

CCIC AGM: Civil Society, Crisis and Transformation (30 mins).

Thank you Esperanza, I thought of calling this talk “what do you buy for the woman (or man) who has everything” but that reference is probably too oblique. What I mean to say is that Canadian development NGOs – all of you, the membership of CCIC – have done pretty well over the last twenty years in rethinking their roles, strengthening their capacities, re-formulating their relationships away from the paternalism of traditional foreign aid, and developing a domestic constituency for principled international partnership. Obviously the record varies and I’m not pretending that everything in your garden is rosy, especially on the fundraising side, but there is a sense I think that collectively you are strong, confident and progressive in the best sense of that word, and that you have managed to preserve enough of your independence and distinctive identity to remain a force for ethical and political change at home and abroad. That is not something that can be said about many civil societies today and I believe it is a cause for quiet celebration, though not of course for complacency.

Nevertheless it begs an important question – after you’ve pushed your advocacy and campaigning to the limits, developed your accountability mechanisms upwards, downwards, sideways and every other way you can imagine, strengthened your partnerships and constituencies at home and abroad, become the ultimate learning organization and raised your professional standards to Olympian heights, where do you go next? What more is there to do? And how can you get there?

Well, the obvious gift you can give to the woman (or man) who has everything is to give them something that they could never obtain through their own actions, however rich or powerful they become - something which only manifests itself or becomes possible through changes in the *external* environment. And of course that’s the context in which you are holding your meeting today and tomorrow, and it’s the subject I want to talk about for the next twenty minutes. Do changes in our current external environment create an opportunity for transformative work on our part, and if so, how might we seize them?

It's a cliché that crises are simultaneously opportunities for innovation and breakthrough – “why waste a good crisis?” as Rahm Emanuel recently said in Washington – and it isn't always true, human beings and the institutions we create having a sad and predictable tendency to return to the status-quo ante once the immediate pain and shock has passed us by. But it *has* been true of our own development NGO world in recent memory – think of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the remarkable flourishing of our work since then on deepening democracy, strengthening civil society, expanding human rights, and arguing for more equal participation in international affairs. So there's no reason why it can't be true again.

In your conference program it is the worldwide financial crisis that looms largest in the changing external environment for our work, along with the rise of “philanthrocapitalism”, Mathew Bishop's horrible phrase that I'll comment on in a moment. It's certainly true that this crisis is both materially damaging to millions of people and their livelihoods and almost perfect as a platform for debates that are close to our hearts about international economics and financial regulation, and I'm sure you had a great discussion of these issues in this morning's panel with Susan and Bruce, but I think it is too

narrow a lens through which to examine the changes and opportunities that are unfolding in front of us.

Without being starry-eyed or indulging in too much psychobabble (sure-fire evidence that I've been in America too long and need to return to England) I think a much more general questioning is taking place about the meaning of the good society, the nature of wellbeing and human flourishing, the roles and responsibilities of business, government and civil society, the future of politics, and the kind of world we want to create together. And central to that questioning is the second gift we've been given in the last twelve months, the election of President Barack Obama.

I don't say this as someone who agrees with everything Obama is doing, especially in foreign policy and finance, but there is definitely something different about the man and his approach to politics, and that difference is important – a sense that the true goal of government and society at large is transformation, and not just management, maintenance or delivery; a belief that you don't have to abandon your values or principles in order to find enough common ground with those with whom you sometimes disagree to get

important things done, imperfectly; and a blending together of the personal and the political which overrides the conviction that the ‘ends justify the means’, and which returns us to Martin Luther King’s wonderful vision of the “love that does justice” – a way to confront deep-seated questions of power and inequality with a loving heart that opens up new possibilities for fundamental change by integrating personal and social transformation.

Like Gandhi and others before him, King saw unconditional love as the only force capable of sustaining large-scale social progress without internalizing the fear and insecurity that underpins oppression in all its forms and starting the self-defeating cycle afresh, and in his own more pragmatic and prosaic way that, I think, is what Obama is aiming for and why he is so potentially influential.

I think these are incredibly important things for us to consider in relation to our own work, though I realize they sound a bit vague and possibly overly-romantic. Recently I’ve been studying some examples of US non-profits who are using this approach and what strikes me is how far away they are from the usual mushy image of the personal change movement. These are hard-

headed activists tackling some of the toughest issues in society, but they tackle them with none of the ego, turf wars and demonization that have sometimes been associated with activism in the past, and that's the secret of their success. "We are hard on issues, soft on people" as ForestEthics puts it, a group you may know who forged a coalition between government, business, indigenous groups and civil society activists strong enough to save the Great Bear Rainforest in British Columbia, whose different agendas once seemed hopelessly incompatible.

Or take CLUE – 'Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice', which gave birth to the New Sanctuary Movement in California which is changing attitudes towards immigration by creating personal encounters between families threatened with deportation and local politicians and the media. Or 'Make the Road New York', which has combined the best of traditional community organizing with the latest techniques from neuroscience, deep listening and mindfulness to recoup \$6.5 million in lost wages for immigrant workers and win citywide legislation requiring all government agencies to provide translation services to the two million New Yorkers who are not fluent in English.

These successes rest on building a different kind of relationship, and that takes a great deal of time, hard work, humility and the conscious use of techniques and practices which encourage people to identify the ways in which their own attitudes and behavior affect the health and success of their professional endeavors. ‘We must become the change we want to see in the world’ as Gandhi famously said, not just *assuming* that this is what we do because we work in non-profits or foundations, but making it a daily lived reality that permeates every decision about the organization and its work – its structures and systems, its culture and accountability procedures, and its relationships with staff and those with whom it works outside.

These are all ways of bringing the whole range of available resources to the non-profit table - intellectual, organizational, financial, personal and spiritual – and they can produce much stronger alliances and coalitions across old boundaries, more sustainability for the long haul as burn-out grows less likely, and the willingness to tackle deep-rooted power dynamics and issues of diversity that block improvements in organizational performance. They can help to make non-profits the places they are supposed to be – the places we

want them to be - joyful, loving and committed to a real sense of building community within and without, models and micro-climates for the society we want to build and the relationships we want to nurture. You don't have to be depressed to work for an NGO even in a crisis (though I know it helps!), and that isn't a good basis for bringing others to the table. After all, 'what's the point of the revolution if I can't dance' as someone once remarked?

Obviously these are US examples but the principles behind the work and the secrets of its success are transferable I think to the world of international development. In fact they can help us to address exactly those weak points in our own work that persist and that hold us back, perhaps even here in Canada, despite our success in raising our game over the last fifteen years. I'm referring to our inability to lever deep changes in the systems and structures that perpetuate poverty and the abuse of human rights, or to transform power relations on anything like the necessary scale in the crucial areas of class, gender and race, or to foster the shifts in personal attitudes, values and behavior that are needed to underpin new patterns of consumption and production, or to establish strong connections with social movements that are more embedded in the political processes that are essential to sustained change.

These weaknesses have their counterparts inside our organizations and the decisions we regularly make - for example, in the lack of importance we attach to generating diverse, local sources of funds for ‘partners’ in the South (a weakness that underpins many other problems including legitimacy, international under-representation and political threats to organizations perceived as ‘pawns of foreign interests’). We still sometimes internalize functions that should be distributed across other organizations – raising funds, for example, inside developing countries (or ‘markets’ to use a telling common phrase), franchising global brands instead of supporting authentic expressions of indigenous civil society, and crowding out Southern participation in knowledge creation and advocacy in order to increase our own voice and profile. It is these failings that stand in the way of increasing our impact in the future, because our leverage over the drivers of long-term change will continue to be weak.

And why is that? One reason is that there is another powerful set of forces out there acting in the opposite direction that has been very influential in the NGO and international development worlds over the last few years. For shorthand I’ll call these forces “philanthrocapitalism” even though I know

that isn't a very satisfactory term, partly because these forces are themselves very diverse. But there is a commonly-held belief that business thinking and market mechanisms offer a more effective route to social change than traditional government intervention or civil society activism. "The profit motive could be the best tool for solving the world's problems," says Oracle founder Larry Ellison.

Actually you and I know this movement from its grandparents – the inequality, technocracy and control-orientation that have been such a feature of foreign aid since 1945. It amazes me how this stuff is seen as innovative when it seems to be re-introducing outdated models from the past in a new and sexier disguise. I've spent most of the last eighteen months mounting a personal counter-revolution against philanthrocapitalism, not because I don't admire the example that Bill Gates and others are setting to other celebrities and the super-rich, but because the hype surrounding this phenomenon may divert attention away from the deeper changes that are required to transform society, reduce decisions to an inappropriate bottom line, and lead us to ignore the costs and trade-offs involved in extending business principles into the world of civil society and international development.

Business does have an important role to play in social change – of course it does. Creating jobs, raising incomes and building individual assets all have potential social effects, and as social entrepreneurs are showing around the world, lots of useful goods and services that create social and environmental value can be produced and exchanged at a price point affordable to the poor and still make a profit – think of micro-credit loans, solar-rechargeable light-bulbs, new vaccines against malaria, low-cost lap-top computers and so on, but their social impact is limited, at least in the sense I’ve been describing in relation to current trends and the possibilities they present for work that is transformative in its intent.

Philanthrocapitalism may well produce a cure for HIV, but there’s no vaccine against greed, fear, racism, poverty, inequality, violence, corruption, lousy governance, personal alienation, the abuse of human rights and all the other things that plague us. There are *few* areas of business expertise that translate well into the very different world of complex social and political problems where solutions have to be fought for and negotiated - not produced, packaged and sold. There aren’t many philanthrocapitalists who are prepared to invest

in the challenges of long-term institution-building, the deepening of democracy, or the development of a different form of market economy in which inequality is systematically attacked. And the personal norms and values that are encouraged by this new movement are heavily weighted towards increased consumption, material incentives and rewards, individualism and competition – things that seem out of step with the new mood I was describing earlier.

You might think that the worldwide financial crisis would have changed all this (after all, how can business fix anyone else when it can't even fix itself?), and there has been some backtracking from the claim that philanthrocapitalism will “save the world” and that business is always best, more efficient, transparent and accountable than the rest of us in what is often seen as the second-rate world of under-performing NGOs, but this movement is still very influential, particularly among the larger donor agencies, I suspect because it makes their lives more comfortable (as in ordered, predictable and controlled).

The reality is that we face a continuing struggle – hopefully an equal and creative struggle – between these two sets of forces over the next ten years, and as civil society leaders we have a vital role to play in walking the tightrope between our necessarily pragmatic responses to donor demands and new ideas from the world of business, and our continuing mission for social transformation – between what I call “institutional and developmental imperatives”, or what (encouraged by market incentives) we see as desirable for our individual organizations and what we know to be important for the longer term achievement of our collective endeavors, between the incursion of the market into every aspect of our lives and the need to push back against this trend so that non-market values can penetrate ever more deeply into the economic realm, between the need to respond effectively to short-term crises and the opportunity to turn our attention to longer-term transformational activities and investments.

I think the best way to navigate through these choppy waters is to be bolder than we have been to date, to undertake high-profile radical actions that signify a break with the past – around climate change for example, new and more democratic forms of politics and economics, nuclear disarmament, international human rights law, and combating patriarchy (a word that seems

to have disappeared from our lexicon but still pretty much rules the world) – all issues that illustrate interdependence and the need for collective action – and to weave our more traditional issues like foreign aid, debt, capacity-building, partnership and the reform of international institutions through and around these larger and more exciting themes in order to cement constituencies for deep change within and across national borders.

This is more than the next round of small-scale iteration in the development NGO world (the default mode of thinking and action for most of us), or more sophisticated advocacy around the IFIs, or stronger links between agencies working on the same country or issue, or more aid effectiveness and donor harmonization. It's a call to seize the moment, re-imagine what is possible for us in a period of deeper self-questioning and more reflective politics and civil society activism, and come out fighting – non-violently and with a loving heart - to protect and extend what is most valuable and distinctive about our visions for a better world. I wish you the best of luck in all your endeavors, and thanks for listening.