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## organizational change issue

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## Choices and Consequences

### The lessons of organizational change

By Anne Buchanan



Change is a constant of life. This is as true in organizations as it is in any other aspect of life. Change itself is not constant, however. Although it is always taking place, there are periods when change is more visible and more intense.

How we deal with change also is not a constant. There are many different choices that organizations can make when faced with the need for change. What choices are wise? What will be the long-term consequences of choosing a particular path? How do organizations decide what to do?

The past decade has been a period of intense change for civil society organizations (CSOs) in the international cooperation sector. In the mid-1990s, the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) coordinated a two-year process in which member organizations shared experiences and learned together about managing change in the sector. This process culminated in the publication of a book entitled *Grabbing the Tiger by the Tail*. Around the same time, in 1995, reductions in the budget of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) led to significant cuts in funding to individual organizations. These events underscored for leaders of international development CSOs

that their organizations would have to change and adapt, and that the choices they made would be critical.

Ten years later, it seems appropriate to take stock and reflect on the choices and changes that were made, and what these mean for the future.

#### The broader context of change

International development CSOs seek to be agents of social change. As a result of their efforts to encourage change, they continually face the need to reflect on their roles and responsibilities. As the external context changes, so too must organizations.

A decade ago, when the "Tiger" processes took place, pressures were already being felt to transform traditional relationships between Northern and Southern CSOs into equitable partnerships. As Southern CSOs strengthened their capacity and assumed leadership roles in



Photo: Maia Seaden

A Make Poverty History banner on a bridge in Ottawa. The Make Poverty History campaign is one example of the new ways in which international development CSOs are working together for social change.

the development process, they were increasingly challenging their Northern partners to play roles of accompaniment rather than program implementation.

Northern CSOs were coming to understand that their role in the social change process included engaging in policy development, targeting the systems and structures that create and reinforce poverty. However, as program implementers, organizations were confronted with the reality that they were structured and staffed for field work and donor relations rather than for creating the knowledge required for policy impact.

There were other areas where it was clear change was needed. CCIC members had always appreciated how important it was that the Canadian public understand international issues and support the need for social change. However, it was

becoming clear that the “conversion” approach – seeking to convert others to a new view of the world by imparting information – had not been very effective in creating strong public support for sustainable development. New approaches were necessary that would engage people as active players in the social change process, and encourage involvement from a diversity of demographic groups.

These and many other pressures for change have continued over the last decade. In the last few years, global concerns about terrorism have added another major element to the mix. Anti-terrorism legislation has created an extra layer of scrutiny for charitable organizations, raising the spectre of a “chill effect” on the advocacy and development work of individual organizations and on relationships with Southern partners.

**Editor:** Katia Gianneschi

**Co-editor:** Ann Simpson

**Editorial board:** Brian Tomlinson and Anne Buchanan

**Translation:** Marie-Claude Morazain

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Canadian Council for International Co-operation  
1 Nicholas Street, Suite 300, Ottawa, ON K1N 7B7, Canada  
Tel: (613) 241-7007 Fax: (613) 241-5302 e-mail: katiag@ccic.ca  
www.ccic.ca

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International policy dialogue is increasingly sophisticated. At times CSOs are invited to participate in development discourse, but at other times their legitimacy is challenged. Many organizations are still struggling with how to convert on-the-ground observations and experiences into policy-relevant knowledge, and how to intervene effectively in policy development processes.

### Resilience and creativity

In the face of new realities and pressures for change, CCIC members have revealed their resilience, innovating and renewing themselves in various ways. Organizations that previously considered themselves to be in competition, or to have very different goals, have created joint ventures and new models of partnership. Some organizations have “localized” operational work so that it is now carried out by Southern partners. Administrative tasks have been streamlined. Revenue diversification efforts have lessened dependence on government funding for some organizations.

The CCIC Code of Ethics was created to improve ethical practice and address accountability issues through a peer process, and continues to evolve in response to new expectations. Organizations have adopted new models of leadership and new governance structures. Organizational cultures have begun to change to be more respectful of differences such as gender.

Some organizations have become more active as policy influencers, and a number have joined together in regional and thematic policy working groups. During the past three years, a variety of CCIC members have participated in learning processes to build knowledge and capacity for policy influence. CCIC members also responded quickly to Canada’s anti-terrorism legislation by joining with other concerned groups to monitor the impact of the legislation and raise civil liberties concerns.

Lower revenues have forced some organizational leaders to make hard choices – to lay off staff, close programs and regional offices, and reduce funding to Southern partners, or to try to find ways to generate new resources. The search for new resources has raised some concerns that organizational missions and priorities may be adjusted to satisfy the interests of new donors who are willing to supply resources only for targeted issues and programs. Many CSOs continue to grapple with the tension between being “social actors”

with a mission of long-term change, and responding to market forces that emphasize competition for funding and value short-term “results”. This struggle continues to play itself out in choices about Board membership, staffing, organizational priorities, fundraising and organizational “branding”.

### Hindrances to change remain

Even as organizations seek to adapt and innovate, many still face internal hindrances to change. Over the last decade, CCIC members have gathered together in training sessions, learning circles, workshops and dialogues for various initiatives aimed at developing capacity in such areas as public engagement, ethical practice and policy influence. Repeatedly, similar challenges to successful organizational change have been shared in these sessions.

Program staff within organizations report being burdened with cumbersome administrative reporting requirements that do not leave them adequate time to carry out their program activities, research new approaches, innovate, or fully develop partner relationships. Fundraisers and program staff describe how they work in isolation, rarely having the opportunity to share their experiences and expertise with each other, either within their own organizations or with peers elsewhere.

Some CCIC members have expressed concerns that governance structures are out of synch with today’s realities and that Board members either do not value, or are nervous about, increased policy roles for organizations. As a result, many organizational budgets continue to give priority to program activities overseas, with any policy or advocacy roles being add-ons to existing job descriptions.



Participants at a December 2003 CCIC workshop on Building Knowledge in Partnership for Policy Influence. Canadian international development CSOs are increasingly seeking to improve their ability to participate in policy processes and work with Southern partners to press for policy changes.

Staff in many organizations note that too little space is provided for collaborative reflection and learning. Although learning does take place on an individual basis, it is those who learn quickly, "by doing", who benefit. Those who need time to reflect are left frustrated. There is often little consistency around which staff members are sent to learning sessions, so continuity of learning is hampered.

Concerns have also been expressed about external hindrances to change. For example, it is noted that funders' rhetoric about innovation and the importance of becoming learning organizations is in conflict with their pressure for measurable results and low tolerance for risk. Little funding is provided to put in place structures and processes for learning, and there is little room for experimentation. Funders' program frameworks do not necessarily recognize new roles for civil society organizations in policy advocacy and public engagement. Such recognition would encourage organizations to shift the emphasis of their work.

### Looking to the future

Overcoming these hindrances and encouraging positive organizational change will continue to require concerted effort, both within individual organizations and in the sector as a whole. CCIC is working with its members to tackle these questions and encourage collaborative approaches to organizational change issues in the international cooperation sector.

While many of these issues can be addressed by individual organizations, and through joint efforts of the sector, some will require broader changes. CSOs do not operate in a vacuum. The policies and actions of governments and funders have a significant impact on how quickly and effectively organizations and the sector can change. CSOs may recognize that they need to shift focus from service delivery to accompaniment, policy advocacy and public engagement, but if funders continue to see them primarily as subcontracted aid deliverers, change will be more difficult. CCIC continues to raise this issue and to seek recognition of the changing roles of civil society in the development process.

Some of the organizational issues facing CCIC members are common to the broader voluntary sector in Canada. CCIC has

worked through the Voluntary Sector Initiative, a joint undertaking of the federal government and Canada's voluntary sector, to encourage recognition of the importance of learning, policy capacity and collaboration in voluntary sector organizations.

Clearly, this is a pivotal time for international development CSOs. There is much that organizations can learn from one another, and much to be done to enhance our collective ability to thrive in a complex environment. Organizational development is not an obscure subspecialty, of interest only to academics or experts. We all have an interest in helping CSOs develop and change so that they can be as effective as possible in the fight against global poverty.

*Anne Buchanan is Coordinator of Organizational Development for CCIC.*

Throughout the next year, CCIC will be providing various opportunities to its members to share their experiences of organizational change, and to reflect on what these experiences may mean for the future. This issue of *Au Courant* is a launching point for this process of learning on organizational change.

Over the coming months, CCIC members will have opportunities to hear about and learn from the many specific examples of organizational change within the CCIC membership. An organizational development peer learning group, composed of people responsible for change in member organizations, is coming together in a process to build knowledge about good practices in organizational change, learning and capacity development. As well, CCIC members are being broadly invited to tell their stories of change in various ways, including case studies. The various threads of learning and experience with organizational change will be woven together in a conference to be held in conjunction with the May 2006 Annual General Meeting.

## Currents of Change

“Organizational change”. The term sounds so abstract, so general, that our thinking about it can risk becoming generic and divorced from reality. In fact, organizational change is anything but abstract. Few things are edgier or more vital than real organizational change.

Major change is a bit like whitewater canoeing. When you are in the most intense part of it, struggling to avoid the sharp rocks, it can be difficult to see the overall picture. It helps to have a mental map or model that gives you a sense of where the river is going and where you hope to end up. It helps if you recognize the complexities of currents and can tap the energy of the turmoil to make progress. It also helps if you mitigate the risks by not canoeing alone.

One of the strengths of the development cooperation sector is that we need not canoe alone. Collaboration and cooperation are inherent strengths of the sector. Individual organizations do not need to struggle entirely on their own with difficult issues of change.

Development is fundamentally about encouraging change in complex social, political and economic systems. The process of working for this change requires building bridges and alliances, relationships and connections. There is thus a natural habit of collaboration in the sector that can be very beneficial as organizations engage in change themselves.

There is a strength that comes from working together that transcends our strength as individual organizations. The International Campaign to Ban Land Mines, for example, brought about change that none of the participating organizations could possibly have accomplished alone. This year, the Make Poverty History campaign has had an impact on public discourse far beyond what any development cooperation organization could achieve on its own.

It stands to reason, then, that collaboration can also be an important foundation for organizational change in the sector. Indeed, there are indications of this, as in the area of policy capacity development.

Northern civil society organizations are under pressure from partners and others to build capacity for policy accompaniment and advocacy. For individual organizations, it is not always easy to embark on a change process to build this capacity. There are very real concerns about the risks of such activity and the resources it requires.

Organizations have found creative ways to mitigate the risks through collaboration. By developing joint policy groups (such as Africa Canada Forum, Food Security Policy Group etc.), they have found ways to share modest resources and collaborate to have greater impact. Over time, as they participate in these collaborative efforts, organizations also strengthen their own internal policy expertise. Staff members bring back knowledge and experience from the joint effort, and leaders and Boards can start to see the benefits of this new type of work. The external successes of the collaborative effort begin to bolster the case for internal change, and provide a measure of comfort with what is involved.

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In a way, these collaborative structures can be seen as precursors or stepping stones to change that will take place closer to home, in individual organizations. They are signals of the community's tacit recognition of the need for change. Similarly, other kinds of collaborative effort (such as mergers, joint approaches to funders, etc.) provide ways for organizations to address the need for change while reducing the associated risks.

Looking at the various networks and coalitions that have been developed, it is possible to see how the development cooperation community is tracking to change. There are valuable lessons to be drawn from these experiences, through communities of practice, horizontal learning sessions and other means. Policy is one area where there is clearly collective experience with change, but the same approach could be applied to other areas, such as public engagement, fundraising and communications.

One of the lessons from complexity theory is that there is no such thing as an organizational steady state. Organizations are engaged in change all the time, whether they acknowledge it or not. There are always currents, even in calm waters. The key thing is to secure the kind of change we want – to make our organizations and projects the instruments of positive social change that we want them to be.



Gerry Barr  
President-CEO

## New Horizons in Organizational Development

By Kate McLaren and David Kelleher

In the early 1990s, CCIC launched *Grabbing the Tiger by the Tail*, a series of organizational change workshops with member agencies. In 1996, CCIC published a book of the same name that grew out of the workshops. What has changed in the organizational development field since then? What are the implications for civil society organizations (CSOs)? The authors of *Grabbing the Tiger by the Tail* recently got together to reflect on where the field is heading.

### New "big ideas" have emerged

Since we wrote *Grabbing the Tiger by the Tail*, two large concepts about organizations have come forward more strongly, although neither is a new idea. Taken together, they are powerful lenses for understanding how human systems work and evolve.

One "big idea" is that organizations behave like "complex adaptive systems", constantly evolving in sometimes unpredictable ways in response to multiple and continuing external demands.

The other "big idea" concerns the importance of a more holistic appreciation of knowledge and research (scientific, spiritual, artistic etc.), in order to better understand how things work and how they can be changed or transformed. This can be called an "integral" approach.

Does either of these concepts matter to international development CSOs? We think they both do. The concepts sharpen our ability to understand the dynamics and environment in which organizations work today. They point to techniques, practices and approaches that have greater potential to reshape organizational life, culture and work.

### What is a complex adaptive system?

The notion that organizations are "complex" is hardly new. In the past two decades, however, ideas from the life sciences have found a place in thinking about social systems and how these systems respond to greater levels of complexity in the world.

Over time, all systems tend either towards greater complexity, or towards disorder and collapse. There is no such thing as an enduring steady state.

In a complex system, growing numbers of independent variables interact with each other in unpredictable ways, with increasing frequency. In human terms, a complex adaptive system (CAS) is comprised of individuals who have the freedom to act in ways that are not always totally predictable, and whose actions are interconnected. One

person's action changes the context for other people. Thus all actions matter, whether they are planned or unplanned, visible or hidden.

Due to the many levels and forms of interaction, the behaviour of the system is not routine or fully predictable. Change is not easily controlled. Small events somewhere can have a major and unanticipated effect somewhere else. (Think of the turbulence that a rumour can create in your organization, and the energy required to respond.)

A good example of a CAS is the stock market. Affected by many variables, studied intently, it behaves in broadly predictable ways, but its day-to-day and even year-to-year movement is a matter of dispute among sophisticated observers.

### Implications

All human groupings are complex adaptive systems. Here are four CAS principles that have implications for CSO leaders.

- *Live with Dynamic Instability*: A CAS is stable and chaotic at the same time, and great creativity and energy reside at the "edge" between stability and chaos. In turbulent times, CAS theory directs organizational leaders to support high levels of interaction among participants and members, across departments and functions, up and down the hierarchy. This approach contrasts with traditional models of planning and systems change that visualize orderly processes with relatively predictable outcomes.

Complex patterns differ from complicated patterns. Complicated patterns are intricate in the number of parts, some of which are hidden. To understand a complicated system, the parts must be separated and the relationships clearly defined. In a complex pattern, the parts are woven into an intricate whole, and each part is entangled with others. The emergent pattern cannot be seen if the components are separated.

- *Emphasize the Whole*: Think about how an action might affect the whole organizational system. Create opportunities for participation from “the whole”, including informal networks. Remember that many small changes will add up over time until the system reaches a major choice point. The change that results may not be what was originally intended or planned.
- *Self-Organization*: All living systems will self-organize over time, in a process that is not steered from a central point. Self-organizing is happening constantly, through multiple networks of relationships inside and outside an organization. Try to bring self-organizing into a change process and work with it, not against it. As not all self-organizing is positive, it is important to set reasonable boundaries around this activity (such as general purpose, behavioural or ethical norms etc.)
- *Continuous Energy Transformation*: Living systems are diverse, not homogenous. They evolve through constant experimentation, tension, confrontation and excitement. New ideas, different perspectives and mental models are the muscle of organizational change. Welcome new energy from the outside. Look at changing internal processes that cause a loss of energy in your organization.

CSOs need to dance with both chaos and order. In the past, the ideal manager was someone who ran a trouble-free

organization and met his or her planned objectives. Today, managers need to live with, and at times encourage, dynamic instability. This does not mean being out of control or just waiting to see what happens. It means setting a container (helpful boundaries) within which new relationships can develop, experiments happen, and outcomes emerge from the process itself. This approach can help international CSOs respond to the kind of global environment they now face.

### An integral approach

“Integral” can be defined as inclusive, balanced and comprehensive. An integral approach includes and transcends any single method of inquiry to create a comprehensive map of human capacities. This map includes both individual and collective realms, different ideas about evolution or change over time (for example, from psychology or social theory), different lines of development (such as moral, physical or cognitive development), and different ways of knowing (forms of consciousness).

As shown in the diagram of The Integral Framework (page 8), organizations encompass and are affected by internal (individual and collective) dimensions and external (individual and collective) dimensions. All these dimensions of reality are present at all times. We need to include them and work with them. Traditional systems theory, with its analysis of

### Complexity and evaluation

A complexity lens is especially apt for evaluating programs with broad social objectives that are affected by factors beyond one’s control. Standard forms of measurement may not tell us much about what is changing, or why. Using a complexity lens, we might pose questions like the following: Where is energy building or dissipating? Where are the feedback loops – tight and loose? What are the communication and information patterns and flows? What can we learn from differences within and between groups?

A recent impact evaluation of a Canadian advocacy coalition with international networks gathered different perspectives on some of these questions. The evaluators and the funder knew that it was not possible to demonstrate a direct causal link between an action and an outcome because there were many other variables in play. Participants in the evaluation were asked to tell the stories of their experiences with the

coalition’s work in four different areas. The stories formed a powerful base of information and understanding about how some things worked within the complex system.

A recent study of CSOs in Pakistan found that organizations that were changing in response to challenges had a high degree of “openness to disturbance”. Staff were empowered to bring new ideas to the table. Boards held the organizations to a high standard. The organizations were accountable to various constituencies, and their executives were open to change and new ideas. At the same time, these organizations had “capacity for resolution”. They had ways of working with complexity and allowing the organization to find a new balance point. This resolution came from being good at knowledge creation (research studies, multi-stakeholder meetings) and decision-making (shared values, capable boards, participative structures and clear decision rules).

## Complexity and difference

CSOs have begun to realize that diversity within organizations is required in order to understand and respond to complexity in the world. Diversity is a key source of growth and adaptability. It is also one of the most profound challenges to how organizations work.

Attracting and keeping a diverse organizational membership (in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality etc.) is only the

first challenge. Although a diverse group of people may agree on overall principles and purposes, conflicts can arise that point to underlying differences in world views, assumptions and values. Rethinking the organization so that everyone can make a strong contribution and influence how the organization works requires another big step off the beaten path.

flows of products and information, does not include the interior domain. An integral approach embraces aspects of the interior and exterior domains in a more inclusive and holistic manner.

## Implications of integral theory

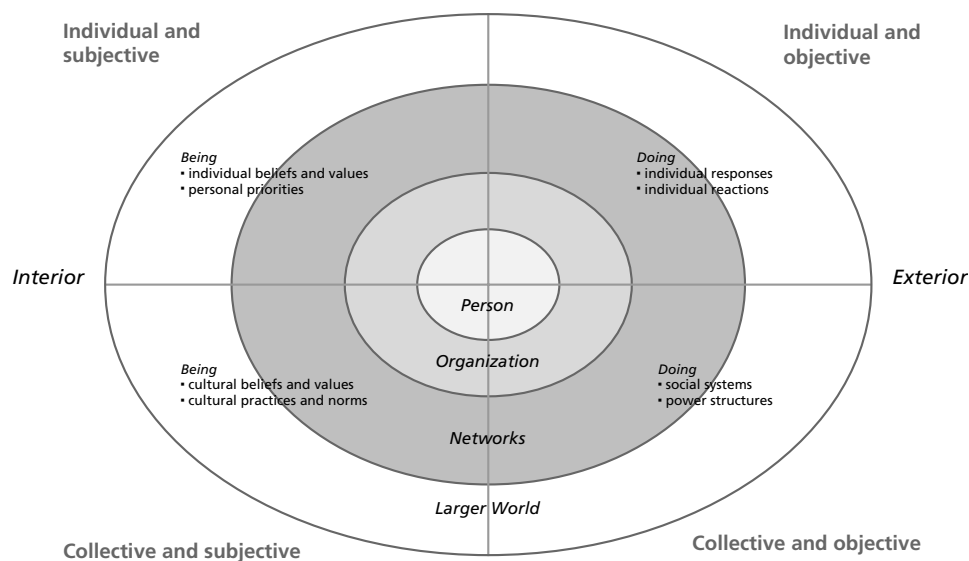
Integral theory works in concert with complex adaptive systems thinking and approaches. In organizations, integral theory points to the importance of:

- focusing on processes and outcomes that take into account both individual and collective realities inside our organizations, and in the work we do in the world;

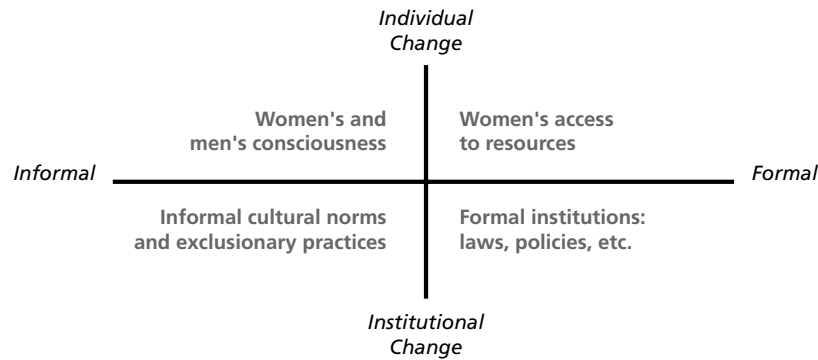
- considering the internal world (invisible) as well as that which is seen or manifest; and
- examining the relationships and processes among the quadrants.

At a recent African CSO workshop, an integral approach was applied to the analysis of gender equality. Historically, in working for gender equality, different organizations have focused on one or another of the four quadrants. Some organizations work on legal and policy change, while others focus on changing material conditions. An integral approach shows that in order to bring about gender equality, change must occur at both the personal level and the social level. Also, change must occur in both formal and informal relations.

## The Integral Framework



## Gender Equality: What are we trying to change?



There are four clusters which affect each other:

- women's and men's individual consciousness (knowledge, skills, political consciousness, commitment);
- women's objective condition (rights and resources, access to health and education services and safety, opportunities for a voice);
- informal norms such as inequitable ideologies and cultural and religious practices; and
- formal institutions such as laws and policies.

Often we assume that change in one area will lead to change in the others. For example, women who have started and maintained micro-businesses often report being more self-confident. But we also know that it is possible to have material resources but no influence, and that it is possible to be "economically empowered" but not free from violence. Sustainable change requires institutional change, which involves the clusters of informal norms and formal institutions.

In an abbreviated way, the accompanying diagram shows the universe of changes that might be contemplated to enhance gender equality. It can serve as an outline to document how the four clusters appear in a particular context, and can help change agents make strategic choices as to where and how to intervene. It points to the fact that changes in resources, capacity, and knowledge are necessary, but not sufficient, for sustainable change. Changes of formal and informal institutions are also required.

### Integral practices

Integral thinking has led to the development and use of practices that help us understand and discuss the hidden side of organizational life – individual beliefs and attitudes and

organizational culture and ideology (represented in the left-hand quadrants of the Integral Framework). Much of this lives below the surface of our understanding and so requires particular practices to bring it out and make it available for discussion. Some of these techniques and practices are:

- Appreciative Inquiry – a process to encourage discussion and build energy for change;
- reflective practices (individual and group);
- dialogue and "conversation" processes that are not ordered by an agenda, but flow from the energy and diversity of participants; and
- creative methodologies for tapping into individual and collective understanding that may not be fully articulated in everyday organizational speech (using story-telling, metaphors, art, poetry and alternative forms of expression that get to the symbolic level where deeper energy and meaning reside).

If we were writing the *Tiger* book today, would it be much different? We still believe strategy, structure and culture are important. However, recent theory development and application in human systems areas would expand and alter our depiction of change processes in their multiple dimensions. In particular, we would encourage organizations to be open to ideas and pressure (energy) from the outside, to pay attention to relationship patterns and whole system approaches, and to be concerned with the implicit, less obvious aspects of organizational functioning.

*The authors drew from a number of published works in writing this article, including "OD Practitioner" and Ken Wilber's "A Theory of Everything". For a full list of references, contact od@ccic.ca.*

## Tackling the Tough Questions

By Rieky Stuart

“As leaders, our goal is to strengthen our organizations. Not being able to be frank about our challenges for fear they will weaken our organizations – in the eyes of our Board, our donors and funders, and our staff – may in itself be a fatal weakness.” When I said this at a Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) meeting about a year ago, there were many heads nodding around the room. Many leaders of international development civil society organizations (CSOs) clearly feel the need to exchange with peers about addressing the challenges we all face.

CSO leaders need opportunities to “let their hair down” – to share their own doubts and concerns about the way the sector is working and about development – in forums that are constructive, candid and confidential. That was the best part of a series of professional development/organizational change sessions sponsored by CCIC in the 1990s (called “Grabbing the Tiger by the Tail”). Today, there is still a strong need for frank consideration of the challenges associated with organizational change.

There are, in my view, three key elements that leaders of international development CSOs need to examine today. We need to acknowledge and deal with the complexity of our organizations’ work. We need to address attitudes of superiority that undermine collaboration and learning. Finally, we need to examine why our organizations are so resistant to changing.

### Acknowledging complexity

In our rhetoric and practice, international development CSOs have not sufficiently come to grips with the complexity of the issues with which we work. We exist to provide “solutions” – whether these involve feeding children or improving agricultural productivity or organizing women – when at best we tackle only a few elements of an issue.

Thomas Dichter, an international development worker, has written a book called *Despite Good Intentions: Why Development Assistance to the Third World Has Failed*. In it, he shares many examples of the unintended – usually negative – consequences of development assistance by governments, CSOs, multilateral institutions and the private sector. He concludes that development is a historic, locally-rooted social, economic and political process that is not amenable to programmatic interventions by outsiders. While one may not agree with everything he says, his points about the complexity of poverty and the inadequate nature of the “aid regime” should provoke reflection about what it is we are trying to do.

We talk, plan and fundraise as if our work were as straightforward as building a motor. This simplistic approach shapes the very model of our organizations, our work and how we do it. Staff – whether our own or those of our local partners – face the impossible task of implementing the “programs” and “projects” that emerge from this thinking. They have a limited number of options as they attempt to reconcile the complexity of their grounded experience with the unrealistic simplicity of project and program models. They may become complicit in perpetuating simplistic views, reporting “successes”, or they may become cynical. Alternatively, they may try to fight back against the lack of understanding at “headquarters”.

Complexity theory (described by Kate McLaren and David Kelleher on page 6) provides a different and more helpful mental model for reshaping our organizations and the development field. The members of the Oxfam family, for example, have been seeking to come to terms with complexity. This has meant struggling to identify their “models of change” – deeply held assumptions and beliefs about how change comes about, and how their interventions can support the kind of change they believe in.

This has not always been easy. The assumptions of policy and campaign staff about the importance of fairer trade rules, for example, have clashed with the concerns of programmers about direct impacts on the lives of poor coffee farmers. By trying to use a “yes, and” approach grounded in complexity theory rather than a simplistic “either or” approach, Oxfam organizations have learned a lot about building programming that includes policy and practice changes. It has helped that task teams and management groups have been built to cut across organizational “silos”. The fact that the various Oxfam Executive Directors have been able to exchange with and support each other as peers throughout this change process has also been enormously helpful.

### The barrier of self-righteousness

A second element that needs examination is what I think of as “holier-than-thou-ness”. Development CSOs were born out of two major streams of thought. There are those who seek to help people who are victims of poverty and suffering, and those who criticize the institutions and structures that create poverty and suffering and seek to build a “better” system. Both sets of assumptions lead practitioners to believe that they are right or better, and that those who are not doing the same type of work are uncaring or complicit.

Neither mindset is conducive to working collaboratively with others when such collaboration is essential for change. New models of collaboration, alliance and partnership can be found in the organizational change literature, and international development CSOs need to learn from them. We also need to pay more attention to processes that encourage shifts in perspective, to reduce the self-righteousness that undermines our ability to learn.

### Addressing resistance to change

The final element we need to examine is why organizations that are all about changing the lives of others are so resistant to change themselves. There is a rigidity in our way of doing things that militates against innovation, experimentation

and adaptive learning. The resistance may be a factor of the “greying” of international development CSOs, the constraints on funding (both institutional and private), the nature of organizations, CSO tendencies to “do” rather than invest in learning, or a combination of these factors.

### Learning from each other

We need to face these issues, and to support and learn from each other. If we don’t, we will become irrelevant. Organizational change is not a “one shot” thing. We need to constantly grapple with the hard questions and seek to be as effective as possible. Within our own organizations, and in groupings of peers such as CCIC, there are opportunities to exchange, learn, experiment and change. What are we waiting for?

*Rieky Stuart has worked in the field of international development for 30 years. She was Executive Director of Oxfam Canada from 1999 to 2005.*



Picking coffee in Costa Rica. Addressing poverty is complex, and people with different “models of change” may have varying ideas about what strategies are most likely to help coffee farmers.

## Horizontal Learning: Freeing people to help each other

By Doug Reeler

Expectations of Northern civil society organizations are changing: there is less emphasis on direct service delivery and more on working with Southern partners and communities to strengthen capacity. What does this mean for developmental practice, and for organizations themselves?

The Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) is a nongovernmental organization based in Cape Town, South Africa, that works with people and organizations engaged in social transformation with marginalized communities. Over the years, CDRA has pioneered and provided organizational development services to improve the effectiveness of more than 500 development organizations, in Africa and elsewhere.

From its own experience and the practices of several of these organizations, CDRA has seen the power of horizontal learning (learning from peers). Horizontal learning is emerging not only as an effective learning method but as a broader developmental strategy and purpose.

### Underlying principles

As Amartya Sen notes in *Development as Freedom*, “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.”

Creating conditions in which people are free to shape their own destiny and help each other is what capacity development should be all about. At CDRA, we believe that four principles of good practice underlie developmental approaches like horizontal learning.

- *Development – and the will or impulse to develop – is natural and innate.* In whatever state we may find people, they are constantly developing. They may not be developing healthily or in ways they like, but they have been developing long before development workers came into their lives and will continue to do so long after we leave.

We cannot deliver development – it is already happening as a natural process that we need to read, respect and work with. People already have enormous capacity in their experience, understanding, knowledge, skills and relationships, but in those who are marginalized or oppressed these capacities are often hindered and hidden. The primary challenge is to support people to free themselves from inner and outer hindrances to their innate capacity and will to develop – to reveal what they already have, to access what they need, so they can choose to take their own initiative and responsibility for change.

- *Development is complex, unpredictable and characterized by crisis.* The web of inner and outer hindrances to development can be particularly complex and resistant to change, surfacing only in periods of crisis. Crises must be embraced as opportunities for deep change. Recognizing and working with crises becomes central to a developmental approach. This has major significance for practice, requiring a very different orientation from conventional project-based approaches, which insist on steering by predetermined outcomes, assume an unrealistic degree of predictability, and abhor crisis as failure.
  - *People’s own capacity to learn from experience is the foundation of their knowledge and development.* Learning from experience is as old as the hills – one of the natural processes by which people develop themselves. It is so obvious that it is easily disregarded. Too often, for example, “experts” seek to train rural mothers in project planning – without first surfacing, appreciating and expanding the skills that the women have already developed through organizing highly complex weddings and funerals.
- “Action learning” is the term given to more disciplined learning from experience. At CDRA, we use action learning to help people, ourselves included, to learn from their own experience more consciously and collectively. In so doing, people can build their own, their community’s or their organization’s ability to act in more sustainable ways that are less dependent on outside expertise.

- *Development is held in relationships.* We live, learn and develop within three different kinds of relationships: relationship with self, interpersonal relationships with people around us and external relationships with the rest of the world. Power is held in relationships, and if we want to shift power, we have to shift relationships.

These four principles reinforce each other in practice in many ways, as can be seen in the use of horizontal learning as method, strategy and purpose.



A Zimbabwean farmer. In capacity development work, it is important to recognize the enormous capacities that people already have as a result of their experience, understanding, knowledge, skills and relationships.

## Learning from each other

Learning from neighbours and peers is an ancient practice. Horizontal learning is, like action learning, a natural and innate process in which we can embed transformation.

When “Education” – in the form of teachers, doctors, agricultural extension workers and other “experts” – arrived in the South under colonialism, people’s belief in the value of their own and their neighbours’ experience and ideas diminished. This impact continues today. Knowledge and learning have become external commodities, increasingly removed from the organic life of communities, robbing people of access to their own local knowledge and weakening age-old relationships of learning in community. Restoring or renewing cultures and practices of horizontal learning is central to developmental practice.

This is not to say that teachers and experts have unimportant roles. They have experience and knowledge and often can bring more conceptual clarity than is available in a peer group. The thing is to know when to use their input, and how. It is generally most effective to bring in new knowledge only after people’s *own* knowledge and experience have been collectively surfaced and validated.

This surfacing and validation cannot be done quickly, because people’s knowledge is often so hindered, deeply hidden and unconscious. Often it is collectively and not individually held. But once it is surfaced, expert knowledge can act to complement and expand it – rather than ignoring, denying or replacing what people already know.

## Horizontal learning as method

Horizontal learning as a method is not new to the development sector: peer learning activities in workshops are common. But it is worth revisiting why it is effective.

Peer learning can free people from dependencies on experts, leaders or facilitators, and encourage the seeking of knowledge and ideas from a wider range of sources. We develop confidence when the answers come from amongst ourselves. In peer learning there is a give and take of knowledge creation, as we are helped to make sense of our experiences and develop our ideas, as we build on each other’s ideas, and as we experience the excitement of dialogue and mutual discovery. Someone who has just learned something can often be a better teacher than an

expert who has known it for years, because she is closer to the experience of learning and can more easily help others work not only with *what* has to be learned but with *how* it can be learned.

Peer conversations provide freer spaces for peoples to tell their stories. A well-told story in a peer setting is *re-experienced* by the listeners, making it available for all to learn from. In peer settings, stories can become powerful processes for group learning, surfacing of crisis, and transformation.

Fear of judgment can act as a major constraint to learning. Participants enjoy the *freedom* of peer learning – free from the power that the expert or facilitator might hold over them in obvious or subtle ways, unintimidated by their ignorance in contrast to the expert's. From having facilitated many peer learning processes, we have been struck by the enormous *responsibility for own learning* that this freedom generates.

Many peer learning processes contain what seem to be unstructured, chaotic periods where anything could happen, and they often surface suppressed crises. But within a purposeful learning environment maintained by a facilitator, this letting-go can generate a surprising degree of self-management and responsibility in a group of peers, and a mature handling of crisis.

Helping people *to work through their own confusion and find their own processes and purposes*, rather than trying to control or avoid the chaos, is profoundly developmental and more likely to yield authentic change.

### **Horizontal learning as strategy and purpose**

One of our clients worked unsuccessfully for decades, trying to teach farmers in Tanzania how to improve production based on what the NGO's staff had learnt from practices of the "developed" world. Eventually, the trainers realized that the farmers knew more about farming under local conditions than they did. They decided to change their approach, based on experiences they had heard about (horizontally) from trainers in other countries.

The NGO began to encourage farmers to form Farmer Learning Groups, to meet regularly and informally to share working methods and innovations, and to invite some of the older farmers who had stubbornly held on to their time-worn methods and less productive but drought-resistant seeds. Gradually, these learning groups began to generate the kind of improved practices the NGO had long been trying to promote.

Soon the NGO was being approached by more farmers to set up groups, and drew on the established learning groups to help. Elsewhere, groups started up spontaneously. Some groups, completely unprompted, embarked on joint farming development projects, while others elected representatives to approach local councils to ask for services that were due to them, especially better roads and marketing facilities. It was not long before some of the groups banded together and formed branches of the national independent small farmers' union.

The power of horizontal learning as a method lives strongly in this case. Horizontal learning as a strategy holds even more developmental potential. Through peer learning, the farmers more consciously and consistently improved their practices. But much more became possible – unintended, unpredictable, unimagined consequences. There was a degree of freedom and empowerment in the learning-based relationships that helped them find their own process. From this came the trust, respect and organization that enabled them to begin *to act together* in joint projects, *to elect representatives* to advocate for their rights and *to mobilize themselves* to join the small farmers' union.

The natural and free relationships of peer learning can become the foundation for authentic organization and joint action. The Farmer Learning Groups' relationships were embedded in simple, innate processes that were not difficult to encourage and support. Yet they were able to generate further social initiatives and to model and multiply themselves, without much more external support.

These are the kind of outcomes that practitioners and donors dream of. There are more stories like this emerging from the creative margins of the development sector – despite the log-framed projects and narrow definitions of accountability that constrain so many practitioners. We have the sense that development, embedded in natural processes like horizontal learning, can be nurtured until something takes hold and multiplies under its own momentum – unpredictably, but freely and authentically. But do those who hold the resources have the insight, the trust and the imagination to allow this to happen?

*Doug Reeler is a staff member of the CDRA. This article was adapted from an article entitled "Horizontal Learning – Engaging Freedom's Possibilities" which can be found on CDRA's website ([www.cdra.org.za](http://www.cdra.org.za)).*

## Developing a Culture of Learning

By Beverly Suderman

One of the critiques being leveled at the voluntary sector is that it has lost its drive to transform society, and has become just another bureaucracy that perpetuates the status quo. Developing a learning culture is one key to ensuring that the sector remains a force for positive change.

### What is a culture of learning?

The word “culture” implies growing something, as in agriculture. Organizations with a learning culture cultivate learning, supporting behaviours and practices that lead to more learning. A learning organization has the capacity to adapt and change because all its members are continually acquiring and sharing new knowledge and skills in pursuit of a common goal.

### Why do voluntary sector organizations need a culture of learning?

Every aspect of work within the voluntary sector has changed in the past 10 to 15 years. One key shift has been from core funding for organizational activities to project funding, and from untied donations to donations made for specific purposes. Another has been the shift from organizational management towards accomplishing mission. These and other shifts have required change and adaptation by voluntary sector organizations (VSOs).

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### How can we effectively do our work, if we do not constantly address the learning we need to be effective?

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Some shifts have created tensions within organizations, and all have, to some degree or another, created less stable organizations. The upside of being less stable is that organizations can be more nimble, responsive, and creative. The downside is that the energy of people within organizations can be consumed by the drive to find funds and to be “accountable” in the narrow sense of the term frequently used by funders.

A culture of learning within an organization can help an organization “surf” these waves of change. It can prevent wastage of resources and energy due to “reinventing the wheel”. It can enhance the quality of team relationships and encourage fresh thinking.

There are also ethical questions involved. Organizations working with vulnerable people (children, people living in extreme poverty, people with disabilities or serious illnesses) have a particular need to stay up-to-date with excellent practice. They need to have excellent knowledge tracking systems, and to keep up with changes in practice as well as with technology. How can we effectively do our work, if we do not constantly address the learning we need to be effective?

### Do voluntary sector organizations already have a culture of learning?

Canada’s VSOs have both strengths and weaknesses with respect to establishing and maintaining a culture of learning.

- *Knowledge acquisition:* Knowledge acquisition is an area of strength. Many VSOs are highly skilled at incorporating new ideas into their work. Front-line staff, volunteers and managers are closely linked with information sources (clients, researchers and publications) about the issue they address. In response to new knowledge, new tactics are developed, new understandings of issues are generated, and new programs or campaigns emerge.
- *Knowledge validation and sharing:* Documentation and transmission of knowledge is weaker. Staff and volunteers are not routinely oriented to the work, philosophy, and existing knowledge of the organization. The “corporate memory” often resides in individuals, and organizations are frequently destabilized by the departure of key individuals. Organizations frequently “reinvent the wheel”. Initiatives are not adequately documented (either within an organization, or in a larger context), so similar ideas are coined and implemented without the benefit of the previous experience.
- *Knowledge management, transfer, and transmission:* There are also weaknesses in this area. Most VSOs do not have established means to share information within the organization, within their sector, and with broader publics. This may be partly a function of resource constraints and a narrow focus on accountability. Sometimes it is due to “organizational silos”.

Knowledge generated by VSOs at the “front edge of the wave” may not fit with the prevailing wisdom about a particular issue. Because most VSOs depend on external funding, there is a complex struggle to have knowledge validated. The ongoing struggle for funding, which privileges service delivery over learning, can subvert an organization’s capacity to develop simple knowledge-management systems.

Too frequently, the work ethic of the voluntary sector prevents staff members from stepping back to reflect on their work. Work patterns (frequent evening and weekend work, with the expectation of weekday presence in the office) combine with the work ethic to prevent reflection. Individual staff members and volunteers are so immersed in day-to-day activities that they feel challenged when larger questions are raised.



Providing opportunities for peer learning is part of developing a learning culture. Here, representatives of Southern and Northern civil society organizations take part in a peer learning workshop sponsored by INTRAC in Oxford, England.

## Nurturing a culture of learning in the voluntary sector

Everybody who cares about the voluntary sector has a role to play in nurturing a culture of learning. Board members can say “no” to cuts to professional development budget items, and develop policies to help their organizations establish learning cultures. Funders can ensure that organizations include learning opportunities in proposal budgets, and be flexible about the types of reporting they accept, while maintaining accountability. Donors can ensure that part of every dollar they provide can be used for administration costs, including activities that foster organizational learning.

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**Learning must be viewed and lived as a value equal in importance to the mission of the organization.**

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Staff members can suggest changes to the way they work and actively pursue professional development. Participation in peer learning circles can transform individuals’ perspectives on the work of the organization, resulting in improved performance.

Many voluntary sector organizations already have elements of a learning culture in place. The challenge is to connect these elements into a coherent whole, adding elements if they have not yet been addressed. Changing an organizational culture requires efforts across the organization, and individual changes in attitudes and behaviour. Learning must be viewed and lived as a value equal in importance to the mission of the organization. Only then can voluntary sector organizations achieve their true potential as agents of social change.

*Beverly Suderman was Project Manager of the National Learning Initiative for the Voluntary Sector, a project of the Voluntary Sector Initiative. This article has been adapted from a March 2005 article entitled “Developing a Culture of Learning Within the Voluntary Sector”, available from [od@ccc.ca](mailto:od@ccc.ca).*