracts with donors. NGOs are hurriedly hiring consultants to help them to whip up a *Theory of Change* (one is enough) to explain what they are doing and against which they can report what they have done. A single Theory of two or three pages is sufficient to stay in the game.

Civil society organisations have generally been uncomplaining about this demand from donors for their *Theory of Change*, especially where it comes as the alternative to proposals based on the ubiquitous Logical Framework Analysis (Logframe), with its own unconscious problem-based, cause-and-effect theory of change. Inherited from the business world as a project planning tool, Logframe is oblivious of its own limited assumptions about the nature of social change, seeing it essentially as a problem-solving project. Because of this it has only been helpful in relatively stable or predictable conditions of change, where well-planned projects are more likely to succeed, but destructive in other conditions where complexity and unpredictability confound the best-laid plans.

For some practitioners, a more explicit *Theory of Change* provides an aid to monitoring, for reflecting on developments, helping to see and explain any progress during and after an intervention, where impact is not yet manifest. This is certainly a better alternative to the Logframe practice of ticking off a list of indicators, like a to-do list of changes, but the intention is still more about reporting than learning.

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<sup>3</sup> Doug Reeler, “A Threefold Theory of Social Change” 2007 – [www.cdra.org.za](http://www.cdra.org.za)

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Many *Theory of Change* templates suffer from the same assumption that lies at the heart of Logframe, that a well-enough planned project, guided by a good vision, will deliver the change, no matter the conditions.

Formats and templates for a single *Theory of Change* accompanying donor calls for proposals, put proposal writing back into formulaic boxes that do not differ that much from Logframes. Granted, there is an attempt to be more imaginative, asking for *visions*, imaginative possibilities instead of the boiled-down *problem and solution trees* of Logframes.

But we are not even sure that what donors call *Theory of Change* deserves the name. Duncan Green suggests that:

It might help to distinguish between Theories of Action, which focus much more on whatever intervention is being discussed, and Theories of Change, which unpack how the system is changing (or might change in future) even absent of our intervention.<sup>4</sup>

This is a helpful distinction, but perhaps *Theory of Action* is also too generous a title. Many uses of *Theory of Change*, as written down in proposals, from what we heard in the Learning Circle and what many others have shown us, are attempts to model an approach as a strategic argument to justify funding, rather than as a thoughtful guide to practice. This request for no more than an over-simplified linear strategic argument, cheapens the notion of *theories of change* and creates an illusion that somehow deeper thinking is being done.

Tellingly, *Theory of Change* templates, as prompted by donors, seldom ask for insights into the nature of existing change, how it happens, whether visible or not, with or without intervention. In this there lies an assumption that the kind of change needed is absent and needs to be imported, via a funded intervention. This is perhaps its most fatal assumption because it leads us straight back to the imposed projects of Logframe.

In a review commissioned by Comic Relief in 2011, *Theory of Change* was defined as ‘An ongoing process of reflection to explore change and how it happens – and what that means for the part organisations play in a particular context, sector and/or group of people’.<sup>5</sup> To be fair, some of this reflection does happen in contextual and baseline studies, but the purpose for these is usually to sketch the environment within which change might be brought, seldom recognising what change is already present, however dormant or latent, in that environment.

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<sup>4</sup> Duncan Green, “Where have we got to on Theories of Change? Passing fad or paradigm shift?” 15 April, 2015. Web link: <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/where-have-we-got-to-on-theories-of-change-passing-fad-or-paradigm-shift/>

<sup>5</sup> Cathy James, “Theory of Change Review” A Report commissioned by Comic Relief, 2011.

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Even where there is crisis or stuckness, it is assumed that change must be introduced or stimulated, not recognising that even in the most immovable situation, the flux of social change is still present, but constrained in ways that enable the status quo to be reproduced. This severely limits available options for change, in particular those that come from within, that can be owned and activated by people themselves. The challenge is not just to push for change (if you are active within the system), but to help to lower constraints and unlock the potential of people and living systems to change themselves.

With these limitations and often fatal assumptions, just as Logframe-based planning, monitoring and evaluation has shaped and skewed a whole generation of social change practice, so *Theory of Change* promises (or threatens) to do the same.

## Ways of understanding theory and implications for practice

But perhaps we are rushing ahead here, assuming ourselves that the very notion of theory is commonly understood. The Oxford Dictionary describes “theory” in three ways:<sup>6</sup>

- a. A supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something
- b. A set of principles on which the practice of an activity is based
- c. An idea used to account for a situation or justify a course of action.

Let us explore each of these, in the context of social change, to flesh out the notion:

### *A supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something*

This first description of theory is focused on its explanatory power, as lens through which to see the world, to give insight into how and why social change happens, with or without intervention. As suggested above, before we bring a contribution to social change we need to understand what is already happening, or changing, or stuck. It is into this flux that we intervene. In the Barefoot Guide 4, we described three prominent kinds of change, and change conditions: *emergent*, *transformative* and *projectable*, that need to be read and adapted to.<sup>7</sup> In the Learning Circle, we saw how often we defaulted to project-based plans, with or without pressure from donors, assuming *projectable* conditions, when the conditions were clearly *emergent* or crisis-ridden (*transformative*), where action learning or unlearning based approaches to change were required. We came back to this again and again, challenging ourselves to hold off from unconsciously assuming conditions of change that might not exist, because they best-suited the kinds of interventions that we were used to or had funding for.

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<sup>6</sup><https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/theory>

<sup>7</sup> Barefoot Guide 4: Exploring the Real Work of Social Change  
<http://barefootguidecontent.weebly.com/barefoot-guide-4.html> - pages 24-26

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*A set of principles on which the practice of an activity is based*

The second description of theory focuses on ‘principles’, themselves defined by Oxford Dictionary as “A fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or behaviour or for a chain of reasoning.”<sup>8</sup> Principles, and by extension theories, are thus described as both fundamental truths and as suppositions, upon which we plan our ‘activities’. Since we cannot see and know everything, as noted, we assert and act from what we believe to be true, and thus make suppositions, or assumptions, whether conscious or not, whether tested or not. We have no choice, except to make these more conscious and visible, which theory helps us to do. In the Learning Circle, we constantly explored the question of what is or is not true, what is right and wrong and what it is that really matters.

The reader might imagine that working with theory is fundamentally about scientific method, but inevitably, when discussing social change, conversations about method, when applied to the things that really matter to human beings, inevitably turns philosophical and ethical, when grounded in lived and felt realities. Our insights gained as much through emotional judgement and social conviction as through any cold, hard scientific logic.

This is not to knock scientific method. If anything, it is to extend it.

*An idea used to account for a situation or justify a course of action.*

We have been dilettantes and amateurs  
With some of our greatest notions  
For human betterment.  
We have been like spoiled children:  
We have been like tyrannical children;  
Demanding proof when listening is required.

Ben Okri<sup>9</sup>

This third description of theory speaks most closely to the donors’ need for a *Theory of Change*. Within the politics and power of governments and corporations, establishing the control templates and compliance procedures are typical ways to define and design accountability. Many donors put *Theory of Change* into a new kind of logical framework which sees change as the result of a vision and then an accountable plan to reach that vision, which, as noted above, we have described as ‘Projectable Change’, only sometimes appropriate to existing conditions, but often not in contexts of conflict and suffering. We know from experience that most social change conditions on which change practitioners focus are not predictable or projectable - indeed the aim of many should be to

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<sup>8</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/principle>

<sup>9</sup> Ben Okri, from *Mental Fight – an anti-spell for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* - 1999 by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

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help to create such conditions, through for example, conflict reduction and consensus or agreement-building.

The result of this bias towards projectable conditions of change is that the possibility of working respectfully and thoughtfully with the existing forces of change is discouraged. For example, legitimate anger from injustice that has brewed in a community can actually be a source of energy and creativity if acknowledged and respected, but wishing it away in a technical project plan, can become a source of apathy or even destruction, however logically it tries to solve the problem. Sometimes, if the conditions happen to be *projectable*, the change is successful and this gives justification for the approach, as “best practice”, for more projects whatever the conditions.

## Building theory beyond empiricism

### *Participation and complexity*

In a curious, collective culture, learning can happen amongst all actors, but in hierarchical and competitive cultures learning is often contained in research and development institutions where we find academically trained people who do research on behalf of others, “objectively” at a distance. This separation is reproduced in the M&E systems of the Development Industry, where specialist M&E personnel collect stories and statistics to repost to donors, where inquiry is separated from action, and where learning is geared towards enabling better compliance rather than better practice. Thus, practice is robbed of the most essential need it has: for participatory learning into the future. The complexity of social change requires participation, not only because people have the right to be central to their own change process but also for their substantial and critical inputs to offer along the way.

In many of the most successful conscious programmes or interventions we have come across it has been the participative horizontal learning processes, like community-to-community exchanges and farmer-to-farmer visits, that have provided the key ingredient of change.<sup>10</sup> Practice, then, is not just about the doing but also the learning and theorising of all actors.

The development industry has become somewhat imprisoned in processes that defines key actors as passive beneficiaries, and then excludes them from the processes where their input and learning is most vital. This is hardly surprising when you consider the consequences of including beneficiaries as drivers of their own development, as planners, resource controllers, leaders, evaluators, decision-makers. What might happen to compliance then?

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<sup>10</sup> Doug Reeler, 2005, “Horizontal Learning – Engaging Freedom’s Possibilities”  
<https://goo.gl/PrKvzX>

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## *Principles of life, values and principles of action*

Inevitably our conversations turned to discussing *values and principles*, both trying to see which were at play behind an initiative and which could guide future work. It seemed to us that these lie close to the heart of any theory of change, though we often struggled to pin down exactly how.

We argued about what *principles* and *values* actually mean, making some headway with *values*, but it still felt unresolved. Subsequently, we have explored the notions and made some interesting progress, especially in unpacking *principles*, realising that the term is used, loosely, in different ways:

***Principles of life***: this refers to those *observed fundamental truths or tendencies* that describe how life works or how people or societies change, somewhat regardless of culture (though they may be shaped, emphasised or denied by culture). For example, “people learn from their own experience” or “organisations tend to move through distinct phases of development, with crises between them (i.e. pioneering, rational, integrated etc. phases).”

We observe *principles of life* as a truth, whether or not we choose to pay attention to it or give it value. (These can hardly be described as whole theories, though, referring to the Oxford Dictionary definitions above, it may well be that *sets* of these do.)

***Values***: being those qualities of being human that we find worthwhile and by which we choose to live, whether perceived positively or negatively, whether conscious or not. Connecting to the example of a *principle of life* we could assert a *value* that “we value the experience that the community has to shape their own knowledge and actions”.

We may consciously value “kindness” or “generosity” but unconsciously value “selfishness” or “competitive” behaviour. Values often exist in polarity with each other. For example, we may value “transparency” but sometimes find ourselves in a situation where “confidentiality” is more important.

In our work with organisations we have found that it pays to focus attention, not on all the dozens of values we wish to live and work by, but on those *working values* that are particularly important to the context, issue or situations we work with or those that we are struggling to live by.

***Principles of action***: unlike *principle of life* which are given to us, *principles of action* are chosen to guide our doing. So, as stated above we may recognise that people learn from their experience, then we may choose to *value* that experience, and so a *principle of action* might be that “we encourage initiatives, as a rule, to be rooted in the experience and knowledge of the community”. Thus, *principles of action* are the rules by which we live or practice, that come out of our *values*, that are true to the reality of the observed *principles of life*.

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It should be easy to see that all three of these do and should live strongly at the core of both theories of change and action.

*Theory and imagination:*

I'm enough of an artist to draw freely on my imagination, which I think is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.

Albert Einstein<sup>11</sup>

We might think that theory is about science and calculation, arriving at logical argument, based on the valid evidence at hand. But in human change processes the evidence at hand is seldom clearly visible, let alone measurable or scientifically valid. Yet it is there, we feel it and “see” it and make assumptions about it. And we use it. We can only calculate our way into the future so far. When we work with a community organisation we may sense that the will and courage are there to bring a demand to the authorities. We may find ways of testing the will, perhaps through questions, and the responses we get we can interpret one way or another, itself an act of calculation and imagination, of creative insight.

Each of the three definitions of theory from Oxford Dictionary, above, contains the thought that theory interprets and extrapolates understanding, out of what little is known, imagining what is not known or predictable, supporting thinking into the future.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke expressed the power of creative insight thus:

If I were to tell you where my greatest feeling, my universal feeling, the bliss of my earthly existence has been, I would have to confess: it has always, here and there, been in this kind of in-seeing, in the indescribably swift, deep, timeless moments of this divine in-seeing into the heart of things.<sup>12</sup>

Scientists help us to better see the evidence that is visible, while artists help us to see and appreciate what cannot be measured. Theories are the result of both scientific analysis and creative insight. We appear to have scientific method, but do we cultivate creative insight in the practitioner as social change artist?

The poetry we read at the beginning of each Learning Circle session infused our conversations and theoretical musings with some of that “divine in-seeing into the heart of things.”

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<sup>11</sup> From an interview with the poet and journalist George Sylvester Viereck, Berlin, 1929. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/is-imagination-more-important-than-knowledge-einstein/172613.article>

<sup>12</sup> quoted in "Gissing: A Life in Books" by John Halperin (Oxford University).

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### *Consciousness and humanity:*

It was surprising how often the conversations in the Learning Circle turned towards reflecting on questions of humanity and the struggles we have to be human. For some this was almost a spiritual question and for others a call to their better selves, and no less sacred. We discussed *consciousness*, sometimes as a transformative force and sometimes as a block or constrainer of change. We discovered that there are many layers between consciousness and unconsciousness.

One window into consciousness, that we came back to again and again, is that we are *thinking, feeling* and *willing* beings, both consciously and unconsciously, known as the *Threefold Human Being*<sup>13</sup>. At the *thinking level*, we have thoughts, ideas, intuitions, spiritual insight, assumptions. The *feeling level* is where we most directly experience what happens to us or to others, as empathetic beings, and this colours our thinking and will. Without feelings, we have no humanity. Through the feeling lens we make judgements from which to act. As *willing* beings, we act out of what we want, shaped and affected by our thinking, assumptions and our feelings. Or we may not act, our will blocked by fear, doubt and hatred, even self-doubt and self-hatred.

Being conscious of ourselves as multidimensional beings, makes the mechanisms informing the choices that we make more apparent, and therefore such awareness empowers us within the change processes that we might be involved in.<sup>14</sup> Consciousness is power. Disempowered people are often unsure what they think and doubtful of themselves, unaware of their assumptions, disconnected from their feelings, or beset with emotional pain, frequently traumatised and unsure of where their will lies, what they want, or wanting what someone else wants.

Being conscious of our humanity is foundational for any understanding of our history or our future and the possibility of working together.

### *Theory: models or archetypes:*

“With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. They need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of cunning development programs.”

Amartya Sen<sup>15</sup>

We are beset by models as the basis for “cunning development programmes” that try to impose an external template on change rather than work with inherent forces. Models, or the process of modelling, typically predefines what the change

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<sup>13</sup> Though further developed by Rudolf Steiner, this is an ancient archetype with many variations.

<sup>14</sup> Meghan Krenzer – comment by email – March 2017

<sup>15</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as freedom*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999

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process will or should look like and imagines that changes can be delivered, as a service.

Using *archetypal notions of theory*, as a basis for practice, works in reverse. An archetype is a real, though less visible pattern of behaviour, a natural development process, or a cycle that human systems undergo, inherently. They are the tectonic plates of social change. Human beings, despite their diversity and with cultural variances, are subject to many of the same forces and cycles of nature and of human nature. For example, the seasons of life-cycles, the phases and crises development (in nature, individuals and organisations), the typical stages of grief, the polarities of human temperament (like that described by Carl Jung) etc. In some ways, these are locked into our human and earth's DNA and we remain subject to their forces, though not necessarily at their mercy.

Many of these archetypes help us to explain how change happens, differently in different contexts, to be sure, but with recognisable pattern that can help us to anticipate where we might helpfully work.

The Threefold Human Being archetype described earlier provides great insight, particularly through helpful questions, in exploring holistic change approaches at both individual and organisational levels.<sup>16</sup>

Consider this archetypal theorisation: In relationships and human development we observe the process of moving from *dependence* to *independence* and then to *interdependence*, each shift prompted by a developmental crisis. This applies variously to individuals, from childhood to teenagerhood to adulthood, and to organisations moving from pioneering to more rational and then to more integrated forms. Humankind was for most of its history at the mercy of natural conditions, the weather, wild animals, disease etc., utterly *dependent* on nature for survival. Then we began to develop some *independence* from nature, largely through technology, with weapons, irrigation, seed cultivation, and through advances in organisation, catapulting us into the Anthropocene epoch<sup>17</sup>. But this has now reached a new crisis point, a disjuncture between what we want and what is possible, to the point that only a more conscious, *interdependent* relationship with the natural environment will save human society.

And it is *consciousness* that changes the game here. This is where an ecological theory of change<sup>18</sup>, as archetype, enables a more deliberate and considered practice of meeting change and guiding it more in directions of our own choosing. We cannot impose change on nature but only work with it. In other words, through conscious insight and learning, we not only can anticipate the effects

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<sup>16</sup> See Barefoot Guide to Working with Organisations and Social Change, pages 29 to 32. <http://barefootguidecontent.weebly.com/barefoot-guide-1.html>

<sup>17</sup> The current geological age, where human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

<sup>18</sup> James Taylor– comment by email – March 2017

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these forces may have on our lives and ecosystems, but we can work with them to shape change in the directions we have some choice over.

And this is the point, to have more awareness of the choices we have, through observing and anticipating how life and nature works and what they bring. This may sound like a passive approach to those who would more impatiently force the pace of change to respond to the urgent needs out there. Geo-engineering the atmosphere to stall climate change, comes to mind. Where more stable, predictable or projectable conditions apply there is no problem, but where complex emergent or transformative conditions are present then a more responsive approach, guided by archetypal theory, is not only less risky but more likely to support fruitful ways forward.

## Theory and impact

We are beset with muscular words like *impact* (like a metallic stamp) or business-like terms like *results*, which describe nothing more or less than the *purposes* we set out to achieve. *Where are we on our way to achieving our purpose and what are we learning?* is a far more helpful question than *what impact or results can we measure?*

Even the word *measure* treats change as one or another physical thing against which you can put a ruler, rather than a complex set of relationships, held in dynamic balances that simply cannot be described in numbers or as ticked off lists of indicators or results.

But even if we stick with the word *impact*, the challenge is to try to understand it as it emerges (or dies), not just to blithely measure it as an end in itself. Good theory supports us in our challenge to interpret the limited evidence we can gather to gauge any likely emerging impact, even helping us to peer down the line with some helpful anticipation. From that interpretation, we may improve or shift our practice, or even shift our purpose as new realities show us now what *might* be possible or not.

Again, it's a humble learning process. Indeed, change is intrinsically a learning and unlearning process and so it makes sense to embed our change method in these.

How can theory help us to tie together what little we know into a change narrative of better learning from the past, engaging with the present and then planning, or better preparing ourselves, into future?

## Some final thoughts

We already know that we must become better at learning, even researching, our way forward together, but this can only happen if we put aside proper time and resources to widely share and reflect on our experiences, across sectors.

Yet still we compete, donor against donor, NGO against NGO, vying for funding and political attention. Imagine if, as donors and partners, we could pool our

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efforts, time and resources to research and learn together, concerned more about the quality of our collective learning and practice than whose next funding grant will be approved and whose will not.

But do we have time? Well, we can only have as much time, relatively speaking, as woodcutters have to sharpen their saws. Any less time invested than is needed means that more time is wasted later by trying to work with a blunt instrument.

If we were donors, this might be the one thing that we would make doubly sure we adequately resource and insist upon. But such resources are either frittered away in dry, lifeless and pointless attempts at M&E or they are the least resourced and least insisted upon line item in the budget.

What is more difficult is to let go of the obsessive need, in the name of accountability and *results-based management*, to control and comply with theoretically suspect contracts and plans that must themselves be adapted to the complexity of change. It may seem risky to let go of control that is based on systems of compliance, on signed contracts and the fear of funding not being renewed. But that control is illusory and defeats the very purposes it is designed to protect.

We have tried the business-like, logframed-based way and it has failed. We worry that *Theory of Change* is not much better in its current use, particularly because little seems to have changed in the hierarchy of relationships between “donor”, “partner” and “beneficiary”. These are still, more often than not “cunning development programs” for passive recipients, participating in processes that they do not own.

Having said this, and based on the experience of those who have chosen to break from convention, we hold hope, as Merton exhorts us, in concentrating on “the truth of the work itself” and that with learning and imagination we can, as true partners, meet our shared, complex realities to navigate our ways creatively into the future.