'In this powerfully argued book, Duncan Green shows how we can make major changes in our unequal and unjust world by concerted action, taking full note of the economic and social mechanisms, including established institutions, that sustain the existing order. If self-confidence is important for the effective agency of deprived communities, so is a reasoned understanding of the difficult barriers that must be faced and overcome. This is a splendid treatise on how to change the actual world—in reality, not just in our dreams.'

Amartya Sen, Thomas W. Lamont University Professor, and Professor of Economics and Philosophy, Harvard University

'In *How Change Happens*, Duncan Green points to a simple truth: that positive social change requires power, and hence attention on the part of reformers to politics and the institutions within which power is exercised. It is an indispensable guide for activists and change-makers everywhere.'

Francis Fukuyama, Olivier Nomellini Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI), and the Mosbacher Director of FSI's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Stanford University

'It was George Orwell who wrote that "The best books … are those that tell you what you know already." Well in Duncan's book *How Change Happens* I have found something better: A book that made me think differently about something I have been doing for my entire life. He has captured so much in these pages, drawing on global and national and local change and examples from past and present. But what makes this book so insightful is that at all times we are able to see the world through Duncan's watchful eyes: From his time as a backpacker in South America to lobbying the WTO in Seattle and his many years with Oxfam, this is someone who has always been watching and always been reflecting. It is this gift that will most help Duncan's readers—whether they be students or those who think they have seen it all. There is always more to notice about such a complex, changing world. And the more we can see, the better we will be at making change happen.'

Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director, UNAIDS

'Once again, following *From Poverty to Power*, Duncan has given us a remarkable tour de force, wide-ranging, readable, combining theory and practice, and drawing on his extensive reading and rich and varied

experience. *How Change Happens* is a wonderful gift to all development professionals and citizens who want to make our world a better place. It confronts contemporary complexity, systems, power, and wealth and builds on an extraordinarily rich treasury of experience and evidence to give us a new, grounded realism for development practice. Only after reading and reflecting have I been able to see how badly we have needed this book. It does more than fill a gap. The evidence, examples, analysis, insights, and ideas for action are a quiet but compelling call for reflection on errors and omissions in one's own mindset and practice. Here then we have vital reading for all development professionals, practitioners, and activists, and all concerned citizens. It is as relevant and important for South as North, for funders as activists, for governments as NGOs, for transnational corporations as campaigning citizens. We are all in this together. *How Change Happens* should stand the test of time. It is a landmark, a must read book to return to again and again to inform and inspire reflection and action. I know no other book like it.'

Robert Chambers, Research Associate,
Institute of Development Studies

'This is a gem of a book. Lucidly written and disarmingly frank, it distils the author's decades of experience in global development practice to share what can work and what may not, in changing power relations and complex systems. Again and again I found myself agreeing with him. All of us—practitioners *and* academics—who want a better world, and are willing to work for it, must read this book.'

Bina Agarwal, Professor of Development Economics
and Environment, Global Development Institute,
University of Manchester

'This fascinating book should be on the bedside of any activist—and many others besides. Duncan Green is the rare global activist who can explain in clear yet analytical language what it takes to make change happen. Ranging widely from Lake Titicaca in Peru to rural Tajikistan, from shanty towns to the halls of power, this is a book sprinkled with wisdom and insight on every page.'

Dani Rodrik, Ford Foundation Professor of International Political Economy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

'*How Change Happens* is a positive guide to activists. It is one of the most helpful, hopeful and thoughtful manuals on the process of transformation. It is an optimistic book; to be an activist you need to be an optimist! When one feels despondent and disheartened then reading this book will help to encourage, energise, and inspire one to participate in the creation of a better world. Duncan Green makes the case with vivid examples that significant changes have taken place and continue to take place when social and environmental activists employ skilful means and multiple strategies such as advocacy, campaigning, organising, and building movements. It is a wonderful book. Read it and be enthused to join in the journey of change.'

Satish Kumar, Founder of Schumacher College and Editor Emeritus*, Resurgence & Ecologist*

'The world committed to global transformative change in 2015, with the 2030 Agenda and targets in the Paris Climate Agreement to stay well below 2°C and achieve carbon neutrality by the second half of the century. We need to understand how change happens in order to accelerate our pathway to a safe future. Duncan Green's book is a timely and badly needed guide to bringing about the necessary social and political change.'

Mary Robinson, Chair of the Institute for Human Rights and Business

How Change Happens

DUNCAN GREEN

With Tom Kirk

How Change Happens

Second Edition

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For Tito and Jenny who got me started, Cathy who kept me going,
and Calum, Finlay and maybe one day, Cora, who can take over from here.

Foreword

Ha-Joon Chang

'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it', said Karl Marx in one of his most celebrated passages, which eventually became one of his two epitaphs (the other one being 'Workers of all lands, unite').

Marx was certainly right to argue that social theories should be not just about understanding the status quo but also about offering a vision for its improvement; but he was wrong to imply that no one before him had thought like that.

For the last several thousand years at least, human beings have tried to imagine a different world from the one they live in, and worked together to create it. Human history is littered with countless visions of—and struggles for—an alternative social order. These may have been large-scale social experiments based on elaborate theories, like Marxism, the welfare state, or neo-liberalism. Or they may have involved daily struggles for survival, safety, and dignity by oppressed and underprivileged people, even though they may not have had any sophisticated theory about their alternative world. However, the capacity to imagine an alternative social order and cooperating to create it is what distinguishes humankind from other animals.

Despite the fact that much of human history has been about attempting to create different realities, we do not understand the process of social change very well.

To be sure, we have grand historical narratives that describe social change as the results of interactions between technological forces and economic institutions, such as property rights; Marxism is the best example of this. We know quite a bit about the way in which society is transformed because of the changes in political–legal institutions, such as the court system or international trade agreements. We have interesting and detailed

accounts of how certain individuals and groups—whether they are political leaders, business leaders, trade unions, or grassroots groups—have succeeded in realizing visions that initially few others thought realistic.

However, we do not yet have a good theory of how all these different elements work together to generate social change. To put it a bit more dramatically, if someone wanted to know how she could change certain aspects of the community, nation, or the world she lives in, she would be hard pressed to find a decent guidebook.

Into this gap steps Duncan Green, the veteran campaigner for development and social justice, with *How Change Happens*, an innovative and thrilling field guide to—let's not mince words—changing the world.

Many conventional discussions of how change happens focus on either technology (mobile phones can bring the revolution!) or a brutal account of realpolitik—how oligarchs and elites carve up the world. While not ignoring such factors, *How Change Happens* develops a far better framework for understanding social change by focusing on power analysis and systemic understanding.

This power and systems perspective emphasizes that, in order to generate social change, we first need to understand how power is distributed and can be re-distributed between and within social groups: the emancipation of women; the spread of human rights; the power of poor people when they get organized; the shifting power relationships behind the negotiations around the international economic system. While emphasizing the role of power struggles, the book does not see them as voluntaristic clashes of raw forces, in which whoever has more arms, money, or votes wins. It tries to situate those power struggles within complex systems that are continuously changing in unpredictable ways, affecting and being affected by diverse factors like social norms, negotiations, campaigns, lobbying, and leadership.

Providing a theory of social change that is convincing is already a tall order, but Duncan Green sets himself an even higher bar. The book aims to be a practical field guide to social activism. More than that, it aspires to be a field guide not just for the kinds of people he normally works with, such as NGO campaigners or grassroots organizers. It is meant to be a field manual for activists in the broadest sense: politicians, civil servants, businesspeople, even academics.

This is certainly a hugely ambitious project; how can anyone write a book that can provide sophisticated theories of social change, while providing practical advice to activists?

However, amazingly, *How Change Happens* delivers on its promise. Those who are purely interested in understanding better how societies change will find a treasure trove of theoretical insights and empirical evidence. Those who want to change the world through formal politics will certainly learn a lot from the book in terms of how to establish political consensus and legitimacy, how to build coalitions, and how to use national and international laws to initiate and consolidate changes. Civil servants who want to make things better for citizens or business leaders who want to do more than simply maximize profits will also find plenty of lessons to draw from the book in devising policies and corporate strategies that can make the world a better place in realistic but innovative ways. The book will even help academics, like myself, who try to engage with real-world issues, to grasp better the role that their research and outreach activities can play in bringing about (or hindering) social change.

Drawing on his impressive knowledge of the relevant areas of the social sciences, his thirty-five years of diverse experience in international development and many first-hand examples from the global experience of Oxfam, one of the world's largest social justice NGOs, Duncan Green has produced a unique and uniquely useful book addressing a hugely important but largely neglected issue. Everyone who is interested in making the world a better place should thank him for it.

Acknowledgements

Once again, I am indebted to the editorial dream team of Mark Fried and Anna Coryndon. Mark's unique combination of editorial skill, deep knowledge of development, and phenomenal patience helped steer this book from a messy first draft to (hopefully) something rather better. Anna managed the project throughout with her customary grace and attention to detail.

I would like to thank Oxfam for giving me the time and encouragement to write this book, but while I thank Oxfam for its support, I want to make it clear that *How Change Happens* does not necessarily reflect Oxfam policy positions—the views expressed are those of the author.

A huge number of Oxfam friends and colleagues contributed to various drafts and discussions as well as this second edition, including Laurie Adams, Amitabh Behar, Emily Brown, Celine Charveriat, Nadia Daar, Binay Dhital, Jeanette Dulawan, Thomas Dunmore-Rodriguez, Lisa Marie Faye, Penny Fowler, Uwe Gneiting, Sally Golding, Mark Goldring, Tim Gore, Irene Guijt, Thomas Heath, Mohga Kamal-Yanni, Eluka Kibona, Gawain Kripke, Max Lawson, Anna Marriott, Ruth Mhlanga, Allan Moolman, Paul O'Brien, Anam Parvez, Steve Price-Thomas, Jo Rowlands, Erinch Sahan, Joss Saunders, Kashif Shabir, Barry Shelley, Kaori Shigiya, Mary Sue Smiarowski, Danny Sriskandarajah, Caroline Sweetman, Kristine Valerio, and Andrew Wells-Dang.

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I would also like to thank the many, many people around the world who gave up precious time to answer the questions of a nosy visitor. Many are named in the text, unless they wished to remain anonymous.

And finally, if you helped with the book, have scoured this page, and not found your name, all I can offer is my grovelling apology and a heartfelt thank you.

As ever, any errors in the text are mine alone and certainly not the responsibility of the many people who have helped me along the way. The research project 'How Change Happens' was funded by Australian Aid and the University of Birmingham's Developmental Leadership Program (DLP). The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)/Australian Aid or DLP.

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Human society is full of would-be 'change agents', a restless mix of campaigners, lobbyists, and officials, both individuals and organizations, set on transforming the world. They want to improve public services, reform laws and regulations, guarantee human rights, get a fairer deal for those on the sharp end, and achieve greater recognition for any number of issues, or simply be treated with respect.

It is striking, then, that universities have no Department of Change Studies to which social activists can turn for advice and inspiration. Instead, scholarly discussions of change are fragmented, with few conversations crossing disciplinary boundaries or making it onto the radars of those actively seeking change.

How Change Happens bridges the gap between academia and practice, bringing together the best research from a range of academic disciplines and the evolving practical understanding of activists to explore the topic of social and political change. Drawing on many first-hand examples from the global experience of Oxfam, one of the world's largest social justice NGOs, as well as the author's forty years of studying and working on international development, it tests ideas and sets out the latest thinking on what works to achieve progressive change.

This second edition adds a chapter by the London School of Economics (LSE)'s Dr Tom Kirk on the rising importance of digital technology in activism, and analyses the implications of some of the darker currents of populism and shrinking civic space for those trying to bring about positive change.

Dr Duncan Green is a Professor in Practice in International Development at the LSE and former Senior Strategic Adviser at Oxfam GB. He is author of *How Change Happens* (OUP, October 2016) and *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World* (Oxfam International, 2008, second edition 2012), as well as several books on Latin America. He is Director of the Global Executive Leadership Initiative training programme on influencing.

Tom Kirk is a Research Fellow and consultant based at the LSE. His interests include the provision of security and justice in conflict-affected regions, public authority, protection, social accountability, activism, and governance. Tom co-teaches with Duncan an LSE Masters module on activism and is the manager of the Global Executive Leadership Initiative training programme on influencing in humanitarian contexts. Tom has lived and worked in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Timor-Leste, the DRC, South Sudan, and Kenya.

Introduction

I was moved to write this book by a combination of excitement, fascination, and frustration: excitement at the speed and grandeur of many of the social changes occurring today—continents rising from poverty, multitudes gaining access to literacy and decent healthcare for the first time, women in dozens of countries winning rights, respect, and power. Working at Oxfam gives me an extraordinary and privileged ringside seat from which to appreciate both the bigger picture and the individual stories of inspiring activists across the globe. I have also (miraculously) been given time to read and write, arousing undying envy in many of my colleagues. This book is the result of that dialogue between reflection and practice.

My daily excitement is laced with frustration when I see activists take steps that seem destined to fail. Within months of joining Oxfam in 2004, I witnessed two examples, one big and one small. On a field visit to Vietnam, I was taken to see Oxfam's work with Hmong villagers in the north. As we drove to the remote home of this impoverished ethnic minority, we passed the first, more intrepid backpackers starting to arrive in the area. The Hmong produce wonderful textiles, and it was obvious that a tourist boom was in the offing. Yet our project consisted of training villagers to keep their prized water buffalo warm and well during the winter (involving rubbing them regularly with alcohol, among other things). There is nothing wrong with working on livestock, but what were we doing to help them prepare for the coming influx of tourists? When challenged, our local (non-Hmong, middle-class Vietnamese) staff replied that they wanted to 'protect' the villagers' traditional ways against the invasion of the outside world.

On a grander scale, I had growing misgivings about an enormous, global campaign Oxfam was then leading that implied that activism around trade, debt, aid, and climate change could somehow 'Make Poverty History'. The campaign seemed to gravely downplay the primacy of national politics. I developed my arguments a couple of years later in a book, *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World*.

One of the inputs to that book was a paper we commissioned[1] on the theories of change used by different academic disciplines. It turns out they each operate with separate and often conflicting theories of change, and there is no 'department of change studies' to sort it out. I was intrigued, and set out some rather rudimentary ideas about 'how change happens' in an annex to *From Poverty to Power*, marking the starting point for the prolonged conversation that led eventually to this book.

How Change Happens, in turn led to much deeper engagement with activists around the world, including via numerous book launches,[2] an Open University/Oxfam massive open online course (MOOC) on how to 'Make Change Happen'[3] (17,000 activists enrolled to date), teaching a Masters module at the London School of Economics (LSE) on 'Advocacy, Campaigning and Grassroots Activism',[4] and, most recently, directing a training course on 'Influencing for Senior Leaders' in the United Nations (UN), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.[5] All of these involved conversations that helped flesh out and critique[6] the ideas in the book, and which I have attempted to capture in this new edition.

It has also made me a confirmed fan of Open Access (OA) in books (not just for journal articles). Making the first edition OA transformed its readership in terms of both numbers and geography. In the first four years since publication, the ratio of hard copies to pdfs to online reads was 1:5:15. In real numbers, the book sold roughly 10,000 copies, 50,000 people downloaded the pdf, and 150,000 read anything from a paragraph to the whole thing online.[7] I am delighted that OUP has agreed to continue the experiment with this new edition.

[1] Roman Krznaric, 'How change happens: interdisciplinary perspectives for human development', Oxfam Research Report (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2007).

[2] Duncan Green, 'Some highlights from the first 30 book launches for How Change Happens', From Poverty to Power blog, 17 November 2016, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/some-highlights-from-the-first-30-book-launches-for-how-change-happens/.

[3] https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/make-change-happen.

[4] https://www.lse.ac.uk/resources/calendar2022-2023/courseguides/dv/2022_dv455.htm.

[5] Global Executive Leadership Initiative, Influencing for Senior Leaders: Analysis, Strategy, and Practice, https://www.geli.org/programmes/regional-training-programme/influencing-senior-leaders-analysis-strategy-and-practice.

[6] Duncan Green, 'The case against optimism: a Harvard law prof critiques How Change Happens', From Poverty to Power blog, 1 June 2017, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/the-case-against-optimism-a-harvard-law-prof-critiques-how-change-happens/.

[7] Duncan Green, 'Open Access rocks—How Change Happens is four years old this week and OA has made all the difference', From Poverty to Power blog, https://frompoverty.oxfam.

This book is for activists who want to change the world. A narrow interpretation would say that means people engaged in protest movements and campaigns around topics as disparate as climate change and the rights of people living with disabilities, usually on the margins of 'the system', people who from the days of the abolitionists have been making change happen. But the list of 'change agents' (English is sadly devoid of non-clunky descriptors in this field) is much wider. I include reformers inside the system, such as politicians (both elected and unelected), public officials, and enlightened business people. And the civic world beyond formal institutions is far too rich to narrow down to a single category of 'campaigners'. Faith groups, community leaders, and the many self-help organizations that women form are all often influential players. Even within aid organizations, those engaged in what we call 'programmes'—funding or running projects to create jobs or improve health and education services, or responding to emergencies such as wars or earthquakes—are just as involved in seeking change as campaigners. When I use the word 'activists' I mean all of the above. (If that all sounds too exhausting and you would rather be an armchair activist who just wants to understand change better, that's fine too.)

How Change Happens also sheds light on why the relationships between such activists are often fraught. People bring their own worldviews to the question of change. Do we prefer conflict ('speaking truth to power') or cooperation ('winning friends and influencing people')? Do we see progress everywhere, and seek to accelerate its path, or do we see (in our darker moments) a quixotic struggle against power and injustice that is ultimately doomed to defeat? Do we believe lasting and legitimate change is primarily driven by the accumulation of power at grassroots/individual level, through organization and challenging norms and beliefs? Or by reforms at the levels of laws, policies, institutions, companies, and elites? Or by identifying and supporting 'enlightened' leaders? Do we think the aim of development is to include poor people in the benefits of modernity (money economy, technology, mobility) or to defend other cultures and traditions and build an alternative to modernity? Do we want to make the current system function better, or do we seek something that tackles the deeper structures of power? For me, the answer is 'all of the above'—this

org.uk/open-access-rocks-how-change-happens-is-four-years-old-this-week-and-oa-has-made-all-the-difference/.

book tries to show how these different approaches fit into the wider picture of change.

The book takes as its starting point Amartya Sen's brilliant definition of development as the progressive expansion of the freedoms to be and to do.[8] It discusses political and social change, as well as some of development's economic aspects. It focuses on *intended* change, even though a good deal of change is unintended or accidental (the invention of the washing machine made a huge contribution to women's empowerment, even though that probably wasn't in the minds of its inventors).

One of the curious insights I gleaned from writing the book is that the same categories of analysis (power, norms, complex systems, institutions, agency) seem to be helpful at all levels, whether considering change in a single community, in a country, or at a global level. Like Russian dolls, or fractals, the same features reappear at different scales as you zoom in and out. Those ways of thinking also help when defending good things from attack (resisting the wrong kind of change) and when trying to explain why change often *doesn't* happen, with the deep-rooted resistance of institutions, interests, and ideas that often blocks the way.

Which is perhaps just as well, given that much of the political weather since the book was first published (in the year of the Brexit vote and Donald Trump's election) has been stormy. Around the world, populist governments have attacked or sought to immobilize activists and undermine the institutions that uphold rights and democracy. Initial optimism about the liberating power of the internet has given way to growing fears of a cyber-dystopia. Internally, organizations like Oxfam have become much more aware of their own power, and the potential for abuse, with regard to everything from safeguarding their staff and those they seek to help, to the importance of the language they use.[9] I have tried to reflect this more sombre, reflective mood in this new edition, without abandoning the hopes and expectations that the arc of history will eventually bend towards justice.

The new edition contains two new, or significantly rewritten, chapters. The first is on digital activism, written by my LSE colleague and friend Tom Kirk. It fills a hole that was already noticeable in the book in 2016, on a topic that has since become even more central to the nature of activism. The second is the final, wrap-up chapter, pulling together what I think are

[8] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[9] Oxfam, Inclusive Language Guide, March 2023.

some of the book's lessons for activism. Here I have come off the fence rather. The first edition stopped well short of prescribing in any sort of detail what activists should actually do—I felt the sheer complexity of most systems made efforts to boil down such efforts into the latest 'toolkit' largely futile. But since then, working with people from around the world trying to bring about change in the most difficult of circumstances, I think some useful ideas have emerged on how to bring about intentional change while respecting complexity. See what you think.

How Change Happens is divided into four parts. The first sets out the conceptual underpinning of the book and is an effort to understand change through the prism of complex systems, power, and social norms. Perhaps it is the legacy of a long-distant physics degree, but at times in the last few years, it has felt something like a unified field theory of development is emerging from these discussions. Part I also wrestles with the fact that books are inevitably linear creations: you start at the beginning and (if it's any good) read through to the end. That seems terribly inappropriate for a discussion of non-linear complex systems, and runs the risk that readers give up before getting to the 'so what' conclusion. I have therefore tried to boil down the final message of the book into a brief summary in Part I, which gives a taste of what is to come.

Part II discusses some of the main institutions that are both the object and subject of most change processes: central government, legal systems, political parties and other channels of accountability, the international system, and large transnational corporations. Some of this may feel like hard work, and certainly a long way from a feel-good celebration of activism. But I suspect many activists could use a quick refresher on the history, politics, and internal structures of the institutions they wish to influence if we are to find new ideas and possibilities for promoting change and seizing moments of opportunity.

Part III discusses some of activism's main players—citizen activists, digital spaces, and advocacy organizations—and the role of leadership. Finally, Part IV explores the implications of my analysis for individual activists and their organizations.

The book is not a manual. Indeed one of its conclusions is that an uncritical reliance on checklists and toolkits is one of the things that is holding us back. Instead it proposes a new mindset, involving a combination of analysis, questions, and case studies, with the aim of helping readers look afresh at both the obstacles and the enthralling processes of change going

on all around them, and to gain some new energy and ideas about how to contribute.

Like most change processes, this book emerged rather than being decided in advance. Hundreds of people contributed their ideas and experiences; when we posted a draft version for comment, more than 600 people downloaded it. Since it was published (the wonders of OA), some 200,000 people have read at least parts of it, while the interaction with the participants in the various courses based on it have tested (sometimes to destruction) many of its assumptions and ideas. I have made every effort to incorporate those conversations and a range of voices and opinions, but in the end, this is a book written by a white, Western (and rapidly aging) male, and it inevitably echoes my experiences, networks, culture, assumptions, and prejudices. Please don't forget that, while you're reading it.

Not that 'I' am a fixed quantity. Researching and writing this book has changed me in ways I probably won't fully understand for some time. I have always felt a tension between the desire to be a 'finisher'—dotting the i's and crossing the t's—and the urge to move on to new ideas, to grab the next shiny shell on the beach. At university, I studied physics but moonlighted for lectures on Joyce and Eliot, and wrote truly execrable poetry. My personality assessments in things like the Myers Briggs test are a mess. Most of the time, I don't know what I think or, like the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*, I seem to hold entirely contradictory opinions at the same time.

Somehow, the act of writing made me acknowledge that ambiguity and grow comfortable with it. You would think that writing a book, with its words fixed forever and its pretensions to authority, would be anathema to ambiguity, complexity, and change. Luckily books these days are no longer tablets of stone, rather the more time-consuming part of a wider conversation. As well as the various courses mentioned earlier, the conversation continues on my 'From Poverty to Power' blog. I look forward to hearing your thoughts and arguments on all of the issues raised in this book—and to changing my mind, preferably several times before breakfast.

PART I

RETHINKING OUR APPROACH TO CHANGE

Change may not be linear, but books are. One of the standard frustrations for time-strapped readers is having to wade through a couple of hundred pages before you get to the 'so what' section at the end. Many do not make it, so I have cheated—here's a brief preview of the final chapter of the book, which sets out a (partially) new approach for those seeking to achieve change in the world around them.

Since no amount of upfront analysis will enable us to predict the erratic behaviour of a complex system, such a perspective interweaves thought and action into a distinctive mindset, learning and adapting as we go. The purpose of initial study is to enable us to place our bets intelligently. Crucial decisions come after that, as we act, observe the results, and adjust according to what we learn.

Thinking in terms of power and systems encourages multiple strategies, rather than a single linear approach, and views failure, iteration, and adaptation as expected and necessary, rather than a regrettable deviation from the true path. It covers our ways of working—how we think and feel, as well as how we behave as activists. It also suggests the kinds of questions we should be asking (non-exhaustive—the list is as endless as our imagination).

How we think/feel/work: four steps to help us dance with the system

- Curiosity—study the history; delve into problems; 'learn to dance with the system'.
- Humility—embrace uncertainty, ambiguity, and fallibility (yours and others').

- Reflexivity—be conscious of your own role, prejudices, and power.
- Include multiple perspectives—listen deeply to others, especially 'unusual suspects'; be open to different ways of seeing the world.

The questions we ask (and keep asking)

- What (really) is the problem we are trying to address?
- What kinds of change are needed to resolve the problem (individual attitudes, social norms, laws and policies, access to resources)?
- Among these, where are the most promising points of entry for us to get involved, given who we are (our institutions, experience, networks, legitimacy)?
- What kind of power perpetuates the problem or enables it to be resolved? How can we help redistribute power to achieve fairer outcomes?
- What precedents are there that we can learn from (positive deviance, history, current political and social tides)?
- What kind of strategy might make sense for this change (traditional project, insider vs. outsider advocacy, multiple parallel experiments, fast feedback and rapid response)?
- What tactics are we going to try (delivering services, building the broader enabling environment, demonstration projects, convening and brokering, supporting local grassroots organizations, advocacy)?
- Learning and course correction: how will we learn about the impact of our actions or changes in context (e.g. critical junctures)?

I hope that gives you a flavour. For more on rethinking our approach, please skip to Chapter 13. Otherwise, just read the whole book—good luck!

1
Systems Thinking Changes Everything

> The future is a dance between patterns and events.
>
> ***Embracing Complexity***[1]

Political and economic earthquakes are often sudden and unforeseeable, despite the false pundits who pop up later to claim they predicted them all along. Take the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 2008 global financial crisis, the Arab Spring (and ensuing Winter), the Covid-19 pandemic, or Russia's invasion of the Ukraine. Even at a personal level, change is largely unpredictable: how many of us can say our lives have gone according to the plans we had as 16 year olds?

The essential mystery of the future poses a huge challenge to activists. If change is only explicable in the rear-view mirror, how can we accurately envision the future changes we seek, let alone achieve them? How can we be sure our proposals will make things better, and not fall victim to unintended consequences? People employ many concepts to grapple with such questions. I find 'systems' and 'complexity' two of the most helpful.

A 'system' is an interconnected set of elements coherently organized in a way that achieves something. It is more than the sum of its parts: a body is more than an aggregate of individual cells; a university is not merely an agglomeration of individual students, professors, and buildings; an ecosystem is not just a set of individual plants and animals.[2]

[1] Jean Boulton, Peter Allen, and Cliff Bowman, *Embracing Complexity: Strategic Perspectives for an Age of Turbulence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 29. By permission of Oxford University Press.

[2] Donella Meadows and Diana Wright, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

A defining property of human systems is complexity: because of the sheer number of relationships and feedback loops among their many elements, they cannot be reduced to simple chains of cause and effect. Think of a crowd on a city street, or a flock of starlings wheeling in the sky at dusk. Even with supercomputers, it is impossible to predict the movement of any given person or starling, but there is order; amazingly few collisions occur even on the most crowded streets.

In complex systems, change results from the interplay of many diverse and apparently unrelated factors. Those of us engaged in seeking change need to identify which elements are important and explore how they interact.

My interest in systems thinking began when collecting stories for my book *From Poverty to Power* (2008). The light-bulb moment came on a visit to India's Bundelkhand region, where the poor fishing communities of Tikamgarh had won rights to more than 150 large ponds. In that struggle numerous factors interacted to create change. First, a technological shift triggered changes in behaviour: the introduction of new varieties of fish, which made the ponds more profitable, induced landlords to seize ponds that had previously been communal. Conflict then built pressure for government action: a group of twelve brave young fishers in one village fought back, prompting a series of violent clashes that radicalized and inspired other communities; women's groups were organized for the first time, taking control of nine ponds. Enlightened politicians and NGOs helped pass new laws and the police amazed everyone by enforcing them.

The fishing communities were the real heroes of the story. They tenaciously faced down a violent campaign of intimidation, moved from direct action to advocacy, and ended up winning not only access to the ponds but also a series of legal and policy changes that benefitted all fishing families.[3][4]

The neat narrative sequence of cause and effect I've just written, of course, is only possible in hindsight. In the thick of the action, no-one could

[3] Neelkanth Mishra and Mirza Firoz Beg, *Strength in Numbers: Fishing Communities in India Assert Their Traditional Rights Over Livelihoods Resources* (Oxford: Oxfam GB on behalf of Oxfam India, 2011).

[4] In 2018, I revisited the communities and was inspired (and relieved) by the amazing progress achieved since 2006. See 'Tikamgarh revisited, what's happened to the amazing fishing communities I visited in 2006?', https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/tikamgarh-revisited-whats-happened-to-the-amazing-fishing-communities-i-visited-in-2006/.

have said why the various actors acted as they did, or what transformed the relative power of each. Tikamgarh's experience, like that of Bolivia's Chiquitanos discussed in Chapter 3, highlights how unpredictable is the interaction between structures (such as state institutions), agency (by communities and individuals), and the broader context (characterized by shifts in technology, environment, demography, or norms).[5]

Unfortunately, the way we commonly think about change projects onto the future the neat narratives we draw from the past. Many of the mental models we use are linear plans—'if A, then B'—with profound consequences in terms of failure, frustration, and missed opportunities. As John Lennon sang (shortly before his tragic murder), 'life is what happens when you're busy making other plans'.[6]

Let me illustrate with a metaphor. Baking a cake is a linear 'simple' system. All I need do is find a recipe, buy the ingredients, make sure the oven is working, mix, bake, et voila! Some cakes are better than others (mine wouldn't win any prizes), but the basic approach is fixed, replicable, and reasonably reliable. However bad your cake, you'll probably be able to eat it.

Baking a cake is also a fairly accurate metaphor for the approach of many governments, aid agencies, and activist organizations. They decide on a goal (the cake), pick a well-established method (the recipe), find some partners and allies (the ingredients), and off they go.

The trouble is that real life rarely bakes like a cake. Engaging a complex system is more like raising a child. What fate would await your new baby if you decided to go linear and design a project plan setting out activities, assumptions, outputs, and outcomes for the next twenty years and then blindly followed it? Nothing good, probably.

Instead, parents make it up as they go along. And so they should. Raising a child is iterative, an endless testing of assumptions about right and wrong, a constant adaptation to the evolving nature of the child and their relationship with their parents and others. Despite all the 'best practice' guides preying on the insecurity of new parents, child-rearing is devoid of any 'right way' of doing things. What really helps parents is experience (the second kid is usually easier), and the advice and reassurance of people who've

[5] In *From Poverty to Power* I developed this concept into a simple model for analysing processes of change. This book builds on those initial ideas. Duncan Green, *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2008), Annex A: How Change Happens, p. 432.

[6] John Lennon, 'Beautiful Boy', 1980.

been through it themselves—'mentoring' in management speak. Working in complex systems requires the same kind of iterative, collaborative, and flexible approach. Deng Xiaoping's recipe for China's take-off epitomizes this approach: 'We will cross the river by feeling the stones under our feet, one by one'.[7]

Systems are in a state of constant flux. Jean Boulton, one of the authors of *Embracing Complexity*, likes to use the metaphor of the forest, which typically goes through cycles of growth, collapse, regeneration, and new growth.[8] In the early part of the cycle's growth phase, the number of species and of individual plants and animals increases quickly, as organisms arrive to exploit all available ecological niches. The forest's components become more linked to one another, enhancing the ecosystem's 'connectedness' and multiplying the ways the forest regulates itself and maintains its stability. However, the forest's very connectedness and efficiency eventually reduce its capacity to cope with severe outside shocks, paving the way for a collapse and eventual regeneration. Jean argues that activists need to adapt their analysis and strategy according to the stage that their political surroundings most closely resemble: growth, maturity, locked-in but fragile, or collapsing.

I was not a quick or easy convert to systems thinking, despite the fact that my neural pathways were shaped by my undergraduate degree in physics, where linear Newtonian mechanics quickly gave way to the more mind-bending world of quantum mechanics, wave particle duality, relativity, and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Similarly, my experience of activism has obliged me to question linear approaches to campaigning, as I hesitantly embraced the realization that change doesn't happen like that.

Once I began thinking about systems, I started to see complexity and unpredictable 'emergent change' everywhere—in politics, economics, at work, and even in the lives of those around me. The rest of this chapter suggests ways systems thinking can transform our understanding and actions.

[7] Arthur Sweetman and Jun Zhang, *Economic Transitions with Chinese Characteristics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), p. 1.

[8] Thomas Homer-Dixon, 'Our panarchic future', *World Watch* 22 (2) (March/April 2009), https://rs.resalliance.org/2009/02/13/our-panarchic-future-worldwatch-institute/.

Systems, economics, and development

Several great books helped me flesh out the ideas behind systems thinking and apply them to economics. They included Hernando de Soto's *The Mystery of Capital*,[9] a brilliant description of how property rights in successful economies emerge organically from gold rushes and other economic events, and *The Origin of Wealth*[10] by Eric Beinhocker,[11] who argues that the discipline that became mainstream economics took a tragic wrong turn in the nineteenth century when its adherents chose physics rather than evolution as the basis for its thinking.

Mental models that stress stability and equilibrium (balls in bowls disturbed, then rolling back to rest) hardly capture the profound instability of real economies, which grow and evolve as technologies rise and fall, firms start up or go bust, countries wax and wane.

Replace Isaac Newton with Charles Darwin and economies start to make much more sense. Firms, ideas, and institutions obey the basic mechanisms of evolution. First comes variation (or differentiation), the endless frenetic churn of human activity, as we attempt to come up with the next big idea, new technology, trendier restaurant, catchier tune. Then comes selection: people either like/buy your idea or they don't. Next comes amplification: if your app is popular, more and more people buy your product, and the company grows and becomes more powerful. Evolution lies at the heart of what economist Joseph Schumpeter called the 'creative destruction' of capitalism, and its dynamism partly explains why the centrally planned economies of the last century could not compete.

This is what makes China all the more fascinating. Yuen Yuen Ang's instant classic *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*[12] shows that, far from being a rigid state based on central planning, China was willing to 'dance with the system'. While there were plenty of dos and don'ts, the Party used deliberate 'directed improvisation' for a third tier of decisions, involving a

[9] Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

[10] Eric Beinhocker, *The Origin of Wealth: Evolution, Complexity, and the Radical Remaking of Economics* (London: Random House Business Books, 2007).

[11] See also David Hamilton, *Evolutionary Economics: A Study of Change in Economic Thought* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1970).

[12] Yuen Yuen Ang, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

'paradoxical mixture of top-down direction and bottom-up improvisation'. She paints a picture of millions of study groups of civil servants poring over the latest Delphic utterances from the Central Committee (e.g. 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'), trying to work out what they can get away with, then entrepreneurially beavering away in response. The solutions and innovations they came up with sometimes astonished the big cheeses in Beijing, but were often then picked up and amplified (Darwin's third stage).

Systems thinking raises some awkward questions for me regarding economic policy. In my years doing policy advocacy on trade and globalization, the work of economists like Ha-Joon Chang and Dani Rodrik had fully convinced me of the need for the state to play a hands-on role in economic development through some form of industrial policy. Put in its crudest form, industrial policy boils down to 'picking winners'—as the South Korean state did when it decided to shift its economy into shipbuilding and then electronics. That worked in South Korea and a handful of other 'developmental states', but failed in many others to produce modern, competitive companies because businesses used their connections to lobby for unwarranted state subsidies and protection from imports. Critics of industrial policy love to quote the aphorism 'governments are hopeless at picking winners, but losers are really good at picking governments'.

It is a short step from accepting the systems thinking mantra that 'evolution is cleverer than you are'[13] to arguing in favour of *laissez faire* policies that leave it entirely up to the market what will be produced and where. Is systems thinking inherently pro-liberalization and anti-state intervention? In order to embrace Eric must I abandon Ha-Joon?

Thinking about how power operates within systems (the topic of Chapter 2) helped me resolve the dilemma. Even if markets start off with a 'level playing field', they self-organize into complex structures that reward winners and punish losers in the 'positive feedback loops' that are a common feature of systems. In the absence of countervailing forces such as state regulation or trade unions, the powerful can use their political and economic clout to get even richer—survival of the fattest, rather than the fittest—and so create growing polarization and unfairness, leading to monopoly and stagnation.[14]

[13] Known as Orgel's Second Rule, after evolutionary biologist Leslie Orgel. 'Leslie Orgel', https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/leslie_orgel.

[14] Jean Boulton, Peter Allen, and Cliff Bowman, *Embracing Complexity: Strategic Perspectives for an Age of Turbulence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

In complex systems, institutions are needed to keep the playing field level enough to encourage the dynamism at its heart—for example, through competition policy, access to information, enhancing general technological skills, or credit and other support for small firms. And since markets should be at the service of society, not the other way around, the state and other institutions must find ways to push markets to pursue socially desirable goals, such as greater equality, human rights, or long-term sustainability, without undermining the dynamism of the market system. A tall order, but many states have managed to balance power such that public institutions are able to respond rapidly to feedback from the real economy, while remaining sufficiently autonomous to minimize capture by vested interests.[15] To my relief, it turns out that Eric and Ha-Joon are compatible, after all.

Crises as critical junctures

Change in complex systems occurs in slow, steady processes such as demographic shifts and in sudden, unforeseeable jumps. Nothing seems to change until suddenly it does: a stop–start rhythm that can confound activists. When British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was asked what he most feared in politics, he reportedly replied in his wonderfully patrician style, 'Events, dear boy'. Such 'events' that disrupt social, political, or economic relations are not just a prime ministerial headache. They can open the door to previously unthinkable reforms.

In Tikamgarh, in 1995, a protest in which three people were seriously injured and fishing families' houses were burned down became a rallying point for further organization. I have heard dozens of similar accounts around the world—most community change processes include a turning point that becomes iconic and inspirational.

What triggered change in Tikamgarh also works on a greater scale. Such 'critical junctures', as the economists Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson[16] call them, force political leaders to question their long-held

[15] Peter Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[16] Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), p. 101.

assumptions about what constitute 'sound' policies, and make them more willing to take the risks associated with innovation, as the status quo suddenly appears less worth defending.

Much of the institutional framework we take for granted today was born of the trauma of the Great Depression and the Second World War. The disastrous failures of policy that led to these twin catastrophes profoundly affected the thinking of political and economic leaders across the world, triggering a vastly expanded role for government in managing the economy and addressing social ills, as well as precipitating the decolonization of large parts of the globe.

More recently, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 2008 global financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic,[17] and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have all sent economic and political shock waves reverberating around the world, shaping its evolution for decades to come.

At national level, political and economic upheaval in China (Maoism), Vietnam (economic crisis), and Bangladesh (a massive cyclone swiftly followed by a brutal war of independence from Pakistan)[18] paved the way for economic take-off.

Milton Friedman, the father of monetarist economics, wrote:

> Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.[19]

Naomi Klein, in her 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine*,[20] argues that 'Disaster Capitalism' has used shocks much better than the Left, especially in recent decades. Klein cites the example of how proponents of private education in the US managed to turn Hurricane Katrina to their advantage: 'Within 19 months, New Orleans' public school system had been

[17] Filippo Artuso, Katrina Barnes, Duncan Green, and Irene Guijt, 'Emergent agency in a time of COVID-19', Oxfam Research Report (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2023).

[18] Naomi Hossain, *The Aid Lab: Understanding Bangladesh's Unexpected Success* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[19] Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. ix.

[20] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2007).

almost completely replaced by privately run charter schools'. According to the American Enterprise Institute 'Katrina accomplished in a day what Louisiana school reformers couldn't do after years of trying'.[21]

Although it is hard to establish causation, many observers attribute some of the more regressive recent developments, such as Brexit or the rise of populism, to the loss of faith in political institutions triggered by the global financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath of wage stagnation and rising inequality.

Sometimes, however, progressive activists engaged in policy advocacy are also attuned to Friedman's lesson. Within weeks of the appalling Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh that killed over 1,100 people in April 2013, an international 'Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh'[22] was signed and delivered.[23] A five-year legally binding agreement between global companies, retailers, and trade unions, the Accord mandates some astounding breakthroughs: an independent inspection programme supported by the brand-name companies and involving workers and trade unions; the public disclosure of all factories, inspection reports, and corrective action plans; a commitment by signatory brands to fund improvements and maintain sourcing relationships; democratically elected health and safety committees in all factories; and worker empowerment through an extensive training programme, complaints mechanism, and the right to refuse unsafe work.

In hindsight, we can point to several factors to explain how this grisly 'shock as opportunity' drove rapid movement towards better regulation:

- A forum on labour rights in Bangladesh (the Ethical Trading Initiative) had already built a high degree of trust between traditional antagonists (companies, unions, and NGOs). Trust allowed people to get on the phone to each other right away.
- Prior work, ongoing since 2011, had sketched the outline of a potential accord; the Rana Plaza disaster massively escalated the pressure to act on it.

[21] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2007), p. 6.

[22] 'Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh' (ACCORD), www.bangladeshaccord.org.

[23] Duncan Green, 'Will horror and over a thousand dead be a watershed moment for Bangladesh?' From Poverty to Power blog, 17 May 2013, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/will-horror-and-over-a-thousand-dead-be-a-watershed-moment-for-bangladesh/.

- A nascent national process (the National Action Plan for Fire Safety) gave outsiders something to support and build on.
- Energetic leadership from two new international trade unions (IndustriALL and UNI Global Union) helped get the right people in the room.

Ten years on, a study of the legacy of Rana Plaza by Bangladeshi researchers concluded:

> Factory buildings have become much safer; a culture of occupational health and safety has been established in most factories; and manufacturers have begun to work with labour unions on factory safety monitoring. However, Bangladeshi workers are still paid among the lowest wages in the world, barely enough to eat or cover rent. Low wages are a direct consequence of concerted efforts to restrict labour organization, which in turn reflects the fact that factory owners have far more political influence than factory workers.[24]

Perhaps we should add to Friedman's instruction 'to keep alternatives alive and available' that progressive activists also need to build trust and connections among the key individuals who could implement the desired change.

I am not suggesting that activists become ambulance chasers, jumping on every crisis to make their point. Rather, we must understand the windows of opportunity provided by 'events, dear boy' as critical junctures when our long-term work creating constituencies for change, and transforming attitudes and norms, can suddenly come to fruition or face new threats.[25]

[24] Maheen Sultan, Iffat Jahan Antara, and Touhidul Islam, 'Ten years after Rana Plaza: remembering, learning, and moving forward', Research Brief (Dhaka: BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, 2023).

[25] For examples of how critical junctures have led to numerous anti-corruption reforms, see Florencia Guerzovich, Soledad Gattoni, and Dave Algoso, 'Seizing a window of opportunity: lessons from research on anti-corruption reform', From Poverty to Power blog, 9 February 2021, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/seizing-a-window-of-opportunity-lessons-from-research-on-anticorruption-reform/.

The world is complex—so what?

Many activists are, above all, doers, keen to change the world, starting today. They instinctively reject the first lesson of systems thinking: look hard before you leap. They get itchy with anything that smacks of ivory tower 'navel gazing' and worry about 'analysis paralysis'. In the development arena, donors often accentuate the penchant for short-termism by demanding tangible results within the timescales of project funding cycles.

My advice would be to take a deep breath, put your sense of urgency to one side for a moment, and become a 'reflectivist' who, in the words of Ben Ramalingam, should 'map, observe, and listen to the system to identify the spaces where change is already happening and try to encourage and nurture them'.[26]

That said, another lesson of systems thinking is that you cannot understand and plan everything in advance. If each situation is different, so must be the response. One of the founders of systems thinking, Donella Meadows, talks of the need to learn to 'dance with systems'.[27]

Combining these two lessons leads to some general principles for how to bring about change:

Be flexible: You should be willing to shelve or adapt the current plan in response to emerging events, and your organization's culture should thank the staff who alert it to signals of change. In the world of humanitarian response, this approach is standard, whereas in long-term aid programmes or campaigns people are often reluctant to shift gears, or simply fail to notice that new opportunities have opened up.

Seek fast and ongoing feedback: If you don't know what is going to happen, you have to detect changes in real time, especially when the windows of opportunity around such changes are short lived. That means having (or developing) acute antennae and embedding them

[26] Ben Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[27] Donella Meadows and Diana Wright, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

in multiple networks to pick up signals of change and transmit them to your organization. This will usually involve listening (or transferring power) to actors in the communities concerned—a process known as 'localization' in the aid business.

Success is often accidental: 'Fortune favours the prepared mind', according to Louis Pasteur, pioneer of the germ theory of disease.[28] Surprise breakthroughs (often subsequently rewritten as triumphs of planning!) are a recurring feature of innovation and change. One reason you need fast feedback is to spot and respond to accidental successes as early as possible. One approach that builds on success born of chance variation, positive deviance, is discussed in the next section.

Undertake multiple parallel experiments: Activists hate failure. No one wants to think they've wasted their time, or wake up to newspaper headlines about money lost or 'wasted' on failed projects. Compare this risk aversion to a venture capitalist who backs ten projects, knowing that nine will fail but they will make enough money on the tenth to more than compensate for the rest. With a venture approach you would spend less time and money designing the perfect plan and instead pursue a 'lean start-up' based on best guesses about what will work, followed by a fast and frugal cycle of experimentation and adaptation until you find something that really does.[29]

Learn by doing (and failing): In a complex system, it is highly unlikely you will get things right from the outset, or that they will stay right (think back to raising a child). You and your colleagues have to be ready to discuss and learn from failure, rather than sweep it under the carpet. Fast feedback on your own impact is thus just as important as feedback on the outside world, not least to detect unintended consequences. If people are keeping chickens in the latrines you are building, you probably need to go back to the drawing board.[30] Alas,

[28] Lecture, University of Lille, 7 December 1854.

[29] Steve Blank, 'Why the lean start-up changes everything', *Harvard Business Review* (May 2013), pp. 63–72.

[30] Tim Harford, in his book *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure*, proposes a 'three step recipe for successful adapting: try new things, in the expectation that some will fail; make failure survivable, because it will be common; and make sure that you know when you have failed … distinguishing success from failure, oddly, can be the hardest task of all'. Tim Harford, *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure* (London: Little, Brown, 2011).

my experience is that colleagues are reluctant to admit, let alone discuss, failure. A better way may be to ask 'What have you learned?' during the course of any given effort, which covers the same ground in a less embarrassing fashion.

Identify and discuss your rules of thumb: When the US Marines go into combat (an archetypal complex system), they use rules of thumb (stay in contact, take the high ground, keep moving) rather than detailed 'best-practice guidelines'. Activists do too (Have we thought about gender? What is the government doing?), but these often remain tacit, and so are not questioned, tested, or improved upon. Make them explicit and review them regularly.[31]

Convene and broker relationships: Bringing dissimilar local players together to find their own solutions can be a particularly useful role for foreign aid organizations and other activists from outside the community in question. Effective convening and brokering requires understanding who should be invited to the table. Which players have, or could have, their hands on the levers of change? Providing them with a space for dialogue outside of their home institutions can encourage them to think in new ways.

Journeys not moments: Based on a review of long-term significant, progressive change events around the world,[32] my colleague Irene Guijt concluded, 'The past decade has shown that change can happen but that doesn't mean it sticks. How change happens and how change "sticks" are different. This means referring to scales of change; journeys rather than single victories, dealing with inevitable backlash, emotional energy to sustain the longer journey, evolving coalitions, and an integrated approach that simultaneously seeks to reduce poverty, environmental damage and gender injustice. All this must be led by a vision of a better world, an unshakeable belief that this is possible and worth fighting for and a dogged commitment to create and scale solutions even against the odds.'[33]

[31] Duncan Green, 'Rules of thumb—good idea or double-edged sword?' From Poverty to Power blog, 1 October 2020, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/rules-of-thumb-good-idea-or-double-edged-sword/.

[32] Ruth Mayne and Irene Guijt, 'Inspiring radically better futures', Oxfam Research Report (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2020).

[33] Email communication, 26 July 2023.

If these principles sound a bit abstract, here are three examples of change that put systems thinking into practice.[34]

Chukua Hatua ('take action' in Swahili) is an Oxfam project in Tanzania explicitly modelled on evolutionary theory, aimed at improving the accountability of local authorities to their citizens. In the first phase, lots of different 'hares' were set loose, from 'farmer animators' who encouraged peasant communities to engage with village officials, to 'active musicians' who visited primary school student councils to spread the word about the benefits of community participation. The project plan stipulated that this experiment in variation would be followed at a predetermined date by selection. Communities, partners, and Oxfam staff met to identify the most successful variants, which were then expanded and adapted. Farmer animators proved the most promising; communities nominated non farmers as animators, including a father who was trying to convince families to send their daughters to school and a woman who was organizing fellow traders at the local market. The first generation of animators was put to work training the new arrivals.[35]

A group of 'development entrepreneurs' in the Philippines,[36] backed by The Asia Foundation, advocates for reforms in education, taxation, civil aviation regulation, and property rights by working in small teams. The teams comprise a leader, technical analysts (e.g. lawyers), lobbyists with good political skills and networks, and 'insiders' with deep knowledge and experience in the reform area (e.g. former civil servants). Such teams can respond rapidly to events and new opportunities, making a number of 'small bets' and then dropping the experiments that go nowhere.

Every two months, Oxfam's TajWSS project to improve Tajikistan's dismal water and sanitation systems convenes everybody involved: seventeen

[34] For an excellent and much more comprehensive guide to using systems thinking in practice, see Kimberly Bowman, John Chettleborough, Helen Jeans, Jo Rowlands, and James Whitehead, *Systems Thinking: An Introduction for Oxfam Programme Staff* (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2015), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/systems-thinking-an-introduction-for-oxfam-programme-staff-579896/.

[35] Duncan Green, *The Chukua Hatua Accountability Programme, Tanzania* (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015). Lisa Marie Faye, personal communication, 31 August 2015.

[36] Jaime Faustino and David Booth, 'Development entrepreneurship: how donors and leaders can foster institutional change' (San Francisco and London: The Asia Foundation and ODI, 2014); and Duncan Green, 'How does Coalitions for Change in the Philippines compare with other adaptive management programmes?' From Poverty to Power blog, 11 September 2019, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/how-does-coalitions-for-change-in-the-philippines-compare-with-other-adaptive-management-programmes/.

government ministries and agencies, several UN bodies, international NGOs, aid agencies, academics, journalists, Tajik civil society organizations, private companies, and parliamentarians. Resisting the urge to forge a master plan, this motley grouping engages in a freewheeling discussion that has given birth to innovative partial solutions. For example, local officials have found companies willing to help with village-level chlorination and Tajik banks to help finance water systems. Its biggest victory so far is a new Water Law that establishes who is in charge, who is responsible for regulation, and who is the service provider. According to TajWSS activist Ghazi Kelani, 'We didn't draft it—it had been there for years in somebody's drawer. The network raised the importance of having a law, someone dug it up and we decided it was good enough for a start'.[37]

Finally, since this book was published in 2016, those involved in the work of organizations like Oxfam have come to realize that they are also systems, deeply influenced by the interplay of power and norms in a way that does not always work in the interests of the most marginalized people and communities. The 'sector' is deeply engaged in discussions on how to shift power to the grassroots (localization) and from North to South (decolonization) and how to tackle deeply rooted issues such as gender inequality, affecting everything from the language we use, to the way money is spent and decisions made. At the time of writing, it is still too early to say how much real difference these discussions have made—perhaps I (or someone else) can come back in another ten years with an update ….

Positive deviance

These principles for working in complex systems can help activists improve our day-to-day work, but they can also prompt a radical rethink. One of the most exciting alternatives to business as usual goes by the name of 'positive deviance'.

In December 1991, Jerry and Monique Sternin arrived in Vietnam to work for Save the Children in four communities with under-three-year-olds, most of whom were malnourished. The Sternins asked teams of volunteers to observe in homes where children were poor but well fed. In

[37] Ghazi Kelani, Author interview, September 2012.

every case they found that the mother or father was collecting a number of tiny shrimps, crabs, or snails—making for a portion 'the size of one joint of one finger'—from the rice paddies and adding these to the child's diet. These 'positive deviant' families also instructed the home babysitter to feed the child four or even five times a day, in contrast to most families who fed young children only before parents headed to the rice fields early in the morning and in the late afternoon after returning from a working day. Results were shared on a board in the town hall, and the charts quickly became a focus of attention and buzz. By the end of the first year, 80 per cent of the children in the programme were fully rehabilitated.

In their book *The Power of Positive Deviance*,[38] the Sternins, with Richard Pascale, describe how the approach was subsequently applied in fifty countries, on everything from decreasing gang violence in inner-city New Jersey to reducing sex trafficking of girls in rural Indonesia. The starting point is to 'look for outliers who succeed against the odds'. But who is doing the looking also matters. If external 'experts' investigate the outliers and turn the results into a toolkit, little will come of it. When communities make the discovery for themselves, behavioural change can take root—providing what the authors call 'social proof'.

Positive deviance capitalizes on a hugely energizing fact: for any given problem, someone in the community will have already identified a solution. It focuses on people's assets and knowledge, rather than their lacks and problems. The Sternins recount their experience in Misiones Province, Argentina, where school dropout rates were awful. Teachers and principals were hostile to criticism and put the blame on the parents. All that started to change when facilitators asked the 'somersault question' 'Why were dropout rates much lower in some schools?' Teachers then agreed to ask the parents at those schools, who rapidly identified teacher attitudes towards parents as the key. The positive deviant teachers were negotiating informal annual 'learning contracts' with parents. When many teachers adopted that approach, dropout rates in test schools fell by 50 per cent.

Despite its success, positive deviance remains an outlier in the aid business—I find myself advocating it in several conversations every month,

[38] Richard Pascale, Jerry Sternin, and Monique Sternin, *The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2010).

to little avail. The 'standard model' of identifying gaps, devising initiatives to fill them, and disseminating the guidance is incredibly hard to budge. Perhaps not surprisingly, experts are often part of the problem. The Sternins write:

> Those eking out existence on the margins of society grasp the simple elegance of the PD approach—in contrast to the sceptical consideration of the more educated and/or privileged. Uptake seems in inverse proportion to prosperity, formal authority, years of schooling and degrees hanging on walls.[39]

I can vouch from personal experience how hard it is to give up my learned role and become a facilitator. Holding back from providing your own answer when you ask a group a question is, as the Sternins put it, 'more difficult than trying to stifle an oncoming sneeze'.

Conclusion

In the first film in *The Matrix* series (the only one worth watching), the hero, Neo, suddenly starts to see the matrix of ones and zeroes that lies beneath the surface of his world, at which point he becomes invincible. I feel similarly about systems (aside from the invincibility part). As the title of this chapter says, thinking in systems should change everything, including the way we look at politics, economics, society, and even ourselves, in new and exciting ways.

It also poses a fundamental challenge to traditional linear planning approaches and to our ways of working. We activists need to become better 'reflectivists', taking the time to explore the system before (and while) engaging with it. We need to better understand the stop–start rhythm of change exhibited by complex systems and adapt our efforts accordingly. And we need to become less arrogant, more willing to learn from accidents, from failures, and from other people, especially those at local level who are both most affected and most knowledgeable about the challenges they face.

[39] Richard Pascale, Jerry Sternin, and Monique Sternin, *The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2010), p. 8.

Finally, we have to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty, while maintaining the energy and determination so essential to changing the world.

It isn't easy, but it is entirely possible, as I hope I have shown. Once we learn to 'dance with the system', no other partner will do. In the next chapter, we explore the force that binds together disparate systems, the sea in which change and change agents swim: power.

Further reading

Y.Y. Ang, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

E. Beinhocker, *The Origin of Wealth: The Radical Remaking of Economics and What it Means for Business and Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2007).

J. Boulton, P. Allen, and C. Bowman, *Embracing Complexity: Strategic Perspectives for an Age of Turbulence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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R. Pascale, J. Sternin, and M. Sternin, *The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2010).

B. Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

C. Rayner and F. Bonnici, *The Systems Work of Social Change: How to Harness Connection, Context, and Power to Cultivate Deep and Enduring Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Further viewing

'Development and Complexity', slide and audio lecture by Owen Barder, CGD, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02ezpxpcfqs&ab_channel=centerforglobaldevelopment.

2
Power Lies at the Heart of Change

As a rather lost and miserable post-college backpacker, I once found myself in a small village on the shores of Lake Titicaca in Peru, at the home of a charismatic activist with the memorable name of Tito Castro. Tito was a lapsed Christian Brother who had decided to devote himself to raising awareness among Peru's indigenous people. He had arrived in the village with a library of books on politics, economics, sociology, and indigenous rights, and when I met him he was lending out books and running discussion groups for local leaders.[1]

Tito took me to meet the villagers and introduced me to Peru's history of apartheid-like racial discrimination. He patiently explained how, by organizing, indigenous people can win greater control over their lives. By the time I went on my way, I was filled with an exhilarating sense of a big and heroic struggle for justice. My slow process of learning suddenly hit a critical juncture, and soon I was back home working to defend human rights in Chile and Central America. Tito later became mayor of the nearest city, Puno, and eventually a sociology professor at Lima's Catholic University.

What Tito showed me—and I experienced—was empowerment in real time, when light bulbs go on in the heads of people who had previously felt helpless or shackled by their lot, and they begin to take action to change it. Such small, personal events often lie at the heart of the tides of social and political change that are the subject of this book.

Empowerment, the driving force behind Amartya Sen's definition of development as the progressive expansion of the freedoms to do and to be,[2] is one of the most ubiquitous buzzwords in the lexicon of development

[1] For more on this quintessentially Latin American approach to activism see Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1996), first published in English in 1970. https://envs.ucsc.edu/internships/internship-readings/freire-pedagogy-of-the-oppressed.pdf.

[2] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

activists. Many, however, shy away from the word from which the term derives: power. Power, which allows one person or institution to command the resources, actions, or innermost thoughts of another, was central to Tito's understanding of Peruvian society and it should be so for all activists.

The most evident and most discussed form of power is 'visible power':[3] the world of politics and authority, policed by laws, violence, and money. It gets bad press, conjuring up images of force, coercion, discrimination, corruption, repression, and abuse. But visible power is also necessary to do good, whether to implement enlightened public policies or to prevent acts of violence by the strong against the weak.

Activists seeking social and political change usually focus their efforts on those who wield visible power—presidents, prime ministers, and chief executive officers (CEOs)—since they hold apparent authority over the matter at hand. Yet the hierarchy of visible power is usually underpinned by subtle interactions among a more diverse set of players. 'Hidden power' describes what goes on behind the scenes: the lobbyists, the corporate chequebooks, the old boy network.[4]

Hidden power shapes what decision-makers consider sensible or reasonable. Any environmentalist who has sat across the table from government officials or mainstream economists and dared to question the advisability of unlimited economic growth in a resource-constrained world will have met the blank faces that confront anyone breaching those boundaries.

As important as 'hidden power', and certainly more insidious, is 'invisible power', which causes the relatively powerless to internalize and accept their condition. In the words of French philosopher Michel Foucault, 'There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, which each individual will end up interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer.'[5]

Invisible power often determines the capacity of change movements to influence visible and hidden power. It shapes the belief systems about

[3] See Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation* (Oklahoma City: World Neighbors, 2002). See also 'Powercube—understanding power for social change', http://www.powercube.net/.

[4] Stephen Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[5] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–77* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 155.

what is 'normal' or 'natural', leading some groups to exclude themselves, as when women blame themselves for their abuse or poor people for their poverty. 'Empowerment', through the sort of awareness-raising Tito Castro promoted to build self-esteem and local leadership, seeks to alter invisible power. Because the targets of such efforts are the inner lives of individuals, cultural initiatives and mass media can be important tools, as has been the case in the rapid progress in respect for women's rights in recent decades. Chapter 3 discusses how such shifts are reflected in the evolution of 'norms'—ideas of what is natural, acceptable, or right—an area that receives increasing attention in development circles.

Thanks in part to movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, one of the striking changes since this book was first published is the attention now devoted to how power operates within activism itself. Some of the power is visible—the imbalance between donor and recipient is so prevalent that I was recently reduced to giving a lecture (with apologies to John Lennon) on 'Imagine There's No Money—a thought experiment on aid without $'.[6]

But much of the power is invisible—deep-rooted layers of colonial superiority ('white saviourism'[7]), racism, misogyny, homophobia, classism, or other forms of prejudice can coexist and undermine stated commitments to change in these very areas of inequality.

Academics, North and South, shape minds and policy, but are not exempt. Professor Epeli Hau'ofa in his essay 'Our Sea of Islands' reflects on his own complicity in reproducing the notions of smallness and dependency in the Pacific region: 'What kind of teaching is it to stand in front of young people from your own region, people you claim as your own, who have come to university with high hopes for the future, and you tell them that our countries are hopeless? Is this not what neocolonialism is all about? To make people believe they have no choice but to depend?'[8]

[6] Duncan Green, '"Imagine there's no money"—a thought experiment on aid without $', From Poverty to Power blog, 2 November 2022, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/imagine-theres-no-money-a-thought-experiment-on-aid-without/.

[7] Themrise Khan, Kanakulya Dickson, and Maïka Sondarjee, *White Saviorism in International Development: Theories, Practices and Lived Experiences* (Quebec: Daraja Press, 2023).

[8] Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Our sea of islands', *The Contemporary Pacific* 6 (1) (Spring 1994), pp. 148–61.

No such thing as a power vacuum

Rich ecosystems of power exist in the most unpropitious of circumstances. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is often portrayed as a failed state, particularly in the East, a dystopian nightmare of anarchic violence. But to call that a 'power vacuum' is a highly misleading caricature. Power is everywhere, and it is multifaceted.

During a visit to the DRC in 2014, I met one village official, Kabuya Muhemeri, in his 'office': tin roof, floor of volcanic rubble, no glass in the windows, bare plank walls covered with heavily logoed NGO and UN posters on sexual violence, torture, HIV, and land rights, plus a hand-drawn map of the area. On his desk, the classic tools of the functionary: a rubber stamp, a mobile phone, and a pile of files and notebooks.

He had been in the post since 2008. He laughed when asked if the state gives him training: 'We rely on the NGOs for that. They help us with what the law says—don't torture, don't lock people up for unpaid debts. There are lots of rights and laws I didn't know.' In his world, state officials and customary authorities are all part of public administration. 'The *chefferie* (traditional authority) collects the taxes. I report to the *mwami* (traditional leader) as well as to the ministry.'[9]

Later, I talked to a traditional leader, on the veranda of his rather smart house at the top of a steep mud path. The chief spoke softly, radiating authority and cradling his two mobile telephones. 'I've been chief for twenty years, my father was chief before me. The state authorities are in charge of roads and bridges, tax is collected from shops, restaurants, and markets by the *chef de chefferie* [his superior in the traditional hierarchy]. I encourage the population to pay.'

Several other poles of power vie with civil and traditional authorities: armed groups, the army, the police, humanitarian agencies, faith organizations, civil society organizations, secret societies, even sports clubs. A body of recent scholarship terms all of these as examples of 'public authorities', a useful term that reminds us of the need to look at power beyond the boundaries of the state.[10] Activists, whether local or from outside, need to understand the nature and distribution of the power wielded by these

[9] Author interview, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, June 2014.

[10] Tom Kirk and Tim Allen, *Public Authority in Africa*, Routledge Handbook of Public Policy in Africa (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

varied bodies (especially the ones that are unfamiliar) to determine who they need to work with (and how) to help bring about change.[11] We'll examine the interactions among such poles of power in more detail in Chapter 4.

Power and change

Contemplating the gamut of visible, hidden, and invisible power that supports the status quo can be dispiriting, inducing feelings of helplessness before the Leviathan.[12] Fresh back from my life-changing moment in Tito's house, I spent many long mornings standing outside the US embassy in London's Grosvenor Square, protesting against Washington's policies in Latin America. Our motley scatter of placards and banners contrasted painfully with the vast and highly visible power encapsulated in the great blank face of the building, topped by a huge gilded eagle glowering down at us. I didn't feel very powerful.

Fortunately, other ways of thinking about power highlight the opportunities and possibilities for change. My colleague Jo Rowlands, based on her work on women's empowerment in Honduras,[13] identified a different scheme that encapsulates this more optimistic approach:

- Power *within*: personal self-confidence and a sense of rights and entitlement.
- Power *with*: collective power, through organization, solidarity, and joint action.
- Power *to*: meaning effective choice, the capability to decide actions and carry them out.
- Power *over*: the power of hierarchy and domination, as described above.

This 'four powers' model provides a more positive approach to promoting change. People first develop a sense of self-confidence and a

[11] Duncan Green, 'Where does power lie in a fragile state like Eastern Congo? What does it mean for aid organizations?', From Poverty to Power blog, 13 June 2014, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/who-has-power-in-a-fragile-state-like-eastern-congo-what-does-it-mean-for-aid-organizations/.

[12] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[13] Jo Rowlands, *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras* (Oxford: Oxfam UK and Ireland, 1997).

belief in their own rights (power within), then join hands with others in similar situations (power with), and demand a say (power to). Outsiders can help along the way. As Tito showed in his Peruvian idyll, personal empowerment can be the first step on the path to social transformation.

Over the last few years, Jo has been a politely persistent mentor and critic, prodding me to think harder about power and participation in change processes, especially in terms of women's rights, where 'power within' has proved to be a remarkably important and useful concept. In South Asia, *We Can* was an extraordinary campaign on violence against women, launched in late 2004. At its peak it had signed up some four million women and men to be 'change makers'—advocates for an end to violence in their homes and communities. *We Can* did not target policies, laws, or the authorities (visible power). Instead, it addressed invisible power, using dialogue and example to change attitudes and beliefs at the level of individuals and communities. Its model was viral. Each change maker talked to friends and neighbours, trying to persuade them to change and become change makers in their turn. To the organizers' surprise, half of those who signed on over the course of seven years were men.[14]

For Selvaranjani Mukkaiah, a *We Can* activist in Badulla, Sri Lanka, acquiring 'power within' was life-changing: 'To me change is the killing of fear. Someone may know how to sing but will not sing. Someone or something needs to kindle the fire in you and kill the fear that stops you from changing. I have killed the fear of talking and that is a change for me.'[15]

'Power within' often morphs rapidly into 'power with' and 'power to'. In Nepal, women taking part in Community Discussion Classes (CDCs) moved swiftly from learning to action. Fed up with their drunken husbands' violence, CDC women in Sorahawa, Bardiya District, decided to impose a 500 Rupee fine (rising for further offences) on any man who beat his wife or other female household members after he had been warned not to do so. 'Now, our husbands fear they may lose face on account of

[14] Duncan Green, *The 'We Can' Campaign in South Asia*, Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-we-can-campaign-in-south-asia-338472/.

[15] Quoted in 'Change making: how we adopt new attitudes, beliefs and practices'. Insights from the We Can Campaign, 2011, https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/change-making-how-we-adopt-new-attitudes-beliefs-and-practices-145255//.

community-level insults and also cough up the fine. They go off quietly to sleep.'[16]

However, I have some qualms about 'power within'. The concept seems to skate rapidly over the deeper waters that determine individual attitudes and beliefs. Thinking about power within is only the first step in what should be a much longer conversation about the role of psychology, empathy, and relationships in bringing about change. Many effective activists are instinctively empathetic and emotionally literate. They are experts at grasping 'the point of view of the other' (POVO), even when that 'other' might not be your dinner companion of choice (one academic analysis of the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign was memorably titled 'Bono Made Jesse Helms Cry'[17]).

But many are not. I have seen too many examples of the finger wagging of angry lobbyists who seem unaware of what is going on in the heads of the people they are talking to and unable to grasp that their hectoring tone alienates the very people they are trying to influence. In his 2007 paper 'How Change Happens', which got me started on the road to this book, Roman Krznaric concluded that, 'Development strategies display an overwhelming focus on individual actors, organised social groups, and institutions, with little acknowledgement that societies and institutions are composed of human relationships. There is much greater scope for development organisations to pursue strategies that encourage mutual understanding, empathy, and trust.'[18] (Since then Roman has become something of an empathy guru, through his books[19] and even an 'Empathy Museum'[20].)

On the other hand, many NGOs, faith organizations, and others traditionally leery of 'politics' over-invest in individual empowerment, and

[16] Duncan Green, *The Raising Her Voice Nepal Programme*, Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-raising-her-voice-nepal-programme-338476/.

[17] Joshua Busby, 'Bono made Jesse Helms cry: Jubilee 2000, debt relief, and moral action in international politics', *International Studies Quarterly* 51 (2) (2007), pp. 247–75, https://academic.oup.com/isq/article/51/2/247/1920322.

[18] Roman Krznaric, 'How change happens: interdisciplinary perspectives for human development', Oxfam Research Report (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2007), https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/10546/112539/2/rr-how-change-happens-human-development-260207-summ-en.pdf.

[19] Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (London: Penguin Random House, 2014).

[20] http://www.empathymuseum.com/.

fail to support the next step from individual to collective empowerment ('power with') or take on those who oppress the disempowered through their hidden and visible power. Their wariness is understandable: collective action tends to be rather more unruly than the orderly workshops that are NGOs' staple. In fact, before imposing the fine for domestic violence, several of the Nepalese women's groups I mentioned earlier decided that the best way to curb their husbands' alcoholism was to burn down the stores selling them drink.[21]

The territories of 'power to' and 'power over' are more familiar for most activists, since their interaction forms the basis of politics and the economy. In some ways the distinction is a false one—one person's 'power to' can be experienced by another as 'power over'. Activists instinctively hostile to 'power over' should recall that, like 'visible power', it is essential to do good. The 'power over' of police, courts, and *in extremis* armed forces guarantees security, an aspect of wellbeing particularly prized by anyone who has lived where it is absent. The issue is whether 'power over' is subject to checks and balances to ensure it is not wielded in ways that are arbitrary or unjust.

Given power's central role in determining both stasis and change, I find its absence from the development lexicon remarkable. The aid landscape is littered with terms that avoid the uncomfortable truth that seldom is power distributed fairly. Apparently neutral words like 'consultation', 'stakeholders', 'dialogue', and 'inclusivity' paper over the underlying power dynamics between conflicting interests, which can determine people's capacity even to participate, never mind influence outcomes. The landmark Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness agreed by government aid donors and recipients in 2005 uses the words partner and partnership ninety-six times, but power not once.[22]

Even though aid donors increasingly accept the futility of pursuing purely technical solutions that ignore political realities, they are still not willing to talk about power. Instead, there seems an inbuilt tendency (I'm not sure whether conscious or unconscious) to reduce every question to economics, as if material incentives alone explained human behaviour.

[21] Duncan Green, *The Raising Her Voice Nepal Programme*, Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-raising-her-voice-nepal-programme-338476/.

[22] Robert Chambers, *Provocations for Development* (Rugby: Practical Action Publishing, 2012), p. 108.

That kind of 'political economy analysis' misses what is distinctively political about politics: a broader understanding of power, agency, ideas, leadership, the subtleties of building and sustaining coalitions both inside formal politics and beyond, and the role of shocks and accident.[23]

Language is treacherous and constantly evolving. I now even feel slightly hesitant in using the word 'empowerment'. In a recent paper, John Gaventa, creator of the 'powercube', worried that 'we have seen a systematic process of "taking the power out of empowerment". For many concerned with challenging and confronting power, especially its more structural forms, empowerment has come to be a word to be avoided, as it often now focuses on individual fulfilment, disconnected from the underlying causes of powerlessness.'[24] But the right kind of leadership and support *does* empower others, as numerous accounts show, so, for the moment, I'm sticking with (the right kind of) 'empowerment'. Sorry John.

Is power a zero sum game?

I wonder if the reluctance to address power explicitly in the aid world comes from viewing power as a zero sum game. In some circumstances giving power to some people does mean taking it away from others. Often the role of activists is precisely to support that process, for example, by supporting coalitions that can redistribute power from the haves to the have-nots. Resistance from the haves is one reason why change can be violent and difficult on issues such as who owns land or how the state levies tax and allocates spending.

Effective change strategies often pursue something more subtle than outright confrontation (which often plays into the hands of the powerful). Reframing the understanding of self-interest, using divide and rule tactics to split up opposition blocs, or promoting long-term shifts in ideas and norms can help get round the zero sum problem. Moreover, many changes benefit both the have-nots and the haves. Men in the *We Can* programme reported marked improvements in their own quality of life from

[23] David Hudson and Adrian Leftwich, *From Political Economy to Political Analysis* (Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program, 2014), https://dlprog.org/publications/research-papers/from-political-economy-to-political-analysis/.

[24] John Gaventa, 'Linking the prepositions: using power analysis to inform strategies for social action', *Journal of Political Power* 14 (1) (2020), pp. 109–30.

respecting women's rights in the home; unsurprisingly, the sex improved too, according to some.

To add to the complexity, processes and institutions that initially favour one group are sometimes subverted over time and taken over by another: access to justice by poor communities can turn the law from a bulwark of the status quo to a driver of change; capture of democratic processes by the rich can achieve the exact opposite. Empowerment is not so much a single event as a process taking place in a complex system replete with multiple feedback loops, rather than linear chains of cause and effect.

Using power analysis

Many aid organizations have come to the realization that their cherished projects on the ground are at best producing islands of success in a sea of failure as a result of bad government policies. The futility of promoting 'livelihoods projects' that help poor communities benefit from markets when those same markets are being battered by government debt crises and spending cutbacks has provoked understandable frustration, and in recent decades, efforts to change public policy through advocacy and campaigns have mushroomed.

For these activists, power is a central concern. Both the visible-hidden-invisible scheme and the 'four powers' approach can help identify what we do or do not know about a system, prompting an exploration of pertinent questions, be it Why are small farmers poor? or Why doesn't the government spend more on local schools?

By formulating tentative answers to such questions, activists initiate what at Oxfam we call a 'power analysis'. In essence, a power analysis tells us who holds what power related to the matter, and what might influence them to change. I set this out in more detail in the final chapter, but here are the headlines.

Activists informed by a power analysis can select a more appropriate strategy: Will it be lobbying in the corridors of power, protesting in the street, or providing low-profile, long-term support for grassroots organizations or public education? Still more questions will sharpen the strategy: Who does the minister or CEO actually listen to? Are they persuaded by a successful demonstration on the ground, research, stories, media coverage, or the opinion of peers? Discussing power in its various forms is helpful

in challenging assumptions about citizen apathy: Why don't they protest more?

Power analysis can help activists identify a wider range of potential allies. All too often, we tend to default to working with 'people like us', when alliances with unusual suspects (corporations, faith leaders, academics) can be more effective.

To move from a general exploration of power to specific plans for influencing its redistribution on any given issue, we need to identify the key players and map where they stand on the matter at hand: Who are the main actors involved (poor communities, decision makers, private sector companies)? What other individuals or institutions (media, religious institutions, intellectuals, traditional leaders) are relevant and influential? Which are potential allies? Which are blockers? And which are 'shifters', potentially important players who can be convinced to support the change?[25]

Activists themselves, and their supporters, need to be at the heart of any power analysis. Discussion of where they are most able to exert influence (at the household, local, national, or global level) should help identify promising entry points, tactics, and alliances. Every activist group has strengths and weaknesses. For example, an international NGO like Oxfam can link up consumers in rich countries to put pressure on companies to improve their impact in poor ones, but it can also be seen as a tool of Western foreign policy.

When activists draw up a list of stakeholders, we often initially describe a sparsely populated landscape ('the state', 'people's organizations'). Closer scrutiny normally uncovers a much more complex ecosystem, as I discovered in 2014 when I asked a group of Tajik activists and aid workers to list the stakeholders on water and sanitation in a typical village. First it was only state authorities and villagers' water associations. Then one added, 'Who you turn to depends on the issue: for policy you go to the village head; for health problems to the doctor; if you have bad dreams, you go to the *mullah*'.

The group ended up plotting the influence and level of interest of appointed and elected village officials, the school principal, *mullah*, doctor, respected village elders, women's groups, community organizations, state employees, the local trucker (a networker between villages), 'educated

[25] Celine Charveriat, 'Power analysis checklist and methodology', unpublished paper (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2005).

people', and 'relatives (and lovers!) of powerful people'. All were seen as potential allies in improving the lamentable provision of water and sanitation.[26]

The conversation in Tajikistan brought home to me the importance of mapping *all* the players who could be part of any given change process, as well as the ease with which we default back to a polarized and often self-defeating 'them and us' mental map.

Power analysis reflects a strategic mindset that prizes results, as opposed to what I might call a 'principled' mindset that prizes 'speaking truth to power'. I use cartoons a lot on my blog, and one of my favourites shows two medieval peasants walking past a castle wall, on which a severed head sits on a spike. One peasant is saying to the other 'he spoke truth to power'. Open and individual opposition may be admirable, even heroic, but it is seldom effective without a more subtle understanding of the distribution of power and the potential for change. Similarly, by exhorting politicians simply to show 'political will' and do something that will lose them votes or power, we abdicate our responsibility to find a way to enable them to support the change we seek.[27]

Of course, some of the most effective activists don't spend hours doing power analyses. They have a feel for what works, built up from long experience and natural aptitude. 'Power analysis' is simply a way of codifying what such gurus do instinctively, making it explicit and thus easier for the next generation of activists to learn.

Why change *doesn't* happen

Although this book is about 'how change happens', often the pertinent question is 'why *doesn't* change happen?' Systems, whether in thought, politics, or the economy, can be remarkably resistant to change, like the mature forests discussed in Chapter 1. I like to get at the root of the 'i-word' (inertia) through three other 'i-words': institutions, ideas, and interests. A

[26] Duncan Green, 'What makes a perfect short field trip (and a top village power analysis)?', From Poverty to Power blog, 7 February 2014, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/what-makes-a-perfect-short-field-trip-and-a-top-village-power-analysis/.

[27] Duncan Green, 'Why demanding "political will" is lazy and unproductive', From Poverty to Power blog, 5 November 2009, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/why-demanding-political-will-is-lazy-and-unproductive/.

combination of these often underlies the resistance to change, even when evidence makes a compelling case.

Institutions: Sometimes the obstacle to change lies in the institutions through which decisions are made or implemented. Even when no-one in particular benefits materially from defending the status quo, management systems and corporate culture can be powerful obstacles to change. Although I love Oxfam dearly, I also wrestle with its institutional blockages, including multilayered processes of sign-off and a tendency to make decisions in ever-expanding loops of emails where it is never clear who has the final say. I guess I need to work on my internal power analysis.

Ideas: Often inertia is rooted in the conceptions and prejudices held by decision makers, even when their own material interest is not at risk. In Malawi, researchers found that ideas about 'the poor'—the 'deserving' vs. the 'undeserving' poor—had a significant impact on individuals' readiness to support cash transfers to people living in poverty. The elites interviewed—which included civil society, religious leaders, and academics as well as politicians, bureaucrats, and private sector leaders—all believed that redistributive policies make the poor lazy (or lazier). The overwhelming evidence for the effectiveness of cash transfers made no difference; neither did the fact that the elites stand to lose little from such reforms (and could even gain electorally, in the case of politicians).[28]

I witnessed the obstructive power of ideas during my brief spell working in the International Trade Department of the Department for International Development (now the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office). We received a visit from a senior official at the Treasury, worried that we were going off message. Radiating the suave self-assurance of a Whitehall mandarin, he informed us that, while he was happy to discuss UK trade policy, we should first agree that there were certain 'universal truths', namely that trade liberalization leads to more trade, and more trade leads to less poverty. Both claims were highly debatable, but no-one was going to change the mandarin's habit of regurgitating what he had learned at university some decades back. I recalled Keynes' wonderful line: 'Practical

[28] Heather Marquette, personal email communications, 2015.

men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.'[29] Not much room for evidence-based policy-making there.

It is always possible, of course, that madmen in authority can be persuaded to change their minds, but it is uphill work: a steady drip-drip of contrary evidence, public criticism, pressure from their peers, and exposure to failures and crises all help. In the end, I fear that many deep-rooted ideas only change through crises or generational turnover.

Interests: The writer Upton Sinclair once remarked, 'It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it'.[30] Powerful players who stand to lose money or status from reform can be very adept at blocking it. Especially when a small number of players stand to lose a lot, whereas a large number of players stand to gain a little, the blockers are likely to be much better organized than the proponents. Billions of people stand to benefit from a reduction in carbon emissions that reduces the threat of climate chaos, but they will have to overcome opposition from a handful of fossil fuel companies first.

Interests are not always malign—after all, a great deal of progressive social change comes from poor people fighting for their own interests. Nor are interests always material. Masood Mulk, who runs the Sarhad Rural Support Programme in Pakistan, told me a wonderful story that harks back to the importance of psychology and personal relations:

> I remember a valley where all the poor united to build the road, which they believed would change their lives totally. Unfortunately the road had to pass through the land of a person who had once been powerful in the valley, and he was totally unwilling to allow it. Frustrated, the villagers asked me to come to the valley and go to his house to resolve the problem. It was a remote place so we flew in a helicopter. For hours I tried

[29] John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1936), pp. 383–4.

[30] Upton Sinclair, *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

> to persuade him to be generous and give his permission but he would not budge. He did not like the way the communities behaved now that they were powerful. In the end he said he would relent, but only if we would fly around his house three times in the helicopter. I realised that it was all about egos. The villagers were unwilling to go to him because their pride did not allow it, and he was not willing to concede to them unless he could reemphasise his importance.[31]

In recent years, the glacial pace of progress on climate change illustrates all three i's to a depressing extent: despite the growing evidence of 'global boiling'[32] around the world, vested interests lobby to frustrate attempts to reduce carbon emissions and support spurious 'science' to throw mud at the evidence that underpins the call for action; an unshakable belief in the value of economic growth limits any attempts to imagine a 'beyond-growth' approach to the economy; and global institutions governed by national politicians with short time horizons are poorly suited to solving the greatest collective action problem in history.

Conclusion

Walk into any household, village, boardroom, or government office and you will enter a subtle and pervasive force field of power that links and influences everyone present: friends and enemies, parents and children, bosses and employees, rulers and ruled. No matter the political system, power is always present. As the joke from the Soviet era put it: Under capitalism, man exploits man. Under socialism, it's the other way around.

Studying and understanding that force field is an essential part of trying to influence change. Though largely invisible to the newcomer, power sets parameters on how social and political relationships evolve. Who are likely allies or enemies of change? Who listens or defers to whom? How have they treated each other in the past?

Starting with power should induce a welcome sense of optimism about the possibilities for change. Many of the great success stories in human

[31] Masood UL Mulk, personal email communications, January 2016.

[32] '"Era of global boiling has arrived", says UN chief as July set to be hottest month on record', *The Guardian*, 27 July 2023.

progress—universal suffrage, access to knowledge, freedom from sickness, oppression, and hunger—are at their root, a story of the progressive redistribution of power.

Thinking in terms of power brings the true drama of development to life. In contrast to the drab portrayal of poor people as passive 'victims' (of disasters, of poverty, of famine) or as 'beneficiaries' (of aid, of social services), 'empowerment' places poor people's own actions centre stage. In the words of Bangladeshi academic Naila Kabeer, 'From a state of powerlessness that manifests itself in a feeling of "I cannot"; activism contains an element of collective self-confidence that results in a feeling of "We can"'.[33]

Readers who are starting to feel addled by the number of frameworks I have thrown at them may wish to consider a crude but extremely useful way to keep power in mind when going about your daily business, devised by Robert Chambers, one of the most interesting and original thinkers in development. In any relationship, ask yourself who are the 'uppers' and who the 'lowers'[34] and how that affects their behaviours. Chambers' schema also captures an awkward fact: what do a congenital wife beater, a devout Christian or Muslim, and a lifelong trade union or NGO activist have in common? They can all be the same person; the same individuals can be uppers in one context and lowers in another.

Updating this chapter in 2023, I am struck by its optimism—activism, along with events and longer-term processes, would ensure that humanity overall continues to take more steps forward than back. Recent years of backlash and populism haven't felt that way. Moises Naim, in his book *The Revenge of Power*, summarizes one facet of these reversals, the rise of '3P autocrats' (discussed in Chapter 4), with a formula for a 'malignant new form of power'[35]: Populism, Polarization, and Post-Truth. Yet understanding and engaging with the many forms of power remains essential if we are to tackle both new and old challenges.

Now that we have explored the constituent elements of power and systems thinking, some readers may wish to review the approach I set out in

[33] A. Dighe and S. Jain, 'Women's development programme: some insights into participatory evaluation', *Prashasnika* 18 (1–4) (1989), pp. 77–98, quoted in Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 262.

[34] Duncan Green, 'Robert Chambers on the fifth power (the power to empower)', From Poverty to Power blog, 29 November 2012, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/robert-chambers-on-the-fifth-power-the-power-to-empower/.

[35] Moises Naim, *The Revenge of Power: How Autocrats are Reinventing Politics for the 21st Century*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 2022).

summary form at the start of Part I. For those who choose to soldier on, there is a full explanation in the final chapter.

Further reading

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Further viewing

'Powercube—understanding power for social change', http://www.powercube.net/.

3
Shifts in Social Norms Often Underpin Change

Over a beer in a remote corner of Bolivia, Miguel Rivera, a Chiquitano activist, reflected on his own discovery of 'power within': 'A sense of our rights came from outside, from political leaders and ILO Convention 169', he told me. 'It was important, it made our indigenous part wake up.'[1] It wasn't the kind of conversation you have every day and, to be honest, I didn't entirely welcome it. I had trekked deep into the Bolivian interior to find out how social change happened in the exotic (to me) world of Latin America's indigenous movements, and here was a grassroots activist quoting the stuffy, Geneva-based International Labour Organization (ILO), putting his people's success partly down to those international talking shops of which I had been so dismissive.

At least the setting lived up to expectations. The Chiquitanos are best known outside Bolivia from the 1986 film *The Mission*, which recounts how, in exchange for protection by the Jesuits from Brazilian slavers, the Chiquitanos became (and remain) adept Baroque musicians and built extraordinary white-and-orange churches that still attract tourists.

Of all the stories of change I have witnessed over the last forty-five years, that conversation with Miguel in the sweltering heat of the summer of 2006, and my subsequent visits to the Chiquitano community, was one of the most influential in shaping my thinking. In the case study that concludes the first part of this book, I use the Chiquitanos' story to illustrate the importance of power and complex systems in understanding change.

Miguel educated me about the importance of social norms—the explicit or implicit rules specifying what behaviours are acceptable in society. What people see as normal, desirable, or aberrant determines their sense of right and wrong, and can both drive and hold back the search for social justice.

[1] Author interview with Miguel Rivera, Bolivia, 2006.

Norms come in all shapes and sizes, whether social, legal, or moral, and they exhibit a subtle contradiction, which they share with institutions like the state or transnational corporations: they are both static and changing. At any given moment, most norms appear fixed; people see them as a 'given', a pre-existing, eternal, social reality. Without that sense of fixity, norms would not provide what they must, namely stable standards of conduct to guide the choices of those subject to them. Yet, at the same time, norms are a continuously evolving system. Even law—the most codified, formal subset of norms—is constantly changing, as I discuss in Chapter 5.[2]

How norms evolve

For much of human history, norms mostly evolved organically in local and national communities. Over the last century, however, a formal process for debating, agreeing, codifying, and enforcing global norms has come into being, housed within a number of international institutions, such as the UN and the ILO so revered by Miguel Rivera.

Today that normative framework advances through a bewildering proliferation of conferences, 'high-level panels', international targets such as the Sustainable Development Goals, treaties, and conventions. It's a merry-go-round I usually prefer to avoid, due to the prevalence of rhetoric and platitude over substance. I now think my aversion (though understandable) is unwarranted. The merry-go-round is complex and unpredictable, but undoubtedly important. The body of international agreements that has emerged captures and nudges along the world's evolving understanding of its condition, building our sense of belonging to one 'humanity'.

Very little of it is 'hard law', enforceable in the courts. But it sets standards that national movements can use to press for changes to legislation and public attitudes on everything from whether bribery is acceptable or parents have the right to beat their children, to discrimination against migrant workers, indigenous people, or those living with a disability, or what activity should be considered as 'work'.

At an individual level, norms start to develop from the moment of birth, as children soak up notions of what is 'natural' from the behaviours and

[2] Wayne Sandholtz and Kendall Stiles, *International Norms and Cycles of Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

words of those around them. As an institution (albeit a hugely varied one), the family is probably the greatest forging ground of the values and norms that shape a person's life. Within a few years, schooling starts to play a central role in transmitting society's wider understanding of norms. When activists ignore these early years, they miss a huge trick. Faith organizations, which invest large amounts in education, have been rather more on the ball. St. Francis Xavier, the founder of the Jesuit order, once said, 'Give me the child until he is seven and I will give you the man.'

The extent to which norms have changed over time is extraordinary. Two hundred years ago, slavery and colonization were seen as the natural order of things (at least in Europe); men 'owned' women and slaves. States were unencumbered in their conduct of war; today they are partly circumscribed by rules. Entire bodies of international law—human rights, environment—did not even exist a century ago. As these timelines suggest, normative change is deep and slow, often measured in generations or centuries. For that reason, it sometimes passes relatively unobserved and unappreciated by activists or politicians who think in the three- or four-year cycles of elections and campaigns.

I first became fully aware of the importance of norms in the mid-1990s, when researching for a book for Save the Children.[3] Philippe Ariès' paradigm-changing book *Centuries of Childhood*[4] showed me just how much of what I considered 'natural' was in fact historically determined. In 1724, the great British novelist Daniel Defoe saw nothing wrong with saying all children over the age of four or five should earn their own bread.

Hundreds of conversations with children across Latin America further transformed my understanding of the nature of childhood and the roles, rights, and responsibilities of children. Of course, working children complained of exploitation and the difficulties of combining work and school, and street kids were often drugged up and miserable, but what struck me most was their sense of agency. Working children told me how much they valued contributing to their family's welfare; street kids laughed while boasting about their ability to get what they could from the various organizations intent on 'rescuing' them ('the food's better there, but they make

[3] Duncan Green, *Hidden Lives: Voices of Children in Latin America and the Caribbean* (London: Cassell, 1998).

[4] Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Random House USA, 1965).

you pray'). As the father of two young children of my own at the time, it felt very personal.

When the book was published, I learned that challenging norms about something as deep as our attitudes towards children can provoke very powerful reactions. Trade unions accused me of justifying child exploitation, street child organizations of undermining their work. They preferred a notion of childhood as an innocent 'walled garden' in need of protection even if, as Ariès shows, that garden is a recent and Western historical construct.

Norms, gender, and power

The roles expected of women have undergone extraordinary change over the last century. Was the main factor behind this shift the right to vote, employment outside the home, the invention of the washing machine, girls' education, new forms of contraception, access to information, or the women's movement? The answer of course is all of the above and more. In a complex system full of feedback loops and surprises, each of these factors has both shaped and been shaped by evolving norms on women's roles.

Globalization is one such driver of change. At 7.30 a.m. every morning, the streets of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, light up as a Technicolor tide of young women in vivid saris emerge from the slums en route to the many mouldering factories that line the streets of the city. The women remain there until well into the night, cutting and stitching clothes for export.

Observing thousands of these laughing, engaged, and eager women on the move, I struggled to maintain my activist's disapproval of globalization and its 'exploitation' of cheap labour. Outsiders tend to compare conditions either with their own country or with global norms and rights. The women, understandably, look at their actual options. Conversations in their shanty-town huts confirmed how highly prized jobs in the garment factories were. The women certainly complained about the low wages, long hours, and workplace dangers affecting millions of women in Bangladesh's garment industry. But they also insisted that earning an income brings a redistribution of power at home: women can now leave the house without male permission; they exercise more of a voice in household decisions; girl children are more valued than before.

The factories did not head for Dhaka intent on improving the lot of Bangladesh's women. As is often the case in a complex system such as the global garment trade, the evolution of gender norms was an accidental by-product of structural changes in the economy. Also influential were urbanization and the spread of television, with its soap opera portrayals of 'modern' and largely urban women. The introduction of cable television in rural India in the early 2000s led to significant reported increases in women's autonomy, a fall in the acceptability of domestic violence, and decreases in preference for male offspring. Researchers also found increased female school enrolment, decreased dropout rates, and fewer births per family. The correlation was striking—between 45 and 70 per cent of the difference between rural and urban areas in these three indicators disappeared within two years of cable's introduction.[5]

'Critical junctures', such as wars or political and economic crises, can help shift norms, when an upheaval in traditional routines opens the door to new thinking. In the US, the experience of Black and White Americans fighting alongside each other in the Second World War helped galvanize the US civil rights movement. Increased public and political attention to inequality in recent years is at least partly down to the 2008 global financial crisis.

International agreements like those described by Miguel that evening in Bolivia can both reflect and lead changes in public attitudes. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. It defines what constitutes discrimination against women and obliges states to commit themselves to a series of measures, including:

- to incorporate the principle of equality of men and women in the legal system, abolish all discriminatory laws, and adopt appropriate ones prohibiting discrimination against women;
- to establish tribunals and other public institutions to ensure the effective protection of women against discrimination; and
- to ensure elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by persons, organizations, or enterprises.

[5] Robert Jensen and Emily Oster, 'The power of TV: cable television and women's status in India', NBER Working Paper No. 13305 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2007), http://www.nber.org/papers/w13305.

CEDAW and the agreements that emerged from the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing created a normative framework that national movements have used to exert steady upwards pressure on respect for women's rights in public attitudes and in legislation. At the time of writing, 189 out of 193 UN member state countries worldwide have ratified CEDAW.[6]

South Asia's *We Can* campaign (mentioned in Chapter 2) is one such movement that seeks to propagate the norms established in CEDAW by promoting 'power within' and 'power with'.

Norm changes and the state

We Can largely bypasses the formal world of state action, but states too can reinforce emerging norms. In 1993, the Indian government introduced a law calling for one-third of village council leader positions in village councils (Panchayat) to be reserved for women. At the time, sceptics argued that influential men would place their wives in the position and manage from behind the scenes. However, researchers subsequently found that adolescent girls in villages with female leaders in two election cycles were more likely to want to marry after age 18, less likely to want to be a housewife or have their occupation determined by their in-laws, and more likely to want a job requiring education. Parents were less likely to believe in-laws should determine girls' occupations. The gender gap in adolescent educational attainment was erased and the gender gap in time spent on household chores closed by eighteen whole minutes, reflecting girls spending less time on these activities.[7]

Three decades later, in September 2023, India's parliament extended the provision to higher echelons of government, passing a bill reserving a third of the seats in its lower house and in state assemblies for women. In so doing, it demonstrated both the slow pace of norm change and its ability to continue in otherwise hostile political environments.[8]

[6] UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw.

[7] Beama Lori, Duflo Esther, Pande Rohini, and Topalova Petia. 'Female leadership raises aspirations and educational attainment for girls: A policy experiment in India', *Science* 335 (2012), 582–6. 10.1126/science.1212382.

[8] UN Women, 'India passes law to reserve seats for women legislators', 4 October 2023, https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2023/10/india-passes-law-to-reserve-seats-for-women-legislators.

Part of the art of outstanding political leaders such as Gandhi and Mandela lies in their ability to go beyond merely reflecting public norms and instead influence them for the better. Even the endless repetition of simple messages, which may be one of the most off-putting aspects of politicians' daily lives, helps challenge old norms and cement new ones. Governments use norms to try to shape people's personal behaviour. Particularly in the richer countries, this includes a daily avalanche of 'nudges' regarding diet, smoking, drink driving, and more.

Activism for norm change

Governments are rarely the original source of new norms. In fact, the ideas for many of what we now consider the core features of the state (social protection, education, healthcare) were incubated by activists before being taken up by the state, as were the rules of war and the principles of child rights. A similar process is now occurring regarding environmental stewardship, data transparency, and disabled people's rights.[9]

To try to identify what factors drive change in government policies on violence against women, Laurel Weldon and Mala Htun painstakingly constructed the mother of all databases, covering seventy countries over three decades (1975–2005). It included various kinds of state action (legal and administrative reforms, protection and prevention, training for officials), as well as a number of other relevant factors (the presence of women legislators, GDP per capita, and the nature of the political regime).

Their findings bear out the importance of pressure from below: 'Countries with the strongest feminist movements tend, other things being equal, to have more comprehensive policies on violence against women than those with weaker or non-existent movements. This plays a more important role than left-wing parties, numbers of women legislators, or even national wealth. These movements can make the difference between having a critical legal reform or funding for shelters or training for the police,

[9] Duncan Green, 'What's next for the (rapidly growing) global disabled people's movement?', From Poverty to Power blog, 27 August 2014, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/whats-next-for-the-rapidly-growing-global-disabled-peoples-movement/.

and not having it'.[10] Htun and Weldon also found that governments, like US energy users and UK taxpayers, are particularly susceptible to unfavourable comparisons with their neighbours.

When combined with leadership from political authorities and the international mechanisms of the UN, activism can form a crucial pincer movement. In the words of one Filipina activist, 'How do you cook a rice cake? With heat from the bottom and heat from the top. The protests, the marches, the uncompromising position that women's rights are human rights, full stop. That's the heat from the bottom. That's Malcolm X and the suffragists and gay pride parades. But we also need the heat from the top.'[11]

In 2021, just such a 'rice cake' strategy saw a Prohibition of Child Marriage (PCM) bill signed into law in the Philippines, the result of a campaign by a 'Girl Defenders' alliance that included lawmakers, youth campaigners, women's rights organizations, and government agencies.[12]

Over the years since this book was first published, there has been a wave of research and analysis shining a light on how activists can shape norms at local, national, and global level. The starting point is a recognition that simply throwing evidence at people (i.e. proving we are right) is of limited value.

In fact, this may even be counter-productive. Simply telling someone they are wrong or need to change triggers a common psychological response called reactance—that stubborn feeling you get when someone tells you what to do. (I confess, I am a prime example.)

Oxfam has done some fascinating work in this area, focusing on the idea of 'narratives'—the stories we tell ourselves and others to make sense of the world. Increasingly, especially in the light of how activists have lost crucial battles in the resurgence of populism in many countries, the ability to construct convincing positive narratives, and counter

[10] Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon, 'The civic origins of progressive policy change: combating violence against women in global perspective, 1975–2005—CORRIGENDUM', *American Political Science Review* 106 (3) (August 2012), pp. 548–69,10.1017/S0003055412000226.

[11] Kavita Ramdas, 'Radical women, embracing tradition', Transcript, TED, April 2010, https://www.ted.com/talks/kavita_ramdas_radical_women_embracing_tradition/transcript?language=en.

[12] Oxfam Pilipinas, 'Girl Defenders' Alliance welcomes the signing of IRR for anti-child marriage law', 6 January 2022, https://philippines.oxfam.org/latest/press-release/girl-defenders-alliance-welcomes-signing-irr-anti-child-marriage-law.

the other kind, is becoming a crucial element in the change-maker's repertoire.[13]

One starting point for building better narratives is understanding different kinds of norms.

Based on her work in areas such as encouraging breastfeeding, philosopher Cristina Bicchieri[14] distinguished between moral norms, which are something we would believe even if we were alone on a desert island, and social norms, which are a form of collective compliance driven by what we think our societies expect of us. Changing moral norms is deep, slow work, whereas changing social norms can be influenced by dispelling myths about 'what the neighbours think'. In the US, telling high users of energy how their consumption compared with that of their neighbours prompted them to use less.[15] In the UK, telling residents that most neighbours had already paid their taxes led payment rates to rise by around 15 per cent.[16]

Identifying contradictory norms is another good entry point for changing behaviours—in Yemen, Oxfam used social norms around protecting children's health to undermine normative support for early marriage.[17]

The Ghanaian–American philosopher Kwame Appiah in his book *The Honor Code*[18] dug into history for some fascinating examples of norm changes, such as the abandonment of 'foot-binding' in China and the abolition of the slave trade, and concluded that the moral arguments were

[13] For interviews and analysis with dozens of activists, psychologists, and other specialists on the nature of narratives and how to use them in activism see 'Narrative power and collective action: conversations with people working to change narratives for social good' (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2020), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621020/.

[14] Cristina Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure and Change Social Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[15] 'Nudge nudge, think think: the use of behavioural economics in public policy shows promise', *The Economist*, 24 March 2012, http://www.economist.com/node/21551032.

[16] Leo Benedictus, 'The nudge unit—has it worked so far?', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/may/02/nudge-unit-has-it-worked.

[17] Duncan Green, 'How change happens: campaigning on early marriage in Yemen', From Poverty to Power blog, 21 September 2010, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/how-change-happens-campaigning-on-early-marriage-in-yemen/.

[18] Kwame Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

known long before they influenced public attitudes. When they did so, it was not because of any intrinsic appeal to rationality or even humanity or sympathy. Rather, reformers had to mobilize contempt and shame, the sense of being dishonoured even by belonging to a society in which such things took place.

Finally, shifting norms is not about short-term wins, but a long journey requiring extraordinary dedication and stamina, and facing inevitable setbacks. As Mary Beard says of discrimination against women, 'when it comes to silencing women, western culture has had thousands of years of practice'[19] (and the same goes for plenty of non-western cultures, of course). Discussing such historic shifts in our understanding of what is right, Alex Evans argues that:

> To animate movements on this scale, we need powerfully resonant stories, and they need to be stories that unite rather than divide us. 'Enemy narratives' that tell us why climate change is all the fault of Exxon or Saudi Arabia won't cut it. Instead, we need stories that help us to see the world and ourselves in a very different way.
>
> Not so long ago, our society was rich in these kinds of stories, and we called them myths. Today, though, we have a myth gap. Religious observance is declining steadily. So is trust in leaders and institutions of all kinds. Almost unnoticed, we have slowly lost the old stories that used to bring us together and help us to make sense of the world. In their place, new 'anti-myths' are flourishing—that we are what we buy, for instance, or that the world is heading rapidly towards environmental collapse and there's not a thing we can do about it.[20]

This brings us to the central role of culture and faith in shaping (and shifting) norms.

[19] Mary Beard, *Women and Power: A Manifesto* (London: Profile Books, 2018).

[20] Duncan Green, 'Book review: Eden 2.0: Climate Change and the Search for a 21st Century Myth, by Alex Evans', From Poverty to Power blog, 1 July 2016, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/book-review-eden-2-0-climate-change-and-the-search-for-a-21st-century-myth-by-alex-evans/.

Norms, culture, and faith

Norms overlap with another blind spot in the thinking of many activists—culture, both the arts (literature, music, cinema, theatre, painting) and, more broadly, the ideas, customs, and behaviour of a particular people, which plays a vital role in shaping values and internal narratives. I am convinced that in the UK writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien and Philip Pullman are among the most powerful influences on future generations of activists. Culture also binds society together; starting a conversation about the fates of football teams in the British premiership is a sure-fire bonding exercise in many parts of the world.

Cultural attitudes vary between and within countries. Research by social psychologist Geert Hofstede and others has used interviews and surveys about attitudes to compare culture across nations. They have identified six 'dimensions' that show variation between national cultures: the extent to which people accept inequality, the tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, individualism vs. collectivism, the distribution of emotional roles between genders (interestingly, men's roles appear to vary more than women's), long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint. These dimensions have been applied in business (e.g. for designing marketing campaigns), education, and healthcare.[21]

While culture in no way predetermines actions or attitudes, it can heavily influence such things as the authority of leaders, the desirability of risk taking, or the relative standing of young and older people. Activists should see cultural difference not as a source of frustration ('why can't he just hurry up and say what he means?'), but as a source of strength, since in any ecosystem diversity is a sign of good health.

Perhaps most central to the realm of culture, and often underestimated by activists, is faith. I am a lifelong atheist, but decades of working in Latin America, including eight years for the Catholic aid agency CAFOD (Catholic Agency for Overseas Development), have left me with an abiding respect for the role of faith in social change. In Latin America, I saw the power of liberation theology to move thousands of church activists, nuns, and priests to confront military dictatorships, often at huge personal cost.

[21] National Culture, the Hofstede Centre, https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=orpc#:~:text=This%20article%20describes%20briefly%20the,Orientation%2C%20and%20Indulgence%2FRestraint.

When I worked at CAFOD I used to receive messages such as 'Sorry [Sister] Pat can't make the meeting—she's been arrested again' (for chaining herself to the railings outside the Ministry of Defence, in protest at nuclear weapons). I acquired a deep respect for indomitable nuns everywhere.

Along with the family and education, religion is one of the most powerful forces in shaping an individual's norms and can be a powerful catalyst of 'power within' and 'power with'. While secularization has been a notable feature of European life at least since the 1960s, in much of the rest of the world religious institutions remain at the centre of community life. In many communities, people trust their local church, mosque, or temple more than any other institution. Numerous countries have seen a rise in religious fervour, perhaps because faith can bring solace and security, especially when livelihoods and cultures are challenged by globalization or emigration from settled rural communities to the chaos of the shanty town.

Although public attention often focuses on conflicts between faiths, perhaps more remarkable is how much they have in common. The so-called golden rule, expressed in Islam as 'No man is a true believer unless he desireth for his brother that which he desireth for himself' (Azizullah—Hadith 150), has remarkably close parallels in the scriptures of every major religion. When representatives of nine world faiths—Bahá'ís, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, and Taoists—attended a World Faiths and Development Conference in 1998, they revealed a startling degree of consensus about some of life's deepest truths:

- Material gain alone cannot lead to true development: economic activities are interrelated with all other aspects of life.
- The whole world belongs to God. Human beings have no right to act in a harmful way to other living creatures.
- Everyone is of equal worth.
- People's wellbeing and their very identity are rooted in their spiritual, social, and cultural traditions.
- Social cohesion is essential for true development.
- Societies (and the world) must be run on the basis of equity and justice.[22]

[22] Wendy Tyndale, 'Faith and Economics in "Development": A Bridge across the Chasm? (La Foi et l'économie Dans Le 'Développment': Un Pont Sur l'abîme? / Fé e Economia No "Desenvolvimento": Uma Ponte Sobre o Abismo? / La Fe y La Economía En El "Desarrollo":

These essential affirmations underlie attitudes, beliefs, and personal behaviour, including activism. In southern Africa, I have come across many powerful and charismatic women who run community projects helping those living with HIV or orphaned by AIDS. Most are active church-goers and draw on their faith for inspiration and comfort in what is often an exhausting and thankless task.

However, a profound ambiguity characterizes the interaction between faith and politics. Karl Marx saw religion as 'the opium of the people', blinding us to the true nature of our oppression (today football probably plays a similar role), and Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci saw it as a means through which elites could construct and maintain their domination. Yet French sociologist Émile Durkheim portrayed it as a way of building a collective identity that promotes social cohesion and stability.[23] Religion can encourage or discourage activism, promote conformity or challenge it, foment love or hatred.

Nowhere is this contradictory role more evident than in relation to women's rights. Fundamentalists of virtually all religions view the emancipation of women as profoundly threatening, giving rise, for example, to the curious alliance of the Vatican, the Iranian government, and the US government to block international progress on sexual and reproductive rights.

But the traffic is not all one way. Despite the opposition of their respective religious hierarchies, women activists in both Muslim and Christian communities have reinterpreted Islamic and Catholic scriptures in accordance with women's rights, leading to a new approach to the faith. In 2004 women's organizations in Morocco won a remarkable victory when parliament unanimously approved a new Islamic Family Code that radically strengthened the rights of women. The reforms included the right to decide legal matters without the guardianship of a male, equal responsibility over the household and children, and the need for consent from both husband and wife to dissolve a marriage.[24]

Un Puente Entre El Abismo?)'. *Development in Practice* 10, (no. 1) (2000), 9–18, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4029768. Accessed 7 January 2024.

[23] Emma Tomalin, 'Sociology, religion and development: literature review', Working Paper No. 4 (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2007), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242478820_sociology_religion_and_development_literature_review.

[24] Alexandra Pittman and Rabéa Naciri, 'Winning women's rights in Morocco', IDS Research Summary, October 2008, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08bb6e5274a31e0000d08/rs_morocco_final.pdf.

Throughout the campaign, activists opted to work within the framework of Islam, arguing that the conservative interpretation enshrined in family law ran counter to the true spirit of the Koran. According to activist Rabéa Naciri: 'We chose not to separate the universal human rights framework from the religious framework. We maintained that Islam is not opposed to women's equality and dignity and should not be presented as such … Islamic law is a human and historical production, and consequently is able to evolve, to fulfil the current needs of Muslim men and women.'[25]

Such examples are inspiring, but largely ignored by many activists. I call this 'the flipchart problem'. When I raise the importance of faith and faith-based organizations in discussions within Oxfam, colleagues nod, but somehow the issue never makes it to the flipchart that becomes the record of the conversation. Some of this is due to the failings of many faith organizations, from gay rights to contraception, but a lot also derives from our personal 'cup half empty' feelings about religion. On a visit to the Philippines a few years ago, Filipino staff were describing Oxfam's fascinating work on women's rights among the Muslim communities of Mindanao. What about working with the Catholic Church as well, I asked (after all, far more Filipinos are Catholic than Muslim)? 'No way', came the response, 'we're all lapsed Catholics and have no intention of going back to the fold!' Surely it's time to get over that one.

Changing norms on female genital cutting

The movement against female genital cutting (FGC) is a good example of activism to transform a destructive social norm. FGC, which involves full or partial removal of a girl's external genitals, serves no medical purpose and has many harmful consequences. Yet the practice is widespread. By one estimate, worldwide over 200 million women and girls are currently living with the consequences of FGC. A further 4.1 million girls are at risk of being cut every year in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and diaspora communities around the world.[26]

[25] Duncan Green, *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2008), p. 67.

[26] This figure underestimates the real number of girls affected, because other countries (e.g. Indonesia) are not included. 'What is FGC?', Orchid Project, http://orchidproject.org/category/about-fgc/what-is-fgc/.

This centuries-old practice now faces a major normative shift driven by pioneering national and grassroots campaigners, such as Efua Dorkenoo, a Ghanaian–British academic and midwife who wrote one of the earliest reports on FGC, published in 1980, and campaigned tirelessly up to her death in 2014.[27]

The World Health Organization (WHO) rejected a UN request to investigate FGC in 1958, arguing that it was a cultural, rather than medical, issue. When campaigners reframed FGC as a health rights issue some decades later, they gained the adherence of a group of powerful and 'neutral' champions: doctors. In 1997, WHO, UNICEF, and the UN Population Fund issued an influential joint statement calling FGC a violation of the rights of women and girls to 'the highest attainable standard of health', helping to persuade at least fourteen African countries to outlaw FGC. Yet prevalence remains high in half a dozen countries, where over 90 per cent of women are still mutilated.[28]

Researchers Gerry Mackie and John LeJeune[29] studied national movements against FGC in Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, and Sudan, and compared them to an earlier normative campaign against the Chinese practice of binding women's feet to enforce chastity and fidelity by limiting women's physical mobility.

Like FGC, foot-binding was both medically unjustifiable and deeply entrenched in urban and coastal China at the beginning of the twentieth century. First, reformers spread the word that the rest of the world did not bind women's feet, making the natural-foot alternative seem feasible. Second, they explained the advantages of natural feet and the disadvantages of bound feet. And finally, they formed 'natural foot societies' whose members pledged not to allow their sons to marry women with bound feet, as well as not to bind their daughter' feet. The reformers' strategy brought a thousand years of practice to an end in a single generation.

[27] Stella Efua Graham and Scilla MacLean (eds), *Female Circumcision, Excision, and Infibulation: The Facts and Proposals for Change*, Report 47 (London: Minority Rights Group, 1980).

[28] Alison Brysk, 'Changing hearts and minds: sexual politics and human rights', in *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance*, edited by Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 259–74.

[29] Gerry Mackie and John LeJeune, 'Social dynamics of abandonment of harmful practices: a new look at the theory', Special Series on Social Norms and Harmful Practices, Innocenti Working Paper No. 2009–06 (Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2009), http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/iwp_2009_06.pdf.

Anti-FGC movements in Africa face similar obstacles: families carry out FGC in order to ensure the marriageability and status of their daughters, so a family's choices depend on those of other families in their community. If a single family ends FGC, their daughter may never be able to marry. In other words, FGC is a classic collective action problem, a social norm in which everyone must move together to reach a solution (not unlike climate change requiring all nations to curb carbon emissions).

In Senegal, reformers found a solution. When a relatively small critical mass of first movers conditionally resolved to abandon FGC, these families had a strong incentive to recruit the remaining members of their community to join them, until a tipping point was reached and whole communities abandoned the practice. Four thousand Senegalese villages have declared themselves FGC free.[30]

In Egypt, campaigners adapted the 'positive deviance' approach discussed in Chapter 1. Rather than focus on the 97 per cent of Egyptian women who were being subjected to FGC, the 'somersault question' became what could be learned from the 3 per cent who were not. Getting them to testify on camera unlocked a wave of energy for the anti-FGC movement, and worked far better than being lectured at by 'experts' and outsiders.[31]

Making the commitment in public helps: in 2000, the Ethiopian development organization KMG began holding public weddings of couples who chose to break with the tradition. As many as 2,000 people attended the first wedding, where 317 girls who had not undergone the practice served as bridesmaids. During the ceremony, the bride and bridesmaids wore signs that read: 'I will not be circumcised. Learn from me!' The groom wore his own placard saying: 'I am happy to marry an uncircumcised woman.' Thanks to such campaigns, backed by government action, younger mothers in Ethiopia are nearly 80 per cent less likely to have a daughter cut than

[30] Alison Brysk, 'Changing hearts and minds: sexual politics and human rights', in *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance*, edited by Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[31] Richard Pascale, Jerry Sternin, and Monique Sternin, *The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2010).

older mothers. Reported support for cutting halved from 60 per cent in 2000 to 31 per cent in 2005.[32]

Interestingly, where activists emphasized health concerns, which was so effective at the international level, some parents turned to medical practitioners for a 'safer FGC'. Where activists stressed human rights (in both Senegal and Ethiopia) parents abandoned it altogether.

The researchers concluded that parents decide to perform FGC because failure to do so brings shame and social exclusion to girls and their families. Once an alternative is perceived to be feasible and people realize the community might be better off without FGC, a more basic norm comes to the fore—to do what is best for their children—and communities abandon the harmful practice.

The FGC campaign contains numerous insights for activists: the importance of building 'power within' among both girls and women and their families and friends; the value of positive deviance and social learning (seeing is believing); the need to find a countervailing norm, such as a daughter's health; and, as ever, the importance of collective action—power with.

Backlash

While normative change has become a much more recognized goal of activism in recent years, so has the backlash against everything—from feminism to environmentalism, or, more generally, political institutions such as governments or the European Union.

Defined in one recent paper on climate policy as 'an abrupt and forceful negative reaction by a significant number of actors seeking to reverse a policy, often through extraordinary means that transgress established procedures and norms',[33] some backlash is co-ordinated from the top (as with the earlier example of the Vatican spearheading an unlikely coalition to undermine women's rights), while other examples are more dispersed.

One battleground where the forces of norm change and resistance slug it out is often the law. Feminist scholars Ayesha Khan, Emilie Tant, and

[32] Alison Brysk, 'Changing hearts and minds: sexual politics and human rights', in *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance*, edited by Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[33] James J. Patterson, 'Backlash to climate policy', *Global Environmental Politics* 23 (1) (2023), pp. 68–90.

Caroline Harper compare two simultaneous pieces of legislation in 2023, one in Uganda, one in Florida, that 'strip rights based on gender and sexuality'.

Uganda: Anti-Homosexuality Bill 2023
Homosexuality was already illegal in Uganda, but this Bill introduces the death penalty for 'aggravated' homosexuality (in cases of transmission of HIV/AIDS) and decrees life sentences for those considered to be 'promoting' homosexuality, effectively criminalizing speech about LGBTQI+ rights.

United States: Florida House Bill 2023: 1069 Education
This Bill is just one of many in Florida reinforcing patriarchal and binary norms around gender. It prohibits educators to cover gender diversity, sexuality and non-heteronormative sex in reproductive health education, only using materials approved by the Department of Education. It also prohibits requirements for personnel or students to be referred to with pronouns that do not correspond with biological sex.'

They argue that the impact has been profound: 'Global consensus around gender justice claims is fracturing. According to the Gender Social Norms Index, there has been little to no overall progress towards more gender-equal norms over the last decade, which has materialised as a period of stagnation for women in the areas of politics, gendered violence, reproductive justice and economic autonomy.'[34]

The backlash is real, and sometimes horrifying, but thinking in terms of systems and the long term can help. Miguel Rivera's indigenous movement has been built, with numerous reverses, over five centuries since Columbus landed in the Americas. Although I think activists can do much to avert backlash, I also believe that, in the end, it is partly a sign that we are winning.

Conclusion

Anyone interested in bringing about change must pay close attention to the way social norms are established, evolve over time, and can be

[34] Ayesha Khan, Emilie Tant, and Caroline Harper, 'Facing the backlash: what is fuelling anti-feminist and anti-democratic forces?', ALiGN/ODI, July 2023, www.alignplatform.org.

changed for the good. Campaigners and lobbyists often prefer to focus on the tangible—laws and policies, spending commitments, public statements of this and that. In our enlightenment/rationalist bubble, whether as researchers or activists, we prefer 'evidence-based policy-making' to 'myth- or narrative-based policy-making'.

Perhaps this is because this is the way we would like the world to work, or through a desire to measure our impact (and thus prove our effectiveness), or a frustration with the vagueness of 'talking shops' about rights and norms, or by sheer impatience at the slow pace of normative change. Whatever the cause, neglect of the 'invisible power' of social norms is a big mistake, nowhere more so than in confronting the existential challenge of the climate crisis. We can still focus on the tangible to communicate and to campaign, but norms should lie at the heart of our deeper understanding of how change happens. And the norm changes we contribute to are likely to be our activism's greatest legacy.

Further reading

K. Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

P. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Random House USA, 1965).

A. Betts and P. Orchard, *Implementation and World Politics: How International Norms Change Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

C. Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure and Change Social Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

J.W. Busby, 'Bono made Jesse Helms cry: Jubilee 2000, debt relief, and moral action in international politics', *International Studies Quarterly* 51 (2007), pp. 247–75.

J.W. Busby, *Moral Movements and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

I. Crabtree-Condor, *Narrative Power and Collective Action: Conversations with People Working to Change Narratives for Social Good* (Oxford: Oxfam, 2020).

T. Risse, S. Ropp, and K. Sikkink (eds), *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Case Study

The Chiquitanos of Bolivia

On 3 July 2007, after twelve years of unremitting and often frustrating struggle, the Chiquitano people of Bolivia—a group numbering some 9,000 people—won legal title to the 1-million-hectare (2.4-million-acre) indigenous territory of Monteverde in the eastern department of Santa Cruz. Evo Morales, the country's first indigenous president, attended the ceremony with several of his ministers. So did three elected mayors, ten local councillors (six women, four men), a senator, a congressman, and two members of the Constituent Assembly—all of them Chiquitanos.

Such an event would have been unthinkable a generation before. Until the 1980s, the Chiquitanos lived in near-feudal conditions, required to work without pay for local authorities, landowners, and the Church, and were prevented from owning land. In the words of Chiquitano activist Jeronima Quiviquivi,[1] 'My father never realised about our rights. We just did what the white people told us; only they could be in power, be president. We couldn't even go into the town centre, people swore at us. But then we got our own organisation and elected our own leaders and that's when we realised we had rights.'[2]

To test the importance of power and systems thinking, let's explore how this change happened.

Systems, power, and norms: The change took place as part of wider evolution of indigenous identity and of Bolivian politics and economy. In the 1980s, inspired in part by Chiquitano language radio programmes,

[1] Author interview, 2008, quoted in Duncan Green, *From Poverty to Power* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2008).

[2] Sources: Eduardo Cáceres, 'Territories and citizenship: the revolution of the Chiquitanos', input paper for Oxfam (Oxford: Oxfam, 2007); Diakonia, *Género, Etnicidad y Participación Política* (La Paz: Diakonia, 2006); García Linera. For a short chronology of the Original Community Territory legal process up to 2001 see *Artículo Primero* V (19) (2001), pp. 37–41.

for the first time, the Chiquitanos began to identify themselves as indigenous people. Indigenous identity began to replace the class-based peasant identity promoted by the nationalism of the 1952 revolution.

The dawn of 'power within' rapidly led to 'power with' in the form of cultural associations, which rapidly acquired an explicitly political nature. The Chiquitano Indigenous Organization (OICH) represented more than 450 communities. As one older woman explained, 'Only a short while ago did we begin calling ourselves Chiquitano Indians … We look alike, we were all handed over to the bosses … they called us *cambas* or peasants until not long ago.'

The Chiquitano movement was unexpectedly boosted by the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s, which dramatically reversed three decades of state intervention and improvements in social rights, and galvanized protest movements across Bolivia. Sacked miners from the highlands spread out across the country, setting up new organizations and spreading their traditions of activism and protest. The 1990s saw some unorthodox measures within the hard-line Washington Consensus policies, including a new law that greatly facilitated participation in local government, and an acceleration of agrarian reform, all of which helped boost indigenous movements.

The Chiquitanos' recovery and celebration of indigenous identity led them to join in continent-wide alliances to protest the 500th anniversary (and celebration) of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas.[3] The rise in indigenous consciousness was reflected in Bolivia's constitutional reform of 1994, which redefined the state as 'pluri-ethnic and multicultural'.

The tipping point came in 2005, with the election of Evo Morales as Bolivia's first ever indigenous president. It marked a sea change in the fortunes of Bolivia's indigenous peoples, including the Chiquitanos. Many smaller 'critical junctures' helped galvanize the movement, including a succession of long marches to the capital, La Paz. At one point protestors broke into the local mayor's office and found documents showing that forced labour had been banned in Bolivia, even though the Chiquitanos were still being obliged to perform it. Their conclusion? We need our own mayor.

[3] Phillip Wearne, *Return of the Indian: Conquest and Revival in the Americas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

Two further factors eased the path to change. The discovery of large reserves of natural gas from the late 1980s onwards contributed to a general perception that the country was on the threshold of a historic opportunity. Second, the historical memory of the country's indigenous peoples allowed them to draw strength from deep traditions of identity and resistance.

Formal politics: After protests toppled President Sánchez de Lozada in October 2003, identity documents became easier to obtain and candidates were allowed to run independently of traditional political parties, which led to major gains for indigenous peoples in the 2005 municipal elections. Because Evo Morales' MAS party was unpopular locally (it was seen as being dominated by the more numerous indigenous highland peoples), activists stood as OICH candidates.

The law: In addition to marches and protests, the Chiquitanos tried to work within the system, insisting on legal procedures despite the tricks of adversaries and delays of judges. In January 1995, the Chiquitanos presented their first legal demand for title to Monteverde under a new concept, 'Original Community Territory'. A year and a half later, a second indigenous march won parliamentary recognition for the concept. Years of tedious legal procedures followed, with small gains and reversals, but they paved the way for eventual legal recognition for their territorial claim.

The international system: The International Labour Organization (ILO) played a role in the rise of indigenous identity and was also a channel for legal appeals from the Chiquitano movement.

The private sector: The local private sector, especially landowners and forestry companies, was the main opponent of the land reform, but in the end was unable to stop the momentum of the Chiquitano movement.

Change agents: The main actors in the drama were, of course, the Chiquitanos themselves. Following the lead of other social movements, lowland peoples organized a march to La Paz in 1990, which, as one participant put it, 'demonstrated that the indigenous peoples of the East exist'. Literally and politically, indigenous people were on the move.

Alliances: A turning point came when the Chiquitanos decided to join up with Bolivia's far more numerous highland Indians. 'We met with one of the highlands leaders', recalls Chiquitano leader, now Senator, Carlos Cuasase, 'and we said, "Look brother, you have the same problems that we do, the same needs". We agreed not only on [the law to nationalize] hydrocarbons but also to defend the rights of indigenous people of both

highlands and lowlands.'[4] The Roman Catholic Church was divided on social justice issues between traditionalists ('blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God') and more radical liberation theologians among the local priests who were important allies for the Chiquitanos.

Oxfam's role: The Chiquitano movement was highly 'endogenous', with only a minor role for outside supporters such as NGOs. One of these was Oxfam, which provided small amounts of funding, thanks to the imaginative ways local staff came up with to get round Oxfam's internal bureaucracy. When one evaluation asked about the 'mobile workshops' we were funding, a sheepish programme officer confessed that this was funding for the long marches to the capital, which did indeed act as mobile workshops.

Update: In 2019, thirteen years after the visit that prompted this case study, I went back to Chiquitania and caught up with Jeronima Quiviquivi and the other activists. The pride in their achievement remained, but some of the euphoria had worn off: 'The land is a treasure. But there were things we needed on top of land—schools, healthcare for pregnant women; the houses are full of mosquitoes. And the young people need communications—there's no signal anywhere outside Concepcion—all we have is one old landline for the whole village. But at least we have our first students at university now.'

Conclusion

My conclusions, along with several other conversations recorded on my blog,[5] were as follows:

> What was being described is a battle of logics: extractivism (the government needs natural resource revenues to fund essential services, transform the country and maintain popularity); party politics (the lowland Indians have few votes, so count for little in electoral politics); indigenous

[4] Eduardo Cáceres, 'Territories and citizenship: the revolution of the Chiquitanos', input paper for Oxfam (Oxford: Oxfam, 2007).

[5] Duncan Green, 'Return to Chiquitania: what's changed in the 13 years since my first, mind-blowing visit?' From Poverty to Power blog, 12 July 2019, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/return-to-chiquitania-whats-changed-in-the-13-years-since-my-first-mind-blowing-visit/.

autonomy (still a powerful narrative); modernity and materialism (also powerful, including among the Chiquitanos, as the market economy, with its school fees and newly-acquired desires for cool stuff, penetrates ever deeper).

I was also struck by the growing importance of connectivity (broadband, phone signal, roads, cheap Chinese motorbikes) in building lives, and trying to stop the young people from giving up and leaving for the city—always likely once they start going to secondary school or university. As one villager said 'They went to study in the town and they didn't want to come back to the darkness'.

It may feel like the Chiquitanos have run out of political road, but one indigenous organizer Hernan Avila Montaño was more upbeat: 'In the long run, indigenous movements have political agency greater than anything in the past. They won't go away. Their communities are still there, in spite of everything!

PART II

INSTITUTIONS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY

Institutions are both the object and subject of most attempts to make change happen. The next five chapters will apply the conceptual framework of systems, power, and norms to the institutions that most activists belong to, ally with, or seek to influence.

People seeking change are often impatient, intent on addressing the problems of the world. In the words of one of the greatest activists of them all, they are consumed by 'the fierce urgency of now'.[1] From the perspective of 'now', institutions appear to be permanent and unchanging; in fact, they often depend on that appearance for their credibility. But 'now' is merely a moment on the continuum of history, and history shows us that the status quo is far less fixed than it appears. Yes, institutions are inherently conservative, but their normal functioning provokes changes in the world, changes that buffet them and oblige them, over time, to either evolve or fail.

In recent years, a wave of populist leaders has understood the power of institutions all too well and set about systematically chipping away at the checks and balances they create to the exercise of political power. Leaders from Donald Trump to Viktor Orban to Rodrigo Duterte have developed a new way of doing politics, and their attacks on courts, the media, civil society, or any independent source of power has helped their opponents rediscover the value of institutions.

Examining history helps us question the world we take for granted, and understand what long-term trends are shaping it. By learning how today's world has been constructed we can more realistically see how it

[1] Martin Luther King, Jr, 'I Have a Dream', 28 August 1963.

can change. On this, Adam Hochschild's wonderful history of the abolitionist movement, *Bury the Chains*,[2] is the one book every activist should read. 'What climate change, gross inequality, or poverty are for us, slavery was to them—a massive, immovable object. Yet, by being small cogs in a very large machine, driven largely by unexpected and uncontrollable factors, they were able to make a difference. So while it's hard for us to see how we can possibly make a dent in something like inequality, we just have to remember that it's been done before!'

History inspires a deep respect for the personal sacrifices and the campaigning acumen of our predecessors. In the UK, Friends of the Earth ran a fascinating exchange between historians and campaigners to learn from the activists of yesteryear.[3] I was startled to learn that the Chartists (nineteenth-century democracy campaigners) at one point delivered a petition that was six miles long, with a third of the UK population signed up. And all without social media.

History can provide the intellectual ammunition to challenge the narrow orthodoxy of now. I vividly remember my 'light-bulb moment' back when I first took up international trade activism in the 1990s. It was provoked by reading *Kicking Away the Ladder* by reading Korean economist Ha-Joon Chang.[4] He showed that the policies of rapid liberalization that rich countries were then trying to force on poor ones were the exact opposite of the policies they themselves had used during their own take-offs. Rich countries used protection to build up their industries, and only later opened up their markets; now they were trying to force poor countries to liberalize straight away.

The double standards were breathtaking and the impact of Ha-Joon's book profound. At the WTO headquarters in Geneva, I saw how his concise presentation of history strengthened the determination of developing country governments and activists to resist the arm-twisting from rich countries and how it sowed well-justified doubt in the minds of the liberalizers.

[2] Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2012).

[3] Friends of the Earth, *Campaigning for Change: Lessons of History* (London: Friends of the Earth, 2017).

[4] Ha-Joon Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* (London: Anthem Press, 2002).

In systems terms, history reveals how different institutions emerged and evolved to reach the structure, culture, and practices we see today, offering useful insights on how to influence them. History inspires a healthy acceptance of pluralism, since institutions have taken many different paths.

History provides a kind of temporal positive deviance: by studying the historical outliers on any given issue, we get new insights and ideas.

History reinforces both curiosity and humility, an antidote to the hubris that sometimes afflicts the activist bubble. It reminds us that the conscious efforts of activists are usually less influential than accident or political and economic changes or 'unusual suspects'.

Not every lesson of history is positive. The central role of conflict and war in driving change always depresses me. Luckily, history is not a straitjacket. Times change and institutions change. New factors, like technologies, women's rights, and mass literacy, emerge to shake the kaleidoscope of power and unleash the possible, as do new threats like climate change. History can be an engine of the imagination.

The next five chapters apply a power and systems lens to explore the historical evolution and current role of the institutions that are often central to achieving change: states, the machinery of law, political parties, the international system, and transnational corporations.

4
How States Evolve

In 2015, I spoke to a director of works in a Pacific island nation who understandably preferred to remain anonymous because he had had enough. A no-nonsense engineer trying to build the roads his country desperately needs, he was instead grappling with a venal political system. His frustration was palpable:

> In a mature system, everything is in place—the rules, the processes. Here, the playing field changes all the time. Development here *is* politics. We can see where we want to go, the vision for 2020. But we have a government that is power-hungry, politicians maintaining their own position. I've been moved, suspended, chucked out, called names. We had a good, cost-effective road programme on one of our islands. Then in comes a new minister, and one of his advisers is from that island, so he makes promises, says he wants to build some ridiculously expensive road. I say it's impossible and am basically told 'I'm the minister, what I says goes—I want you out by 5 p.m'.

The director, who survived in the end, is a good example of many unsung heroes in the drama of development: civil servants who soldier on despite the obstacles, because the stakes are so high—the institution they work within will shape the fates and futures of their peoples. That institution is the state.

The German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel described the state as 'the march of God through the world'.[5] I doubt the frustrated Pacific engineer would agree with its divine origins, but, to a greater or lesser degree, states ensure the provision of health, education, water, and sanitation; they guarantee rights, security, the rule of law, and social and economic stability; they

[5] Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 176.

arbitrate in the inevitable disputes between individuals and groups; they regulate, develop, and upgrade the economy; they organize the defence of national territory. More intangibly, they are an essential source of identity—the rise of nationalism and the state have gone hand in hand, for good or ill.

My own views on the state have evolved from indifference to hostility to admiration. Growing up in 1970s Britain, I was surrounded by a state languishing in the midst of stagflation, industrial unrest, and an aura of historical decline. Everything exciting (anti-nuclear protests, the burgeoning environmental and feminist movements, the cathartic anarchism of punk) was happening outside the channels of government. The state was boring and I took it for granted. In Chile and Argentina in the early 1980s, I saw a far bleaker side of the state: beribboned dictators in sunglasses and friends in permanent pain over the whereabouts of their 'disappeared' relatives. Latin America at that time recalled George Orwell's 1984, written at the onset of the Cold War, with its dystopian vision of a 'big brother state' as 'a boot stamping on a human face, forever'.[6]

Later in the decade, I moved to Nicaragua before the sheen came off the Sandinista Revolution and saw the upsurge in social and economic freedoms a progressive state could achieve. Then, as Latin America slid into debt crisis and enacted ill-conceived liberalizing market reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, I was struck by the contrast between the region's economic stagnation and the concurrent state-driven 'Asian Miracle'. Collaboration with Ha-Joon Chang cemented my belief in a positive role for the state in development.[7] Matthew Lockwood's book on the state in Africa[8] convinced me that at the heart of Africa's problems lay weak states, more than the international system then being targeted by activists around the world. I then focused my 2008 book *From Poverty to Power* on 'effective states' as a central pillar of development.

States may be ubiquitous, but they are far from static. A constant process of conflict and bargaining shapes their contours and responsibilities, and a flux of power determines both what changes and what does not.

[6] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949).

[7] Ha-Joon Chang and Duncan Green, 'The Northern WTO Agenda on Investment: do as we say, not as we did', South Centre/CAFOD, 2003, https://www.ecolomics-international.org/n_sd_south_center_doaswesay_notaswedid_03.pdf.

[8] Matthew Lockwood, *The State They're in: An Agenda for International Action on Poverty in Africa* (London: ITDG Publishing, 2005).

Activists need to look under the bonnet of states and understand them as complex systems that can be influenced. The dynamics of change in states epitomizes the characteristics of systems discussed in Chapter 1: the combination of steady change and sudden, unpredictable jumps born of personalities and events. So does states' inertia: ideas, institutions, and interests interact to prevent progress and drive well-intentioned civil servants to distraction.

I worked for a brief spell for the British government's development department in the mid-2000s. What had appeared to an NGO activist on the outside as a monolithic institution dissolved into Whitehall's sprawling system of ministries and personalities, each with their own traditions, jargons, and acronyms (*lots* of acronyms). Power was endlessly disputed within the system, as everyone lobbied internally for their preferred policies and budgets, using all the tactics of activists everywhere—coalitions, the search for champions, seizing critical junctures, and the rest.

Officials, especially 'mandarins' (senior civil servants), emerged from the shadows as powerful players and rather more permanent than their political masters. The enduring popularity of the British TV satire *Yes Minister* (which I am told is used to induct French officials into the ways of Whitehall) comes from the pleasure of watching the suave mandarin, Sir Humphrey, run rings round his hapless political master. Beyond the Whitehall bubble, similar scenarios can be found in other tiers of the state, right down to local councils.

States influence the lives of their citizens primarily by agreeing and implementing laws, rules and policies, taxation and spending, and public messaging that influences norms and beliefs. Their most basic role is to guarantee the physical security of the population, offering protection against disaster and preventing what philosopher Thomas Hobbes called the 'war of all against all',[9] in which citizens are at the mercy of anyone with a weapon and a grudge. Historically, as Orwell described, this role has been a double-edged sword. In the twentieth century some 170 million people were killed by their own governments, four times the number killed in wars *between* states.[10] The picture looks different today, despite the slaughter currently going on in Russia's invasion of Ukraine; the worst

[9] Thomas Hobbes, *Elementorum philosophiae sectio tertia de Cive* (Amsterdam: Apud Danielem Elzevirium, 1642), chapter 1, para 13.

[10] Geoff Mulgan, *Good and Bad Power: The Ideals and Betrayals of Government* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

deprivation and suffering often coincide with states that are weak or almost non-existent.

Freedom to be and to do requires income as well as security. States help create jobs, and regulate and upgrade the economy to deliver the kind of inclusive growth that liberates people from hunger and want and allows them to acquire knowledge, skills, voice, and agency, not least by guaranteeing access to quality healthcare, education, water, and sanitation, along with some form of social protection.

Politically, states guarantee the rights and voice of poor and excluded groups both directly (the right to vote, access to justice) and by creating an enabling environment, for example, through legislation on access to information, media independence, or decentralization and other participatory governance reforms.

Since the first edition of this book was published in 2016, a renewed struggle over the role of the state has emerged in a turbulent period of countervailing trends. On one side is a wave of populist autocrats who, according to Moises Naim, 'Rather than trying to build old-style dictatorships, progressively hollow out the state'. Like a parasite that eats away the host animal from the inside but lets it carry on walking (for a bit), the autocrats pay lip service to democratic institutions while simultaneously undermining them.

Set against that has been the impact of the Covid pandemic, which both reaffirmed the role of effective states (most populist leaders made a horrendous mess of responding to the disease) and bequeathed a legacy of renewed interest in an active and enlarged state, for example in steering the economy.

Whether defending them from attack, or pushing for reform, understanding and influencing states will remain a core task for many activists. It helps to see them as systems, rather than monoliths, full of competing tendencies, interests, and ideas. States emerge over time and evolve as they interact with numerous non-state institutions and individuals. It is those interactions that matter for activists seeking to promote change.

How states evolve

In evolutionary terms, states are a comparatively recent addition to the family and kinship groups that have been the basic building block of human society since *Homo sapiens* emerged from Africa some 100,000 years ago. China was the first to create a recognizably modern state, in the shape of

a coherent, merit-based bureaucracy, in the third century BC. By contrast, modern states did not emerge in Europe until some 2,000 years later, following two centuries of wars that whittled 500 political entities down into a couple of dozen nation states.[11]

States rise and fall; prolonged periods of institutional inertia are punctuated (as now) by crises and sudden change. Over time, however, states have expanded, both in remit and size. States that once confined themselves to conscripting and taxing their citizens now seek to influence many aspects of their lives. In 1880, government spending in the UK and the US was only about 10 per cent of GDP;[12] by 2021 it was 48 per cent and 45 per cent respectively.[13] State spending tends to grow as economies develop.

In his monumental history of the state,[14] Francis Fukuyama argues that 'the miracle of modern politics' lies in achieving a precarious balance between three pillars: effective centralized administration (civil service), the rule of law (courts), and accountability mechanisms (elected government and parliamentary oversight). Following this framework, I will discuss the administration in this chapter, while subsequent ones will cover the machinery of law and accountability.

Balance among these three elements is a miracle because they are often in conflict. Central administrations usually seek to maximize their power, while courts and parliaments seek to limit it. When balance is achieved, it doesn't always last: societies have always wrestled with the ability of lobbyists and vested interests ('hidden power') to buy access and influence with decision makers. In trying to influence states, insider activists use many of the same tactics, albeit with considerably less money and different aims.

Fukuyama argues that the UK in the nineteenth century was the first to put in place a balance of all three pillars. He also finds comfort in the history of the US, which suffered mind-boggling levels of patronage and corruption in the nineteenth century, yet in the fifty years prior to the Second World War managed to turn the US government into a relatively effective bureaucracy.

[11] Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), pp. 19 and 328.

[12] Ha-Joon Chang, *Economics: The User's Guide* (London: Pelican, 2014).

[13] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 'General government spending', https://data.oecd.org/gga/general-government-spending.htm.

[14] Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

In today's lower income countries, successive waves of European colonization wielded a lasting influence over the evolution of states. Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and others took over existing states or created new ones where none had previously existed. In Latin America, Spain found the militarist imperial structures of the Aztecs and Incas not that dissimilar from its own, and used them to rule over their conquered subjects, leaving a legacy of hierarchical, unresponsive bureaucracies.

In lucrative Asian colonies such as India and Singapore, whose wealth and trade underwrote the British Empire and Britain's industrialization, the colonizers invested significantly in the national army and civil service to suit their purposes—institutions that lived on after independence. China and East Asia's legacy of strong states survived European occupation and provided a basis for rebuilding upon decolonization. Africa was another story; the pillage of its people by the slave trade required no state institutions and, with the exception of South Africa, the continent appeared to offer little wealth and myriad difficulties for the colonizers. As a result, the Europeans opted for indirect rule with few settlers and fewer state institutions. The least developed parts of the world today are those that lacked either strong indigenous state institutions or transplanted settler-based ones.[15]

The evolution of modern states has taken centuries, in a tortured and often bloody process far removed from the staid world of technocratic 'state building' promoted by today's aid donors. Typical of the evolution of complex systems, the dynamic has been one of slow change, punctuated by sudden upheavals. Historically, war has been one of the great drivers of state evolution; in the words of social historian Charles Tilly, 'war made the state and the state made war'.[16] The first proper state was forged amid carnage on the battlefields of China, and a similar bloodbath gave birth to modern European states and many others across the globe.

War posed existential threats that forced elites to pool their efforts, accept restraints on their individual power, and embrace change. It led to the introduction and expansion of taxation, which in turn required a state bureaucracy to collect and administer the revenue. And it laid the foundation for a social contract between citizen and state based on security: the

[15] Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), p. 33.

[16] Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 54.

former provided soldiers and money in return for the latter's protection. As noted in Chapter 1, the two World Wars of the twentieth century vastly expanded the obligations of citizens and states to each other.

Wars (or the threat of them) are examples of 'critical junctures', major events that also include financial meltdowns and epidemics (the Black Death transformed Europe in the fourteenth century; we still don't know the long-term impact of Covid-19). Another such juncture is a 'resource shock' that finances either a corrupt feeding frenzy (Nigeria's discovery of oil and gas), a period of boom and prosperity (Botswana's diamonds), or a cycle of overspending, indebtedness, and financial crisis (as seems to be happening in Ghana after its recent oil finds).

Each of these shocks prompted shifts in the structures and operating values of the state that proved crucial to movements for change. Critical junctures act as catalysts of change, rearranging the patterns of alliances and allegiances that underpin the political order, but also transforming norms on everything from the role of the state in providing welfare to the rights of women or African Americans (both strongly influenced by the Second World War).

Longer-term, less-visible processes than war also create evolutionary pressures on the state. Economic growth can create new poles of power: it can throw up new entrants to elites, who demand preferential policies; and it can lay the basis for new social movements, through which middle classes demand civil rights and freedom of expression, or trade unions and urban slum dwellers fight for improved state services and a fairer distribution of wealth. Activists need to engage with new movements as they arise out of such slow processes, and at the same time remain alert to moments that allow for breakthroughs.

In recent decades the actions and courage of strong and cohesive non-violent civic coalitions have proven vital to the political transitions that presage state change. Since the 1980s, successive waves of civil society protest have contributed to the overthrow of military governments across Latin America, the downfall of Communist and authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the removal of dictators in the Philippines and Indonesia, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the upheavals of the Arab Spring. Effective tactics have included boycotts, mass protests, blockades, strikes, and civil disobedience.

Even the most repressive states cannot ignore such movements for long. Confucius wrote that every ruler needs arms, food, and trust, but that if any

of these had to be forfeited, the first two should be given up before the last. Even unelected governments need a degree of trust to do their day-to-day work. Without it, laws will more often be evaded and broken, taxes harder to raise, and information harder to gather.

'Legitimacy'—when citizens accept the rights of states to rule over them—lies at the heart of the social contract between rulers and ruled.[17] Opinion polls show that such legitimacy is in retreat or broken in many countries. Fukuyama ends his history of the state with an impassioned denunciation of today's US 'vetocracy', paralysed by vested interests. Left to fester, he argues such decay resembles the build-up of pressures in the earth's crust preceding an earthquake.

Writing from the vantage point of 2023, that analysis seems particularly prescient. Since this book was published in 2016, a new set of disruptive players and tactics has transformed the way we think about politics, the state, and change. They are driven by the interaction of slow change (the rise of social media, rising inequality, growing distrust of institutions) and crisis (the global financial meltdown of 2008). In his book *The Revenge of Power*, Moises Naim[18] describes a generation of new '3P autocrats' with a formula for a 'malignant new form of power': Populism, Polarization, and Post-Truth. They portray a political realm neatly cleft into two: the corrupt, greedy elite versus the noble and pure—but betrayed and aggrieved—*Volk*, the people.

The populist repertoire, repeated endlessly, includes 'catastrophism, the criminalization of political rivals, using external threats, militarization and para militarization, crumbling national borders, denigrating experts, attacking the media, undermining checks and balances, Messianic delivery'.

That onslaught has been part of a global assault on democratic institutions that has reversed many of the gains of recent decades. According to Freedom House, a libertarian think tank that publishes an annual 'Freedom in the World' index, global freedom in 2022 declined for the 17th consecutive year.[19]

[17] Claire Mcloughlin, 'State legitimacy', DLP Concept Brief 02 (Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program, 2014), https://dlprog.org/publications/research-papers/state-legitimacy/.

[18] Moises Naim, *The Revenge of Power: How Autocrats Are Reinventing Politics for the 21st Century* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2022).

[19] Freedom House, 'Freedom in the world 2023', https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/fiw_world_2023_digtalpdf.pdf.

The democratic retreat will not last for ever. Systems are in constant flux and change is highly non-linear. Based on his observations in several Mexican municipalities, political scientist Jonathan Fox found state policy evolving at the local level through a cycle of conflict and cooperation: after a conflict would break out, more progressive local state officials would talk to the more approachable protest leaders, and a period of reform would ensue. When those reforms ran out of steam, or new issues emerged, conflict would flare up and the cycle would begin anew.[20] Another political scientist, Sidney Tarrow, sees a similar dynamic of repression, partial victories leading to reform, and demobilization repeating itself in Europe over the last two centuries.[21]

I use this model a good deal, because it neatly explains why struggles move between periods of conflict and cooperation. It also captures the fact that most political change happens through deals behind closed doors that seek to accommodate change and avert mass violence, even if protests and conflicts understandably draw our attention. The 'political settlement' that ended apartheid in South Africa and brought transition to non-racial democracy involved a wide range of pacts, deals, and 'accords' struck between major political forces, powerful economic interests, the labour movement, and civil society groups. Such deals reflect power, both visible and hidden, and activists need to be aware of the extent of their leverage and also be present, with access to decision makers at critical moments, even when decisions are made behind closed doors. Engaging in this way often provokes charges of legitimizing anti-democratic or untransparent processes, while refusing to engage entails missed opportunities. This issue generates a good deal of argument between 'insider' and 'outsider' activists, and will be discussed in Chapter 12.

States in lower income countries today

Nearly all lower income countries reflect the dynamic interplay of ancient political traditions and those imposed by their European colonizers. Each state is unique and any typology is inevitably unsatisfactory because

[20] Jonathan Fox, *Accountability Politics: Power and Voice in Rural Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[21] Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

particular states tick more than one box, they move between categories over time, or different elements within a state behave in different ways. Nevertheless, I find it helpful to divide states into three broad groupings: developmental states, patrimonial states, and fragile/conflict-affected states.

'Developmental' states have an effective centralized state apparatus, geared primarily to generating economic growth. Many of them emerged where state institutions pre-date European takeover. Since the 1960s, developmental states like South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia have made huge strides growing the economy and reducing poverty; Ha-Joon Chang says that, for a development economist, growing up in 1960s Korea was like being a physicist present at the birth of the universe. The 'Asian Tigers' are closest to the classical description of the state set out by the German sociologist Max Weber, namely an efficient, merit-based civil service that manages to avoid capture by vested interests and guides the national economy in a process of sustained upgrading. Some observers include Botswana, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Chile in the category.

As that list suggests, there is a problem. While aid donors laud the successes of developmental states in freeing their populations from poverty, human rights advocates condemn their repression of opposition and free speech. Going back to Amartya Sen's definition, developmental states deliver only some kinds of 'freedoms to do and to be', while actively suppressing others.

Before everyone starts calling for a strong leader to impose order and deliver growth, it should be remembered that while some autocracies are developmental, many are not. Cross-country comparisons show that, on average, there appears to be no growth advantage (or disadvantage) in being authoritarian. Autocracies do account for some of development's success stories, but they have also been responsible for innumerable dismal failures. Living in Argentina in 1980, I saw the hyperinflation inflicted by military rule that went hand in hand with their cruel human rights abuses.

The quality of growth also varies. As systems, autocracies are distinguished from democracies by the paucity of feedback loops and constraints—a dictator dictates, after all. With untrammelled power, a leader can conduct necessary reforms, often leading to growth spurts, but should the situation change, or should they simply get it wrong, there is no-one who can force them to alter course. Economies under autocracies are thus characterized by booms and busts, whereas democracies, with

their often exasperating degree of feedback and constraint, have historically proved better at avoiding the extremes, producing a smoother ride.[22]

'Patrimonial' states bear very little resemblance to the Weberian ideal. They are deeply inefficient, with high levels of patronage and corruption, as officials and leaders put self and kin before citizens and country. The Pacific director of public works recalled one minister telling him that he was speaking at that meeting on that island and that he wanted him to make sure that the diggers arrived while he was speaking. There were no road works under way, but he made sure the big yellow excavators arrived for the show. He had even set aside a small fund to pay for such pointless exercises in order to buy the political elbow room to get on with the real work.

Patrimonial states lie along a spectrum from vampire to ruminant: at one extreme, corrupt governments suck the blood out of the economy and give nothing back; at the other extreme, a degree of 'eating' does not rule out something useful emerging as a by-product.

The third grouping of 'fragile/conflict-affected states' can barely control the national territory, or are wracked by conflict and violence. There, nothing seems to work, public services are negligible, the rule of law practically non-existent. Citizens do not even enjoy the basic right not to be shot by marauding gangs. In such places, according to Alex de Waal, '"States" are largely imaginary constructs. What matters in politics is accumulating as large a "political budget" as possible—the discretionary funds that any leader can spend on buying support, whether in votes or guns.'[23]

Over the course of this century, such states will be home to an increasing proportion of the world's people living in poverty and therefore a growing focus for aid agencies.

Some recent research could be of great use here. Most families in most places in such states get on with their lives, raise children, try to earn a living, and resolve their problems without picking up a gun. How do they do that? Researchers in the 'Action for Accountability and Empowerment' programme[24] asked local researchers to help families keep 'governance

[22] Tim Kelsall, 'State of the art: authoritarianism, democracy and development' (Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program, 2014).

[23] Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

[24] Institute of Development Studies, 'Governance at the margins: exploring marginalised groups' engagement with public authorities', https://www.ids.ac.uk/projects/governance-at-the-margins-a4ea/.

diaries' in conflict-affected areas of Mozambique, Myanmar, and Pakistan. Regular conversations about how poor families resolved conflict revealed that they hardly ever speak directly to the state (too remote, too risky). Instead they ask a variety of intermediaries (retired officials, faith leaders, etc.) to intervene on their behalf, or else bypass the state altogether.

Activists and their supporters should avoid imposing a Weberian lens of state–citizen interaction on a world where it does not exist. They may also find the typology useful for identifying the appropriate change strategy. In fragile states, where power resides mostly outside the state, they may be better off working at a local level, with municipal officials and non-state bodies like traditional leaders, faith groups, or the kinds of intermediaries revealed by the governance diaries research.

In developmental states, engaging directly with efficient bureaucracies, using research and argument rather than street protest, often makes for a better (and safer) influencing strategy than openly challenging politicians. In my experience, closed political systems are often more responsive to evidence than democracies, where political horse-trading dominates. In more patrimonial systems, the best influencing strategy may be to network directly with those in power, perhaps even joining the local golf club to chat up the civil servants and politicians there, as recommended by one of Oxfam's country directors in West Africa.

The world in which today's states operate is also changing fast. In some ways, traditional nation states are becoming too small for the big things, and too big for the small things. The 'big things'—problems without passports such as climate change, migration, international criminal networks, or tax evasion—have been pushed upwards to regional and global bodies such as the European Union (EU), African Union (AU), or United Nations (UN). For activists, this means working in international networks and/or within international organizations. The Paris climate change conference in 2015 succeeded in part because a large and influential network of NGOs and scientists worked well with proactive national delegations. I discuss this in a case study on the Paris Agreement on pages 159–62.

At the same time, 'small things' like public services and policing have been pushed downward to municipal and provincial levels. A few cities in Colombia and South Africa are starting to look like 'municipal developmental states'.[25] Decentralization has opened up enormous

[25] Hugh Cole, 'Are progressive cities the key to solving our toughest global challenges?', From Poverty to Power blog, 2 September 2014, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/are-progressive-cities-the-key-to-solving-our-toughest-global-challenges/.

possibilities for change, as we saw in Chapter 3 regarding the Chiquitanos of Bolivia. At local level, the balance of power between social movements, activist organizations, and the state is likely to be less unequal.

Aid-financed state reform

Since the 1990s, aid agencies and international financial institutions have devoted considerable attention to reforming states in developing countries. Their efforts to bring about 'good governance' have restructured budgets and ministries, rewritten laws, and even spawned new institutions, but by and large they made little change to the way states operate. The economist Lant Pritchett talks about governments' increasing skill at 'isomorphic mimicry'—a term borrowed from biology, where it describes different organisms that evolve to look alike without actually being related.[26]

The lively conversation among aid donors, researchers, and activists regarding the failure of aid to bring lasting state reform was one of the prime motivators for this book. The discussion in networks with names like 'Doing Development Differently' (DDD)[27] and 'Thinking and Working Politically'[28] has been rewarding and frustrating in equal measure: rewarding because I have learned a great deal from the assembled big brains about how states and aid systems do and don't work; frustrating because some of the issues dear to my heart ('power within', citizen activism, gender rights) are often pushed aside in favour of dissecting political deal-making at the top. (It has also been rewarding in a more direct sense—as part of the Thinking and Working Politically conversation, Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade agreed to support the work that went into this book.)

One recurring theme of these conversations is that aid-financed state reform failed because Western donors tried to graft liberal-democratic and free-market institutions onto countries with very different traditions.[29]

[26] Lant Pritchett, Michael Woolcock, and Matt Andrews, 'Capability traps? The mechanisms of persistent implementation failure', CGD Working Paper No. 234 (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2010).

[27] The DDD Manifesto, https://bsc.hks.harvard.edu/the-ddd-manifesto/.

[28] Adrian Leftwich, 'Thinking and working politically: what does it mean, why is it important and how do you do it?', Document prepared for the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) Research Policy Workshop, 10–11 March 2011, Frankfurt, https://gsdrc.org/document-library/thinking-and-working-politically-what-does-it-mean-why-is-it-important-and-how-do-you-do-it/.

[29] David Booth and Diana Cammack, *Governance for Development in Africa: Solving Collective Action Problems* (London: Zed Books, 2013), p. 123.

Governments became adept at passing rules and creating institutions that look good on paper but are in practice entirely cosmetic. At one point Uganda had the best anti-corruption laws in the world, scoring 99 out of 100 in one league table, yet came 126th in the 2008 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index.

In contrast, countries that successfully reformed state institutions often did not follow some Washington- or London-decreed 'best practice'. Instead, they created hybrid institutions that combine elements of traditional, nationally specific institutions with good ideas from outside.

Recent studies have provided donors with some useful pointers for success. A heavily researched 20-year programme of institutional reform in Nigeria, funded by the UK, uncovered some important lessons:[30]

- Nigerian states with the least political competition saw the most sustained governance reforms. Back to the autocrats vs. democrats debate: more politically insulated leaders find it easier to take risks and rock the institutional boat.
- UK programmes contribute to governance reforms when they understand and act on leaders' political base for reform; that is, when they think and work politically.
- Most progress on governance was achieved when there were elements of empowerment and accountability, even in relation to core state processes such as budgets.

The researchers concluded by urging aid donors to look for a 'sweet spot' in state reform. Don't back powerful governors that are likely to carry out the reform anyway, and avoid places where the political stars are not even remotely aligned. Instead, find places where reforms could go either way, where outside support could tip the balance, and 'focus on constructive engagement between state and non-state actors, forming coalitions between civil society, media, bureaucrats, and politicians, etc. For us, this was often the difference between lasting success and failure'.

[30] Laure-Hélène Piron and Sam Waldock, 'Getting into the politics of why (some) governance programmes work', From Poverty to Power blog, 19 November 2021, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/getting-into-the-politics-of-why-some-governance-programmes-work/.

Other work has highlighted the existence and promise of identifying and working to support 'pockets of effectiveness'—public organizations (particular ministries or city administrations) that 'deliver public goods and services relatively effectively … scattered islands in seas of administrative ineffectiveness and corruption'—in effect, a kind of institutional positive deviance that looks at assets and success (rather than the more familiar focus on deficits and failure).[31]

These kinds of results show the power of a systems perspective. Activists working with the grain of systems need to not only be keenly attuned to both visible and hidden power but also support the redistribution of that power to the people on the sharp end. What does *not* work is a top-down attempt to shoehorn in 'best practice' institutions from elsewhere.

Conclusion

States are complex systems, made up of families of institutions, each with its own history, procedures, and norms. Even the most apparently monolithic dictatorship is, on closer inspection, nothing of the sort. The solidity of presidential palaces and halls of the people is in fact ephemeral, built upon the shifting sands of legitimacy and events. When I lived in Argentina, the military dictatorship appeared impregnable, yet within two years two 'critical junctures' led to its downfall—hyperinflation eroded its middle-class support and military defeat in the Falklands destroyed its aura of power.

States exemplify the challenges of complexity. The interactions, alliances, and disputes between politicians and civil servants, between one ministry and another, or between different tiers of government, and how each of them in turn responds to citizen demand and other external pressures, provide the political landscape upon which decisions are made. Learning to 'dance with the system'—understanding how the state in question evolved, how its decisions are made, how formal and informal power is distributed within it, and how that distribution shifts over time—is an essential task for any activist intent on making change happen.

Alongside the world of officials and ministries that constitute the administrative state, there are two additional institutional entry points for

[31] Michael Roll (ed.), *The Politics of Public Sector Performance: Pockets of Effectiveness in Developing Countries* (London: Routledge, 2014).

activists: the structures that administer justice and those that provide accountability. We turn to them now.

Further reading

M. Andrews, *The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development: Changing Rules for Realistic Solutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

P. Chabal and J.P. Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (London: James Currey, 1989).

F. Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

F. Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651, published Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

A. Leftwich, *States of Development: On the Primacy of Politics in Development* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

B. Levy, *Working with the Grain: Integrating Governance and Growth in Development Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

M. Lockwood, *The State They're in: An Agenda for International Action on Poverty in Africa* (London: ITDG Publishing, 2005).

M. Naim, *The Revenge of Power: How Autocrats Are Reinventing Politics for the 21st Century* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2022).

5
The Machinery of Law

A few years ago, I visited a homeless shelter next to Nigambodh Ghat, the main crematorium in central Delhi, the capital of India. The shelter was built on the banks of the polluted Yamuna River, on land shunned by other residents, due to the clouds of smoke from burning bodies rising from the open-air pyres next door. While those flames lit up the night, a hundred men of all ages sat cross-legged on their sleeping mats, talking to charismatic activist Harsh Mander about depression and drug rehab. They all seemed to be drunk or high, which made the meeting slightly nerve wracking.

Inhospitable as the shelter seemed, it provided these homeless men with a place to sleep and a fixed address. After the meeting, Harsh, who is also a commissioner to India's Supreme Court, advising it on the right to food, roped me in to hand out passbooks. The next day, clutching their proof of address (even if it does say 'homeless shelter') they would all go down to the bank to open accounts. In a month's time they would get biometric ID cards, the digital gateway to rations, cash transfers, and an official identity.

The shelter exists because in 2011 the Court decreed that there should be one homeless shelter for every 100,000 residents. According to Harsh, the Supreme Court was the most effective arm of government on social policy. 'I'd been talking to government for years on homelessness without result. I wrote a letter to the Supreme Court saying people were dying in the Delhi winter, and this is the result.'[1]

India made me rethink my attitude to the law (and most lawyers), which had previously seemed a stupefying combination of rote learning of cases, tedious obsession with procedures, and impenetrable jargon. Even before meeting Harsh, another light-bulb moment came when a young Spanish lawyer working on food security explained to me, 'You must understand,

[1] Author interview, November 2012.

the state sees the world through the eyes of the law'. Her words have stuck with me, giving meaning to those endless news items on judicial reviews, test cases, and supreme-court rulings: the state sees the world, learns, and evolves at least partly through the machinery of law. Activists take note.

Beyond the set of rules enforced by litigation, the police, and the courts, the rule of law includes legal procedures that prescribe how state officials do their work and laws are implemented. The law also has a broader role: it encapsulates what we expect of our society and at the same time it contributes to delivering on that expectation.

As a Brit, I have one particular blind spot—constitutions. Without a formal written document, we mainly come across them in US TV series like West Wing (aka the 'kahnstitooshn'), or when trying to work out why political protests in places like Chile so often lead to 'Constituent Assemblies' to write yet another one.[2]

What's it all about? For similarly baffled readers, I recommend Linda Colley's *The Gun, the Ship and the Pen*,[3] a book with the grandest of sweeps on warfare, constitutions, and the making of the modern world. Colley takes us through political history from 1750 to the present day through the lens of the appearance and endless rewriting of constitutions.

Most examples of what she calls a new 'political technology' lasted only a few years. During their heyday, every nerd and oddball was at it (they were the political apps of the eighteenth century). There's a lovely account of a US constitutionalist beavering away in his Paris lodgings, drafting a new constitution for France (which no-one had requested). Suddenly comes a knock on the door and a random Parisian asks to present the new constitution *he* had just drafted for the US. At which point, the penny drops and the American realizes that maybe everyone should stick to drafting constitutions for places they actually know about—a lesson that still escapes neocons and some people in the aid business, alas.

The law matters for a country's development. Because social, political, and economic change alters the distribution of resources and power, creating winners and losers, development is rife with conflict. A biased legal system will increase the potential for violence and exclusion, while a fair and effective one can harness the participation and voice of diverse groups

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_Chilean_constitutional_referendum.
[3] Linda Colley, *The Gun, the Ship and the Pen* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2021).

to achieve a more consensual resolution of conflict and a smoother ride for an evolving society. That is why so many populists in recent years have taken aim at their country's legal institutions.

When the rule of law is absent, the consequences are dire. No-one described that calamity better than Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, published in 1651:[4]

> Without Law there is no place for Industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no Culture of the Earth, no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious Building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth, no account of Time, no Arts, no Letters, no Society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of people, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.

The law as a driver of change

In theory, the law protects rights, imposes duties, and sets a framework for the conduct of almost every social, political, and economic activity. It punishes offenders impartially, compensates the injured, and enforces agreements. In addition, it endeavours to guarantee justice, promote freedom, and provide security.

But as the French writer Anatole France caustically observed, 'The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread'.[5] In practice, the law reflects disparities of wealth and power: money can hire the best lawyers; white-collar crimes always seem to get off more lightly than blue-collar ones; hidden and invisible powers work their sinister magic.

The degree to which impartiality is constrained by power varies widely from country to country. When it comes to using the formal legal system to promote development, it is hard to beat India, which suffers from a sclerotic legislature and an indifferent government. Its hyperactive legal system has stepped into the breach. Social activists like Harsh Mander regularly try to

[4] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 84.
[5] Anatole France, *The Red Lily* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1894), chapter 7.

persuade the Supreme Court to rule that the government must do something, and then mobilize people to ensure implementation of the ruling. On the rights to food and education, for example, the Court has been the impetus for some of the country's best-known progressive legislation.

That culture filters down to the grassroots. Activist talk is dotted with references to public interest litigation (PIL). Women in slums told me they were bringing claims under India's Right to Information Act to find out what their children's schools should be providing, or who is actually in charge of the community toilets, which had been shut for the last seven years.

But not all activists are as well connected as Harsh and not all PILs are progressive. Plenty of industry lobbyists use the tactic, leading to an overall environment characterized by abrupt and unpredictable policy changes. Judicial activism is also not known for its speed. According to a Ministry of Finance study from the 1990s, to settle the backlog of 25 million cases in India's courts was going to take 324 years at the current disposal rate.[6] I doubt things have got much better since. From a systems perspective, India's judicial activism may well compensate for the failings of the state and the political system, yet it sacrifices the law's ability to act as a neutral arbiter.

When legal systems work for poor people, they can transform the lives of multitudes. In Bangladesh a 2008 Supreme Court ruling confirmed the citizenship rights of thousands of Urdu speakers still living in camps set up after the 1971 War of Independence, allowing them to obtain identity papers that opened the way to formal jobs, votes, and passports.

An analysis by the Overseas Development Institute[7] of the case identified six factors that make this kind of positive impact possible: progressive legal frameworks; sympathetic or activist judiciaries (like the one that helped Harsh Mander); a support structure for legal empowerment (so that poor people have access to money, legal aid, and social contacts); a motivated government (especially in implementing, rather than ignoring, court rulings); potential beneficiaries and their supporters with the incentive and capacity to cooperate; and activists with the right combination

[6] Gurcharan Das, *India Grows at Night: A Liberal Case for a Strong State* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2012).

[7] Tam O'Neil, Craig Valters, and Cynthia Farid, *Doing Legal Empowerment Differently: Learning from Pro-Poor Litigation in Bangladesh* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2015).

of insider and outsider tactics, who can spot windows of opportunity and forge effective alliances. Since many lawsuits last for decades, an additional requirement is staying power. Former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown is said to have once joked, 'In establishing the rule of law, the first five centuries are the hardest'.

The courts are one of the few institutions that have stood up to autocracy (at least some of the time). Until 1994 apartheid South Africa essentially had no written constitution or bill of rights. The white-ruled parliament was supreme, and no court had the power to strike down its laws, no matter how unjust or unfair. But South Africa's courts did have the power to interpret legislation, which they used to blunt some of the more notorious apartheid laws. South Africa also exemplifies another aspect of the law: while it is not immune to influence by elites (that much we know), it can also be influenced by social mobilization ('power with'). I watched fascinated as women's organizations sang and danced outside a Johannesburg courthouse where cases of domestic violence were being tried. I was told such protests greatly increase the chances of success.

Decades after the fall of apartheid, legal activism is still flourishing in South Africa. In 2023, I interviewed Aditya Kumar and Mpho Raboeane of Ndifuna Ukwazi, an NGO working with grassroots communities in Cape Town. They told me: 'The Law is often viewed as a tool for those who are in power or have access to power. We are trying to use the law to empower people, to reclaim that space. Nothing is ever won through one mechanism, one route. For communities to be heard, the language of protest is essential, but it doesn't translate into policy or legislation, that's where advocacy and legal methods are needed. Mobilization gives a face to the issue, helps judges realize the extent to which people are affected by it.'

Aditya and Mpho cited a recent campaign against land sell-offs for private schooling, which not only won its short-term aims but also helped shift the language of government:

> The State was selling off land, which went against pieces of national legislation that say that state assets should be used for social good before being disposed of. We managed to get a review of the sale, and stop the transfer of land. Prior to that, 'spatial justice' was not an objective of the Western Cape administration—land use, especially state land, was geared towards private development and political benefit. That case shifted the logic on the disposal of land. The campaign grew into today's

'Reclaim the City' campaign, which tackles issues like gentrification and the use of land as political currency and corruption.[8]

There are thousands of small, dedicated legal aid and legal rights organizations around the world. I confess I have sometimes been sceptical of activists lugging huge, tattered statute books full of impenetrable legal jargon to workshops in factories and shanty towns, but the legal rights of the poor do matter. A 2002 survey in Ecuador found that women's use of legal aid clinics to help with separation and divorce reduced the probability of severe physical violence after separation by 17 per cent. Legal aid clients also raised their chances of obtaining a child-support award by 20 per cent.[9]

A World Bank study on the use of the courts to enforce the rights to healthcare and education in Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa, and Nigeria[10] posed an intriguing question: Does resort to the legal system make governments more accountable (because they are forced to fulfil their promises) or less (because courts are often the preserve of the rich)? The trade-offs can be complicated: in Costa Rica, a single decision by the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court (perhaps Latin America's most powerful Constitutional Court) led to an 80 per cent reduction in mortality rates among AIDS patients, but obliged the health system to spend 8 per cent of its medicines budget to treat just 0.012 per cent of its patients.

The World Bank study reached a broadly optimistic conclusion. Judges tend not to try to force governments to do the impossible (when they do, they achieve little). Instead, they have become a part of an iterative policy-making process in which 'litigation upsets the status quo, creating the context for a joint search for new solutions' to previously unrecognized problems (such as access to medicines for new diseases) and to reflect shifts in public opinion (such as on the right to food or work). The study concluded: 'When the courts work in congress with other branches of the state, legalization is democracy by another means.'[11]

[8] Author interview, 24 July 2023.

[9] World Bank, *World Development Report 2006. Equity and Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[10] Varun Gauri and Daniel Brinks (eds), *Courting Social Justice: Judicial Enforcement of Social and Economic Rights in the Developing World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[11] Varun Gauri and Daniel Brinks (eds), *Courting Social Justice: Judicial Enforcement of Social and Economic Rights in the Developing World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Inequality in access to justice remains profound. A UN Commission in 2008 found that four billion people (around half the world's population) are robbed of the chance to better their lives and climb out of poverty because they are excluded from the rule of law (although that figure is disputed).[12] One of the most painful examples of inequality before the law is the harsh treatment of poor people at the hands of the police, who often act as an occupying army in poor communities.

In some places activists have won significant improvements in police behaviour, as we saw in the Tikamgarh case discussed in Chapter 1. 'Community policing', an approach that integrates police into community life, has gained a toehold in many countries. Brazil's police, for example, once notorious for links to death squads and the assassination of street children and other 'undesirables',[13] spearheaded the innovation of women-only police stations beginning in the 1980s. The stations commonly address family violence, are often staffed by specially trained female personnel, and aim to improve the ability of the police to respond to the unique needs of women. Their success was such that they have now spread to fifteen countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. In India, a study found that the establishment of 188 women's police stations resulted in a 23 per cent increase in reporting of crimes against women and children and a higher conviction rate.[14]

Customary law

In countries where courts and lawyers are in the pockets of wealthy elites and the laws themselves are structured to protect the privileged, poor people and communities often seek redress through 'customary law', a community-level justice system not codified by the state.

Customary law regulates important aspects of daily life, such as disputes over access to land and water, and family issues, such as inheritance and marriage. It derives its legitimacy from local mores, values, and traditions.

[12] UNDP, *Making the Law Work for Everyone*. Volume 1. Report of the Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor (New York: Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor/United Nations Development Programme, 2008).

[13] Gilberto Dimenstein, *Brazil: War on Children* (London: Latin America Bureau, 1991).

[14] UN Women, 'Women's police stations/units', https://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/1093-womens-police-stations-units.html.

And it is affordable: one activist from a remote area in Pakistan argues that, 'Most people in our part of the world who call for sharia courts and laws do so with the belief that it would save them from litigation spread over a lifetime and the exorbitant costs of lawyers. This has little to do with practicing Islam or harsh punishments. People just want to keep everything simple.'[15]

In many poor countries, customary law is the rule rather than the exception. According to Ugandan Professor Sylvia Tamale, 'in Uganda, less than 5 per cent of dispute resolution takes place in a court of law'. She argues that 'customary and religious law play a crucial part in determining the real entitlements at the grassroots level for both women and men'.

But she distinguishes between 'state customary law', where colonial elites adopted customary rules, and living customary law: They set up local courts administered by chiefs and headmen to enforce traditional justice which they baptized 'customary law'. There is now a mix. For example, 'Legal pluralism is also prominent in most African marriages. The majority of parties mix customary marriage rituals like lobola with religious or civil marriages.'[16]

I got a crash course in the workings of customary law during a visit to the Pacific archipelago of Vanuatu in 2015, especially when we left the capital, Port Vila, and headed for the village of Epau. Conversations in the capital had all been about government, parliament, and aid; in Epau, that all seemed very distant. Here, the chiefs were in charge; lots of them—primary chief, assistant chief, and the chiefs of the community's four tribes—all chosen by bloodline (as are most chiefs in Vanuatu). When I asked what they do if a chief misbehaves, the villagers looked nonplussed. 'We've never had a problem, but I guess the village would meet to discuss the problem and work it out.' When money arrives from outside organizations, the chiefs ask for volunteers to manage it, rather than do so themselves.

The balance between formal and customary systems is constantly evolving, according to former Minister for Lands Ralph Regenvanu: 'It's organic and fluid. The chiefs have agreed that rape, murder, incest, and theft that is large scale or from foreigners should be dealt with by the police, partly because it is too divisive, and partly because they can no longer apply traditional sanctions (killing the perpetrators).'[17] In contrast, the management

[15] Masood Ul Mulk, personal communication, 4 January 2016.
[16] Sylvia Tamale, *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* (Quebec: Daraja Press, 2020).
[17] Author interview, November 2015.

of land seems to be ever more in the chiefs' hands, not least because Ralph pushed through legislation to strengthen the customary system.

The formal system of police, courts, government, and parliament is tightly interwoven with the traditional chief system. For example, when riots threatened to break out over the management of the Vanuatu National Provident Fund, the police sent for the local chiefs to calm people down. But they each govern according to different worldviews: the chief system focuses on the collective, whereas the formal system privileges the rights of the individual. Customary law is often about making peace and reconciliation, rather than establishing guilt and redress.

Outsiders tend to over-romanticize customary systems, which are just as prone as any other to imbalances of power. I was told that some of the more 'political chiefs' are using the land reform to grab more land for themselves, and that women's rights are routinely violated. According to Merilyn Tahi of the Vanuatu Women's Center, in reconciliation processes arising from domestic violence cases, compensation 'is often paid to the family rather than the women who have been abused … We should make peace between communities, but women victims need [formal] courts.'[18]

Combining customary and formal systems

The Mystery of Capital[19] by Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto is where I first learned how porous the border between 'modern' and 'customary' legal systems can be. Its subtitle is *Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* and the back cover carries an endorsement by Margaret Thatcher. But one of its core arguments is, to my mind, progressive (systems thinking rarely sits easily on the Left–Right spectrum). In the most successful economies, property rights emerged organically from social practice and customary laws, not through imposition by experts or central government. De Soto argues that today's US property laws are essentially based on the 'extralegal' practices of its early settlers and wildcat miners, and those roots in the daily reality of its citizens are one reason why they have proved so durable.

[18] Author interview, November 2015.

[19] Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

More broadly, de Soto points out that English legal traditions, now in use across the English-speaking world, evolved out of customary systems (known as 'common law'). In contrast, Spanish and French legal traditions (in use throughout their former colonies) were imposed from above, ignoring local customary law or other traditions. Essentially, de Soto is saying we should see the Law as an evolving complex system, rather than a fixed entity.

This kind of systemic approach to the law is starting to show results. Efforts by aid donors to bring peace to the arid pastoralist areas of Northern Kenya, which are dogged by violence, combine elements of formal and customary law in a hybrid approach by creating 'peace committees' to resolve conflicts where the formal legal system has failed. In many pastoralist societies conflicts between individuals are perceived to be the responsibility of larger kin groups, who feel obliged to take matters into their own hands. The payment of compensation is a common means of re-establishing peace, reinforcing the social contract both within and between groups, something the formal courts do not recognize.

Peace committees, formed with the support of NGOs and donors, have sought to institutionalize and regulate this customary approach to conflict resolution. With the participation of local authorities, the committees have drafted detailed declarations, which act as a local system of regulation for the district—in essence locally generated laws. The committees have proved effective and have spread rapidly across the region, but as in Vanuatu there are downsides, born of disparities of power: one declaration stated that the death of a man should be compensated by a hundred cows or camels, while the death of a woman is valued at only fifty cows or camels.[20]

While the change potential of hybrid approaches is huge, activists who wish to engage with such endeavours should take note of both the good and the bad sides of the Kenya story, avoiding both 'West-is-Best' bias and naive romanticism about the workings of customary systems. In either system and in hybrids, the key is to understand how power operates and how it can be redistributed to benefit those currently excluded.

[20] Caroline Sage, Nicholas Menzies, and Michael Woolcock, 'Taking the rules of the game seriously: mainstreaming justice in development—the World Bank's Justice for the Poor Program', Justice & Development Working Paper Series 7/2006 (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2009).

International law

I have always been a little sceptical of the phrase 'international law', because it seems to carry a misleading sense of solidity. How can a set of rules and agreements to regulate the behaviour of states (rather than individuals) be considered 'law' when the international system rarely can muster anything resembling police, courts, or sanctions to force states to comply? Power to and power over seem largely absent.

But even though international law may not often be backed by force, it does shape and constrain behaviour and promote a wider sense of how states should behave. If thousands of interactions between nation states pass without a hitch every day, trade is conducted, and contracts and rights are respected, we have international law to thank.

Some international law is 'hard law', enforceable in courts with fines or sentences. In 2021, sixteen years after first issuing a warrant for the arrest of Dominic Ongwen, a notorious commander of Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army, judges of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague convicted him of 61 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including crimes of sexual and gender-based violence, and conscripting and using child soldiers in hostilities.[21]

Other international commitments are enshrined in conventions and treaties that can be subsequently incorporated into enforceable national law. At the softest end of the spectrum are aspirational statements and promises like the Sustainable Development Goals agreed at the UN in 2015, which may have some 'teeth' in the shape of reporting requirements, but do not require changes to national legislation.

Like its national counterpart, international law is often designed for, and used by, the powerful. One example is the proliferation of Investor–State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) mechanisms.[22] In January 2016, the TransCanada energy company went to court to claim that the Obama administration's failure to approve the Keystone XL pipeline violated US obligations under the North American Free Trade Agreement

[21] The LSE's Jackline Atingo watched the judgement back in Northern Uganda, with six women, including Ongwen's wife. Her fascinating account of how people on the ground perceive international law in operation can be seen at https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2021/02/17/watching-icc-judgement-lra-commander-dominic-ongwen-uganda-victims-rape-marriage/.

[22] See http://investmentpolicyhub.unctad.org/ISDS for an interactive map of ISDS cases.

(NAFTA, since replaced by the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA)). The company demanded $15 billion in compensation from US taxpayers.[23]

The fact that the US has never lost an NAFTA case shows how power influences the workings of international law. The rules are not meaningless, but nor are they entirely neutral. ISDS mechanisms are a very contentious issue in recent free trade negotiations, like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP, between the US and EU), not least because they bypass domestic courts and give too much power to the investors.[24]

Activists can also use international law in a variety of more progressive ways, whether to buttress litigation or to press for changes to national legislation and public attitudes. There has been a huge growth of climate litigation in recent years, targeting institutions such as the International Court of Justice, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, the maritime tribunal). There has been a similar surge in claims to international human rights tribunals, in particular the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights. As of late 2023, Oxfam was involved with several climate-related cases, involving the private sector but going far beyond, looking at the role of fossil fuel investors (in France) and at the role of the state, and seeking to clarify and extend the rights of future generations.[25]

As noted in Chapter 3, international law can help promote norm changes when it is taken up by grassroots movements.

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) obliges ratifying governments to protect children from discrimination, to ensure that their best interests are of primary consideration in policy making, to ensure their survival and development, and remarkably to 'assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child'. The CRC rapidly proved something of a phenomenon in international law, becoming the most widely

[23] Todd Tucker, 'TransCanada is suing the U.S. over Obama's rejection of the Keystone XL pipeline. The U.S. might lose', Monkey Cage blog, *Washington Post*, 8 January 2016.
[24] Todd Tucker, 'TransCanada is suing the U.S. over Obama's rejection of the Keystone XL pipeline. The U.S. might lose', Monkey Cage blog, *Washington Post*, 8 January 2016.
[25] Joss Saunders, email, 8 August 2023.

and rapidly ratified human rights treaty in history. Only three countries, Somalia, South Sudan, and the US, have not ratified.[26]

By the time I arrived in Latin America and the Caribbean a few years later, ratification had triggered a spate of new 'children's codes', such as Brazil's Child and Adolescent Statute (ECA), and child rights bodies like Peru's Demunas (Municipal Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents). Most progress was achieved (both in law and, more importantly, in the lives of children) where domestic movements of children and their supporters were strong enough to put pressure on governments from below, to match the pressure from above exerted by the existence of the Convention. Across the region, I had hundreds of conversations with activists, both children and adults, who were using the CRC as the basis for their campaigns.

The December 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change provoked a fascinating conversation on the capacity of international law to address complex problems such as reducing carbon emissions. Some thought the Agreement's lack of binding targets was a sign of its weakness, since only a binding document can be enforced by courts and arbitration tribunals. By contrast, Anne-Marie Slaughter, Hilary Clinton's right-hand woman during her period in the State Department, saw Paris as a 'model for effective global governance in the twenty-first century'.[27]

Slaughter argued that the agreement 'substitutes transparency for compliance' and that is a good thing. The commitments in a legally binding treaty would be permanent, which in practice would lock in the lowest common denominator. Paris agreed a process of review that opened the door to ratcheting up emissions targets over time and which could be adapted to new evidence, opinion, and national circumstances. I discuss this in a case study on the Paris Agreement as a change process on pages 159–62.

Some legal scholars view the remorseless spread of international law, both in scale and the range of issues it covers, as 'the precursor of international government'.[28] Like Gulliver being tied down by the Lilliputians'

[26] Human Rights Watch, '25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child', 17 November 2014, https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/11/17/25th-anniversary-convention-rights-child.

[27] Anne-Marie Slaughter, 'The Paris approach to global governance', Project Syndicate, 28 December 2015, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/paris-agreement-model-for-global-governance-by-anne-marie-slaughter-2015-12.

[28] Joel Trachtman, *The Future of International Law: Global Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

threads,[29] the web of international law has grown and already exerts a surprising level of discipline on national governments. It has done so in a de Soto-esque fashion, expanding and evolving from its roots in the conduct of war and diplomacy to include trade, environment, social norms, and human rights. Its future will be shaped not only by the powers that be, but also by activists who find ways to use it to promote progressive change.

The law as a system

Like many institutions that at first sight appear fixed and monolithic, the law is a system in constant flux. Not only are old laws replaced by new, but also the interpretation of laws evolves, including the weight assigned to customary systems. In the words of renowned US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, 'The law embodies the story of a nation's development through many centuries, and it cannot be dealt with as if it contained only the axioms and corollaries of a book of mathematics.'[30]

Evolutionary tides are not bound by national borders. In much of Africa and Latin America, the 1990s saw the end of a twenty-year period in which the state had reigned supreme, largely untroubled by legal constraints, swept aside in part by an international surge in interest in rights-based approaches and international human rights law.

A new generation of rights-based constitutional reforms was enacted, like Costa Rica's in 1989, which gave international human rights treaties the same force as domestic law. Constitutional courts in South Africa, Colombia, and elsewhere were set up to oversee new constitutions, becoming lightning rods for legal activism. Colombia's constitutional court heard 800,000 cases on the right to healthcare between 1999 and 2009 and ended up ordering the systematic restructuring of the country's health system because, despite previous legislation calling for universal coverage and other improvements, the government had failed to act.[31]

[29] Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (London: Benjamin Motte, 1726).
[30] Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Common Law* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1881), p. 1.
[31] Alicia Ely Yamin and Siri Gloppen, *Litigating Health Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 343.

Some legal systems remain rigid and inflexible and, like the old forest systems discussed in Chapter 1, exhibit periods of sclerosis punctuated by periods of violent disruption and upheaval. But ever more of them have grown malleable, able to adapt to the evolving distribution of power, interests, and norms in their changing societies. In what some lawyers call a 'legal social justice revolution', progressive lawyers around the world recognized that the law is not an immovable institution and began the slow process of harnessing the law to promote human rights and equality and to address privilege and discrimination. As a result, the law has evolved from a musty, rigid defender of the status quo (especially those aspects that reinforced power and inequality) to an active player in creating and recreating the society in which we live.

Conclusion

There is a character in Shakespeare's *Henry VI* who declares, 'The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers'.[32] However tempting, I think he's wrong. I now understand why so many activists, especially in the US, are (or want to become) lawyers.

The legal system, like any institution, is not a level playing field. The rich and powerful can hire better lawyers, can lobby law makers, and generally get a better deal. But not always—if people organize, build the right coalitions, and pursue the right argument and tactics, laws and lawyers can bite back; governments and Big Men can lose cases.

The law will remain an essential weapon in the armoury of activists around the world. In the ever-expanding realm of national and international law, unexplored avenues abound. Oxfam lawyers are currently investigating whether climate change litigation could follow the path of tobacco, and my guess is that obesity and road traffic accidents will one day follow. The challenge will be to build bridges between legal activism and other efforts to influence the system, since the two worlds are often divided by impatience, different theories of change, or the chasm of language.

Now that we have examined the administrative and legal systems, the next chapter will explore the third area of the state in Fukuyama's schema—the institutions that provide accountability.

[32] William Shakespeare, *Henry The Sixth*, *Part 2*, Act 4, scene 2, pp. 71–8.

Further reading

T. Bingham, *The Rule of Law* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

T. Carothers (ed.), *Promoting the Rule of Law Abroad: In Search of Knowledge* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008).

V. Gauri and D. Brinks (eds), *Courting Social Justice: Judicial Enforcement of Social and Economic Rights in the Developing World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

J. Kinghan, *Lawyers, Networks and Progressive Social Change, Lawyers Changing Lives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

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J.A. Widner, *Building the Rule of Law: Francis Nyalali and the Road to Judicial Independence in Africa* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

6
Accountability, Political Parties, and the Media

It's hard to imagine a more precious time slot in a politician's calendar than three days before a general election, yet the May 2015 'Citizens' Assembly' in a cavernous London church hall attracted two of the UK's three main party leaders, while the governing Conservatives fielded a high-level stand-in for David Cameron. The politicians submitted themselves to being grilled before 2,500 activists from Citizens UK, a community organization. The audience was a kaleidoscope of multicultural Britain, drawn from faith groups, schools, networks of asylum seekers and refugees, and other grassroots institutions. There was no favouritism: each politician was allowed just four minutes each to make their pitch and they were then cross-examined in detail. Vague or evasive answers were challenged, promises were extracted, and the politicians ended up making extra commitments under pressure from the crowd.[1]

For Francis Fukuyama, accountability means that 'the rulers believe that they are responsible to the people they govern, and put the people's interests above their own'.[2] I would add that accountability also means that the population and institutions of civil society hold significant power and can exact redress when duties and commitments are not met. Accountability is the glue that binds together citizen and state, which is desirable in itself because having a voice contributes to wellbeing, as well as being a practical means to drive progressive change.

[1] Duncan Green, 'Active citizens holding Britain's politicians to account—why can't the rest of the UK election campaign be more like this?', From Poverty to Power blog, 6 May 2015, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/active-citizens-holding-britains-politicians-to-account-why-isnt-the-rest-of-the-uk-election-campaign-more-like-this/.

[2] Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), p. 321.

In aid and official development, however, accountability is often framed much more narrowly in terms of being accountable for the results promised in a particular project, or 'upwards accountability' to donors, which often takes precedence over 'downwards accountability' to citizens.

Some observers equate accountability with the holding of elections, but it is a pressing issue in democratic and non-democratic systems alike. This chapter discusses political parties and the media as two crucial institutions that provide avenues for accountability, as well as the burgeoning field of 'social accountability', in both elected and unelected regimes. All three provide valuable channels for activists to hold those in power to account for their decisions.

Political parties as drivers of change

Citizens UK's deliberate and energetic engagement with political parties, especially Right-wing ones, is comparatively rare for activist organizations. Development thinkers pay parties scant attention and aid organizations tend to discount their importance. Few activists take the time to understand and engage with the labyrinth of committees, networks, and procedures through which political parties influence the decisions made by those in office.

I sympathize because, in my experience, even progressive parties can be pretty unappealing. I was briefly a Labour Party activist in the late 1980s, but found its meetings dominated by local government employees who seemed solely concerned with conserving their jobs and used an impenetrable shorthand to describe party processes. I ended up being put in charge of jumble sales (which I quite enjoyed). When my first baby came along, I quietly dropped out.

I now think that was short-sighted, because familiarity with the complex world of party histories, cultures, structures, and decision-making is an essential part of understanding (and influencing) how change happens. However dull, political parties are the clutch in the engine of politics, linking citizens to government. They reconcile and represent the interests and viewpoints of numerous individuals and groups in society; they

recruit and train future leaders; and above all, they hold government accountable and organize opposition.[3] In national parliaments, provincial assemblies, and town councils, parties propose, debate, and scrutinize legislation and the actions of central government. And they really come into their own at election time, fielding candidates and marshalling votes.

Representative democracy based on universal suffrage and political parties is relatively recent, in historical terms. The American Constitution makes no provision for parties and many of the Founding Fathers were hostile to the idea that they should come to govern the country. George Washington warned in his farewell address of 'the baneful effects of the Spirit of Party; a conflict that would divide and potentially destroy the new nation'. His Successor John Adams argued that 'a division of the republic into two great parties … is to be dreaded as the greatest political evil under our Constitution'.[4]

In 1900, New Zealand was the world's only country with a government elected by all its adult citizens. Since then, democratically elected government has spread in successive waves, most recently since the fall of the Berlin Wall. By 2023, Freedom House, a conservative US think tank, classified 84 of 195 countries as 'free', compared to only 44 of 148 countries in 1973.[5]

The parties that contest power in today's democracies come in a bewildering range of shapes and sizes. Some are 'Toyota' parties, whose leaders and followers could fit into a single car; others are mass-based organizations with thousands of organizers. Some represent the interests of just a few wealthy businessmen; others speak for millions of impoverished and marginalized people.[6] Some grew out of social movements, whether religious (India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Europe's Christian Democrats, the Middle East's Islamist parties) or social (Bolivia's

[3] Vicky Randall, 'Political parties and democratic developmental states', *Development Policy Review* 25 (5) (2007), pp. 633–52, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-7679.2007.00389.x/pdf.

[4] Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), p. 140.

[5] Freedom House, 'Freedom in the world 2023', https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years.

[6] Thomas Carothers, *Confronting the Weakest Link: Aiding Political Parties in New Democracies* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006).

Movement to Socialism (MAS), Brazil's Workers Party (PT)). Some draw on ethnic or regional affiliation (many of Kenya's parties) or are personal vehicles for charismatic leaders (Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra).

Parties that emerge from social movements, trade unions, and other mass organizations have been responsible for some inspiring breakthroughs in South Africa, Brazil, Bolivia, India, and elsewhere. A recent example is India's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP, or the 'Common Man's Party'), which grew out of an anti-corruption protest sparked by a 2011 hunger strike by a renowned and self-consciously Gandhian protestor named Anna Hazare.[7] His action helped force the introduction of anti-corruption legislation, but the movement lost momentum and media interest in the energy-sapping labyrinths of parliamentary procedure. Other leaders then recast the movement as a political party to mobilize for the longer-term grind of political reform. In 2013, barely a year after its founding, the AAP came second in the Delhi Assembly elections, and in 2015 it won sixty-seven out of seventy assembly seats.

Social movements organize as parties because as movements they tend to rise and fall in sudden bursts of protest and can rarely muster the long-term engagement with the state required to achieve lasting change. What's more, civil society organizations find it hard to make any legitimate claim to represent the will of the people because no-one has elected them. However, many activists argue that playing the electoral game entails compromises that inevitably tarnish the clarity of the message and the moral legitimacy of a protest movement and lays it open to betrayal by leaders seduced by political opportunism. Such tensions obliged leaders to break with Anna Hazare to found the AAP, and have dogged South Africa's African National Congress (ANC), Brazil's PT, and Bolivia's MAS, all of which emerged from coalitions of social movements and came to rule the country.

Political parties often follow a cycle of birth, growth, and decay. A charismatic new leader bursts onto the scene, or a social movement turns itself into a clean, inspiring new party, and supporters rally to the flag of a new kind of politics. The AAP, like Podemos in Spain or Syriza in Greece,

[7] Prashant Sharma, 'From India against corruption to the Aam Aadmi Party: social movements, political parties and citizen engagement in India', in *Political Parties and Citizen Movements in Asia and Europe*, edited by Raul Cordenillo and Sam van der Staak (Singapore: Asia–Europe Foundation, Hanns Seidel Foundation, and International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2014).

initially showed huge mobilizing power and a commitment to a new way of doing politics: non-hierarchical, internally democratic, financially transparent, and free of big money or dynasty politics. But it proves remarkably hard to maintain that coherence and dynamism. Most of them had to make difficult choices and undertake compromises that contributed to an eventual decline in their support.

The churn of the political party system is both an opportunity and a threat for activists and their organizations. Understand and engage with it, and they can influence current and future governments, reaching far more people than an activist organization can ever hope to alone. Parties can be long-term institutional homes for policies and ideas, in contrast to the peaks and troughs of activist movements. But there are trade-offs. The election of progressive parties often leads to a dip in broader social activism as progressive governments and parties siphon off leaders, ideas, and activists from NGOs and social movements, while urging them to 'leave it to us'. That is often a risky move, as even progressive parties need to be kept honest by activists to prevent the compromises and temptations of office from diluting their initial impetus. Like Citizens UK at its London Assembly, activists need to maintain their ability to criticize and oppose if they are to advocate effectively for marginalized people.

Democracy under siege

Re-reading the previous sections for the 2023 update of this book, I am struck (once again) by their optimism, bordering on naivety. Like any complex system, democratic change is far from linear, and in recent years the long-term trend of the expansion of democratic voice has gone into reverse. According to Freedom House, aggregate, global freedom declined for the seventeenth consecutive year in 2022.[8]

True, there have been some signs of progress, such as the increasing interest in 'deliberative democracy' through citizens' assemblies[9] or participatory budgeting, but overall, the last decade has seen a widening gulf between 'democracy as people power' and the reality of autocrats

[8] Freedom House, 'Freedom in the world 2023', https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years.

[9] See, for example, www.involve.org.uk.

getting better and better at manipulating elections and other aspects of accountability in order to cling on to power. The bad guys learn and adapt too, sometimes faster than the good guys.

In *How to Rig an Election*,[10] Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas start with a paradox: 'there are more elections than ever before, and yet the world is becoming less democratic'. The basis for these claims includes interviews with more than 500 elite figures in eleven countries, backed up by a global data set of all elections held since 1960. Their focus is on 'goldilocks' states—neither pure authoritarian nor 'pure democratic' (if such places exist), but lying on a spectrum from dominant authoritarian (Russia, Rwanda) to competitive authoritarian (Kenya, Ukraine), which together they call 'counterfeit democracies' masquerading as the real thing. They also include lots of examples from the chequered pasts and presents of countries like the US (Donald Trump) and the UK (rotten boroughs).

What they find is that rigging elections is a *really* good strategy for autocrats—much better than simply trying to kill everyone who opposes you. Rigging elections 'typically enables embattled governments to secure access to valuable economic resources like foreign aid, while reinvigorating the ruling party and—in many cases—dividing the opposition … 30 years ago, the main aim of the average dictator was to avoid holding elections; today it is to avoid losing them'.

Cheeseman and Klaas identify a six-stage 'menu of manipulation': Gerrymandering; vote buying; repression; hacking the election; stuffing the ballot box; and playing the international community. One trick the authors overlook is the increasing use by autocrats of anti-corruption and other notionally progressive legislation to either jail opponents or ban them from standing.

Election rigging has become easier thanks to the hollowing out of many democratic institutions: from courts stuffed with pro-regime judges to the sudden collapse of hitherto stable political party systems around the world, democratic systems have become more vulnerable to capture. The unholy alliance between digital platforms and repressive autocrats so graphically described in the Philippines by Maria Ressa in her book *How to Stand up to a Dictator*[11] has turbocharged the process:

[10] Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas, *How to Rig an Election* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

[11] Maria Ressa, *How to Stand up to a Dictator* (London: W.H. Allen, 2022).

> I have lived through several cycles of history, chronicling the wild swings of the pendulum. When journalists were the gatekeepers to our public information ecosystem, those swings took decades. Once technology took over and abdicated responsibility for our emotional safety, history could be changed in months.
>
> When that happened, it transformed the old checks and balances on power and transformed our world. We elected incompetent populists who stoked our fears, turning us against one another, fueling and feeding off our fear, anger and hate. They appointed officials like themselves: their goal was not good governance but power. When termites eat away at wood, we didn't see that the floor we stood on could collapse at any minute.

Happily, recessions, even democratic ones, don't last for ever. The implications of all this for activists is not for them to give up, but to analyse and understand the tactics and strategies of their opponents, and then learn to dance with the system better than them.

Parties and women

To do a decent job of representing citizens, political parties need to reflect their societies, yet the workings of social norms and hidden power mean that they seldom do so. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of women, who have traditionally been marginalized both in internal party power structures and places in parliaments. In 2022, women occupied only 26 per cent of parliamentary seats worldwide (although that had grown steadily from 12 per cent in 1997).[12] As of 2022, only four countries in the world (Rwanda, Cuba, Nicaragua and New Zealand) had a majority of women in parliament.[13]

Driven by changing social norms on the roles and rights of women, backed by dedicated activism, that picture has started to change in recent decades. Electoral quotas to try to even up the balance have been

[12] World Bank, 'Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%)', https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sg.gen.parl.zs.

[13] https://www.statista.com/statistics/267028/women-in-selected-national-parliaments/.

introduced in half the countries in the world, with knock-on effects on the internal procedures of many political parties.[14]

Once elected, women representatives can face isolation and marginalization in male-dominated systems, and can benefit from support and the establishment of networks with other women in similar positions.

The Aurat Foundation in Pakistan convenes 'Women's Leadership Groups' (WLG) in thirty districts across the country, with a total membership of 1,500 women activists. Part of their mandate is to encourage these women to become active in political parties, and in May 2013 six WLG women were elected to provincial assemblies (five in Punjab and one in Sindh), while one became a member of the National Assembly. Working with other civil society organizations, the WLGs and Aurat Foundation developed a 'women's manifesto' for those elections, listing the minimum acceptable requirements of political party engagement on women's empowerment. The manifesto and accompanying campaign reached both national media and inner circles of influence, achieving a high level of buy-in from political parties.[15]

Parties in non-democratic systems

In one-party states, parties are part of the apparatus of command and control, but they are also the eyes and ears of governments that, in the absence of open elections, need alternative feedback systems about their effectiveness (or otherwise) and potential threats to social cohesion or political legitimacy.

Parties thus play an active and constantly evolving role in many non-democracies. The best known is the Chinese Communist Party's role in China's extraordinary transition to 'state capitalism' since 1979, but East Asia has other examples. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has been the ruling party in the north of the country since 1954 and the only party in power in Vietnam since unification in 1976.

Since the late 1980s' turn towards a market economy, the CPV has gone through significant internal changes, including more open elections for

[14] https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas-database/quotas.

[15] Duncan Green, *The Raising Her Voice Pakistan Programme* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2015).

senior members of its leadership. These changes were influenced by an emerging civil society and by the rise of a new social class of wealthy entrepreneurs linked to a segment of high-ranking party officials.

Vietnamese scholar Hai Hong Nguyen argues that the CPV is 'motivated more by the desire to survive and avoid Tahrir Square (Arab Spring) type events than by a true belief in democratic reform.'[16] Yet party reform has opened opportunities for activists to exert influence, even if Vietnam remains a one-party state.

The Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI)[17] ranks local government performance all over Vietnam, using local researchers to interview a large, carefully selected sample on their experience in areas such as health and education, the level of petty corruption, and participation. In the words of one of the organizers, Giang Dang, 'When Vietnam opened up, the two things that arrived first were beauty contests and Coca Cola. So we decided to organize beauty contests. Most opposition came from the contestants in the beauty contest—the public servants.'[18]

According to Giang Dang, 'higher ranking provinces are keen to keep their position and feature their ranking in all their documents. Some of the lower ranking provinces are starting to set up task forces, and asking us for advice on how to improve performance.'

The secret of PAPI's success lies in the way it actively recruits champions inside the system. Its advisory board has representatives from the National Assembly, ministries, government inspectorates, and academia. The Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), a mass organization of the CPV, supports the project and opens doors all the way down to commune level.

The CPV's attitude to PAPI underlines the importance of legitimacy and social cohesion in one-party systems. Like most governments, dictatorships are keenly aware of the ups and downs of their legitimacy

[16] Hai Hong Nguyen, 'Political parties, civil society and citizen movements in Vietnam', in *Political Parties and Citizen Movements in Asia and Europe*, edited by Raul Cordenillo and Sam van der Staak (Singapore: Asia–Europe Foundation, Hanns Seidel Foundation, and International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2014).

[17] https://papi.org.vn/eng/.

[18] Presentation to seminar on 'Active citizenship in Asia', Bangkok, September 2012, in Duncan Green, 'Building Active Citizenship and Accountability in Asia: case studies from Vietnam and India', From Poverty to Power blog, 2 October 2012, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/building-active-citizenship-and-accountability-in-asia-case-studies-from-vietnam-and-india/.

in the eyes of their citizens and especially their economic elites, and are willing to consider change when loss of legitimacy could threaten their survival. In the case of the CPV, the party knows the poor performance of local government is a threat to its dominance, so it supports improved accountability via the index, even though it occurs outside party channels.

Party platforms as venues for change

Activists often seek to have their issues incorporated into party platforms, so that if the party is elected they can push for government action. The kinds of questions discussed in this book, exploring issues of power, precedent, possible strategies, and critical junctures, can be useful in shaping their influencing efforts, as the following example from India shows.

India's landmark 2005 National Rural Employee Guarantee Act (NREGA), which guarantees all rural citizens a hundred days of unskilled employment per year on public works programmes, came about due to a combination of determined citizen activism and the fortunes of the Congress Party.

In response to drought and rural distress, civil society networks in the state of Rajasthan submitted a petition to the Supreme Court in 2001 on the 'Right to Food', which received favourable interim directives. Encouraged, they drafted a Rajasthan State Employment Guarantee Act in 2003, though it did not garner support from Congress or other parties.

The 2003 legislative assembly elections opened a political window of opportunity, because the Congress Party suffered a demoralizing loss in Rajasthan and other states, leading most to believe it had no chance in the 2004 general election. Impending political defeat weakened the resistance of fiscal conservatives in the Congress leadership and the employment guarantee was included in the 2004 Congress national manifesto.

When the party won a surprise victory that year, the leadership needed to rapidly cobble together a programme. Not only was the employment guarantee ready to go, but also removing it would have endangered its coalition with Left-wing parties. Still, getting agreement on such a far-reaching initiative took a determined campaign, involving a fifty-day march across the

country's poorest districts, sit-in protests, direct contacts with politicians, and public hearings.[19]

Despite the Congress Party's subsequent loss of power in 2014, the scheme has continued to expand. In 2023, it was providing employment to 155 million poor people across India.[20]

The story of NREGA offers some lessons about working with and through political parties. Activists saw that political travails had made the Congress Party open to new ideas. They developed their proposals well in advance of the critical juncture and they combined insider and outsider tactics to get it onto the platform and finally implemented. The story also demonstrates the importance of accident and luck: if the 2004 elections had gone as expected, Congress would have lost and NREGA might well have joined the ranks of good, but forgotten, civil society initiatives.

The traditional media and accountability

States may see the world through the eyes of the law, but politicians often see it through the eyes of the media, and not just any media. During my brief spell working on trade policy at the British aid ministry, the Department for International Development (DFID), whenever something appeared in the *Financial Times* about negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO), the minister would send down his special adviser to find out what was going on. Another minister reportedly set a performance target for DFID's long-suffering media team for how many photos of himself they were able to place in his favourite (party-aligned) newspaper. Rather more honourably, Thomas Jefferson once said (even though he was regularly vilified by the press), 'If I had to choose between government without newspapers, and newspapers without government, I wouldn't hesitate to choose the latter'.[21]

The media can echo, amplify, or substitute for citizens' voices. Governments monitor (often obsessively) their popularity, detecting unrest and

[19] Ian MacAuslan, 'India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: A Case Study for *How Change Happens*' (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2008).

[20] *The Hindu*, 'Explained | The funding and demand for MGNREGA', 1 February 2023, https://www.thehindu.com/business/economy/explained-the-funding-and-demand-for-mgnrega/article66454860.ece.

[21] Thomas Jefferson, 'Letter to Edward Carrington, Paris', 16 January 1787.

threats to their legitimacy and, eventually, rule. That can be hard to achieve when cocooned in the corridors of power, and the media provides one form of feedback loop to 'what the people are thinking' (as of course does the proliferation of polls and focus groups that inform government decisions). My boss at DFID was using the *Financial Times* partly as a proxy for what was significant in the unfolding global trade talks. The lesson for me as an activist was that I needed to get better at 'using the media' (the title of one indispensable 1980s' guide for activists[22]). In other words, find out what paper the minister reads, and try to get to know (and influence) its journalists.

Governments and politicians are often rather better at this than activists, since they wield a lot more formal power and cash and fewer scruples. In the 1990s, Peru's secret-police chief Ivan Montesinos systematically bribed all the democratic checks and balances in the country—the opposition, the judiciary, a free press. Once he had fallen from power, some enterprising scholars managed to get hold of and compare the bribes he paid for different targets. They found that, by revealed preference, the strongest check on the government's power was the news media (and by some distance).[23] Bribing a television channel owner cost about a hundred times more than a judge or a politician. One single television channel's bribe was five times larger than the total of all opposition politicians' bribes.

Since Montesinos' time, the media landscape has been transformed by technology, and with it the role of the media in accountability. Tom Kirk discusses the impact of digital media in Chapter 10. In some countries, old media has fragmented and escaped the cruder forms of state ownership. Elsewhere, autocracies such as China and Russia have become adept at controlling both online and offline content. Fragile states have seen the rise of 'warlord radio', media that are controlled by particular political, ethnic, religious, or military leaders and used for factionalist ends. In other fragmented societies local radio has stoked hatred, as in Kenya's post-election violence in 2008, which claimed 1,200 lives, and in the Rwandan genocide fourteen years earlier.[24]

[22] Denis MacShane, *Using the Media: How to Deal with the Press, Television and Radio* (London: Pluto Press, 1979).

[23] John McMillan and Pablo Zoido, 'How to subvert democracy: Montesinos in Peru', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18 (4) (2004), pp. 69–92.

[24] James Deane, *Fragile States: The Role of Media and Communication*, BBC Media Action Policy Briefing No. 10 (London: BBC Media Action, 2013).

Overall, the evidence supports both optimists and sceptics. A study of the role of the media in four countries—Kenya, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq—concluded that, in all four countries, parts of the media have strengthened ethnic and sectarian identity, especially at key moments such as elections. But some of the vernacular media in Kenya so implicated in fuelling the 2007–2008 violence were also instrumental in calling for calm when the violence escalated. Somalis value only those media they can trust, and prove it by switching on or off accordingly. When the Islamist Al-Shabaab group seized power and either operated radio stations or intimidated them into broadcasting their propaganda, it struggled to attract significant audiences.[25] Around the world, more and more people are getting their news from each other, via social media, not from news sources that they see as compromised.

The media is a complex system and getting more so. The boundaries are blurring between traditional and digital media and between digital and social media in the hands of citizens. The changes lamented by Maria Ressa are becoming universal, with citizens living inside algorithmic echo chambers that undermine social cohesion and fuel the rise of populism. These days I rarely watch the TV news, getting my information about the world from my social media timeline, counterbalanced by skimming newspapers and magazines such as *The Economist* to try to avoid living totally inside my filter bubble.

But in most places, traditional media still matters and often provides the initial content for 'the socials' to amplify. For activists, learning to 'dance' with that system means finding out how the media works in any given setting, learning its language, timetables, and incentives.

As noted in Chapter 3, activists have used old media reality shows and soap operas to go beyond issues of short-term accountability to try to influence the underlying system of attitudes and norms. In Tanzania, a reality TV show, *Female Food Heroes*, raised awareness of the important, but often overlooked, role of its women food producers. Contestants spend three weeks on the programme, which became an unlikely national hit, to see which female farmer is chosen as the winner by viewers and others. Fans reportedly included the agriculture minister.[26]

[25] James Deane, *Fragile States: The Role of Media and Communication*, BBC Media Action Policy Briefing No. 10 (London: BBC Media Action, 2013).

[26] Oxfam, 'Bahati Muriga Jacob: Female Food Hero 2014, Tanzania', https://www.oxfam.org/en/bahati-muriga-jacob-female-food-hero-2014.

Understanding the role of the media in boosting accountability also means understanding power. Patterns of ownership and party allegiance heavily influence the message in many old media. Rupert Murdoch's sprawling media empire has played a crucial role in undermining public trust in institutions and promoting the rise of populists such as Donald Trump.

New (digital) media are less obviously subject to such bias, but are hardly a power-free zone either. After years of engaging with people on Twitter, I have been dismayed by the impact of Elon Musk's ownership of what he has now bizarrely rebranded 'X'. What was a vibrant place of exchange has now become a tired platform for PR announcements, 'humble bragging', and adverts. The best part of my job at Oxfam has been creating the space to talk and discuss with others on my blog From Poverty to Power,[27] created in 2008. But most widely read bloggers on aid and development are almost all white Western men (and I'm guilty as charged).

Transparency and accountability initiatives

Most of this chapter has been about what the World Bank calls the 'long route' to accountability:[28] citizens delegate authority to political representatives, usually via political parties, who then govern bureaucracies that deliver services. Long route accountability comes from citizens using elections or pressure to make sure those politicians are doing their job. But there is also a 'short route' to accountability: rather than asking your MP or local councillor to improve your child's school, why not lobby the headmaster directly?

Attempts to build this short route, often called 'social accountability', have spread like wildfire in recent years, driven by both new technology and the need for solutions when states are weak or unresponsive. These efforts, widely known as 'transparency and accountability initiatives', rely on access to information, citizen monitoring of government performance, and citizen activism to hold officials to account.

[27] https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/.

[28] World Bank, 'World Development Report 2004. Making services work for poor people' (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2003).

In South Africa, the Public Sector Accountability Monitor analysed and publicized budget and service delivery information produced by the health department of one of the weakest provincial governments, the Eastern Cape. While its efforts initially had limited impact, the national government took note and intervened. As a result, the provincial health minister and head of department were replaced, 31 officials were criminally charged, and a further 800 officials were dismissed.[29] Needless to say, financial management improved substantially.

The promise of such initiatives is real, but has been oversold. Some talk 'as if all one had to do was to sprinkle mobile phones or internet and the persistent, structural imbalances and power asymmetries that had dogged us for decades would melt away', in the words of one of the movement's most charismatic leaders, Rakesh Rajani.[30]

Rakesh invited me to take part in a soul-searching exercise at Twaweza, the pioneering Tanzanian NGO he founded. Twaweza believed that boosting poor people's access to information could make government more accountable on things like poor schools across East Africa.[31] They took the idea to scale, providing social content for top TV soap operas and radio satire, and advertising on the back page of 40 million school notebooks. It was a challenging, large-scale innovation and donors loved it.

The trouble was it wasn't working. None of the evaluations led by eminent academics from around the world had uncovered evidence that Twaweza's information was registering with citizens on any scale, still less triggering increased citizen action. One of the evaluators (echoed by Rakesh) called it a 'bucket of cold water' on the original concept—hence the invitation, because, true to its courageous approach, Twaweza published the findings of its (non) impact and invited people to come and discuss them.

[29] Duncan Green, 'Ups and downs in the struggle for accountability—four new real time studies', From Poverty to Power blog, 5 September 2013, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/watching-the-ups-and-downs-of-accountability-work-four-new-real-time-studies/.

[30] Rakesh Rajani, 'Why transparency and technology won't drive accountability', in Duncan Green, 'What are the limits of transparency and technology? From three gurus of the openness movement (Eigen, Rajani, McGee)', From Poverty to Power blog, 7 April 2014, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/what-are-the-limits-of-transparency-and-technology-the-thoughts-of-three-gurus-of-the-openness-movement/.

[31] Duncan Green, 'Twaweza, one of the world's cutting edge accountability NGOs', From Poverty to Power, 8 October 2013, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/a-fascinating-conversation-with-twaweza-one-of-the-worlds-cutting-edge-accountability-ngos/.

The ensuing three days brought home to me the importance of examining the assumptions and conditions that underlie all theories of change—'looking at the arrows'. My all-time favourite cartoon[32] on how change happens shows two boffins in front of a blackboard, with equations to the left and right and in between the words 'then a miracle occurs' (see Figure 6.1). Twaweza's theory of change was: 'citizens get information about services → citizens take action to improve them'; in between lay the unexplored 'miracle' of accountability.

As one of the evaluators of the programme pointed out, inside that simple a → b theory of change lay a whole sequence of assumptions and conditions: Do I understand the information? → Is it new information to me? → Do I care? → Do I think that it is my responsibility to do something about it? → Do I have the skills to make a difference? → Do I have the sense of efficacy to think that my efforts will have an impact? → Are the kinds of actions I am inspired to take different from what I am already doing? → Do I believe my own individual action will have an impact? → Do I expect fellow community members to join me in taking action?[33]

Twaweza's degree of openness may be exceptional, but the problems it identified were not. Gopa Kumar Thampi of the Asia Foundation worries about the 'Primacy of technique over politics' and the 'Tyranny of tools' that are undermining the potential for accountability activists to bring about change.[34] I saw this for myself in conversations with social accountability practitioners in Myanmar: the word that recurred throughout my time there was 'trust'—seeing social accountability work as an exercise in broader trust-building, bringing people together to build relationships, and 'bridging capital' between groups may well be the biggest contribution of activists, rather than rushing to wheel out the toolkits so beloved of social accountability adherents in many countries.[35]

Tanzania is relatively stable, but what about trying to promote accountability in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, riven

[32] Sidney Harris, 2016, http://www.sciencecartoonsplus.com/pages/gallery.php.

[33] Duncan Green, 'So what should Twaweza do differently? How accountability work is evolving', From Poverty to Power blog, 9 October 2013, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/so-what-should-twaweza-do-differently-how-accountability-work-is-evolving/.

[34] Gopa Kumar Thampi, 'Social accountability from the trenches: 6 critical reflections', From Poverty to Power, 3 May 2017, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/social-accountability-from-the-trenches-6-critical-reflections/.

[35] Duncan Green, 'Do we need to rethink social accountability? Thoughts from Myanmar', From Poverty to Power, 27 September 2019. https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/do-we-need-to-rethink-social-accountability-thoughts-from-myanmar/.

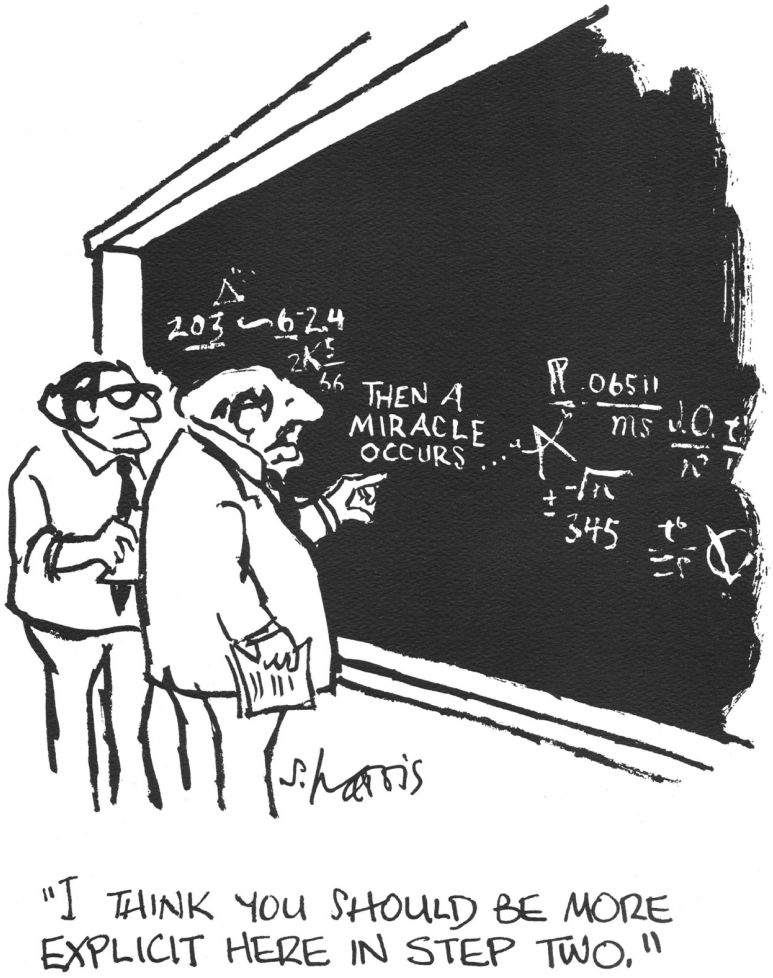

Figure 6.1 Then a miracle occurs

Source: Sidney Harris, Science Cartoons Plus.com.

by conflict? Action for Empowerment and Accountability,[36] a six-year research programme in which Oxfam was involved, concluded that accountability work in such places is still possible for aid agencies and

[36] Institute of Development Studies, https://www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/action-for-empowerment-and-accountability-a4ea/.

activists, but the growing crackdown on independent activism is making it harder in many countries. In response, 'citizen-led strategies for empowerment and accountability' often bear little resemblance to the polite, information-led dialogue between citizen and state of the social accountability toolkits. Cultural protest, riots, or finding intermediaries to intercede with the authorities on your behalf all play a role.

In such places, unless we have a much fuller analysis of the systems through which power works to achieve accountability, we are essentially crossing our fingers and hoping for a miracle to occur. What is needed instead is to look at the system as a whole, including political parties and the media, combining demand from activists, access to information, and a better understanding of how those in power make decisions and could become allies in change.[37] For the moment, that approach looks like a better bet than waiting for miracles, but I wouldn't be surprised if we are back in Dar es Salaam in a few years examining another set of depressing evaluations. Such is the nature of working in complex systems.

Conclusion

All too often a gulf divides the words of those in positions of power and responsibility from their subsequent deeds. The gulf is partly the result of the workings of ideas, interests, and institutions and a reflection of the way power is distributed in society. The gap between words and deeds often engenders cynicism about those in power among the public ('all politicians are the same').

However tempting, I think activists who simply endorse that scepticism will miss valuable opportunities for change. Political parties, the media, and social accountability initiatives are vital parts of systems of accountability that can be used, and strengthened, to close the gap.

Countries with stagnant or corrupt party systems do not remain so forever. Instead, they constitute an ever-evolving system, driven by pressure from below, changing norms, new leaders, and critical junctures. Activists need to learn to dance with that system, using the media and 'short route' approaches, but also working with parties by building alliances,

[37] Jonathan Fox, 'Social accountability: what does the evidence really say?', GPSA Working Paper Series No. 1, September 2014.

identifying and working with champions, and seizing moments of opportunity, because parties carry the potential to achieve changes on an otherwise impossible scale.

Further reading

N. Cheeseman and B. Klaas, *How to Rig an Election* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

R. Cordenillo and S. van der Staak (eds) *Political Parties and Citizen Movements in Asia and Europe* (Singapore: Asia–Europe Foundation, Hanns Seidel Foundation, and International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2014).

J. Deane, *Fragile States: The Role of Media and Communication*, BBC Media Action Policy Briefing No. 10 (London: BBC Media Action, 2013).

F. Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

V. Randall, *Political Parties in the Third World* (London: Sage, 1988).

A. Rocha Menocal, *Ten Things to Know About Democracy and Elections* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2013).

7
Why the International System (Still) Matters

'Shame!' roared the bearded activist, pointing an accusing finger as, uncomfortably besuited, I wended my way through the police lines. Attending an international trade conference as a civil society delegate was supposed to be a routine induction to CAFOD's work in international institutions. However, the 1999 WTO ministerial in Seattle was anything but routine. Trapped between tear-gas-spraying robocops and enraged protesters, we NGO lobbyists from the UK ended up taking refuge with the British government delegates in their swanky conference centre offices. And that proved a great chance to build relationships and trust—two crucial ingredients in insider influencing. It probably wasn't what my placard-wielding accuser intended, but as it turned out he was very helpful.

For me, Seattle marked the beginning of several years of lobbying on global trade rules. Working alongside government delegations from Pakistan, the Philippines, and many other countries, plus a plethora of fellow NGO policy wonks and academics, provided me with a great introduction to the complex dynamics of the international system and how activism interacts with events, long-term trends, and shifts in norms and ideas.

The key event in those years was the 9/11 attack on New York's World Trade Center, which took place just weeks before the 2001 WTO ministerial that followed the debacle in Seattle. Jittery delegates in Doha flinched whenever planes flew near the conference centre. Along with berobed Qatari staff, the delegates and I watched on TV screens in the conference hall as US troops took Kabul in response to the attack. In this febrile atmosphere, governments rallied behind the international system and launched an ambitious 'Doha Development Round' of trade talks.

At the ministerial in Cancun two years later, however, longer-term trends came to the fore. Growing unease in the US and Europe had helped weaken their resolve and, more importantly, newly assertive lower income country

blocs refused to sign on to their agendas on agriculture and investment. The talks fell apart in spectacular fashion.

Ideas also played a key role in the evolution of the trade debate, especially the academic counter-attack against the crude 'if it moves, liberalize it' impulse that dominated in the late 1990s.[1]

That complex web of interacting events, long-term economic and political processes, individuals, and ideas is typical of how change happens in the international system.

The multilateral system evolves

In many ways, the international system is an extraordinary success story. Every day sees huge amounts of largely smooth interchange between nation states: people chat online or cross borders in the flesh; messages, emails, even letters arrive at the correct destination; freighters load and unload containers of goods in foreign ports in an ever-expanding cycle of global trade. In the Global North, we only notice when those relatively unencumbered processes are interrupted, as when Britain voted to leave the EU in 2016, kicking off a decade-long institutional 'omnishambles' that did lasting damage to the British political system.

Remarkably, these smoothly functioning exchanges occur under a fairly loose system of governance—a combination of norms, rules, procedures, and institutions—and without any recognized world government.

The first attempt to bring order to international relations came in Europe after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. The victorious powers set up a 'Concert for Europe' which, though it had no written rules and no permanent institutions, offered a forum for negotiating differences. It successfully limited warfare in Europe for much of the nineteenth century, accommodating the unification and rise of Germany and Italy, before collapsing in the First World War.

Ever since the founding of the Red Cross in 1863, discussions on international governance have been driven by efforts to regulate the use of violence, and the international system has evolved primarily in response to war. The First World War led to the creation of the League of Nations,

[1] See, for example, Dani Rodrik, *The Global Governance of Trade as if Development Really Mattered* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2001) or Ha-Joon Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* (London: Anthem Press, 2003).

an idealistic and ill-fated attempt to build a 'world parliament'. The Second World War bequeathed the basic institutions that make up the international system today. The UN, unlike the League, fuses global democracy (the General Assembly) with 'great power' politics (the Security Council). To promote economic coordination between countries and curb the economic nationalism that helped destroy the League, the victorious powers established the predecessor to the WTO and what are known collectively as the 'Bretton Woods Institutions'—the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (better known as the World Bank) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Eighty years on, with increasing signs of sclerosis and being sidelined by emerging powers such as China and India, the UN, World Bank, and IMF, joined by the WTO in 1995, are clinging on at the top of a burgeoning and complex system of international governance. And I mean complex: during the course of the twentieth century, over 38,000 international organizations were founded, almost half of them in its last two decades.[2]

The UN is a sprawling system unto itself. It consists of three core bodies set up in 1945—the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Secretariat—subsequently joined by numerous 'specialized agencies', such as the World Health Organization (1948), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (1950), the UN Conference on Trade and Development (1964), the UN Development Programme (1965), and UN Women (2010).[3]

In response to events (especially failures and crises) as well as the political stagnation and glacial pace of reform in existing institutions, new elements continue being grafted onto the basic architecture of the international system. The failure of UN peacekeeping to prevent massacres in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s led to the founding of the International Criminal Court in 2002 and an increasingly assertive role for UN peacekeepers in crises, backed by a 2005 agreement on the 'responsibility to protect' civilians from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

My own highly peripheral engagement is also a sign of another evolution in the international system, the rise of non-state networks. States remain the main players, but they are increasingly surrounded by, and

[2] Thomas Weiss, *Global Governance: Why? What? Whither?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 16.

[3] Anthony Payne, *The Global Politics of Unequal Development* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), chapter 5.

forced to engage with, representatives of the private sector, NGOs, philanthrocapitalists such as Bill and Melinda Gates, and policy-savvy academics. Networks among these new players have given rise to public–private initiatives such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization.

While constitutionally part of the UN system, the IMF and the World Bank were set up in a radically different manner. The UN works largely on the principle of 'one country, one vote' (with the notable exception of the Security Council), whereas decisions of the multilateral financial organizations are generally taken on the basis of 'one dollar, one vote', guaranteeing the dominance of the US and other major shareholders.[4] At US insistence, the organizations were located in Washington, within walking distance of the White House, rather than with the UN in New York. Put crudely, the UN system is weighted towards the more numerous lower income countries (although they are often themselves divided in terms of ideology and positions), whereas the Bretton Woods Institutions are more likely to reflect the views and interests of their richer members.

Ideology and politics are not the only differences. I have always been struck by the divide between the seedy offices and frustrating bureaucracy of the UN and the swanky digs and smart efficiency of the Bank and Fund. I received a graphic demonstration of this in 2013, when I gave talks about blogging to staff at the UN Development Program (UNDP) and World Bank. At the UN, cowed staff debated whether they were even allowed to blog, for fear of offending one or other member state. At the World Bank, the self-confident and amused response to my request to meet its bloggers was 'tricky, there are 300 of them'.[5]

The particular culture of each organization matters because global activism by NGOs and others often relies on alliances with one international institution to influence the rest. Building alliances with the UN

[4] One exception is the arm of the World Bank that lends to low income countries, the International Development Association (IDA). Technically, this has a different structure to the main board of the Bank, and poor countries get 41 per cent of the vote in decisions made by the IDA board. However, only a few of these countries are involved in setting the agreements that decide the IDA's policies, a process that takes place every three years. Here, as everywhere at the International Finance Institutions (IFIs), it is the large donors who really make all the significant decisions.

[5] Duncan Green, 'Blogging in big bureaucracies round two: the view from the World Bank', From Poverty to Power blog, 10 May 2013, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/blogging-in-big-bureaucracies-round-two-the-view-from-the-world-bank/.

system ought to be a no-brainer, given its orientation and commitment to progressive change. Alas it is often a frustratingly bureaucratic nightmare.

Furthermore, adopting a 'UN good, World Bank bad' view of the world is too simplistic. There are endless turf wars, but also genuine differences of opinion and ideology within the UN system and the Bretton Woods Institutions, as well as between them. After the 1998 Asian financial crisis, for example, the IMF wanted to pressure countries to cut spending, while the World Bank thought they should reflate.

'Hard' and 'soft' power

Given that most of the decisions that matter in the lives of ordinary people are ultimately taken by national governments, it is not surprising that many officials at international institutions (and not a few activists) yearn for the international system to acquire the 'hard power' to compel governments to act. Only a few international bodies can exercise such influence: the UN can authorize sanctions on oppressive regimes; the IMF uses its financial power to impose particular economic policies, such as public spending cuts, in return for loans and bailouts; the WTO can approve fines to enforce trade rules; and the International Criminal Court (ICC) can prosecute leaders with blood on their hands.

Activists managed to harness the international system's hard power through a successful campaign on arms control launched in 2003 by Oxfam, Amnesty International, and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), along with many other organizations across the world. The aim of the Control Arms Campaign was to reduce armed violence and conflict through a new Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which would be the world's first ever global effort to regulate the transfer of conventional weapons and ammunition from one country to another.

When the campaign began, only three governments (Mali, Costa Rica, and Cambodia) would publicly associate themselves with the call for a treaty. Undeterred, the campaign assembled a wide range of allies, including companies in the defence industry that saw themselves as the 'responsible end' of the arms industry, retired generals and former war correspondents, financial investors, people wounded by small arms, and more. Lining up on the other side were the US (until 2009 the only country that publicly opposed a treaty) and other weapons-dealing states (Russia,

China, and Middle Eastern countries), plus the National Rifle Association and associated pro-gun groups.

The initial strategy was to get one government in each region of the world to champion the ATT and convince others to follow their lead in a snowball effect. Direct lobbying won individual converts within governments, but it was mass petitions and other public campaigning activities that made support for the ATT politically feasible. By mid-2005, the snowball was rolling: at the Biennial meeting of the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms, 55 states voiced support; by the end of 2006, 153 countries voted in favour of moving towards a treaty. The ATT became international law on Christmas Eve, 2014.

The ATT campaign is a great case study in how to use power and systems analysis to drive change in the international system. Campaigners were adept at building alliances with 'unusual suspects', had a deep understanding of the way power operated in the international system, and moved adroitly between outsider campaigning and insider lobbying as the negotiations progressed. They also made full use of critical junctures, such as outbreaks of violence in Eastern Congo, Darfur, and later Syria, and China's arms shipment to Zimbabwe in 2008 just before violence-marred elections. (South African dockworkers refused to unload the ship, and the campaign promptly highlighted both the effectiveness of the action and the human cost it prevented.)[6]

But the 'hard power' of international law has its limits. Powerful countries can ignore the rulings of international bodies or apply them selectively, while less powerful governments often say yes and do nothing.

An underestimated strength of the international system is its 'soft power': the ideas and norms that filter down to societies and states from the endless round of conferences, conventions, and discussions within the international system. As discussed in Chapter 3, the UN's most profound influence may well be its role in agreeing and promoting the evolving norms that govern human society on everything from the treatment of women, children, or indigenous people to attitudes to corruption or warfare. The World Bank has huge influence in shaping public and official understanding of development and what constitutes 'sound' policies. International knowledge networks (comprising academics, policy makers, and the research

[6] Duncan Green and Anna Macdonald, *Power and Change: The Arms Trade Treaty* (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015).

arms of international institutions) can be highly influential, as the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has shown in the case of global climate negotiations. The IPCC is in many ways a modern expression of a nineteenth-century belief in the power of scientific knowledge to solve humanity's most pressing problems, and its relative success is heartening for a lapsed scientist like me.

I like to think of the debates in international forums as an ecosystem. New ideas, and variations of old ones, are constantly introduced and chewed over. Some rise and are taken up by the institutions that comprise the system, while others wither away. Churn and change are constant, as intellectual tides shape individuals' understanding of the world and decisions at all levels.

Activists who despair at the deaf ear turned to them by the international system need patience. When I first encountered the IMF and World Bank in the late 1980s, they were 'the Poverty Brokers',[7] using the debt crisis of those years to impose austerity and 'structural adjustment' across the developing world. Growth was all; the state was always the problem, never the solution; and deregulated markets were the only way forward.

I started off firmly in the 'anti' camp, supporting the '50 years is enough' protests in 1994 that argued for the Bretton Woods Institutions to be scrapped. But as I engaged more and more with staff at the Bank and Fund, my views began to soften. I'd like to believe my shift was due to the institutions improving, but I confess I was also growing older and more conciliatory. I even ended up writing for the World Bank's governance blog.[8] Even so, when IMF boss Christine Lagarde launched its new paper on gender and inequality at Oxfam's Washington office in 2015,[9] I had to pinch myself. Words like 'gender' and 'inequality' would never have made it past the IMF's internal thought police in the bad old days.

Explaining how the Bretton Woods Institutions have evolved would take a book in itself, but the process shows all the hallmarks of a complex adaptive system. 'Tribes' within each institution from different disciplinary or ideological backgrounds slug it out over vital issues such as the role of

[7] Martin Honeywell, *The Poverty Brokers: The IMF and Latin America* (London: Latin America Bureau, 1983).

[8] Duncan Green, World Bank blogs, http://blogs.worldbank.org/team/duncan-green.

[9] Christine Lagarde, 'Speech: Catalyst for change: empowering women and tackling income inequality by Christine Lagarde, IMF Managing Director', speech to Oxfam America, 22 October 2015, Washington, DC, https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/sp102215.

the state, the importance and origins of inequality, and whether health and education services should charge user fees.[10] Events and real life move debates along: the terrible human cost of those 1980s' structural adjustment dictums sowed doubt and confusion over the 'rightness' of the policies known as the 'Washington Consensus'. Some brilliant, visionary critics in the UN system led the counterattack—UNICEF's book *Adjustment with a Human Face*[11] highlighted the human cost of IMF and World Bank policies, while the annual 'Human Development Report', first published by the UNDP in 1990, pioneered a rethinking of poverty and development away from narrow definitions of income and economic performance; its broader focus on the multiple aspects of wellbeing/ill-being guides the work of most of the aid and development sector today.

Those critics and many other activists and intellectuals within and close to the UN system articulated both the failures of the old thinking and a more progressive alternative. One of them, Ha-Joon Chang, likens the band of heterodox economists to which he belongs to the heroes in *Lord of the Rings*, standing shoulder to shoulder at Helm's Deep, taking on the oncoming tides of neoclassical orcs.

Events and long-term political and economic processes came to the rescue of these beleaguered heroes: the 1998 Asian financial crisis and the 2008 global meltdown forced the IMF to recognize the folly of forcing countries to open their capital markets. The economic rise of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China) weakened the dominance of the US and UK, as exemplified by the World Bank's appointment of Chinese and Indian experts to the top post of chief economist in 2008 and 2012, respectively.

As I watched this battle unfold, I came to realize that one of my most useful roles as a non-economist activist was to use the NGOs' ability to organize and communicate to help the Helm's Deep heroes get their message across. I became something of a cheerleader for the heterodox economists.

[10] Oxfam has been deeply involved in this debate. See, for example, Anna Marriott, 'Sick development: how rich-country government and World Bank funding to for-profit private hospitals causes harm, and why it should be stopped' (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2023), https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/sick-development, and Katie Malouf Bous and Jason Farr, 'False promises: how delivering education through public–private partnerships risks fueling inequality instead of achieving quality education for all' (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2023), https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/false-promises.

[11] Giovanni Cornia, Richard Jolly, and Frances Stewart, *Adjustment with a Human Face: Protecting the Vulnerable and Promoting Growth* (Wotton-under-Edge: Clarendon Press, 1987).

Others certainly don't share my optimism, so perhaps I have been too thoroughly co-opted. Critics point to the gulf between the IFIs' improving research and policy pronouncements and the lack of change in their demands on governments (which arguably matter more). A study of the World Bank's Development Economics Vice Presidency (DEC) concluded that its role was one of 'paradigm maintenance', defending and perpetuating an orthodox form of neoclassical economics through an interlocking set of 'drivers of inertia', including hiring preferences, promotion, and the selective enforcement of rules. Dissident research generally undergoes stricter external review with occasional rejection or disappears into a Kafkaesque limbo where it is never signed off for publication. Dissidents are labelled 'idiosyncratic' or 'disaffected' and otherwise deemed misfits, while the Bank's External Affairs Department gets behind the 'good guys', showering them with high-profile speaking and writing opportunities.[12]

But whether you are of the cup-half-full or cup-half-empty persuasion, this battle of ideas has great implications for activists and policy makers around the world, because the UN, Fund, and Bank play a crucial role as 'knowledge brokers'. The research they conduct and publish shapes thinking about development and economic policy in virtually every country (including that of activists).

Because 'soft power' matters, we activists should put our shoulders to the wheel to support the forces of light, providing platforms, building alliances, spotting champions, amplifying messages, and doing our own research. If the new friendly rhetoric on rights or inequality at the Bank or Fund doesn't match what they do in practice, we have a perfect opportunity to highlight implementation gaps and double standards.

Goodbye Washington?

Some of the main international bodies are old institutions ruled by old powers who do not want to let go of power. The inability of the IMF and World Bank to reflect the long-term rise of emerging economies' power in their governance structures prompted a series of new institutions and initiatives, some of them discussed below.

[12] Duncan Green, 'Why is economic orthodoxy so resistant to change? The art of paradigm maintenance', From Poverty to Power blog, 17 September 2014, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/the-art-of-paradigm-maintenance-has-anything-changed-at-the-world-bank/.

The years since 2016, when this book was first published, have seen the geopolitical tectonic plates shifting under our feet at startling speed. Even before the global financial crisis exploded in 2008, the old international system was coming under pressure from the tensions between rising new powers like China and India demanding a seat at the table and the old, post Second World War powers who seemed intent on defending an increasingly unconvincing status quo in organizations like the World Bank and IMF.

This battle for power came against a backdrop of proliferating 'problems without borders': the most recent is the deep concerns raised by artificial intelligence (AI), but AI is just the latest addition to a long list—pandemics, climate crisis, migration and refugees, fuel and food shocks, on top of financial instability, the rise of violent extremism, and the ongoing threat of nuclear proliferation.

In the aftermath of 2008, hopes that the G20 group of major economies (both emerging and established) could become the new 'global steering committee' swiftly faded. Into the vacuum has emerged a more fragmented and complex mix of institutions that challenge the dominance of the Bretton Woods Institutions, such as the New Development Bank, established by the BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Both of these are headquartered in China, whose rise has played a big part in shaking up the international order. In aid and development, a booming economy allowed it to announce its 'Belt and Road Initiative' in 2013, pumping money into infrastructure projects in some 150 countries. On security, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, established in 2001 by China and Russia, is now the world's largest regional organization in terms of geography and population.

The Covid pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine 2023 saw further shifts in the global centre of gravity, with an expansion of the BRICS membership and signs of a more assertive China in the UN and elsewhere.[13] Historians are understandably anxious—in the past, such shifts in the balance of power have often precipitated conflict and war. At the very least they will pose a huge challenge to diplomacy and the ability of the international system to adapt.

[13] Duncan Green, 'The world order seems to be in turmoil—what's going on?' From Poverty to Power blog, 5 September 2023, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/the-world-order-seems-to-be-in-turmoil-whats-going-on/.

The new geometry is not simply a bipolar competition between Washington and Beijing. The South Koreans have led the effort to explore the collective diplomatic potential of the middle-power MIKTA countries (Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey, and Australia).[14] Regional powers such as Turkey and Brazil flex their diplomatic and economic muscles in their spheres of influence. The new international order is now negotiated between a broader set of players, almost coming to resemble a global version of the Concert of Europe from the early nineteenth century.

This increasing fragmentation has created spaces for entrepreneurial leaders from outside the major powers. At the time of writing, Mia Mottley, the charismatic Prime Minister of Barbados, has won significant attention for her 'Bridgetown Initiative',[15] offering practical solutions to reform the international financial system in connection with halting climate change. It does not look like she is proposing a radical alternative, but rather putting more resources into the traditional IFIs, which could explain the strong backing she has received from their leadership.

The big imponderable is the future role of the US, which remains the largest player in many kinds of power (hard, soft, military, economic). The US has long been torn between playing a dominant role in the international system and beating an isolationist retreat. At the time of writing, it is not at all clear which will triumph over the remaining years of the decade.

For activists, this means thinking smart rather than just lobbying the World Bank or G7—dancing with an increasingly complex international system, always seeking to analyse power, spotting where the energy is on a given issue, building new relationships and coalitions, seizing moments, and thinking what role (if any) they can play as allies.

Conclusion

It is easy to become disillusioned with the international system and its unappealing mix of power politics, legalistic nit-picking, and apolitical technocracy. When I first joined the development NGOs, I stalked the pressrooms and NGO fringe events at summits and international conferences, seduced by their aura of power and importance. Summits generate a kind of Stockholm syndrome even among we marginal NGO types: too

[14] www.mikta.org.
[15] https://www.foreign.gov.bb/the-2022-barbados-agenda/.

many meetings, too little sleep, and endless arguments over the fine print of declarations can convince you that the fate of the world lies in changing 'should' to 'shall' in paragraph 2.b.iii.

I remember how disheartening it was when I finally got to 'speak truth to power' at a UN meeting in Geneva, only to watch my carefully honed speech disappear into the cavernous room full of delegates chatting to each other and occasionally tuning in to the simultaneous translation. It didn't feel like a vibrant, world-changing institution and brought to mind a renowned phrase of UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld: 'The United Nations was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell'.[16]

That year, 2005, marked a personal watershed: after Make Poverty History and yet another WTO summit in Hong Kong, I dropped out of the frontline of NGO advocacy. I had become convinced that the real arena for social change was at the national, rather than the international, level. I wrote *From Poverty to Power* to make that case, which I like to think contributed to a wider move by Oxfam and others to spend more time and energy on national influencing, rather than the caravan of international summitry.

Looking back, however, I think I swung too far the other way. When it works well, the international system has a critical role in shaping society's rules, norms, and beliefs. Moreover, many of the most pressing challenges facing humanity are 'collective action problems' that cannot be solved by single countries alone, the Covid pandemic being just the most recent.

National politics more often than not punishes leaders who seek to address the collective problems humanity faces, especially when they engage with the international system to do so. UN stalwart Mark Malloch-Brown calls it 'the Gordon Brown problem'. At the onset of the financial crisis in 2008, the UK finance minister (no relation) showed extraordinary leadership at the G7 and G20 in pushing for public investment to avert an even greater global meltdown. Yet his political reward was negligible because, though action had to be global, votes remained national, with little credit (and lots of brickbats) for leaders engaging in foreign policy, even if it involves saving the world economy.[17]

[16] Quoted in Thomas Weiss, *Global Governance: Why? What? Whither?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 3.

[17] Mark Malloch-Brown, *The Unfinished Global Revolution: The Road to International Cooperation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), p. 199.

Activists can change that equation. Our movements in the national and local arenas can make it politically feasible for governments, as well as enlightened leaders in the international system, to address climate change, pandemics, crime, weapons proliferation, migration, or race-to-the-bottom competition between nations on taxation. And by acknowledging the primacy of national politics in most situations, our advocacy in the international system could become much more effective, even as the international system is fragmenting because of the failure of multilateral institutions to sufficiently adapt to changing balances of power.

Growing up in the west of England, national elections in the Bath constituency where I lived were brightened up by a classic English eccentric. Posters would appear saying 'Vote for Gilbert Young, World Government Party'. (The party's other proposals included turning Buckingham Palace into a home for old-age pensioners.) Young never won more than a few hundred votes, and his party died with him in the 1970s, but as global collective action problems become more pressing, he may end up being proved right after all.

Making the international system work better is essential to the survival of our species and the individual and community wellbeing of its members. And yes, that may eventually require a move from global governance to some kind of global government. Perhaps one day, Gilbert Young will be lauded as a prophet in the 1970s wilderness.

In the meantime, activists have plenty of work to do, sharpening their understanding of power and process in the complexity that is the evolving international system, and working to ensure it addresses the many pressing problems we face.

The next chapter looks at another, increasingly important player in that international system—the transnational corporations.

Further reading

I. Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself: What Happens When No One Leads the World* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2013).

H.J. Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* (London: Anthem Press, 2003).

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S. Park, *Owning Development: Creating Policy Norms in the IMF and the World Bank* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

A. Payne, *The Global Politics of Unequal Development* (Abingdon: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Thomas Weiss, *Global Governance: Why? What? Whither?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 16.

S. Woolcock and N. Bayne, *The New Economic Diplomacy: Decision-Making and Negotiation in International Economic Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

8
Transnational Corporations as Drivers and Targets of Change

Brian was in an expansive mood. Relaxing over dinner in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka, he explained why he had abandoned a British émigré's retirement in Florida to run a large garment factory, where some 2,000 women stitched sportswear for Nike. 'I'm not doing this for the money, I don't need it', he mused. 'It's providing jobs for all those women that makes it worthwhile.'

I was in an awkward position. Thanks to Brian, I had earlier toured the factory (off limits to most visiting NGOs), now I was bonding with him as a fellow Brit. But I could hardly let this pass. After a quick mental calculation, I made a mischievous suggestion: 'Well, why don't you give your salary to the women? It would double their wages—all 2,000 of them!' 'No way', he retorted. 'It's all about keeping count.' He meant that once you get to his level, salary is more about status and peer competition than mere income.

Staying friends with Brian wasn't the only source of awkwardness that day. I was researching a report for a campaign on exploitative transnationals. Yet the garment workers I interviewed, both onsite and off, told me how much they prized working at the clean, modern factory in one of Dhaka's export processing zones. It was infinitely preferable to a sewing job in one of the dingy, dangerous local factories in downtown Dhaka, the women said, let alone a life of domestic servitude back in the village.

Ubiquitous global brands like Nike epitomize widespread concern about globalization and have become the favoured target of campaigners. Transnational corporations (TNCs) certainly hold significant power.[1]

[1] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 'World Investment Report 2023: Investing in sustainable energy for all', https://unctad.org/topic/investment/world-investment-report.

In 2020, these generated an estimated $6.5 trillion in value added[2] and employed some 80 million workers. The total annual sales of TNCs' foreign affiliates rose from $4.8 to $30 trillion between 1990 and 2020.[3] In 2023, southern TNCs held assets of $460 billion, compared to the $1 trillion in assets held by their northern counterparts.[4]

Anxiety over their sheer size has prompted critics to argue that corporations 'rule the world'.[5] Money is power, and a 2018 comparison of the revenues of the world's top 100 economies—tax take for governments vs. turnover for corporations—found that of the top 100 revenue generators, 71 were corporations.[6]

This chapter focuses on TNCs, not only as economic heavyweights, but also as influential players (for good *and* ill) in political and social change. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) account for many more jobs and may well be more important in the daily lives of marginalized people, but such companies tend to be less active in consciously pursuing and preventing change. I see SMEs, like markets in general, more as part of the context within which activists operate than actors in their own right. TNCs, on the other hand, behave more like activists.

This chapter is probably going to get me into trouble with some colleagues. Opinions on TNCs seem to be more polarized than on any other subject in development. These run on a spectrum, from contempt for corporations as the shock troops of capitalism, destroying lives and cultures in a frenzy of corporate greed, all the way to infatuation with their power, scale, and dynamism. Whether through experience or because I'm getting on in years, my instincts have perhaps moved from nearer the former to nearer the latter—not infatuation exactly, but recognizing their potential as drivers of change. Whatever your position, this chapter will sketch out what you need to know to understand TNCs as a system, their history and incentives, and the range of their behaviours.

[2] 'Value added' is the amount by which the value of an article is increased at each stage of its production, exclusive of initial costs.

[3] UNCTAD, *World Investment Report 2023: Investing in Sustainable Energy for All* (Geneva: United Nations, 2023), p. 50.

[4] UNCTAD, 'World Investment Report 2023: Investing in sustainable energy for all', https://unctad.org/topic/investment/world-investment-report.

[5] David Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World*, 2nd ed. (Bloomfield and San Francisco: Kumarian Press and Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2001).

[6] Milan Babic, Eelke Heemskerk, and Jan Fichtner, 'Who is more powerful—states or corporations?' Global Policy blog, 13 July 2018, https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/13/07/2018/who-more-powerful-states-or-corporations.

Some history

The East India Company, established in 1600 with a trading empire that encircled the globe, was the mother of modern TNCs.[7] While its imports of spices, textiles, and teas wrought a lifestyle revolution in the UK, the company became a byword for corporate malpractice and general skulduggery, conquering nations and ruling over millions with its private army. When China tried to stop the firm from flooding the country with smuggled narcotics, two Opium Wars ensued.

The East India Company pioneered the cycle of corruption, bubbles, and bail-outs that has been an all-too-frequent feature of the corporate landscape in recent years. It also launched the shareholder model of corporate ownership, which allowed companies to burst beyond the bounds set by family wealth and led to an explosion of new corporations in Europe and the US in the last third of the nineteenth century.[8]

That was when recognizably modern TNCs spread across the developing world, initially concentrated on transport, building railways to facilitate the extraction of raw materials, and the marketing of their manufactures. Soon, TNCs expanded into communications (telephones, radio, movies), energy (oil, gas, electricity),[9] and subsequently manufacturing.[10]

The first wave of TNC expansion peaked just before global markets fragmented in the Great Depression and the Second World War. In the post-war era, TNCs expanded again, even though the larger developing countries in Latin America and later Africa placed limits on their operations in order to protect nascent local industry. Many countries nationalized industries, making TNCs much more wary of investing.[11]

In the wake of the oil shock of the 1970s and the debt crisis that followed, developing-country governments began relaxing restrictions as they

[7] Nick Robins, *The Corporation that Changed the World: How the East India Company Shaped the Modern Multinational*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

[8] Bruce Kogut, 'Multinational corporations', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, edited by N.J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Oxford: Pergamon), pp. 10197–204, https://wwwo.gsb.columbia.edu/faculty/bkogut/files/chapter_in_smelser-baltes_2001.pdf.

[9] Alfred Chandler and Bruce Mazlish (eds), *Leviathans: Multinational Corporations and the New Global History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[10] Alfred Chandler and Bruce Mazlish (eds), *Leviathans: Multinational Corporations and the New Global History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 20.

[11] Alfred Chandler and Bruce Mazlish (eds), *Leviathans: Multinational Corporations and the New Global History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 40.

competed to attract foreign investment, setting off a renewed wave of TNC expansion. Manufacturing and extractive industries led the way, but the wave really took off in the 1990s in services like finance, management consultancy, tourism, hotels, fast food, and, increasingly, Big Tech—which by the end of 2022 accounted for the world's largest four companies by market capitalization (Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet, and Amazon).[12] As of 2014, services accounted for 63 per cent of global foreign direct investment, more than twice the share of manufacturing (26 per cent); the primary sector (farms, mines, gas, and oil) accounted for less than 10 per cent.[13]

Since the 1980s, there has been a rise of new TNCs from emerging economies in South and East Asia and Latin America. In 2013, southern TNCs held assets of $460 billion, compared to $858 billion in assets held by their northern counterparts.[14]

According to the UN, 'developing Asia' (i.e. excluding Japan) now invests abroad more than any other region.[15] Compared with their developed-country counterparts, more southern TNCs are state- or family-owned and more are based in the primary sector or resource-based manufacturing, such as iron, steel, and cement.[16] Developing-country TNCs make greater use of 'intermediate' technologies that are more labour intensive, and so create more jobs.[17]

Like their northern counterparts, their performance on social and environmental responsibility varies widely.

While China's growing investment in extractive industries in Africa (and its less publicized surge in Southeast Asia and Latin America) is well known, Chinese companies have also taken on a significant number

[12] Global Finance, 'Largest companies in the world', 30 January 2023, https://www.gfmag.com/global-data/economic-data/largest-companies.

[13] Alfred Chandler and Bruce Mazlish (eds), *Leviathans: Multinational Corporations and the New Global History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 12.

[14] UNCTAD, 'Trends in outward investments by transnational corporations in 2013 and prospects for 2014–15', 29 April 2014, https://unctad.org/news/trends-outward-investments-transnational-corporations-2013-and-prospects-2014-15.

[15] Other strong economies like Taiwan and northern Italy have relied more on networks of SMEs, and failed to produce many global companies. UNCTAD, *World Investment Report 2015: Reforming International Investment Governance* (Geneva: United Nations, 2015), p. ix.

[16] UNCTAD, *World Investment Report 2006: FDI from Developing and Transition Economies: Implications for Development* (Geneva: United Nations, 2006).

[17] Dilek Aykut and Andrea Goldstein, 'Developing country multinationals: South–South investment comes of age', in *Industrial Development for the 21st Century: Sustainable Development Perspectives* (New York: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2007), pp. 85–116.

of infrastructure projects deemed too risky by European or US firms.[18] In Sierra Leone in 2005, within two years of the end of a bloody civil war, China was already investing $270 million in hotel construction and tourism.[19]

Southern TNCs have also become major investors in northern economies. In the UK, India's Tata Steel now owns Corus, while Tata Motors owns Jaguar; Brazil's Vale mining conglomerate bought Canada's second largest mining company, Inco, in 2006; Mexico's dynamic cement company Cemex has built a global network through mergers and acquisitions. Chinese companies' attempts to buy US firms have provoked a nationalist backlash on several occasions.

The backlash against southern TNCs has been fiercest in the case of Chinese tech companies like Huawei—an important sign of the rising tensions and 'decoupling/derisking' between superpowers discussed in Chapter 7. In steps that must horrify the more gung ho advocates of globalization and trade liberalization, the US and Europe have increasingly used investment screening and export controls to keep advanced technology out of unfriendly hands, while announcing massive new subsidy programmes for home-grown new tech and renewables.

The rise of southern TNCs challenges activists' traditional approach to advocacy. These firms seem less susceptible to threats to their brands, and the family-owned ones are not susceptible to shareholder pressure. Later in this chapter I look at what a new model of influencing might look like.

Most modern TNCs bear little resemblance to the vertically integrated corporations of yesteryear, where, for example, United Fruit directly owned and managed its banana plantations and Ford its factories. Today, TNCs sit atop complex 'global production networks', coordinating a web of interconnected firms in multiple locations, through a mind-boggling combination of subcontracting, outsourcing, offshoring, partnerships, and mergers and acquisitions. Global production networks accounted for 80 per cent of international trade in 2012.[20]

[18] Deborah Brautigam, 'China–Africa post-doctoral fellowship opportunity', The China–Africa Research Initiative blog, 19 January 2016, http://www.chinaafricarealstory.com/.

[19] Mark Doyle, 'Tourism boost for Sierra Leone', BBC News, 7 May 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3694043.stm.

[20] UNCTAD, *World Investment Report 2013: Global Value Chains: Investment and Trade for Development* (Geneva: United Nations, 2013).

The political significance of TNCs is hotly disputed. The acronym 'TNC' is actually somewhat misleading, since few are genuinely transnational: most retain a high degree of linkage to their home countries, particularly in terms of where decision-making power lies and where the high-value end of research and design is located. That home identity shapes their corporate cultures, sometimes leading to hybrid forms: when Japanese TNCs set up a factory in Europe, they blend Japanese and European work practices.[21] Sometimes this causes friction: when I visited the Pacific island nation of Vanuatu, local people expressed annoyance that not only do Chinese construction companies import Chinese workers, but also those workers even grew their own vegetables, minimizing the benefits to local businesses.[22]

Nevertheless, the top echelons of TNCs (not unlike the top positions at big NGOs) are staffed by an international elite that is largely insulated from local environments. They shop at the same luxury boutiques and send their kids to international schools. They are the 'have yachts', in stark contrast to the 'have nots'. In the 1980s, a hot topic for leftists across Latin America was whether their countries still possessed a truly 'national bourgeoisie', or whether the region's elites had become so Americanized and rootless that they would rather exploit their compatriots and shop in Miami than build flourishing economies at home. That question is still an open one everywhere, as far as I can tell.

How TNCs drive change

TNCs drive change both through their normal business operations and through their behaviour as political players. Using a 'poverty footprint' methodology,[23,24] Oxfam sought to measure the economic impact of

[21] Peter Dicken, *Global Shift: Mapping the Changing Contours of the World Economy*, 6th ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2011), p. 122.

[22] Author field trip, Vanuatu, November 2015.

[23] Oxfam America, The Coca-Cola Company, and SABMiller, 'Exploring the links between international business and poverty reduction: the Coca-Cola/SABMiller value chain impacts in Zambia and El Salvador', 29 March 2011, https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/exploring-the-links-between-international-business-and-poverty-reduction-the-co-266676/.

[24] Rachel Wilshaw, with Erinch Sahan, Gerry Boyle, Katie Knaggs, and Neil McGregor, *Exploring the Links Between International Business and Poverty Reduction: Bouquets and Beans from Kenya* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2013), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/exploring-the-links-between-international-business-and-poverty-reduction-bouque-290820/.

Unilever's (a producer of consumer goods that owns brands like Marmite and Domestos) presence in Indonesia. The study arrived at some unexpected conclusions: more than half of the 300,000 jobs that Unilever's operations generate in Indonesia are in the company's 'downstream' distribution and retail chain, and only about one-third in the part that makes inputs for the company's products (campaigners' usual focus).[25] Although direct employment was better paid than most, in the less formal parts of the company's activities, away from the comparatively ordered world of permanent jobs, wages, conditions, and the right to organize were found to be weakest.

Beyond the direct impact of a company's capital investment, jobs, and taxes (when they pay them), there can be spillover effects on the local economy from training of local staff and the introduction of new technology, both of which can influence local firms, especially when the TNCs source their materials and services from local suppliers.

Many TNCs provide products and services that people living in poverty not only want but also can use to improve their lives.[26] Southern-based companies have proven adept at producing and marketing products for poorer consumers. In Tanzania, the Swahili name for cheap motorbike rickshaws is 'bajaji', a corruption of Bajaj, the Indian firm that makes them.

TNCs not only follow consumers' desires but also shape them, often to resemble those of the former colonialist powers (think McDonald's) and sometimes in ways that are controversial. Perhaps the most notorious is Nestlé's aggressive effort to persuade mothers in poor countries to abandon breastfeeding in favour of formula milk, despite the expense and the risks arising from dirty water. According to the *British Medical Journal*, 'Suboptimal breastfeeding is associated with over a million deaths each year and 10% of the global disease burden in children'.[27] Such concerns sparked a global boycott[28] that has done lasting damage to the company's previously impressive reputation.

[25] Jason Clay, *Exploring the Links Between International Business and Poverty Reduction: A Case Study of Unilever in Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxfam GB, Novib Oxfam Netherlands, and Unilever, 2005).

[26] C.K. Prahalad and Stuart L. Hart, 'The fortune at the bottom of the pyramid', *strategy+business* 26 (2002), pp. 1–14.

[27] June Pauline Brady, 'Marketing breast milk substitutes: problems and perils throughout the world', *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 97 (2012), 529–32.

[28] IBFAN, Why the Nestlé boycott continues https://www.babymilkaction.org/nestlefree.

While many firms are diligent in obeying the law and treating their employees and customers with respect, others abuse their power, causing lasting damage to the environment, public health, and local politics. Some undermine the potential for development in a less visible way, by moving operations from one jurisdiction to another to dodge taxes and state regulation. Organizations like Global Witness publish regular exposés of more blatant forms of corporate malpractice. The top stories on its website in July 2023 included: '"We need to kill them": Xenophobic hate speech approved by Facebook, TikTok and YouTube',[29] 'Scarred for life: How a "toxic" landfill bought by French giant Veolia has devastated lives and biodiversity in Colombia',[30] and 'Exposing the connections between Wintershall's Siberian gas fields and Russia's military supply chain'.[31]

TNCs as influencers

In 2016, I interviewed Paul Polman, then CEO of Unilever, about his approach to change. Polman was active on social and environmental issues well beyond the boundaries of his company, which is why he spared the time to talk to me. He told me that his firm's business model calls for each individual brand to reach 'mission targets'.

> A brand like Domestos wants to build 25 million toilets. We want to reach five million people in providing livelihoods. We want to improve the lives of 5.5 million women in our value chain. We want to reach one billion people with health and wellbeing—things like handwashing.[32]

Polman's view of how change happens echoed many of the arguments in this book:

> The job of a CEO has totally changed. You have to be able to work in partnership with national governments and others. I don't want to work

[29] https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/south-africa-xenophobic-hate-speech/.
[30] https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/scarred-life/.
[31] https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/stop-russian-oil/exposing-the-connections-between-wintershalls-siberian-gas-fields-and-russias-military-supply-chain/.
[32] Author interview with Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever, January 2016.

> with just businesses any more. We discovered quickly that we can't do everything alone. We need to use the size and scale of Unilever to get transformational (i.e. systemic) change. If you want to move the world out of deforestation or transform the tea or palm oil market, you have to focus on the right 30 players. You get a flywheel going,[33] with all these alliances, getting everyone—governments, business, NGOs—together.[34]

Polman, a natural systems thinker, emphasized the importance of feedback loops and critical junctures:

> If you're smart you can predict maybe one out of ten things, but in the other nine something happens to which you need to react, new competitors, a natural disaster, a new law is passed—things that happen outside of your control. And the world is getting more volatile everywhere. What you have to do as a company is have quick feedback loops from the market that pick up these signals, and a structure that is very agile and externally focussed. So we have delayered and decentralized to the countries. It's the supertanker to speedboat transition, while you are moving.[35]

His commitment and idealism contrasts with the suspicion in which 'big business' is widely held. TNCs' long track record of blocking progressive changes or actively pursuing regressive ones has made many activists sceptical about the professed desire of some CEOs to address the world's problems. Corporations usually welcome the creative bit of the market's 'creative destruction', the constant evolutionary churn as new ideas, products, and companies rise and fall, since it provides the raw material companies can turn into global empires. (I still remember the first time someone recommended Google's nice clean search engine homepage.) But they do everything they can to avoid the destruction part, including a plentiful resort to 'rigged rules and double standards', in the words of one Oxfam report.[36]

[33] Jim Collins, 'Good to great', *Fast Company*, October 2001, www.jimcollins.com/article_topics/articles/good-to-great.html.

[34] Author interview with Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever, January 2016.

[35] Author interview with Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever, January 2016.

[36] Kevin Watkins and Penny Fowler, *Rigged Rules and Double Standards: Trade, Globalisation, and the Fight Against Poverty* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2002).

Corporations have lobbied extensively for government handouts, excessive patent protection, exclusive contracts, tax breaks, trade rules, and other state interventions that favour their bottom lines (the net profit or loss on a company balance sheet). As one financial executive admitted to *The Wall Street Journal* at the time of the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s, 'We foreign bankers are for the free market system when we are out to make a buck and believe in the state when we're about to lose a buck.'[37]

As the banker implied, when it comes to specific regulation that restricts their freedom to operate as they please, most TNCs fight tooth and nail to block it. From laws that protect minimum wages, health and safety or freedom of association to rules on product quality, corporate governance, or consumer protection, corporate stonewalling has been nearly universal. In 2015, the erstwhile plucky outsider Google was reported to have enlisted members of the US Congress (whose election campaigns the company funded) to pressure the EU to drop a €6 billion anti-trust case against it, while it raised seven-fold its EU lobbying budget to €4 million a year.[38]

Often, individual TNCs opt to keep their heads down and leave the dirty work to business associations (organizations founded and funded by businesses that operate in a specific industry). Again in the words of Paul Polman, when it comes to climate change lobbying, 'the disparities between trade associations and individual companies are huge. The companies say "Yes yes yes", but the trade associations say "No no no". The oil companies are notorious for it.'[39]

Relative bargaining power shapes the nature of the deals struck between particular governments and TNCs. If the host country has something the TNC wants (natural resources, markets, skilled labour, access to export markets), the government's hand is stronger and it will be able to insist on benefits for local people and firms. The more desperate the government, the harder the bargain a TNC can drive.

Because corporations want reliable infrastructure, a healthy, educated workforce, and sizable domestic markets, direct investment is heavily concentrated in richer countries. These are also the ones that can bargain

[37] George Hatch, 'Argentina's banking woes aren't likely to lead to system's collapse, experts say', *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 May 1985.

[38] Simon Marks and Harry Davies, 'Revealed: how Google enlisted members of US Congress it bankrolled to fight $6bn EU antitrust case', *The Guardian*, 17 December 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/17/google-lobbyists-congress-antitrust-brussels-eu.

[39] Author interview with Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever, January 2016.

more effectively: Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and the Russian Federation received 52 per cent of foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows to developing countries in 2014.[40] By contrast, the poorest states are easily bullied with threats of moving somewhere else. The painful paradox is that the more a government needs foreign investment, the worse the deal it is likely to get. However, the balance of power tends to shift over time: a TNC is most powerful in initial negotiations, less so once it has invested capital and leaving becomes more expensive.

International institutions (discussed in Chapter 7) often intervene to set the rules and shape the balance of power between states and TNCs. While the relatively weak UN agencies provide training and advice to buttress state negotiating and monitoring capacity, the World Bank and IMF attach riders to their loans that protect TNCs from what they view as interference by the state. Loan conditions have required such measures as eliminating capital controls and export taxes, unilaterally reducing tariffs and privatizing state companies and public services. Since the 1990s, a web of bilateral investment treaties and regional and global (WTO) trade agreements has further constrained states' ability to regulate TNC behaviour, for example, by proscribing the basic elements of industrial policy.

Corporate lobbying behind closed doors is a key driver of the way trade agreements have evolved. On one of my first visits to the WTO, I burst out laughing when one besuited gent introduced himself in a meeting with officials by saying 'I'm from British Invisibles'. It turned out he was speaking for a powerful association of finance firms that was an extremely effective lobby; true to its name, the general public was largely oblivious of its existence.

One of the most vigorous lobbyists at both global and national levels is the pharmaceutical industry. In the US, pharmaceutical companies employ 3,000 lobbyists and spend millions to influence national laws and the US position in trade negotiations.[41] In the Uruguay Round that led to the creation of the WTO in 1995, the pharmaceutical lobby steamrollered through an agreement on intellectual property whose implications were unclear to many of those involved. Only after it came into effect did developing countries realize they had signed up to a major extension of corporate

[40] Calculated from UNCTAD, *World Investment Report 2015: Reforming International Investment Governance*, Annex table 1, http://unctad.org/en/publicationslibrary/wir2015_en.pdf.

[41] Joseph Stiglitz, *Making Globalization Work* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

monopolies and high-priced drugs that would amount to a death sentence for thousands of sick and dying people.

One huge controversy was over access to medicines for HIV/AIDS, especially in South Africa, the epicentre of the pandemic in the early 2000s. When the Indian generic drug firm CIPLA offered to supply AIDS medicines at a fraction of the cost charged by the big companies, South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and Oxfam pressed for action and won a new South African law allowing the importation of the cheaper generic medicines. Then in 2001 nearly three-dozen international pharmaceutical corporations precipitated a PR disaster by suing to overturn it, prompting an upsurge of activism that gave them such a public battering they were forced to drop the case.[42]

Although that campaign helped push down prices and increase access to vital medicines and made a substantial contribution to the estimated 16.5 million AIDS-related deaths averted between 2001 and 2021,[43] activists experienced a horrific sense of déjà vu when a new generation of vaccines came on stream with astonishing rapidity in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It soon became obvious that developing countries would once again be pushed to the back of the queue, so a combination of a new generation of activists and veterans of the HIV/AIDS movement rapidly set up a 'People's Vaccine' campaign,[44] demanding an end to 'vaccine apartheid', including fair shares for poor countries, suspension of intellectual property restrictions, and a sharing of knowhow on the new vaccine technologies with Global South producers.

But despite some wins, in the shape of support from Presidents Biden and Macron, some minor tweaks to WTO rules and the pandemic's ubiquitous 'no-one is safe until everyone is safe' rhetoric, Big Pharma proved effective blockers, supported by allies led by the European Commission and the governments of Germany, the UK, and Switzerland. The companies used their hidden power to lobby behind the scenes and pushed out borderline racist public narratives that developing countries were incapable of safely managing the new technologies (despite plenty of evidence to the

[42] E.B. Kapstein and J.W. Busby, *Aids Drugs for All: Social Movements and Market Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[43] UNAIDS, Global roll-out of HIV treatment has saved millions of lives, 6 September 2021. https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2021/september/20210906_global-roll-out-hiv-treatment.

[44] https://peoplesvaccine.org/supporters/.

contrary). For what was at stake for Big Pharma, look no further than one of the People's Vaccine headlines 'Pfizer, BioNTech and Moderna making $1,000 profit every second while world's poorest countries remain largely unvaccinated'.[45] In the longer term, the campaign's legacy may prove more positive, something we come back to in Chapter 12.

How do TNCs change?

Activists seek to influence TNCs with strategies that run from cooperation to confrontation. At one end of the spectrum, NGO types sit with corporate executives, academics, and government officials on a proliferating number of 'multistakeholder initiatives' on pressing problems like climate change or food security (the hyperactive Paul Polman seems to be on all of them). At the other, activists use litigation or public shaming to oblige governments to act. In between these poles lies the burgeoning realm of lobbying and campaigns to influence particular aspects of corporate behaviour. The smart money often involves a combination of different approaches.

According to Erinch Sahan, a former Oxfam private sector campaigner:

> What I've learned is this: build the case for why this particular change is inevitable. Make corporates worry that they're on the wrong side of history. We alone don't have the gravitas to do this. So we try and make sure companies hear from pension fund managers and industry peers, from shareholders at their AGMs, and hundreds of thousands of their consumers are interested enough to contact them on social media. The surprising number of angles they hear from generates questions: 'Are we missing something here? Has this become a mainstream issue?'.[46]

Targeting investors has proved particularly effective. In 2014, the Dutch NGO Fossiel Vrij NL launched a campaign calling for the pension fund Stichting Pensioenfonds ABP to divest from the fossil fuel industry.

[45] Oxfam International Press Release, 16 November 2021, https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/pfizer-biontech-and-moderna-making-1000-profit-every-second-while-worlds-poorest#:~:text=we%20therefore%20estimate%20the%20combined,for%20pre-tax%20profit%20margin.

[46] Erinch Sahan, 'What makes big corporations decide to get on the right side of history?', *From Poverty to Power blog*, 26 February 2014, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/what-makes-big-corporations-decide-to-get-on-the-right-side-of-history/.

Seven years later, ABP announced they would divest their direct investments in the fossil fuel industry.[47] Such a campaign epitomizes the value of getting the 'messengers' right—corporate executives listen to and meet regularly (and privately) with their major investors.

Such approaches can be effective, but as Erinch suggests, more weighty pressures are exerted by the web of regulation, relationships, and responsibilities in which TNCs are immersed. Activist organizations are players in this web—known collectively by the unfortunate term 'stakeholders', which always makes me think of people trying to kill a vampire—but it also includes shareholders, customers, the state, and other companies.

Above all, corporate executives are subject to the bottom line: if the company loses money, it will go bust or be bought out. That brutal discipline can be a source of dynamism and innovation, yet it makes businesses inherently conservative. As business strategist Simon Levitt argues, TNCs' default mode is to defend the status quo or at least delay change as long as possible.[48] The greater their capital investment (e.g. oil companies' fixed investments in drilling rigs), the more they will resist change.

Levitt identifies four factors that corporations evaluate before supporting progressive change: protecting their brand (especially important for consumer goods companies); the economic cost; the likelihood of impending change in government policy (companies may decide to jump before they are pushed); and whether the firm stands to gain relative to its current or future competitors. Beyond such cost/benefit calculations, leadership at CEO and senior management levels clearly matters in overcoming inertia and inspiring a commitment to change across the company.[49]

So, in convincing fossil fuel producers to transition to renewable energy, for example, activism clearly matters, but so do the falling cost of renewables, the availability of government subsidies, the threat of legislation and possible litigation, and the personal commitment (or lack of it) of corporate execs.

These factors are weighed in light of longer-term tidal shifts. Technology is the most obvious: the expansion of TNCs to their present pre-eminence has been driven by successive waves of technological progress in transport, communications, and production that first allowed them to trade

[47] Lis Reichelt, Lauren McManamon, Irene Guijt, Joost Vervoort, and Nina Breedveld, 'Learnings from the ABP fossil free campaign', forthcoming.
[48] Simon Levitt, 'Under what conditions do TNCs lobby for change?' (mimeo, undated).
[49] Simon Levitt, 'Under what conditions do TNCs lobby for change?' (mimeo, undated).

across geographical distances, then create a global assembly line for their products, and most recently to manage complex global production networks. Economic development is another, as TNCs increasingly see China, India, and others as lucrative markets, rather than simply enormous reservoirs of cheap labour.

Other long-term shifts are more subtle. The very idea of what a corporation should be and do has evolved over time. In an article entitled 'The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits', economist Milton Friedman accused promoters of corporate social responsibility of 'preaching pure and unadulterated socialism.'[50] Few companies today would agree. The norms governing corporate behaviour (much like human behaviour) have evolved partly through peer pressure among executives. At the annual gathering of corporate titans in the Swiss skiing resort of Davos, 'masters of the universe' swap notes and influence each other, providing an annual snapshot of a global conversation to which ordinary mortals are seldom admitted. Luckily, some international NGO chief executives get invites and a golden opportunity to influence the corporate agenda at the highest level. Watching Winnie Byanyima get stuck in at Davos was an annual treat during her time as Oxfam International's chief executive.[51]

Though Friedman's words now seem to emanate from a bygone age, shareholders and owners still hold the most power to shape a company's actions. That may be why some of the more progressive companies on social and environmental issues are owned by families or foundations that are able to take a longer-term view than investors seeking to maximize quarterly returns.[52]

In companies where workers have managed to organize, trade unions can exert significant influence, especially regarding wages and working conditions. However, unions have struggled to 'transnationalize' along with their employers, linking up workers in different countries and organizing within global production networks characterized by subcontracting and outsourcing.

[50] Milton Friedman, 'A Friedman doctrine—the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits', *The New York Times Magazine*, 13 September 1970.

[51] Billy Perrigo and Abby Vesoulis, 'Davos panel on inequality becomes discussion about the very rich 'paying their fair share', Time Magazine, 25 January 2019, https://time.com/collection-post/5512726/davos-economic-inequality-time/.

[52] Erinch Sahan, 'How businesses can save the world (when their shareholders aren't breathing down their neck)', From Poverty to Power blog, 9 April 2015, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/how-businesses-can-save-the-world-when-their-shareholders-arent-breathing-down-their-neck/.

Corporations with brand names are highly sensitive to the views of consumers, since bad publicity can quickly destroy brand value painstakingly built up over decades. Activists have found success with high-profile campaigns, such as the Nestlé boycott noted above, and with more nuanced engagement, in which civil society organizations use the threat of consumer pressure to persuade companies to improve their social and environmental record.

One of the challenges facing activists, however, is 'greenwashing', when a company spends more time and money on marketing itself as environmentally friendly than on actually minimizing its environmental impact. Such smoke and mirrors not only make it harder to distinguish real action from PR spin, but also risks spreading a wider disenchantment with the possibility of change—none of these actions means anything; everyone is just as bad as everyone else.

Why do different TNCs behave so differently?

Geoff, a senior manager in a major UK supermarket, wandered over to me after the meeting, with a startling proposition: 'Do you think you NGOs could campaign a bit harder against us? My board is thinking of cutting my budget.' I sat with Geoff on the board of the multistakeholder Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) to promote labour rights and decent working conditions in his and other firms' global supply chains. It seems he needed a credible threat (and some dark arts) to keep his company engaged.

That conversation took place in the early 2000s, during a wave of 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR) that has since spread across much of the private sector. CSR is controversial: denounced as corporate spin by its critics, it is held up by supporters as a market-friendly alternative to inefficient government regulation. I was definitely in the supporter camp.

One basic lesson I learned at the ETI was not to lump all corporations together. The corporate world is a system, with positive (and negative) deviants—companies that are unusually progressive and others that are the exact opposite. Differences among TNCs often hark back to the combination of institutions, ideas, and interests that underlie inertia, as discussed in Chapter 2. The nature of a firm's business is critical (arms, tobacco, or oil companies are uniquely regressive). But within a sector, an individual

company's history and culture and the nature of its leadership all weigh heavily in how it reacts to pressure from the public, national governments, international bodies, or competitors.[53]

According to Oxfam's private sector campaigner Ruth Mhlanga,

> Even within a single company figuring out power dynamics is important. While Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reps are often convinced already, our work is figuring out how to get procurement and finance teams on board. If you're talking to a human rights lead from a company, that's not who you need to convince that the company should do something about human rights.[54]

Within the ETI, there were obvious leaders and laggards (I won't start naming names), and the trick was to use the former to put pressure on the latter, since nothing galvanizes action like being shamed in front of your peers and rivals.

Distinguishing between leaders and laggards is also a staple of public campaigns, which make use of brand reputation, corporate rivalry, and public pressure to influence corporate behaviour. Oxfam's 'Behind the Brands' campaign produced a league table assessing the agricultural sourcing policies of the world's ten largest food and beverage companies: (in alphabetical order) Associated British Foods (ABF), Coca-Cola, Danone, General Mills, Kellogg's, Mars, Mondelez, Nestlé, PepsiCo, and Unilever. The results surpassed all the organizers' expectations: between February and October 2014, all of the Big Ten published new policies or assessments relating to the issues covered by the campaign.[55] According to Oxfam's Penny Fowler, the critical success factors included: creating a race to the top between the leading companies, balancing stick and carrot (challenging companies but praising them when they moved; plus insider engagement on solutions), and (echoing Erinch Sahan's point) making sure that the companies didn't just hear from Oxfam but also from

[53] Dana Brown, Anne Roemer-Mahler, and Antje Vetterlein, 'Theorising transnational corporations as social actors: an analysis of corporate motivations', Working Paper No. 61 (Copenhagen: International Center for Business and Politics, Copenhagen Business School, 2009).

[54] Ruth Mhlanga, email communication, August 2023.

[55] The issues were transparency, gender rights, farm workers and small-scale producers in the supply chain, land rights and access, water rights and access and sustainability, reducing GHG emissions, and helping farmers adapt to climate change.

consumers, investors/pension fund managers, and industry peers. Strong and transparent research and methodology also helped, as did filling a policy gap for the companies by setting out a social sustainability framework for agricultural sourcing (which was previously lacking).[56]

Conclusion

The world of TNCs is seething with expressions of power: one major corporate CEO who preferred not to be quoted in this book told me how sitting next to the British Prime Minister on a long-haul flight allowed him to successfully lobby for a change of legislation that affected his company—an expression of 'hidden power' unavailable to the average activist. TNCs also have invisible power in the extraordinary influence on consumers exerted by brands and the values they claim to embody, as well as the apparently mesmerizing authority of giant corporations in the eyes of policy makers.

TNCs use that power in a system that is growing ever more complex. In a world with more TNCs from more countries, the traditional campaigning approach of targeting large TNCs based in Europe or North America risks being wrongfooted. Campaigning against corporates in the Global South will require different strategies: the public naming and shaming of scorecards might not get the same level of support; brands may not respond to public pressure; and the line between the private sector and government is not clear cut.[57]

Yet many activists have upped their game, shifting their focus from addressing individual companies and their supply chains towards creating an enabling environment for change by addressing the incentives that motivate companies.

The to-do list is long: overhauling financial markets to end the culture of short-termism that undermines attempts to build sustainability; increasing transparency and reporting requirements to keep corporations from buying politicians and parties; making sure the polluter pays on issues such as carbon emissions; clamping down on tax dodging; and so on. For any of these initiatives to prosper, coordinated action between northern

[56] Penny Fowler, email communication, January 2016.
[57] Ruth Mhlanga, email communication, 9 August 2023.

and southern activists and alliances with progressive governments, not to mention exploiting differences among companies, will be essential.

It is not enough for activists to declare ourselves either 'anti-corporate' or 'pro-business'. Whatever the starting point, we need to learn to dance with the TNC system by understanding the traditions and mindsets of particular companies, the new variants, positive deviants, and critical junctures that dot the corporate landscape, and the variety of ways corporations can be influenced.

As for me, perhaps I'll have to beg forgiveness from my more anti-capitalist colleagues, because my time at the ETI gave me a lasting respect for the dynamism and seriousness of some of the people who run TNCs. Suited and booted in a central London cafe, I once tried to recruit a new garment retailer to join the Initiative. I deployed my best corporate speak, stressing the business case for signing up—you can recruit better people and keep them longer, you'll manage your supply chain better, you'll avoid damaging your reputation and brand. The exasperated executive interrupted me: 'Forget all that, I just want to make the world better for my grandchildren'. I still remember my sense of embarrassment and shame.

Further reading

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Case Study

The December 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change

Background

On 12 December 2015, more than 190 countries made pledges to cut emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs), covering 94 per cent of the world's GHG emissions. They also adopted language calling for efforts towards a 1.5-degree-Centigrade limit to global warming—the upper boundary of safety for many fragile island states and Least Developed Countries.[1] After twenty-one years of hard negotiations and six years after the 2009 Copenhagen climate talks ended in disarray, this was a remarkable turnaround. How did it happen? This short case study uses the various chapters and themes in this book to unpack the story of Paris.[2]

Contextual drivers of change

There were three major changes in the context that made Paris such a contrast to Copenhagen.

The first and single most important factor was a US–China joint announcement on climate change at the end of 2014,[3] pledging new targets to cut emissions—notably in China's case to peak emissions by 2030—and

[1] For more detailed analysis see 'Oxfam's initial analysis of the Paris Agreement: what will the Paris Agreement be remembered for?', https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/oxfams-initial-analysis-paris-agreement.

[2] Summary of a longer case study paper by Duncan Green and Tim Gore (unpublished).

[3] 'U.S.–China Joint Announcement on Climate Change', 11 November 2014, press release, The White House, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/11/us-china-joint-announcement-climate-change.

to work together for a successful outcome in Paris. With the two biggest GHG emitters on board, an agreement of some kind started to look inevitable. Domestic factors drove both leaders to sign up: on the Chinese side, a smog crisis in Beijing and other cities had shown the environmental limits of China's development model, and especially its reliance on coal. In addition, as China upgraded its economy, its leaders were now keen to move from dirty, low-tech industry to higher value sectors, including renewables.

In the US, President Obama, who had worked to make Copenhagen a success, received much more public backing in the run-up to Paris. Climate activists had pursued an insider strategy prior to Copenhagen, trying to persuade fossil fuel companies to support domestic cap and trade laws, which failed. Before Paris, they opted for more outsider tactics, building a grassroots movement, with the Keystone pipeline as its iconic issue, which provided the Obama administration with the political room to manoeuvre. In addition, since President Obama was approaching the end of his period in office, and had largely given up on winning bipartisan action from Congress, he was more willing to pursue reform through executive action.

The second major shift occurred within the private sector. In Copenhagen, the fossil fuel lobby dominated the private sector presence. In Paris, for the first time there was a powerful and credible countervailing force to the blockers of the fossil fuel lobby: hundreds of companies and CEOs made pledges to reduce their own carbon footprint and called for governments to set more ambitious targets. Business supported a price on carbon and called for an end to fossil fuel subsidies. Credit for the shift goes to the leadership of individual companies and CEOs (Ikea and Unilever among them) swayed by growing concerns about the economic impact of climate change.

The third major shift occurred at the intersection of economics and technology: a dramatic change in prices, with the cost of renewable energy falling much faster than predicted. Through a combination of technological innovation and economies of scale, the price of solar power fell by 50 per cent from 2010 to 2014.[4]

Secondary factors added momentum to the train set moving by the US–China announcement: activist pressure, for example, the September 2014

[4] IRENA, 'Renewable power generation costs in 2014', January 2015, https://www.irena.org/publications/2015/jan/renewable-power-generation-costs-in-2014.

People's Climate March in New York, re-energized the public; outstanding French diplomacy dealt with 'hot potato issues' well in advance of Paris; and a May 2015 Papal Encyclical, 'Care for Our Common Home',[5] galvanized Roman Catholics and other faith communities (and may lead to longer-term shifts in social norms and personal behaviour).

The debate over climate science seemed less significant in Paris than in Copenhagen, perhaps because the deniers had lost the argument, so that debates could shift to the real and thorny problems of implementation.

The main players

In addition to leadership from the US and China, a number of groupings of developed and developing countries shaped the Paris process. These included the 'Climate Vulnerable Forum', led by the Philippines, which was instrumental in winning the reference to a 1.5-degree target and to establishing action to address the 'loss and damage' experienced by poor countries as a fundamental element in the new climate regime. The Pacific Islands, in particular the Marshall Islands headed by Tony de Brun, foreign minister, also played a prominent role.

The underlying geopolitics of the transition from Copenhagen to Paris saw the establishment of a new paradigm, replacing the Kyoto Protocol's division of the world into North (Annex 1) and South (Non-Annex 1), in which only Annex 1 countries were obliged to cut emissions. In Paris, by contrast, all countries made commitments, with emerging powers like China and India being some of the most ambitious.

Critical junctures

In the run up to Paris, a number of weather events helped build a consensus for action. In particular, a series of major climate-related disasters affected the big economies (the US, Australia, Russia) as well as poor countries, building recognition that 'we are all in this together'. But the

[5] 'Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home', Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

most important critical juncture had nothing to do with the climate: the appalling 13 November terrorist attacks in Paris, which killed 130 people, generated worldwide condemnation but also a determination to show solidarity with France, who hosted the climate conference only weeks later.[6]

Systems thinking and climate progress

Progress (and reverses) since Paris epitomize the nature of change in complex systems. First, there was the interaction between unpredictable events and the political timetable: the Covid-19 pandemic forced a year's delay in the Glasgow COP originally scheduled for 2020. This coincided with a transfer of power in the US from Donald Trump, a climate denier determined to pull the US out of climate commitments, to Joe Biden, who was far more committed to action.

Second, there was the broader context. Outside the conference hall, debates were shaped by a new wave of climate activism (Extinction Rebellion; Greta Thunberg and the School Strikes for Climate movement) and the extraordinary efforts of thousands of scientists worldwide, led by the IPCC. These, along with the growing evidence of the climate emergency around the world, helped keep the spotlight on climate action despite Covid and the subsequent disruption of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which galvanized the issue of energy security for Europe and other regions in a way that in the medium term should reinforce support for renewables.

Although it is easy to be dismayed at the gravity of the climate emergency, and the ongoing differences over and threats to climate action, the undoubted progress since the 1997 Kyoto protocol (where developed countries agreed to cut emissions by 5 per cent relative to their 1990 levels) to COP27, where negotiations aimed to get all countries to commit to net zero by the middle of the century, is a story of change that has huge lessons (many of them inspiring) for activists and others.[7]

[6] Duncan Green, 'How will the Paris attacks affect the outcome of the Climate Change talks?', From Poverty to Power blog, 30 November 2015, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/how-will-the-paris-attacks-affect-the-outcome-of-the-climate-change-talks/.

[7] Mark A. Maslin, John Lang, and Fiona Harvey, 'A short history of the successes and failures of the international climate change negotiations', *UCL Open Environment*, 19 July 2023.

PART III

WHAT ACTIVISTS CAN (AND CAN'T) DO

There is a much-quoted phrase attributed to the anthropologist Margaret Mead (although no original source can be found), namely 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'[1]

These words have inspired generations of activists, but they always leave me with mixed feelings. If we focus on 'committed' and lose sight of 'thoughtful', we can fall into the seductive trap of thinking that change comes from a noble and pure band of brothers and sisters, willing to go up into the mountains or onto the streets. I don't think that's how change works.

J.K. Rowling satirizes that kind of 'committed' campaigning in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*,[2] when Hermione sets up an 'Elf Liberation Front' to free the house elves who serve the wizard community. The house elves are horrified—no-one had asked them if they wanted to be 'liberated', which to them looks very much like being unemployed. Hermione didn't consult the elves; she merely assumed she knew what was right for them. She really needed a proper theory of change.

In contrast, a 'thoughtful' power and systems approach emphasizes humility and curiosity about the system we are seeking to influence. Passion is essential, of course, but it must be tempered with critical thinking. Activists need to be reflectivists too.

The next four chapters explore how activists of different kinds go about that task. They cover grassroots campaigning, digital activism (a new chapter by Tom Kirk), the often ignored role of leaders, and how advocacy

[1] The Institute for Intercultural Studies, 'Frequently asked questions about Mead/ Bateson', http://www.interculturalstudies.org/faq.html#quote.

[2] J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000).

can influence the institutions analysed in Part II. It is a necessarily partial and personal view, reflecting Tom's and my own backgrounds and drawing on the activists, leaders, and campaigners we have met, worked with, and above all learned from. I said at the outset of the book that there was no 'department of change studies' that activists can turn to for guidance—the history and variety of activism is an excellent substitute.

The book will then conclude with a 'so what?' discussion in Chapter 13 that fleshes out the power and systems approach and its implications for activists and their organizations.

9
Citizen Activism and Civil Society

I have come across extraordinary citizen activists over the years, among them the Chiquitano people of the Bolivian lowlands, the fisherfolk of India's Bundelkhand, and the members of Citizens UK. For centuries, men and women like them have shrugged off the exhaustion of long days spent earning a living and raising families to join with their communities to discuss, organize, and take action. As we have seen, they courageously risk their lives to confront hired thugs and corrupt officials.

They do so for any number of reasons: to feed their families or improve their neighbourhoods, in response to their sense of what is right and wrong, or because working together in a common cause is fulfilling. Being inspired by their heroic efforts is what has made working in the development business so personally rewarding (it certainly isn't the meetings).

However, I do have one confession to make: in my personal life, I am one of the most inactive citizens I know. I hate confrontation and conflict; I barely know my own neighbours; I'm not a 'joiner'. Nevertheless, I have long been inspired and fascinated by people who behave very differently from me: first, Latin America's brave community organizers, and then the great activists from around the world I have had the privilege to meet through my work at Oxfam. Hypocrisy? Perhaps. I will just have to live with the gulf that separates their lives from mine.

This chapter delves a little deeper into who citizen activists are, how they pursue change, and what outsiders can do to help.

Citizen activism has grown exponentially across the developing world, driven by several factors: rapid increases in literacy and access to education (particularly for women), a greater openness to political activity, and the spread of new norms regarding rights and justice. Urbanization has contributed too: with exchanges of opinions and information on every street corner, cities are vividly political places, dense with social movements demanding housing, schools, clinics, or decent water and sanitation. Protest and conflict abound, between workers and employers or service

providers and users. (The more I see of urban citizens' movements, the more I am baffled by the rural bias of many aid agencies, who seem to prefer villages to shanty towns, even if that means missing many opportunities to support social change.)[3]

Social media and digital activism plays an increasingly central role, a topic Tom Kirk explores in a new chapter for this edition (see Chapter 10).

What is citizen activism?

Citizen activism certainly includes political activism, but it can be much more. A better definition would be any individual action with social consequences. Much of it involves collective activity, including participation in faith groups or neighbourhood associations, producer organizations and trade unions, village savings and loan groups, and funeral societies, among others. Such participation is an assertion of 'power with' and is both an end in itself—a crucial kind of freedom—and a means to ensure that society and its institutions respect people's rights and meet their needs. Active citizens provide vital feedback to state decision makers, exert pressure for reform, or solve their problems themselves, bypassing state systems altogether.

Such 'social capital' is often as valuable as cash or skills. World Bank research in Indonesia found that membership in local associations had a bigger impact on household welfare than education.[4] By one estimate, voluntary associations the world over have become key providers of human services (especially health and welfare) and now constitute a $2.2 *trillion* industry in just the forty countries that were sampled[5]—sixteen times the global aid budget.

The local organizations people form, known in development jargon as civil society organizations (CSOs),[6] complement more traditional links of clan, caste, or religion. Coming together in CSOs helps citizens nourish the stock of trust and co-operation on which all societies depend.

[3] Duncan Green, 'India's slums: how change happens and the challenge of urban programming', From Poverty to Power blog, 1 November 2012, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/indias-slums-how-change-happens-and-the-challenge-of-urban-programming/.

[4] Michael Edwards, *Civil Society*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 92.

[5] Michael Edwards, *Civil Society*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 13, footnote 15.

[6] Jude Howell and Jenny Pearce, *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), p. 31.

Of course, citizens' groups can also reinforce discrimination, fear, and mistrust. Called 'uncivil society' by some, their activities can sometimes spill over into violence, as in the case of religious or racist pogroms, football hooligans, US gun nuts in the National Rifle Association (NRA), or paramilitary organizations. At the time of Rwanda's 1994 genocide, the country had the highest density of voluntary associations in sub-Saharan Africa.[7]

Nor are CSOs immune from the wider power inequalities in society. Men often dominate them, as do individuals from powerful ethnic or caste backgrounds. CSOs of hitherto marginalized groups have often emerged as splinters from mixed organizations, when women or indigenous or HIV-positive people found that their specific concerns continually evaporated from the agenda.

CSOs' work is often local, below the media radar and prone to historical airbrushing. In *I've Got the Light of Freedom*,[8] his brilliant account of the US civil rights movement, Charles M. Payne quotes one high school student: 'One day, a nice old lady, Rosa Parks, sat down on a bus and got arrested. The next day Martin Luther King Jr stood up, and the Montgomery bus boycott followed. Sometime later, King delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech and segregation was over.'

Some of the things airbrushed out of this narrative are worth noting: Parks had been a civil rights activist since 1943. Months before her protest in December 1955, Parks had attended leadership training at the Highlander Folk School. An organized group of 300 educated Black women led by English professor Jo Ann Robinson had been agitating on desegregation since 1946. When Parks sat down in December 1955, Robinson's group had already considered and discounted three other protests that year for various tactical reasons. This time they gave the green light and had a rock-solid boycott in place within days of Parks' protest.

Less glamorous activism by CSOs includes pushing authorities to install street lighting, pave the roads, and invest in schools and clinics. CSOs often run such services themselves, along with public education programmes on everything from hand washing to labour rights. Even in the chaotic, dangerous world of the Eastern Congo (DRC), Community Protection

[7] Michael Edwards, *Civil Society*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 51.

[8] Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

Committees made up of six men and six women elected by their villages have brought new-found confidence and resilience to conflict-affected communities. They identify the main threats and actions to mitigate them. When people are forced to flee renewed fighting, these committees are often instrumental in getting people organized in their new refugee camps.[9]

For the UN, CSOs include everything from small, informal, community-based organizations to the large, high-profile, international NGOs like Oxfam.[10] Many observers distinguish between grassroots CSOs and NGOs: CSOs tend to be membership-driven and local (although some have got very large indeed), can be informal or legalized entities, and are often almost entirely voluntary in nature. NGOs tend to be run by boards and professional staff, with only limited accountability to their supporters. Crucially, CSOs work to advance the interests of their members, whereas NGOs usually do so in the public interest, by running or funding projects, responding to disasters, or trying to influence public policy.

Of course grassroots organizations also lobby for changes that go beyond the immediate interests of their members; and many people in NGOs work there because of their acutely personal commitment to issues such as gender justice. But a large international NGO is clearly a very different beast from a village savings group. The distinction matters partly because the relationship between NGOs and CSOs is often fraught with tensions over access to money and expertise and issues of representation (who speaks on behalf of poor communities?). This chapter sticks mostly to grassroots CSOs, while Chapter 12 covers the influencing work of NGOs.

Citizen activism and protest

In recent years, the rich world has seen an upsurge of protest, whether through the non-violent direction action of groups like Just Stop Oil or Extinction Rebellion, or global movements such as Black Lives Matter or

[9] Duncan Green, *Community Protection Committees in Democratic Republic of Congo* (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/community-protection-committees-in-democratic-republic-of-congo-338435/.

[10] Brian Tomlinson, *Working with Civil Society in Foreign Aid: Possibilities for South–South Cooperation?*, Annex 1: NGOs and CSOs: a note on terminology (Beijing: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) China, 2013), https://www.undp.org/publications/undp-working-civil-society-foreign-aid.

#MeToo. Other motivations have brought people onto the streets worldwide. While the world was watching the war in Ukraine, its side-effects of rising food and energy prices were also triggering mass protests. From November 2021 to October 2022, 12,500 protests erupted in 148 countries, a global wave 'unprecedented in world history'.[11]

Since the 1980s, citizen activists have led protest movements that have ousted dozens of authoritarian regimes across Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. They have removed dictators in the Philippines and Indonesia, ended apartheid in South Africa, and brought down oppressive governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Many autocrats must live in fear that one day tear gas from the protests outside will invade the comfort of the presidential palace, as thousands of citizens gather in the square to demand justice, vowing to remain until they get it.[12]

While other factors contribute to political transitions (involvement of the formal political opposition or the military, foreign intervention, and so on), boycotts, mass protests, blockades, strikes, and other civil disobedience by cohesive non-violent civic coalitions have proven vital.

Protest movements exhibit a particular rhythm and structure. One historian of European social movements sees them as passing through 'cycles of contention',[13] similar to the cycles of state reform described in Chapter 4. The response to explosions of protest is often repression, but frequently laced with reform. As conflict collapses and militants retire to lick their wounds, many of their gains are reversed; nevertheless, they leave behind incremental expansions in participation, changes in popular culture, and residual networks that lay a groundwork for future protest. Open conflict is a season for sowing, but the reaping often comes in the periods of demobilization that follow, by latecomers to the cause and reformers among elites and officialdom.

While many outsiders see protest movements as homogeneous (journalists and politicians often lament their lack of easily identifiable leaders), on

[11] Jeff Hallock and Naomi Hossain, 'Food and energy protests signal failures of accountability on a global scale', From Poverty to Power, 20 April 2023, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/food-and-energy-protests-signal-failures-of-accountability-on-a-global-scale/.

[12] Thomas Carothers and Saskia Brechenmacher, 'The civil society flashpoint: why the global crackdown? What can be done about it?', From Poverty to Power blog, 6 March 2014, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/the-civil-society-flashpoint-why-the-global-crackdown-what-can-be-done-about-it/.

[13] Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 24.

closer inspection they usually contain smaller, more durable organizations that emerge at vital moments and then disperse. According to Oxfam's Ihab El Sakkout, the protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square in the brief Arab Spring of 2011 exhibited just such granularity:

> On 2nd and 3rd of February, when the protestors were attacked viciously by regime thugs, the Muslim brotherhood and organized groups of soccer fans played a key role in defending the square (principally by being able to convey quick decisions via their groups, showing extreme courage and discipline under attack, quickly building barricades, managing counter-attacks, etc.), which helped to turn those in the square from a mass of individuals into a cohesive group able to defend itself.[14]

Now, whenever I read of apparently faceless blobs of protest, I look for those underlying 'grains' of organization.

Citizen activism in a time of Covid

The Covid-19 pandemic that struck in 2020 was the catalyst for a global wave of civic activism. Early on in the pandemic, with a group of colleagues at Oxfam, I set up an 'Emergent Agency in a Time of Covid-19' project that collected over 200 case studies of Covid-related activism (some of which featured on my From Poverty to Power blog[15]) and facilitated conversations between practitioners and academics around the world to understand what was going on.

Overall, we found that local people and organizations responded faster than aid institutions. The focus of civil society responses evolved rapidly from meeting basic needs to a plethora of Covid-related work, including providing emotional and mental health support, countering misinformation, and collecting reliable data where such data were lacking. The response threw up new generations of leaders, particularly women and youths, not least because the shift to digital platforms played to the strengths of 'digital natives'.

[14] Duncan Green, 'Egypt: what are the drivers of change?', From Poverty to Power blog, 17 February 2011, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/egypt-what-are-the-drivers-of-change/.

[15] Duncan Green, Emergent Agency archive, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/category/emergent-agency/.

However, before we get carried away over this silver lining to a terrible global disaster, the research also found levels of deep exhaustion and emotional stress that saw organizations struggle and sometimes collapse.

Overall we found that 'trust became the currency of response. With the normal flow of funds and relationships interrupted, whether by physical isolation, state repression, or sudden poverty, people fell back on the reciprocity and security of their trusted networks—family, friends, neighbours and allies—to get things done amid adversity.'[16] I increasingly think that activists need to become as literate in the dynamics of trust—mapping it; understanding how it is built or destroyed—as they are about power, in order to understand (and influence) how change happens.

Citizen activism and markets

Most day-to-day efforts of citizens' associations are less existential than surviving a pandemic, and more mundane than the overthrow of governments. But they are equally important to how change happens. Take the economy. Factory workers, state employees, and small-scale farmers around the world have long realized that getting organized will give them the bargaining power they need to exact a better deal out of markets. Trade unions, producer associations, cooperatives, small business associations, and the like can win fairer wages, prices, or working conditions for their members. Many of them take up lobbying for state regulation or other measures to limit the excessive but hidden power of vested interests.

Trade unions have been at the forefront of the struggle for workers' rights for over two centuries, winning huge advances regarding wages and working conditions, the rights to collective bargaining and freedom of association, holidays, pensions, and a host of other areas.[17]

In many countries, unions' achievements have been rolled back in recent decades, as corporations and their allies in international institutions and government have gutted hard-won labour legislation. Worker

[16] Katrina Barnes, Irene Guijt, Duncan Green, and Filippo Artuso, 'Emergent agency in a time of Covid-19: key takeaways for donors, INGOs, and the wider sector', 28 February 2023, https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/emergent-agency-in-a-time-of-covid-19-key-takeaways-for-donors-ingos-and-the-wi-621489/.

[17] The International Labour Organization (ILO) has so far agreed 189 Conventions on almost every aspect of working life.

organizations continue to face repression and violence; union leaders around the world confront harassment, rape, and murder. A 2023 survey of 149 countries found that '9 out of 10 violated their right to strike; 8 out of 10 violated their right to collective bargaining'.[18]

In part due to entrenched attitudes in the labour movement that women are temporary, secondary, or less valuable workers, women's organizations have come to the fore in struggling to improve working conditions for the millions of women now employed in factories in developing countries, especially in export processing zones (EPZs), where unions are banned. In Nicaragua, the María Elena Cuadra Movement of Employed and Unemployed Women (MEC) and its 2,000 volunteers helped to win the country's first National Health and Safety Law in 2007, with increased site inspections in EPZ factories to ensure compliance, as well as human rights training for mid-level private sector managers.[19] On export plantations where women make up most of the labourers, women's organizations have also stepped into the fray. In South Africa, the Women on Farms Project helped isolated seasonal workers form an organization to demand a minimum daily wage; after a 2013 strike, the women won a 52 per cent pay increase.[20]

Efforts to organize have also been undermined by the spread of the 'gig economy', where notionally self-employed workers in companies such as Uber and Deliveroo are denied labour rights. Some of the most exciting labour organizing in recent years has tackled this sector. In the UK, the Independent Workers' union of Great Britain was set up in 2012 by Latin-American cleaners organizing for better working conditions. Since then, it has grown to thousands of members across the country, winning some notable victories.[21]

Despite such efforts, approximately 90 per cent of the world labour force remains unorganized, and union membership is declining. In contrast, the number of independent-producer organizations has mushroomed in recent decades.[22] Farmers and other producers are forming co-operatives or associations to improve their bargaining power nearly everywhere.

[18] International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), 'ITUC Global Rights Index 2023', https://www.ituc-csi.org/ituc-global-rights-index-2023.

[19] For further examples of organizing in the informal economy see Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), www.wiego.org.

[20] BBC News, 'South Africa farm workers get 52% pay rise', *BBC News*, 4 February 2013, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21324275.

[21] https://iwgb.org.uk/en/page/about-us/.

[22] For an overview of the issues facing producer organizations see Chris Penrose-Buckley, *Producer Organisations: A Guide to Developing Collective Rural Enterprises* (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2008).

Between 1982 and 2002 the number of villages in Burkina Faso that had such organizations rose from 21 per cent to 91 per cent.[23] In Nigeria, the number of producer co-operatives nearly doubled between 1990 and 2005.[24] By 1998, 65 per cent of all rural households in India belonged to a co-operative society.[25] Such organizations can win better terms for credit, share the cost of expensive machinery like tractors, and process and market their produce more efficiently, thereby gaining a far greater share of the final market price.

One of India's biggest and best-known independent producer organizations is the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which had 2.5 million members in 2023.[26] Born in 1972 as a trade union of self-employed women, its members include everyone from street vendors, to home workers, to casual construction and farm labourers.

SEWA describes its task as 'organising workers to achieve their goals of full employment and self reliance through the strategy of struggle and development'. The 'struggle' part includes campaigns and lobbying for better services for women and against 'the many constraints and limitations imposed on them by society and the economy'; SEWA's development activities strengthen women's bargaining power and offer them new alternatives. SEWA has set up its own bank, health insurer, training schools, and childcare centres.

Civil society and the state: opponents or collaborators?

Where the political system is viewed as inclusive and legitimate, much of the activity of CSOs is channelled into the formal politics of elections or in democracy's daily 'public conversation' about laws and state policy. Many CSOs have ties to political parties, at least at election time, and can be important vehicles for marshalling votes in poor countries and rich alike.

[23] Jean-Louis Arcand, 'Organisations paysannes et développement rural au Burkina Faso', CERDI, Université d'Auvergne, France, 2004, in Marie-Rose Mercoiret and Jeanot Mfou'ou, 'Rural producers organizations for pro-poor sustainable agricultural development', Paper for World Development Report 2008, Paris workshop, 30–31 October 2006.

[24] Research by Leuven University cited in Proceedings Report, 'Corporate governance and co-operatives', Peer review workshop, London, 8 February 2007.

[25] Udai Shanker Awasthi, 'Resurgence of co-operative movement through innovations', *Co-op Dialogue* 11 (2) (2001), pp. 21–6.

[26] https://www.sewa.org/about-us/.

On a visit to India in 2012, grassroots activists in the slums of the city of Lucknow told me the first stage in winning political clout is to convince the lowest rank of elected officials, known as 'corporators', that the slum is worthy of being designated a 'notified slum', so that it appears on the political and fiscal map. Corporators then distribute voting cards, which at the time were the only identity papers available to many residents.

In the eyes of slum dwellers, corporators were the most approachable, but least powerful, politicians. Above them, only a few members of the state assembly were willing to talk to them. 'The officials are worse, especially the low-level ones, they ignore us or demand bribes. At least corporators listen, even if they don't do anything.' Asked why they vote, one responded, 'We're positive if our candidate wins, they will provide basic services. When it doesn't happen, we're disappointed, but then we wait five years and vote for someone else. What else can we do?'[27]

But CSOs are seldom mere pawns in politicians' games. They have set up crowd-source websites, such as 'ipaidabribe.com' in India,[28] to expose corruption by corporate lobbyists, clientilist political networks, and the like. Many now monitor government spending, painstakingly analysing what is promised vs. what is delivered, and seeking to influence budget allocations. In Israel, for example, activists from different social movements set up the Adva Center, an NGO that does research, lobbying, and outreach to promote equal rights for Mizrahi Jews, women, and Arab citizens.[29]

Lobbying government can be a disillusioning experience, as I found when talking to CSOs in South Africa.[30] 'Party hacks get parachuted into senior administrative jobs, lacking the capacity or interest to perform them properly', one activist told me. 'You look at the giant that is government and it's so difficult to navigate. You never quite know where to push—and nor do the officials! You invest hugely in building intimate relationships only to find they've moved department and you have to start all over again.'

In some countries, CSOs have built new political parties, much as trade unions did to represent their interests in the UK and elsewhere. In Bolivia

[27] Author visit, Delhi, 2012.

[28] 'I paid a bribe: participatory website to combat corruption in India', https://participedia.net/case/5579.

[29] http://adva.org/en/.

[30] Duncan Green, 'How to build local government accountability in South Africa? A conversation with partners', From Poverty to Power blog, 18 March 2013, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/how-to-build-local-government-accountability-in-south-africa-a-conversation-with-partners/.

and Brazil, social movements came together to found the Movement for Socialism (MAS) and the Workers Party (PT), both of which subsequently came to power and enacted major progressive reforms. While crucial for policy change, links to the governing party can undermine CSOs' vitality, their leadership poached to become MPs or ministers, or their reputation tarnished by association with the inevitable compromises of political office.

Civil society also finds ways to effect change in more closed political systems, using research and demonstration projects rather than the more risky avenues of campaigns and public protest.[31] Officials in one-party systems are sometimes more willing to listen to evidence of what isn't working because they don't have to worry about adverse press coverage or buying political support. In Russia, for example, disability campaigners lobbied successfully to change badly designed laws on benefits by documenting the problems and explaining them to officials behind closed doors.[32]

Even in apparently unpropitious areas such as women's rights in Pakistan,[33] CSOs have won reforms by working at the local level, where the imbalance of power between activists and the state is less extreme and relationships are easier to establish. Participatory budgeting began in villages and towns in Indonesia and Brazil before spreading more widely, and Brazil's renowned Bolsa Familia social welfare programme was first launched as an experiment under progressive municipal governments.

As noted in Part II, effectively engaging the state means understanding its internal structures and incentive systems. Framing demands in ways that make sense to politicians can greatly improve the chances of success. Publicly congratulating officials and politicians when they do something right, rather than immediately moving the goalposts and issuing new demands, can help build trust.

A review of 200 citizens' anti-corruption projects in fifty-three countries found that success relied on identifying allies among officials and

[31] Duncan Green, 'How can you do influencing work in one-party states?', From Poverty to Power blog, 8 June 2011, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/how-can-you-do-influencing-work-in-strong-authoritarian-states/.

[32] Duncan Green, 'Advocacy v service delivery in Russia: FP2P flashback', From Poverty to Power blog, 17 August 2011, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/advocacy-v-service-delivery-in-russia/.

[33] Jacky Repila, *The Politics of Our Lives: The Raising Her Voice in Pakistan Experience* (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2013), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-politics-of-our-lives-the-raising-her-voice-in-pakistan-experience-294763/.

politicians who could act as champions and sources of inside intelligence.[34] An in-depth evaluation of efforts to influence state services in South Africa, Mexico, Tanzania, and Brazil agreed on the importance of champions and stressed the role of alliances with the media, academics, and other players as activists dig in for the long haul.[35,36]

State crackdowns against citizen activism

Many states see civil society as a double-edged sword: useful when it delivers services and promotes jobs and growth, but threatening when it seeks a more fundamental redistribution of power. In the words of Brazil's great radical archbishop, Hélder Câmara: 'When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.'[37]

In recent years, in what is partly a backhanded acknowledgement of growing civil society strength, the negative view has prevailed, as states have increasingly cracked down on civic activism. According to the 'State of Civil Society Report 2023' by CIVICUS, a global CSO network:

> The right to protest is under attack all over the world. In Iran, the women-led mass protests demanding the end of theocracy have been met with brutal force, including indiscriminate killings and executions along with mass arrests. In Peru, security forces have killed dozens of people protesting against the ousting of the president. All kinds of states are repressing protests. Protesters are being criminalised in democracies such as Australia and the UK for demanding climate action, even when governments claim to take climate change seriously.[38]

Many states have preferred to restrict the activities of CSOs through bureaucratic harassment rather than outright repression. Favourite tactics

[34] Pierre Landell-Mills, *Citizens Against Corruption: Report from the Front Line* (Leicester: Matador, Troubador Publishing, 2013).

[35] Duncan Green, 'Ups and downs in the struggle for accountability—four new real time studies', From Poverty to Power blog, 5 September 2013, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/watching-the-ups-and-downs-of-accountability-work-four-new-real-time-studies/.

[36] Duncan Green and Sophie King, *What Can Governments Do to Empower Poor People?* (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2013), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/what-can-governments-do-to-empower-poor-people-305513/.

[37] Personal communication with Julian Filochowski, CAFOD, 1984.

[38] https://www.civicus.org/index.php/state-of-civil-society-report-2023.

include frequent tax inspections and creating obstacles to legal registration. In India, Amnesty International closed its office in 2020 due to a government 'witch-hunt',[39] while Oxfam India, an independent member of the Oxfam confederation run entirely by Indian nationals, has also fallen foul of such harassment.[40,41]

Foreign funding can make CSOs easy targets for accusations of foreign interference, and weak governance and accountability structures can open the door to questions about their legitimacy.[42]

According to the CIVICUS 2023 report, civil society is responding to such pressures by 'diversifying and widening its repertoire of tactics. Today, much of civil society's radical energy is coming from outside the NGO universe: from small, informal grassroots groups, often formed and led by women, young people and Indigenous people. Many new groups organise horizontally, adopt participatory approaches and cultivate distributed leadership. They tend to rely on voluntary engagement and can achieve a lot with little.'

From a systems perspective, the crackdown could thus become a shock that catalyses the next phase of civic activism. Let's hope so.

How can outsiders support citizen activists?

If the rising voice and influence of civil society is widely recognized, how aid agencies should support it, if at all, is far from clear. In preparation for writing this book, I examined ten cases of Oxfam's work on citizen activism,[43] ranging from grassroots women's empowerment to the

[39] Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Ben Doherty, 'Amnesty to halt work in India due to government "witch hunt"', *The Guardian*, 29 September 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/29/amnesty-to-halt-work-in-india-due-to-government-witch-hunt.

[40] CIVICUS, 'India: Oxfam targeted again with accusations of foreign funding and influencing', 20 April 2023, https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/6370-india-oxfam-targeted-again-with-accusations-of-foreign-funding-and-influencing.

[41] Astha Rajvanshi, 'How the Indian government uses raids to silence critics', *TIME*, 16 February 2023, https://time.com/6255425/india-raid-bbc-modi-documentary/.

[42] Ross Clarke and Araddhya Mehtta, '5 Trends that explain why civil society space is under assault around the world', From Poverty to Power blog, 25 August 2015, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/5-trends-that-explain-why-civil-society-space-is-under-assault-around-the-world/.

[43] Duncan Green, 'Active citizenship case studies' (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2014), http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-work/citizen-states/active-citizenship-case-studies.

global campaign on the arms trade. Here are a few lessons I drew from them:[44]

1. **The right partners are indispensable**: Whether programmes flourish or fail depends in large part on the local CSOs northern aid agencies choose to work with. Good partners bring an understanding of local context and culture, have long-term relations of trust with poor communities, and have well-developed networks with those in positions of local power; they will carry on working in the area long after the outside agency has moved on.
2. **Don't neglect 'power within'**: Helping citizens build their power is a deeply personal process that often starts with boosting their self-confidence and assertiveness, especially in the case of women's activism.[45] Many women experience 'citizenship' very differently from men—even when they share racial, ethnic, age, or class identities. In the realm of formal politics, 'power within' is often a vital precursor to 'power with'; individual self-confidence lays a foundation for setting up collective organizations.
3. **Build the 'grains' of change**: Success in building citizen activism usually involves identifying and working with its constituent 'grains'—the more durable organizations within movements[46]—which are best placed to survive, adapt, and flourish in the complex and ever-changing panorama of activism and protest. These grassroots CSOs naturally adapt to shifts, grab opportunities, seek friends and allies, and frequently show remarkable courage and endurance in the face of attack. For CSO activists, this is their life, not a project or a plan.
4. **Building citizen activism takes time**: Gathering individual organizations into a social movement is painstaking work, requiring sustained investment. The timelines for the cases I examined show

[44] Duncan Green, *Promoting Active Citizenship: What Have we Learned from 10 Case Studies of Oxfam's Work?* (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/promoting-active-citizenship-what-have-we-learned-from-10-casestudies-of-oxfam–338431.

[45] Duncan Green, *The Raising Her Voice Nepal Programme*, Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-raising-her-voice-nepal-programme-338476.

[46] Duncan Green, *The Raising Her Voice Pakistan Programme*, Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-raising-her-voice-pakistan-programme–338443.

work stretching back over a decade or more, far longer than the typical aid-funding arrangement.

5. **Think about working with faith groups**: As we have seen, many people living in poverty place enormous trust in religious institutions, which are often central to the construction of norms and values, including those that promote or inhibit citizen activism.
6. **Conflict vs. cooperation**: Serious change is seldom entirely peaceful, but conflict carries huge risks for people living in poverty. In high-risk environments, the activists opted explicitly for a less aggressive approach; elsewhere, lobbying mixed with confrontation and protest proved effective.

Support from outside is becoming more and more difficult. Being seen to receive funding or support from foreign funders is increasingly being used by governments to justify the crackdown, but the money itself can also be part of the problem. A hundred years ago, during the Mexican Revolution, President Alvaro Obregón is said to have caustically observed, 'No general can withstand a cannonade of 50,000 pesos'.[47] The same appears to apply to some CSOs. Based on research in Pakistan, Masooda Bano[48] argues that aid often erodes the co-operation that underpins CSOs. When foreign money flows in, the unpaid activists that form the core of such organizations can lose trust in their leaders, whom they now suspect of pocketing aid dollars. In Bosnia, my conversations with CSOs suggest that even their supporters view them as little more than 'briefcase CSOs', only interested in winning funding.[49]

How that money and other support can be provided in a way that genuinely helps civic activism flourish is an increasing focus of attention within the aid industry, under the name of 'localization'. Northern and international institutions have long promised to transfer power to locally based organizations, but their behaviour recalls St Augustine's words on chastity:

[47] Stephen Morris, 'Corrupción y política en el México contemporáneo', Mexico, Editorial Siglo XXI, 1992.

[48] Masooda Bano, *Breakdown in Pakistan: How Aid Is Eroding Institutions for Collective Action* (California: Stanford University Press, 2012).

[49] Duncan Green, 'Strengthening active citizenship after a traumatic civil war: dilemmas and ideas in Bosnia and Herzegovina', From Poverty to Power blog, 25 June 2014, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/building-civil-society-after-a-traumatic-civil-war-dilemmas-and-ideas-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/.

'Dear Lord, make me chaste, but not yet'.[50] In the world of humanitarian response, for example, where aid agencies have long acknowledged the importance of local organizations, with their knowledge of and relationships with people and communities on the sharp end, direct funding flows to them remain a small fraction of aid financing, varying between 1.2 and 3.3 per cent of all funding over 2018–2021.[51]

There is no shortage of ideas on how to fix this, from setting binding targets to achieve a certain proportion of direct local funding, to helping CSOs raise money locally to reduce their dependence on aid, to contributing to 'pooled funds' under local management that hand out grants of the size local organizations actually need.

But it isn't happening, at least nowhere near fast enough. The obstacles are a combination of ideas, interests, and institutions. Ideas include the idea that 'they are not ready for the big money yet'—a self-fulfilling and pretty racist supposition. That is buttressed by interest: many northern and international NGOs generally equate success with being big(ger), so they fight to retain their place in the transfer of funds from donors to people on the ground. Finally, the institutional processes of the aid industry, from writing project funding proposals, to deploying the latest jargon, to labyrinthine monitoring and evaluation processes and layers of donor-imposed 'compliance requirements' to address issues such as counter-terrorism and money laundering, constitute a huge 'barrier to entry' for many small, local organizations who would otherwise be perfectly capable of doing the actual job (indeed might well do it better and more cost effectively than large international NGOs).

My conclusion from this is that genuine localization is unlikely to come easily from within the aid sector. Instead, it will require a combination of disruption from new organizations dedicated to promoting local funding, and perhaps critical junctures around shocks and scandals that disrupt the standard model. But even the Covid-19 pandemic didn't prove to be the tipping point it could have been in getting money in the hands of local partners. While local and national organizations were at the forefront

[50] Brian Morton, 'Fleshing out St Augustine', *Sunday Herald*, https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/sundayheraldreview.html.

[51] ALNAP, 'A more localised aid system: current status discourse, 2023', https://www.alnap.org/a-more-localised-aid-system-current-status-discourse-briefing.

of delivering the response, just 2 per cent of the funding went directly to them.[52]

Thinking about systems and power can help outsiders navigate these quandaries. We need to cultivate humility and solidarity and accept that while money is often (very) necessary, it almost always comes with power attached. I once asked Professor Akosua Adomako Ampofo, President of the African Studies Association of Africa, what advice she would give me as an aging white male academic in an age of decolonization. Her reply has helped on many occasions:

> I would say step to the side or to the back. Allow the people for whom this is life and death to take the lead. We all live on this planet, need each other's support. I've been supported throughout my life and career by people of different races, classes, genders. I would be lying if I said no, we can do this alone. We need support, but don't want the white man to be the centre of the stage. Support us financially, give credit where credit is due—there's power that comes with whiteness, and you have to acknowledge that.[53]

Conclusion

Active citizens are the unsung heroes of how change happens, putting the *demos* in democracy,[54] holding governments to account, making states and markets work better, and, occasionally, erupting onto our TV screens to riot or drive tyrants and thieves from power. Like the other systems discussed in this book, civil society is complex, unpredictable, and fascinating. By immersing ourselves in its highways and byways, nourishing a curiosity for its endless energy, courage, and innovation, activists will find not only inspiration but also the knowledge we need to better support progressive change.

[52] ALNAP, 'A more localised aid system: current status discourse, 2023', https://www.alnap.org/a-more-localised-aid-system-current-status-discourse-briefing.

[53] Duncan Green, 'How to decolonize academia. Interview with Prof. Akosua Adomako Ampofo', From Poverty to Power blog, 14 February 2020, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/how-to-decolonize-academia-interview-with-prof-akosua-adomako-ampofo/.

[54] The word democracy comes from the Greek 'demos' (people) and 'kratos' (power).

Further reading

M. Edwards, *Civil Society*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

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C. Tilly and L.J. Wood, *Social Movements, 1768–2008*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

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10
Digital Activism

Tom Kirk

In 1967, Buffalo Springfield released 'For What It's Worth'.[1] It quickly became one of the most famous anti-war protest songs for a generation of Americans incensed by their country's actions in Vietnam. Yet, it was inspired by a series of clashes the year before between Hollywood police and young people demonstrating against recently passed loitering laws that threatened to end the Sunset Strip's liberal night-time economy. The memorable tune opened with the lines 'There's something happening here / What it is ain't exactly clear'.

Those words were never far from my thoughts over the course of the early 2010s. I was watching huge protests unfold, on- and offline, in places and over issues that many had mistakenly written-off as stagnant, unspeakable, or oppressed. I also had a sense that by sharing content, changing my profile picture, signing emailed petitions, and debating developments with friends and acquaintances in chat groups, I was somehow part of them. This is despite being thousands of miles away, unfamiliar with the lives of the people on the ground, and with little in the way of certainty about what their overall goals or endgames were.

This period was marked by techno-optimism. It centred on the growing belief that new information and communications technologies (ICTs), specifically the internet, were eroding old bastions of power and presenting new possibilities for those trying to create change. At the forefront were giant social media platforms owned and operated by well-known companies such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook. With instantly recognizable logos and zeitgeisty mottos such as 'Don't be Evil', 'What's happening'

[1] This chapter is written by Dr Tom Kirk, who teaches a course on 'Advocacy, Campaigns and Grassroots Activism' with me at the LSE. https://www.linkedin.com/in/tom-kirk-68b99055/?originalsubdomain=uk.

(Twitter, now X), and, albeit internally, 'Move fast and break things' (Facebook, now Meta), they promised new ways of connecting, sharing information, and acting upon it.[2]

Digitally mediated activism was for many democratized activism. Through it, full-time dissidents and bedroom-bound supporters alike were able to raise awareness, create communities, organize actions, and circumnavigate slow-footed authorities' attempts to stop them. The barriers to entry were low and the payoffs high. Individuals, companies, and governments offered apologies, changed unpopular policies, and even fell, in the wake of campaigns with significant online components. Digitally signalling one's support for causes near and far became a normal practice for an entire generation. And for those who wanted to participate offline it was easier than ever to find like-minded people planning their next action.

Writing in 2023, this optimism has largely dissipated. Elites in countries that experienced waves of protests during the 2010s have been able to return to power in different guises, governments routinely shut down the internet, opponents go online to hound activists and particular identities, and it is increasingly difficult to verify the veracity of digital content or even who its real authors are. As people increasingly live their lives online, there is also growing pessimism that their digital footprints are making them easier to track and control across all facets of existence. Others argue that persistent digital divides—gaps between those with access to and the capabilities to benefit from ICTs—limit the potential of digitally mediated activism, making it a pastime of the privileged. And AI may accelerate these trends in the coming years.

This chapter will not fall into either the optimistic or pessimistic camp. Rather, it will explore what have proven (so far) to be the enduring lessons for activists. This encompasses the ways ideas and norms spread digitally, how people express themselves, form new identities and communities, and participate in campaigns, and how initiatives can combine complementary on- and offline tactics. Along the way, I will examine the tools and heuristic devices for channelling online crowds. However, I will also show that as new ICTs expand the space for activists, other forces can skill- and catch-up, finding ways to constrain, police, and persecute them once again.

[2] All since replaced during brand refreshes that have adopted far more cautious mottos.

Digital ecosystems

Budding digitally mediated activists must stay abreast of the fast-changing lay of the land. They cannot assume that their ways of working or the platforms they use have the same potential everywhere. Before unpacking why, here's a brief note on the chapter's use of the term 'digitally mediated activism'. I've chosen this rather clunky phrase to highlight two emerging characteristics.

The first is that I'm interested in change processes that use ICTs, from instant messages and shared cloud computing applications to social media posting, citizen journalism, funding drives, and 'hacktivism' (described later). All enable communication at speeds unthinkable a few decades ago and lower the costs to participating in activism. The second is that there are increasingly fewer reasons to separate activists' on- and offline tactics. Compared to previous generations, many digital natives often do not distinguish between their on- and offline selves and activities. Rather, they draw upon and blend both with ease for a range of aims. But how have we got here?

In 2000, a decade after the creation of the World Wide Web, about 50 per cent of Americans were thought to have used the internet in the last three months, accessing it through devices such as mobile phones, personal digital assistants, games machines, and televisions.[3] Elsewhere the figures remained low, with 7 per cent in the East Asia and Pacific region; 1 per cent in South Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa; and 2 per cent in the Middle East and North Africa. At the time of the dot-com crash in 2000, therefore, a tiny minority of the world was online. By the start of the Arab Springs in 2010—sometimes considered social media uprisings—recent internet usage in the Middle East and North Africa had risen to 40 per cent.

The World Bank's latest data available show that by 2021 36 per cent of sub-Saharan Africans had used the internet recently and 43 per cent of South Asians. It also points to growing differences between countries within each region. For example, in South Sudan the figure for 2020 was only 7 per cent, whilst for the DRC it was 23 per cent and for Kenya and Rwanda 26 per cent. In Afghanistan, usage

[3] 'Individuals using the internet (% of population)', *The World Bank*, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/it.net.user.zs.

increased steadily until 2018 and then slowed to rest at 18 per cent by 2020, whereas in its regional peer India it rose to 43 per cent in 2020. This is what one might expect if wealthier, urban populations have largely adopted ICTs and if the returns on the investment of building the necessary infrastructure elsewhere are currently too high.

Beyond geography and wealth, there is also increasing recognition of a digital gender divide. In 2017, research found that globally the proportion of women using the internet was 12 per cent lower than the proportion of men, and that in the least developed countries (LDCs) only one out of seven women was using the internet compared with one out of five men.[4] Organizations such as UN-Women and the International Telecommunications Union have also run campaigns highlighting how marginalized groups such as older, rural, and disabled adolescent girls and women face significantly greater barriers to connectivity. As we will see later, they also face obstacles and violence once online.

These figures capture the breathtaking spread of the internet and its emerging digital divides. Although it's tempting to think that the internet has fundamentally changed how people receive information, communicate, and access services everywhere it has touched, what people experience as 'the internet' can be vastly different across countries. In China, for example, the internet is heavily censored and in Russia the government recently attempted to disconnect itself from the World Wide Web to institute a 'sovereign internet', under state control and free from Western platforms.

It's not just about states. In 2013, Facebook announced its *Internet.org* programme.[5] The company's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, declared that he wanted to bring the internet to the 85 per cent of the world's offline population that at the time lived in areas with cell phone coverage. He even framed internet connectivity as a human right. To do this, Facebook built a mobile browser and app to enable those with low bandwidth and basic mobile phones to access a limited number of websites and online services. Facebook also promised free data to users if they signed up for a Facebook account. So popular was this scheme that by the end of 2018 it had

[4] International Telecommunication Union, 'ICT facts and figures 2017', https://www.itu.int/en/itu-d/statistics/documents/facts/ictfactsfigures2017.pdf.

[5] M. Zuckerberg, 'Is connectivity a human right?' Meta, 21 August 2013, http://newsroom.fb.com/news/2013/08/mark-zuckerberg-is-connectivity-a-human-right/.

connected 100 million people in 65 countries, including in 30 African countries.[6]

Facebook had essentially created and begun to curate its own ecosystem for new internet users in the Global South. As Savannah Wallace put it in the title of an article on this issue: 'In the developing world, Facebook is the internet'.[7] Many users had their first experiences of the internet as the suite of applications provided by *Internet.org*. At the same time, they were subject to media, adverts, and news chosen by Facebook, much of which was created with audiences in the Global North in mind. Users were also largely blocked from accessing other sites and services. In return, Facebook harvested their data and learnt more about them as potential consumers.

For some, Facebook's walled garden was a perfectly pleasant place to spend time online. For others, it constituted a limited and overly controlled solution to the digital divide. In India, campaigners got the service banned from the country in 2016 by arguing that it contravened principles of net neutrality—namely, that internet providers should treat all internet traffic equally—enshrined in national laws. They highlighted how Facebook controlled Indians' freedom to surf and, by selecting services with Western biases, it was obstructing potential local innovations. They also argued that the service's name—*Internet.org*—disingenuously presented it as a charity that offered access to the entirety of the internet, which is perhaps why it was rebranded to *Free Basics* in late 2015. Commentators have since suggested that similar ways of increasing connectivity amount to a form of 'digital colonialism'.

Although this episode led to numerous reforms, it did not stop fears over Facebook's domination of the internet in the Global South. In early 2018, activists from Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam, and other countries used #DearMark to implore Facebook to apply the same standards to content curation and moderation in their nations as elsewhere. They argued that violent hate speech was exacerbating conflicts and had led to

[6] T. Nothias, 'Access granted: Facebook's Free Basics in Africa', *Media, Culture & Society* 42 (3) (2020), pp. 329–48, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719890530.

[7] S. Wallace, 'In the developing world, Facebook is the internet', *The Startup*, 6 September 2020, https://medium.com/p/14075bfd8c5e.

the first 'social-media genocide [in Myanmar]'.[8] They accused Facebook's 'reckless push for expansion' into emerging markets of failing 'to invest in the basic contextual understanding, local language skills, and human resources needed to provide a duty-of-care for users in sometimes repressive regimes—a failure that has real world consequences including loss of life'.

Facebook's advance into the Global South should remind activists that the internet is not neutral. Power and its imbalances (and abuses) exist everywhere, including in cyberspace. In the following years, Facebook was rocked by scandals. They include Cambridge Analytica's unauthorised use of 87 million people's data to influence elections in the US and elsewhere. Then, in 2021, there was a US congressional hearing during which a former employee testified that in the pursuit of profit the company's products 'harm children, stoke division and weaken our democracy'.[9] These revelations further questioned large internet platforms' stewardships of people's online lives and the potential of the 'online public sphere'.

Such instances have led to national and transnational movements for 'digital justice', 'digital citizenship education', and 'digital human rights'. Broadly, they focus on correcting and guarding against the harms that ICTs can do to people and groups. A starting point for many is to afford people the same rights online that they enjoy offline. From there different organizations argue for or against common standards and laws for digital companies and states, and for bodies able to monitor and hold either to account when they err. Yet, many powerful interests stand to benefit from continuing to use ICTs to 'move fast and break things'.

This brief introduction to the uneven and often troublesome spread of the internet shows that the possibilities for digitally mediated activism sit within multiple wider ecosystems. Each contains actors, laws, populations, infrastructures, power inequalities, and norms that activists must be aware of when hoping to harness the power of digital tools. We now turn to the ideas that underpinned many activists' early techno-optimism.

[8] H. Kozlowska, '#DearMark letters underline that Facebook cares only about the crises it creates in wealthy countries', *Quartz*, 23 May 2018, https://qz.com/1284128/dearmark-letters-underline-that-facebook-cares-only-about-the-crises-it-creates-in-wealthy-countries.

[9] M. McCluskey, '4 Big takeaways from the Facebook whistleblower congressional hearing', *Time*, 5 October 2001, https://time.com/6104070/facebook-whistleblower-congressional-hearing-takeaways/.

New Power

In 2018, Duncan unironically used a blog post to admit that he was rethinking his 'grumpy old technophobe's' understanding of the role digital could play in activism.[10] The spark for his introspection was a book by Henry Timms and Jeremy Heimans, who between them had launched numerous digitally mediated activist initiatives and organizations, including 'Giving Tuesday', 'GetUp!', and 'Purpose'.[11] It sought to capture what exactly may be different about how power is accrued, challenged, and harnessed in the digital era. Their resulting 'New Power/Old Power' framework provides a compelling lens for exploring what excited the techno-optimists.

During widespread anti-regime protests in Iran in 2009 the US's State Department asked Twitter to cancel scheduled 'down-time' for maintenance.[12] In December 2016, a ceasefire between the Saudi-led coalition and Houthis fighting in Yemen was agreed during UN-mediated talks that followed co-ordinated on- and offline activism supported by Crisis Action.[13] In the 45 days following actress Alyssa Milano's use of #MeToo in a Twitter post in 2017, the hashtag had been used over 85 million times, across 85 countries.[14] Furthermore, in 2018, India scrapped a 2 per cent tax on feminine hygiene products following the #LahuKaLagaan (tax on blood) campaign led by NGO She Says.[15]

For Timms and Heimans these episodes constituted instances of 'New Power' taking on 'Old Power'. They posit that these contests occur in an era within which:

[10] D. Green, 'Book review: New Power: How It's Changing the 21st Century and Why You Need To Know', From Poverty to Power blog, 20 December 2018, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/book-review-new-power-how-its-changing-the-21st-century-and-why-you-need-to-know/.

[11] H. Timms and J. Heimans, *New Power: How Power Works in Our Hyperconnected World—And How to Make It Work for You* (New York: Doubleday, 2018).

[12] S. Pleming, 'U.S. State Department speaks to Twitter over Iran', *Reuters*, 16 June 2009, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-election-twitter-usa-iduswbt01137420090616.

[13] Crisis Action, *Creative Coalitions: A Handbook for Change*, https://crisisaction.org/handbook/working-behind-the-scenes-saudi-raids-yemen/.

[14] N. Sayei, 'Alyssa Milano on the #MeToo movement: "We're not going to stand for it any more"', *The Guardian*, 1 December 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/dec/01/alyssa-milano-mee-too-sexual-harassment-abuse.

[15] S. Downes, 'Why India has scrapped its tax on women's sanitary products', *Emirates Women*, 22 July 2018, https://emirateswoman.com/why-india-has-scrapped-its-tax-on-womens-sanitary-products/.

> Old Power works like a currency. It is held by a few. It is closed, inaccessible and leader-driven. It downloads and it captures … [whilst] … New Power operates differently, like a current. It is made by many. It uploads, and it distributes. The goal with new power is not to hoard it, but to channel it.

Under their framework, New Power initiatives, organizations, and movements differ from Old Power along two key axes: the models they use to accrue and spend power; and the values they adhere to. New Power models are fundamentally peer-driven, based on participation and supercharged by ICTs. Old Power models are based on consumption, unequal exchanges, and, for the most part, tangible resources and services. New Power's champions value collaboration, information sharing, radical transparency, open-source or maker-culture ethics, short-term opt-in participation, and informal networked governance. In comparison, Old Power's guardians prize exclusivity, professionalism, long-term loyalties, and representative governance.

Timms and Heimans provide examples of well-known companies, movements, and political organizations that subscribe to different ways of acting—New Power (Occupy, Wikipedia) and Old Power (Apple, Barack Obama once in office). They also highlight those that combine elements of each camp's model and values (Facebook, Patagonia, Donald Trump's election campaign). To show why this framework has something important to say about digitally mediated activism, it's worth exploring its application to several well-known episodes.

Following George Zimmerman's acquittal in Miami, Florida in 2013 for the fatal shooting of black teenager Trayvon Martin, Alicia Garza wrote on Facebook that 'Our Lives Matter, Black Lives Matter'. Alicia's powerful message was shared by her friend Patrisse Cullors in the form of a Twitter hashtag (#BLM), whilst another friend, Opal Tometi, designed the blacklivesmatter.com website and the movement's signature colour palette. All three were already civil rights activists. They had long sought to raise awareness of how deaths at the hands of the police disproportionately affect Americans of colour.[16] Yet, these actions kick-started a sea change in narratives around police brutality. On Twitter alone the hashtag was used over

[16] GBD 2019 Police Violence US Subnational Collaborators, 'Fatal police violence by race and state in the USA, 1980–2019: a network meta-regression', *The Lancet* 398 (10307) (2021), pp. 1239–55.

40 million times by the end of May 2015.[17] It was also adopted by activists in other countries to highlight their own struggles with state violence.

But #BLM has more characteristics of a New Power movement than its hashtag. From the very beginning, the founding trio were careful not to make themselves the movement's face. Instead, they embraced a decentralized, peer-driven, and leader-full (as opposed to leaderless) structure. For some, this was necessary due to the prospect that any figurehead would be violently silenced. For others, it also enabled #BLM to encompass a broad range of issues and identities that a small leadership may have shunned, such as those of queer, disabled, and undocumented people. This inclusivity was coupled with a low-cost, opt-in participatory model. It allows membership for those that simply retweet a post all the way up to marching, fundraising, and engaging authorities. It also encourages locally organized chapters and bottom-up policy-making by loose groups of activists that is tailored to discrete issues and contexts.

#BLM's New Power model proved to be adept at providing counternarratives in the aftermath of Mike Brown's shooting in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. Activists set about challenging the mainstream media's depictions of black youths and civil rights protesters as somehow at fault. Their most potent tactics included using the hashtag #HandsUpDontShoot alongside images of youth engaged in quotidian activities, such as walking to school or band practice, often with their hands raised, mimicking the reported words and actions of Brown just before his death. Activists also juxtaposed images of peaceful protestors with the heavily militarized police responses in Ferguson and elsewhere. When it was released, #BLM seized the opportunity by widely disseminating a Justice Department report that found local police were incentivized to fine the population to raise funding. This had led to more than 60 per cent of Ferguson residents having arrest warrants in their name and, ultimately, the context that enabled Brown's killing.[18] Similar tactics were used in response to the violent deaths of Javier Ambler, Manuel Ellis, Elijah McClain, and George Floyd.

[17] D. Freelon, C.D. McIlwain, and M.D. Clarke, *Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice* (Washington, DC: Center for Media & Social Impact, 2016), http://archive.cmsimpact.org/sites/default/files/beyond_the_hashtags_2016.pdf.

[18] C. Friedersdorf, 'Ferguson's conspiracy against black citizens', *The Atlantic*, 5 March 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2015/03/ferguson-as-a-criminal-conspiracy-against-its-black-residents-michael-brown-department-of-justice-report/386887/.

Research in 2020 has since found that about 50 per cent of American adults think police violence against the public is a 'very' or 'extremely' serious problem, compared to 30 per cent five years earlier.[19] Furthermore, roughly 66 per cent of Americans said that the justice system treats violent police officers too leniently, up from around 40 per cent in 2015. Although not solely attributable to #BLM, these changes in attitude created an enabling environment for bans on chokeholds, body cameras on police, and improved data collection efforts to enable the identification of racial biases.

The ability of ICTs to amplify marginalized groups' voices and counternarratives has been documented across numerous campaigns and movements.[20] But in the most successful cases a lot more is going on than meets the eye. Research on those who shared their stories of sexual harassment and abuse in reply to Milano's appeal to other survivors to retweet the hashtag #MeToo in the wake of revelations about Harvey Weinstein is illustrative.[21] It shows how the call overturned long-held social norms that required the abused to remain silent and legitimized the public retelling of how perpetrators (mainly men) exercise and maintain power. It also reduced the very real risks of speaking up, especially as disclosures could be made anonymously.

At the same time, the act of sharing harrowing experiences online created communities of survivors that offered one another support and encouraged further actions to hold abusers to account offline. Such acts can rapidly build 'power within' and 'power with', as participants find they are not alone and gain a measure of safety as part of a wider movement. As Zizi Papacharissi put it in relation to the Arab Springs and Occupy movement, ICTs 'allow crowds to be rendered into publics; networked publics that want to tell their story collaboratively and on their own terms'.[22] But the ripple effects of networked publics are not confined to the online realm.

[19] K. Stafford and H. Fingergut, 'AP-NORC poll: sweeping change in US views of police violence', *Associated Press*, 18 June 2020, https://apnews.com/article/us-news-ap-top-news-racial-injustice-politics-police-728b414b8742129329081f7092179d1f.

[20] Jeffrey Layne Blevins and James Jaehoon Lee, *Social Media, Social Justice and the Political Economy of Online Networks* (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati Press, 2022).

[21] M. Gorissen, C.J.W. van den Berg, C.C.J.H. Bijleveld, S. Ruiter, and T. Berenblum, 'Online disclosure of sexual victimization: a systematic review', *Trauma Violence Abuse* 24 (2) (2021), pp. 828–43.

[22] Z. Papacharissi, 'Affective publics and structures of storytelling: sentiment, events and mediality', *Information, Communication & Society* 19 (2015), pp. 307–24.

Some six months after Milano's call, *Time*, the *New York Times*, and *NBC* all featured lists of alleged abusers, and in major industries new safeguarding measures have since been put in place.

Connective action

How can changemakers turn crowds into connected publics? Timms and Heimans suggest that 'ACE' tactics are part of the answer. These are online calls that are:

- **Actionable**: designed to make people do something beyond merely admiring, remembering, and consuming a message.
- **Connected**: encourage peer sharing and the feeling of participation in a community.
- **Extensible**: easily customized, remixed, and shaped to people's own lived experiences and contexts, whilst retaining a common foundation.

ACE tactics can be as simple as allowing activists to show solidarity by adopting and changing a hashtag, logo, or stunt to better fit their culture or aims. The 'Ice Bucket Challenge' asked participants to pour cold water over their heads on camera and raised over $220 million worldwide for charities working on motor neurone disease. It was adapted by Latha Kalanidhi, a thirty-eight-year-old journalist based in Hyderabad, India, to become the 'Rice Bucket Challenge'—perfectly fitting into his country's context.

As #MeToo showed, ACE tactics can go further, encouraging members of marginalized or oppressed groups to create emotional online content such as blogs and vlogs that personally describe an issue. They can also ask potential activists to engage in citizen journalism that shines light on places and issues underreported in the mainstream media. Examples abound, from activists documenting the state of public services and creating infographics from available data or social audits, to women filming their daily commute to highlight the prevalence of sexual harassment, to the creation of documentaries exposing climate injustices or government cover-ups in the wake of scandals. Such tactics can be replicated and customized by those with basic ICT skills. Indeed, rarely does a news week pass without a #hashtag campaign reaching the headlines due to content created by its participants.

The logic of these forms of 'connective action' (a play on collective action) lies in participants having opportunities to express themselves and to share their experiences and hopes with others at massive scales.[23] Some see this as intimately connected to the rise of individualism and carefully curated online identities, declining rates of memberships in political parties and organizations, and a growing scepticism of mainstream ideologies and institutions.

Research has also pointed to the importance of the support and participation of 'connected connectors'—whether they be well-known activists and political leaders, online influencers, or traditional celebrities.[24] They can legitimize discourses and rapidly spread content beyond people's regular peer groups or networks, escaping the online echo chambers created by digital platforms' algorithms and ideological divides. The point, however, is that contemporary activists want to participate in low-cost ways that centre themselves and their diversity. Channelling that energy is the challenge.

Attempts to do this have been at the heart of digitally mediated activism from its beginnings. In the Global North most have been asked to share their details with, or forward a pre-written email by, a digital advocacy organization. This tactic is akin to when offline activists flood politicians' post-boxes with thousands of variations on the same, often angry, letter. Nina Hall has studied the digital advocacy organizations that have mastered these ways of directing online crowds such as Avaaz (international), Move On (US), Campact (Germany), 38 Degrees (UK), and Amandla.mobi (South Africa). She argues they have changed transnational activism in two fundamental ways.[25]

First, compared to traditional NGOs and international NGOs that claim authority based on their expertise on one or a few issues, digital advocacy organizations are adept at campaigning and mobilizing across multiple issues. Yet, they often have little in-house expertise on them and hop between issues rapidly. This flexibility allows for quick responses to emerging crises or to wherever the crowds' attention is turning. It

[23] W.L. Bennett and A. Segerberg, 'The logic of connective action', *Information, Communication & Society* 15 (5) (2012), pp. 739–68.

[24] D. Abul-Fottouh, 'Brokerage roles and strategic positions in Twitter networks of the 2011 Egyptian revolution', *Policy & Internet* 20 (2) (2018), pp. 218–40. L. Chen and C.M. Liebler, '#MeToo on Twitter: the migration of celebrity capital and social capital in online celebrity advocacy', *New Media & Society*, (2022).

[25] N. Hall, *Transnational Advocacy in the Digital Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

also means these organizations are often member-driven rather than agenda-setting.

Second, they overwhelmingly target their campaigns towards citizens of particular countries, with the goal of politicizing issues to influence governments in democracies. On 3 September 2015, 38 Degrees mobilized 137,000 members of the British public to sign an online petition and send 78,000 emails to politicians concerned by the country's stance on welcoming refugees. Four days later the Prime Minister announced a scheme to take in 20,000 Syrians over the next four to five years.

Due to these approaches, these organizations have been critiqued for not tackling harder global collective action problems and for ignoring minority issues with few existing constituents. Some worry about how quickly they pivot from issue to issue, effectively dropping those that fail to go viral. Some also perceive them as digital mercenaries or digital rent-a-mobs. Participation in their campaigns has even disparagingly been described as 'clicktivism'—more about easy endorphin releases than serious commitments that lead to tangible changes.

The ways in which digitally mediated activism harnesses crowds have become far more sophisticated in recent years. An ingenious recent effort saw Francesca Lawson and her partner Ali Fensome create a bot that replied to brands' gushing tweets welcoming International Women's Day 2022 with information on their gender pay gaps. With over 237,000 followers, the bot's takedown of companies' PR attempts at framing themselves as champions of equality often went viral. Other initiatives ask online crowds to participate by directly challenging powerholders. Stop Funding Hate's followers retweet the organization's calls for well-known companies to stop buying advertising space in newspapers that it views as spreading divisive politics and hate speech. In the UK, Specsavers, the Body Shop, and PlusNet all agreed. Virgin even stopped selling the targeted newspapers on its trains.

Some crowd chasing initiatives create sophisticated websites and games to ensure their messages will be shared. The ethical supply chain focused organization FRDM created a website in 2011 which asked users to input information on their spending habits. In return, it told them about their 'slavery footprint'.[26] The results were then shared with their digital networks.

[26] https://slaveryfootprint.org/#.

Requiring even more energy from participants, Amnesty International and Airwars partnered on an investigation into the 2017 US bombing of Raqqa, Syria. The initiative involved contributions from over 138,000 volunteer analysts of 2 million satellite images, working in 124 countries.[27] Their labour was combined with additional qualitative and quantitative data to verify the deaths of 641 victims and to counter the responsible countries' versions of events.

There are also increasing examples of 'hacktivism'—the use of ICTs to raise awareness of an issue or to engage in forms of civil disobedience. These often entail individual or small groups of tech-savvy activists hacking websites or services to steal sensitive data, deface, or shut them down. Among them, LulzSec, Anonymous, WikiLeaks, the Lizard Squad, and Antisec have earned notoriety in the media. WikiLeaks famously obtained sensitive military and diplomatic data from the US government that exposed its intentions and abuses in several countries. LulzSec targeted the websites of *The Times* and *The Sun* to spread fake stories that their owner, Rupert Murdoch, had died, when he was arguably at the height of his power.

Distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks in which hacktivists try to overwhelm a website or digital platform have been popular since the late 1990s. Sometimes the denial is achieved by software that hijacks others' computers and sometimes by crowds willingly mobilized to flood the target themselves. This was demonstrated by a series of attacks on sponsors organized by Anonymous Brazil to protest the money spent on hosting the 2014 football World Cup despite ongoing poverty. Some with hacker skills have even put them to use during conflicts, such as at the beginning of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine when hackers from TeamOneFist damaged a natural gas power plant and caused a blackout at the airport in Khanty-Mansiysk, Russia.

Budding digital activists should not conclude that they need similar skills. Author and activist Nanjala Nyabola explores this idea in Kenya, sometimes called the 'Silicon Savannah' due to its connectivity and successful FinTech initiatives.[28] She shows how digital influencers and movements such as #KOT (Kenyans of Twitter) have challenged popular, state, and foreign narratives. They include the public shaming and violence directed

[27] Amnesty International, 'War in Raqqa: rhetoric versus reality', https://raqqa.amnesty.org/.

[28] N. Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Kenya* (London: Zed Books, 2018).

towards women accused of dressing indecently, and citizens who documented irregularities at polling stations, causing 2017's elections to be annulled.

Nyabola argues that many digital tactics bear a close resemblance to Kenyan traditions. The spread of fake news is just an online version of the false rumours long spread by politicians during election campaigns; crowd funding mimics the *Harambee* tradition of communities caring for vulnerable people with upcoming big expenses such as school fees or funeral costs; and tweeting direct appeals at leaders is an updated version of the practice of *Naomba serekali* ('I request the government'). This does not limit the potential of digitally mediated activism, but Nyabola concludes that digital divides confine much of it to Kenya's middle classes.

Old Power's response

Despite such activity, the charge of 'slacktivism' remains a critique of digitally mediated activism. Champions of the term often side with the author Malcolm Gladwell, who poured cold water on techno-optimists in a 2010 article entitled 'Small change: why the revolution will not be retweeted'.[29] Using American sociologist Mark Granovetter's idea of weak and strong ties, Gladwell argued that social media platforms tend to build the former. Weak ties are great at supporting horizontal networks that are able to move information at speed. This enables them to efficiently solve problems that do not ask a lot from people, such as finding a lost mobile phone, signing an online petition, or even identifying an organ donor.

In contrast, weak ties are not so great at getting activists to commit to laborious and risky actions such as organizing the types of civil disobedience campaigns seen during the US civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. This, Galdwell suggests, takes repeated in-person meetings and ever more adventurous actions that create enduring relationships. Furthermore, due to their non-hierarchical structures, movements built on weak ties flounder when quick tactical decisions, discipline, or negotiations are called for.

[29] M. Gladwell, 'Small change: why the revolution will not be retweeted', *The New Yorker*, 27 September 2010, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell.

Since Gladwell's article, a host of research has emerged to counter the first critique. It shows that one of the primary strengths of digitally mediated activism is its ability to solve complex problems activists routinely face. Sociologist Zeynep Tufekci provides the example of how Ahmed Abulhassan, a twenty-two-year-old pharmacology student, and three women all in their early twenties were able to organize the provision of medical supplies to protesters battling security forces in Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011.[30] They used Twitter and cloud-based spreadsheets to ensure ten field hospitals got the right supplies at the right time, allowing medical personnel to keep on tending to the injured. They also managed to raise over $40,000 for two anaesthesia devices in under five hours. Remarkably, Ahmed was a thousand miles away in a Gulf state and only one of the women was in Cairo.

Similarly, 'Freedom Rides', named after the painstakingly planned bus protests in the American South during the civil rights movement, were organized by #BLM activists to get protesters to Ferguson in 2014. Only this time, money was raised and seats digitally allocated in a fraction of the time it took in the past.

For Tufekci and others, digital platforms enable a form of 'adhocracy' in which skilled groups can quickly form to solve organizational problems without strict hierarchies. Some even argue that these processes lead to strong ties as digital activists brainstorm and work long hours together, or when they eventually meet offline to engage in actions and face down violent authorities. Lifelong bonds have formed from such instances, with it not being uncommon for online activists to be willing to take huge risks to be heard, spread messages, and show up offline when only a physical presence will do. For Hall, the debate over slacktivism also 'misses the point' that most advocacy is not solely conducted on- or offline.[31] Separating out the two overlooks the ways in which they intimately support each other.

Tufecki is less confident about rebutting Gladwell's second criticism. She argues that digitally mediated movements often 'tactically freeze'—in response to opponents' countermeasures or demands for talks. This is because their openness to mass participation and eschewing of hierarchy means that those who take on leadership positions are easy targets

[30] T. Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).

[31] N. Hall, *Transnational Advocacy in the Digital Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

for others who accuse them of personally gaining from or selling out the movement.

Such weaknesses have long plagued activists that prize deliberations and consensus, with opponents able to watch as they eat themselves or fizzle out. Digital tools that allow for mass participation and self-expression appear to add to them. Of course, examples of digitally mediated movements that have formalized into political parties, such as Spain's Podemos, or had their issues mainstreamed by others, such as the UK's Brexit campaign, exist. It is perhaps, therefore, too early to know whether these flaws are teething problems or inherent to movements that rely on digital tools.

In recent years, the states that have been the target of digitally mediated activism have found ways of fighting back.[32] For instance, Russia's use of digital army brigades, bot farms, and pro-Kremlin trolls is now well documented. They have played a role in the invasion of Ukraine, spreading counternarratives and mis- and disinformation to win allies across the globe, and attacking dissenters online. Complicit companies provide them with training and malware and spybots that enable them to conduct online surveillance of activists and to obstruct their activities. At the same time, less sophisticated fake news and trolling campaigns are increasingly being used as weapons in the digital arsenal of movements, from the alt-Right and conspiracy-theory-believing Left to 'anti-vaxxers' and cults.

More worryingly still, some states use these tactics to silence individuals. In Iran, the women's rights activist Masih Alinejad has persistently been abused by suspected state-sponsored trolls since she started posting pictures of Iranian women without headscarves on Facebook in 2014. This culminated in two gunmen with links to the Iranian state being arrested outside her American home in 2022.

Where all these measures fail to quell dissent, some states choose to shut down the internet entirely or create their own gated versions that they can control. For example, China's 'Great Firewall' keeps foreign content out and it reportedly spends $6.6 billion a year monitoring what goes on inside.[33] This has led civil society organizations to invest in software that enables them to operate safely and, sometimes, unseen online. Here, valuable roles

[32] C. Ogden and O. Hagen (eds), *Digital Repression: Causes, Consequences and Policy Responses*, Global Policy (Durham: Durham University, 2023), https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/projects/gp-e-books/digital-repression.

[33] D. Acemoglu and S. Johnson, *Power and Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity* (London: Basic Books UK, 2023).

are being played by organizations such as CIVICUS and hacker groups that support activists to use the latest technologies and techniques and to raise their voices for their online rights.

AI may be the final nail in the coffin of the techno-optimists. In their latest book, economist Daron Acemoglu and former IMF chief Simon Johnson describe it as 'the mother of inappropriate technologies'.[34] They worry that AI will increase malign actors' abilities to mass produce mis- and disinformation and to conduct digital surveillance. In addition, when fed our online data, AI often adopts many of the biases of wider society, leading to racist, sexist, and generally offensive digital tools. There is now also the prospect of AI-powered chatbots being specifically trained to drive activists out of online spaces, faster and more insidiously than any troll or digital brigade.[35]

But there is an alternative. For many commentators and activists the answer is regulation. They join tech-chiefs who have called for the pace of AI development to be slowed and states to co-operate over frameworks, laws, and accountability mechanisms. For others, AI could be used to police safe online public spheres, create new digital tools for activists, and spot fake news. It could also play a powerful role discerning what messages work with which audiences, rapidly testing out iterations of ACE tactics or creating sensitive content on difficult-to-discuss issues. Such unprofitable applications will likely require state financing, although open-source tech communities may play leading roles.

Going digital

Digitally mediated activism is a long way from the message simplicity and discipline traditionally called for by analogue activists. It is also far from the slow, patient ways past generations engaged in ever more time-consuming and, sometimes, risky actions to cultivate group identities and loyalties. Instead, emphasis is placed on providing low-cost opportunities to participate in and adapt tactics. It is also very difficult to predict which of these will work and have traction when, especially across different identity groups

[34] D. Acemoglu and S. Johnson, *Power and Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity* (London: Basic Books UK, 2023).

[35] M. Murphy, 'The dawn of A.I. mischief models', *Slate*, 3 August 2022, https://slate.com/technology/2022/08/4chan-ai-open-source-trolling.html.

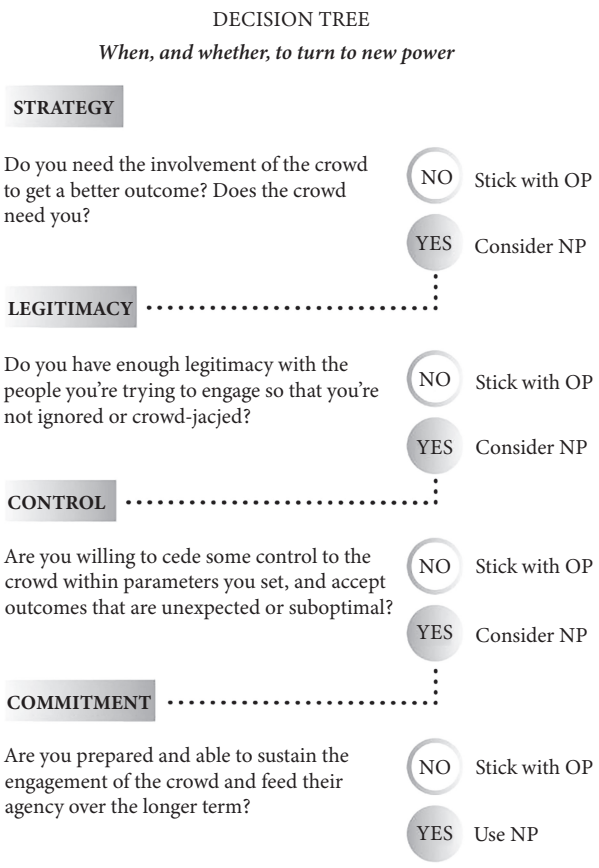

Figure 10.1 New Power Decision Tree

Source: Henry Timms and Jeremy Heimans, *New Power: How it's Changing the 21st Century and Why You Need to Know* (Pan Macmillan, 2018), pp. 144–5. Permission granted by authors.

and cultures. In these ways, crowd channelling is more akin to the trial-and-error approach advocated by some systems thinkers. And its reliance on the energy and innovation of participants echoes calls in the wider third sector for decision-making power to be pushed down or democratized. So who should do this and when?

Timms and Heimans provide a decision tree (see Figure 10.1) for those considering digitally mediated activism. It begins with asking whether your

strategy needs a crowd in the first place. A robust contextual and power analysis will help you to decide this. However, this step must account for the digital ecosystem in which your digital tactics may be applied. After all, tactics that rely on content created by crowds are going to have little traction in places where the internet is effectively gated, digital divides mean participation is confined to an elite, or the risks of online activity are great.

The next two questions concern legitimacy and control. These are connected, as ACE tactics' chances of gaining traction and not being subverted require activists to deeply understand themselves and their potential crowd. The history of corporate attempts to create and harness online crowds is littered with, often excruciating, failures. 'Walkers Wave' and Pepsi's Kendall Jenner 'protest' advert are particularly notable.[36] Activists also often face backlash and abuse from their opponents, some of whom will pervert their messages, such as the US's #BlueLivesMatter movement's response to #BLM. Such responses can often be waited out, but the toll can be heavy on those under attack, particularly for groups that are already marginalized or oppressed offline.

Lastly, the issue of commitment speaks to the flaws highlighted by Gladwell and Tufecki. If digitally mediated activism is to have long-lasting impact and be taken seriously by its increasingly digitally savvy opponents, crowds may have to adopt some of the markers of what Timms and Heimans call Old Power. They need mechanisms to allow them to make quick tactical decisions when critical junctures, for ill or opportunity, arise. And they need forms of representative leadership able to drive forward strategies when obstacles arise or power holders agree to negotiate. Here, digital deliberation and decision-making tools such as decidem, vTaiwan, and SmartParticipation may point the way.

These considerations should not wash away the techno-optimism of earlier decades. They imply that cool heads with good understandings of the systems they operate in and seek to change are needed. This is when ICTs can be used in building and challenging different forms of power. After all, they are constantly evolving and likely to shape on- and offline activism for the foreseeable future. There is still 'something happening here', and today's activists should pay close attention to its twists and turns. For those that do,

[36] C. Bell, 'Walkers Crisps Gary Lineker campaign suffers Twitter sabotage', *BBC News*, 25 May 2017, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40047816 and M.M. Kirchner, 'Pepsi's Kendall Jenner ad sparks mass mobilization of mean, funny tweets', *Intelligencer*, 5 April 2017, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/04/kendall-jenner-bad-pepsi-ad-sparks-twitter-memes.html.

digitally mediated activism adds to the suite of tools in their changemakers' boxes.

Further reading

H. Timms and J. Heimans, *New Power: How it's Changing the 21st Century and Why you need to Know* (Pan Macmillan, 2018).

N. Hall, *Transnational Advocacy in the Digital Era: Think Global, Act Local* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

N. Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya* (London: Zed Books, 2018).

Z. Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

11
Leaders and Leadership

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.
>
> **Karl Marx**[1]

Joseph Sungi MP is known throughout Papua New Guinea's remote Nuku district simply as 'the Member'. He is a Big Man in every sense, oozing authority and confidence, his bull neck and large frame squeezed into a dapper pin-striped suit. Joe is a man on a mission, and that mission is roads. Using the discretionary funds at every MP's disposal, he plans to build all-weather roads to every one of Nuku's eighty-four wards by the next election in 2017.

> When we went home for Christmas we had to walk the last seven kilometres to get to our villages. Our kids don't want to go back home any more. In my village I said, this is the last time I walk here—next time I'll be in a car. So I made sure the road was built, to show I am a man of my word. Then the people are convinced.[2]

Travelling with Joe's team in Nuku, I saw plenty of evidence that his obsession is bearing fruit. The district has bought thirteen shiny yellow pieces of earth-moving equipment and hired a civil engineer; work is under way.

[1] Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', Essay (New York: Die Revolution, 1852).
[2] Author interview, Port Moresby, November 2014.

Joe has tapped a nerve. Everyone I spoke with, from government officials to church and women's groups at ward level, is enthusiastic: roads allow farmers to get their cocoa to market, reduce the costs of resupplying schools and clinics, and help retain teachers and nurses reluctant to work in isolated locations. Of course, roads are no panacea. Women and church leaders worry about negative influences, such as drugs and disobedience, which they blame on the improved links. Women farmers say they can now get their crops to Nuku's main town, but find no buyers and end up bringing them home again.

Joe's other priority is even more ground breaking. He has handed a large wad of local funding directly over to the wards, US$10,000 each, to spend as they please. In Papua New Guinea this is revolutionary—the Big Man is handing over money *even to villages that didn't vote for him*. More traditional spending patterns are on display in the yard of the district administrator's office, where four Land Cruisers are parked, the first instalment of some twenty vehicles the previous MP allegedly handed out to his cronies, which are now being confiscated.

Like a giant magnet surrounded by iron filings, Joe's leadership seems to have built a sense of optimism and common purpose. At every level of society, from the village committee and women's savings group to great nation builders, leaders reinforce group identity and cohesion and mobilize collective effort towards shared goals. Successful leaders know how to inspire and motivate, and they intuitively understand that to turn a vision and a mobilized following into a transformational force they, as leaders, must retain that difficult-to-define quality known as legitimacy.[3]

Leadership comes in many styles. Some leaders oppress, others empower. Some are driven by greed, others by a passion for social justice. When I talk to leaders, especially the more charismatic variety, I am always torn between fascination and suspicion that their fine words are just camouflage for corruption, arrogance, or deceit. This chapter looks at the progressive leaders, who are to be found at all levels of society and in all countries.

The shelves of airport bookshops groan under the weight of homages to corporate titans, promising to distil the secrets of leadership and success for the rest of us. And the subject fascinated great thinkers of the more

[3] Robert Rotberg, *Transformative Political Leadership: Making a Difference in the Developing World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 19.

distant past, who analysed the use of violence, the role of luck, and whether it is better to be loved or feared.[4] Plato and Machiavelli lined up behind political expertise and the concentration of power; Aristotle, Cicero, and Montesquieu argued for constitutional limits on leaders' power. Beyond the Western bubble, few thinkers placed such unreserved confidence in leadership as Confucius, who saw it as the originating and sustaining force behind good politics: 'Let there be the proper men and their good political order will flourish; but without such men, their political order decays and ceases.'[5]

Activists and academics, however, tend to downplay the role of leaders and leadership in driving change. Development studies as a discipline has little to say about the Big Man in the presidential palace, and even less about leadership from below—that which emerges in citizens' movements, voluntary associations, trade unions, faith organizations, and indeed in every walk of life.

Ideological bias may lie behind the academy's neglect of leadership. Marxists (and, more generally, positivists and structuralists) think in terms of masses and institutions, rather than individuals. Socialist historians like E.P. Thompson proposed a 'history from below',[6] in which leaders who strut the stage, claiming to be making history, are in reality mere flotsam on a sea of political, technological, economic, and social change that makes or destroys them.

At the other extreme are rational choice thinkers such as Gary Becker, who see society and the economy as a set of 'utility-maximizing individuals' with little need for leaders (or followers). Progressives uncomfortable with the elitism of a Big Man theory of human history that excludes all women and most male followers fall somewhere in between. Aid technocrats avoid discussions of leadership, because it rapidly gets political and clouds the seductive purity of 'evidence-based policy-making' and 'technical assistance'.

[4] Nannerl Keohane, 'Western political thought', in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership*, edited by R.A.W. Rhodes and Paul Hart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 25–40.

[5] Confucius, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *Circa* 500 BCE, quoted in Joseph Chan and Elton Chan, 'Confucianism and political leadership', in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership*, edited by R.A.W. Rhodes and Paul Hart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 57–71.

[6] Richard Taylor and Roger Fieldhouse, 'Our history is under attack', *The Guardian*, 31 December 2013, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/31/history-under-attackep-thompson.

That seems like a serious oversight. Over the years, I've been lucky enough to spend time with hundreds of leaders in dozens of countries, from ministers and senior officials to grassroots activists who galvanize their communities to work for the common good and take great risks holding corrupt officials or companies to account. Most recently, I have run a course on influencing skills for senior leaders in the UN, international NGOs, and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement—a fantastic opportunity to hear them swap notes on everything from leading ramshackle coalitions of aid organizations to single-handedly persuading governments and armed groups to do the right thing.[7]

Along the way, I have come to believe that leadership is central to any understanding of how change happens. Leaders operate at the interface between structure and agency, striving to leave their mark on the institutions, cultures, and traditions in which they live and work. Activists need to understand where leadership comes from and how we can best identify, support, work with, or become progressive leaders.

This is not just about politicians. Anyone who has worked in organizations (i.e. most of us) will have seen the critical role of leadership (or lack of it). Leadership styles vary—I have worked under 'bull-in-a-china-shop' bosses trying to impose their will on reluctant organizations, charismatic visionaries who inspire and motivate but leave the detail to others, and subtle backseat drivers who drip ideas steadily into the corporate bloodstream without ever taking credit. They may not be great managers (lots of them need a 'finisher' as their number two), but good leaders align the iron filings, just like Joe Sungi did, replacing the natural tendency of organizations to fragment into competing groups with a shared purpose and passion and building up alliances and coalitions for change.

Acknowledging the centrality of power and systems poses some important challenges for leadership. The bull-in-a-china-shop school are usually more comfortable with command and control, than with emergent change and empowering mavericks. But both charismatic visionaries and backseat drivers can create the space needed for their organizations to 'dance with systems'. If leadership is identifying the 'what', management is about establishing the 'how'—we look at the challenges of a power and systems perspective for the management of activist organizations in Chapter 12.

[7] Global Executive Leadership Initiative, Influencing for Senior Leaders: Analysis, Strategy, and Practice, https://www.geli.org/programmes/regional-training-programme/influencing-senior-leaders-analysis-strategy-and-practice.

Understanding leadership at the top

Joe Sungi is no revolutionary. He is a 'transactional leader' trying to make the system work for his constituents, and in Papua New Guinea that is an uphill task. When I first met him in 2014, more than a decade of continuous high growth had raised per capita GDP by 150 per cent, yet Papua New Guinea did not achieve a single one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); in terms of turning growth into development, Papua New Guinea is a strong candidate for the world's worst underachiever. At the heart of that failure stands politics: most of Papua New Guinea's Big Men are more concerned with strengthening their own power and fortune than with building roads or other essential public goods.

I met Joe again in 2022, by which time he had risen to become Minister for Public Service. He explained that transactions are not just about deals between Big Men, but permeate all of Papua New Guinea politics—a classic 'clientilist' system. 'The biggest hindrance to MPs doing things right is the expectations of the people. We're smiling on the grandstand, but inside we know that after five years they'll want cash or they won't vote for you.'[8]

Some leaders have managed to be more transformational than transactional. Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Gandhi in India, Martin Luther King in the US, and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania all emerged at critical junctures in history—moments of abrupt change, crisis, or external threat—and they seized the opportunity to alter the balance of power in their societies. When structural constraints to action are weakened, great leaders can help remake societies, rather than simply make them work a bit better.

Even in the absence of crisis, leaders in developing countries often have more potential to transform society. Where institutions are relatively weak, force of will and personality can help build national culture, laws, and political institutions, including the checks and balances on the power of future leaders.

Perhaps that is why early leaders like Bismarck, Washington, Lee Kuan Yew, Ataturk, and Mandela often achieve mythic status as the founders of the nation. Even the best of those that follow are hemmed in by compromises, institutions, and rules and, through no fault of their own, may look like puny pen-pushers by comparison.

[8] Author interview, Port Moresby, November 2022.

But that relative absence of constraints also increases the potential for damage. Some leaders enter power with the best of intentions, but cling on long after their sell-by date. In 2015 when Barack Obama told the African Union that 'Nobody should be president for life',[9] the public gallery reportedly erupted in cheers, while the front rows maintained a stony silence. At the time, nine African leaders (and one monarch) had ruled for more than twenty years. (And yes, NGOs can suffer from the same syndrome.)

If strong institutions are an indicator of development, then the success of a leader can be measured by the institutional legacy they leave. Effective leaders breathe life into institutions; ineffective leaders destroy or stifle them. I began writing this chapter in 2015, the week a truly transformative political leader died, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew. The obituary pages were filled with praise for his achievements (albeit laced with criticism for his record on human rights). *The Economist* glowed: 'A tribute to Mr Lee's nation-building was the absence of any flicker from the stock market on news of his death … [T]hanks largely to Mr Lee, Singapore's institutions are strong, its governance honest, effective—and dull.'[10]

An article in the same edition entitled 'King Paul'[11] presented a contrasting portrait of one of Africa's most celebrated contemporary leaders, Paul Kagame, the Rwandan president: 'In history's judgment, leaders are only as good as the successors they groom. Mr Kagame has sacked or chased away just about everyone around him who could take over. Some have fled the country and a few have died in mysterious circumstances; others went to prison.'

What makes a leader?

There are many pathways to leadership, and those pathways form some noticeable patterns. One explanation for the differences between Lee and Kagame may lie in how they came to power. Kagame, as a former rebel commander, introduced the top-down disciplines of military authority,

[9] 'Obama to African Leaders: "Nobody should be president for life"', *BBC News*, 28 July 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-33691468.

[10] 'After the patriarch: Singapore after Lee Kuan Yew', *The Economist*, 28 March 2015, https://www.economist.com/asia/2015/03/28/after-the-patriarch.

[11] 'King Paul: a successful man with no successor', *The Economist*, 28 March 2015, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/03/28/king-paul.

along with its rejection of dissidence and pluralism. That path was shared by Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi, Cuba's Fidel Castro, and China's Mao Tse Tung. Lee Kuan Yew, on the other hand, was a lawyer who led Singapore's non-violent independence movement. A similar case was José Figueres, the coffee farmer who led Costa Rica's 1948 revolution that abolished the army and set the country on a democratic path. The military men were willing to use brute force to stay in control and achieve the changes they sought, while the civilians preferred the law and institutions.

The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP)[12] has examined the backgrounds of leaders from a variety of countries and found that education was instrumental in allowing them to stretch their loyalties beyond family, region, class, or ethnicity.[13] In-depth interviews with leaders of Ghana's transformation since the late 1980s revealed three common elements they learned in school: core values of moral purpose and commitment to serving the nation; ways of working, such as critical thinking and collaboration; and the expertise and knowledge that leaders need if they are to drive change.

Of the Ghanaian leaders who attended secondary school or higher, nearly all of them went to elite institutions that were both relatively meritocratic and residential, bringing together talented children from all backgrounds who then forged values and bonds that would shape their future roles as leaders.

A brilliant DLP paper by Sarah Phillips[14] reaches a similar conclusion regarding Somaliland, which split off from the chaos of Somalia in the 1990s. Sheekh Secondary School, set up by Richard Darlington, who in the Second World War commanded the British Army's Somaliland Protectorate contingent, takes only fifty students a year and trains them in leadership and critical thought (Darlington borrowed from the curriculum of his elite English private school, Harrow). The school stresses student intake

[12] The Developmental Leadership Program (www.dlprog.org/) is funded by the Australian government, which also provided support for this book.

[13] Laura Brannelly, Laura Lewis, and Susy Ndaruhutse, *Higher Education and the Formation of Developmental Elites: A Literature Review and Preliminary Data Analysis*, DLP Research Paper 10 (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2011), https://dlprog.org/publications/research-papers/higher-education-and-the-formation-of-developmental-elites-a-literature-review-and-preliminary-data-analysis/.

[14] Sarah Phillips, 'Political settlements and state formation: the case of Somaliland', DLP Research Paper 23, 1 December 2013, https://dlprog.org/publications/research-papers/political-settlements-and-state-formation-the-case-of-somaliland/.

from all clans, especially the more marginalized ones. Sheekh has provided three out of four presidents of the new nation, along with numerous vice presidents and cabinet members.

Joe Sungi's life story echoes these findings. The son of subsistence farmers, well down the clan hierarchy, he was educated at an Australian Catholic mission school and then a boarding school for the best and brightest kids from around the country. He traces his sense of public ethics to that school. Joe laments that one of the unintended consequences of the spread of secondary education is that kids now go to high school in their own communities, rather than being forced to board with the best and brightest from around his fragmented country. He is urging the government to consider introducing elite public boarding schools based on the French lycée system to recreate the lost leadership crucible of his youth.

These are uncomfortable findings for activists. Advocating for elite boarding schools, even meritocratic ones, smacks of old English colonialism (Ghana, Somaliland, and Papua New Guinea are former British colonies) and feels distinctly regressive compared to getting every child into a primary school. So we had better pin down what aspects of elite education create more capable, publicly minded leaders, and figure out how those can be incorporated into modern school systems.

The DLP's findings on education are important but are only one part of the much wider story of what makes for good leaders. DLP researchers suggest a range of other factors: travel, both internal and international, broadens horizons and builds links with the wider world; religious faith is a common motivating factor; and shared experiences of resistance, armed struggle, or suffering bind future leaders together. Finally, some of the most effective leaders, like Nelson Mandela, are traditional authorities with a sense of *noblesse oblige*.

What do leaders do?

The system delivers for Joe Sungi because he knows how decisions get made in the capital: which tables to bang, which favours to call in. Joe says, 'The key is you talk to people. I don't write letters, I do the talking! Most of what I do is informal, I owe it all to informal relationships.'[15]

[15] Author interview, Port Moresby, November 2014.

Like many leaders, Joe gets things moving but leaves the finishing to others. One of his key men is Kenny Myeni, a jovial, bearded engineer whom Joe managed to lure from a comfortable job with British American Tobacco to run the road-building programme. Funds are often in short supply, laughs Kenny, but 'the Member knows where the money is. We provide the documentation and the Member does the talking'.[16]

Sungi exemplifies the two-level game that leaders have to play—building bridges among constituencies and driving bargains with those in power—while constantly maintaining and boosting followers' morale. They must lead but look constantly over their shoulder, because, as a Malawian proverb has it, 'A leader without followers is simply someone taking a walk'.

Indeed, 'great leaders' are often created by their followers and by accidents of history; their rise only appears inevitable with hindsight. Churchill was revered by the British during the Second World War but ridiculed beforehand and unceremoniously dumped at the ballot box once the war was over.

As the quote from Karl Marx at the start of this chapter argues, leaders do not get to do 'as they please'. The art of leadership lies in finding ways to move forward (or more frequently to inspire others to do so) within the circumstances of the moment, in other words within the system. They turn the legacy of history from 'weighing like a nightmare on the brains of the living' into a force for change.

Leaders understand the role of symbolism in building mass movements, a language parallel to and separate from the policy detail preferred by officials and academics. Rather than confront the British on their own terms, Mahatma Gandhi wrong-footed colonial authorities with small personal acts like collecting salt and spinning cotton on a simple spinning wheel to highlight the search for self-sufficiency and independence. The spinning wheel even appeared on an early version of the Indian flag.[17] Mandela too had a talent for the heart-stopping gesture, reaching out to white South Africans by wearing the Springbok rugby shirt or travelling to a remote Afrikaner community to take tea with the ninety-four-year-old widow of

[16] Author interview, Nuku, November 2014.

[17] Makarand Sahasrabuddhe, 'Mahatma Gandhi—the true revolutionary', Makarand blog, 30 January 2015, https://makarandimpressions.wordpress.com/2015/01/30/mahatma-gandhi-the-true-revolutionary/.

Henrik Verwoerd, a key architect of apartheid.[18] Both Mandela and Gandhi demonstrated that humility and ethical probity can generate more political legitimacy than displays of force or expertise.

Discussions of leaders and leadership customarily fixate on the people at the top—the habits and psychologies of CEOs and presidents, be they saints or sinners. But leaders are everywhere, nowhere more than in the movements for change active in poor communities across the world.

Leadership from below

Penha was an imposing figure, a big confident woman who rose to become president of the Alagoa Grande Rural Workers' Union in Brazil's drought-prone and poverty-ridden northeast. When I visited her in 1990, Penha was trying to persuade an impoverished farming community to join the union. Pot-bellied children with skinny arms played at the feet of adults, while banter and serious talk rolled easily along. Penha guided the conversation with a blend of authority, humour, and kindness, letting others speak and enjoying their jokes. The impromptu discussion developed into a full-blown community meeting about the causes of poverty in Brazil and the need to organize to demand rights to the land. As dusk fell, the meeting turned to music and dance, in honour of the visitors.[19]

Later on, she told me her life story, the words half lost in the drumming of a sudden downpour, which turned the street into a river bearing rubbish from the nearby market. A broken home, starting work at age seven, a mother who died from tuberculosis when Penha was twelve, early marriage, and the struggle to feed her six children. To that point it was the story of countless poor Latin American women.

Penha was able to turn her personal courage and determination into leadership thanks to a chance encounter with a charismatic leader named Margarida Maria Alves, who first introduced her to the union. When Margarida was murdered, allegedly by local landowners and politicians, Penha took over.[20]

[18] Robert Rotberg, *Transformative Political Leadership: Making a Difference in the Developing World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 63.

[19] Duncan Green, *Faces of Latin America*, 4th ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013).

[20] Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Report No. 9/08, Case 12.332 Admissibility, Margarida Maria Alves, Brazil, 5 March 2008.

Like leaders at the top, grassroots leaders are shaped by experiences of travel, struggle, and conflict and are thrust forward by the historical moment ('cometh the hour'). In dozens of countries across several continents, I have met grassroots leaders inspired by their faith and equipped with skills by their experiences in choirs or as preachers, both Christian and Muslim. Scripture helped them form a personal narrative about the sources of their deprivation and repression, galvanizing them into action.

Unlike those at the top of society, social movement leaders have little money and few threats with which to control or reward their followers. They rely heavily on their ability to communicate understanding of the lives of others and belief in the value of collective action to address common problems. They foster their followers' sense of 'power within', buttressed by a vision of a better future that justifies taking action, even when to do so at best takes up poor people's scarce time and energy and at worst puts their lives at risk.

Strengthening community organization is often insufficient to win access to land, funding, or respect. Grassroots leaders must also play the same two-level game as Joe Sungi, building alliances with other organizations and cutting deals with people in positions of power. One of the functions of such leaders is to 'create space' for others. Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu put it this way in the sixth century BCE: 'A leader is best when people barely know that he exists, not so good when people obey and acclaim him, worst when they despise him. But of a good leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aims fulfilled, they will all say, "We did this ourselves".'[21]

Many of this century's protest movements (the Arab Spring, Iran, Occupy, Extinction Rebellion) have lacked identifiable leaders. This is seen by some as a strength, since none could be co-opted or attacked. If a movement has no head, how can it be beheaded? It seemed somehow more pure and genuinely of the masses to have no leaders instead of a grand personality who achieves celebrity status. But such 'anti-leadership' movements have their limitations.[22] When the cycle moves on from protest and conflict to co-operation and reform, someone has to engage with those in power to maximize whatever gains have been won through protest. Headless movements cannot cut deals.

[21] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 17, sixth century BCE.

[22] Neil Sutherland, Christopher Land, and Steffen Böhm, 'Anti-leaders(hip) in social movement organizations: the case of autonomous grassroots groups', *Organization* 21 (6), 759–81 (2013).

A simple dichotomy between grassroots leaders and those at the top is, of course, misleading. Intermediary organizations and leaders bridge the gap between state and citizens. Effective grassroots leaders are often well connected with those in formal power, especially in countries where national leaders have themselves emerged from grassroots activism, such as South Africa, Brazil, and Bolivia. Mandela was a civil rights lawyer and African National Congress (ANC) activist; the transformational presidents of Brazil and Bolivia (Lula and Evo Morales) started out as trade union and peasant leader, respectively. But for every household name, there are thousands of Penhas, unsung heroes organizing their fellow citizens in the struggle for change.

Women and leadership

Joe Sungi typifies a leadership style—individualistic, confrontational, public ('I do the talking!')—which seems quintessentially male. Penha's approach was altogether more inclusive; she listened as much or more than she spoke. People like her form a growing movement of women leaders around the world, at all levels of society.

A study by the Overseas Development Institute identified some common factors in the backgrounds of women leaders, which echo some of Penha's life story: many are married, have some professional training, and work in 'nurturing' or community-related occupations like teaching or social work. Many enjoy the psychological and financial support of close family members, as well as the encouragement of role models (women in public office or active in women's civic movements).[23]

Srilatha Batliwala draws a distinction between feminine and feminist understandings of leadership.[24] A feminine approach to leadership recognizes that women often bring a greater attention to collaboration, collective decision making, and building relationships, characteristics that fall well

[23] Tam O'Neil and Georgia Plank, with Pilar Domingo, 'Support to women and girls' leadership: a rapid review of the evidence', Overseas Development Institute, 24 April 2015, https://odi.org/en/publications/support-to-women-and-girls-leadership-a-rapid-review-of-the-evidence/.

[24] Srilatha Batliwala, *Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud* (New York and New Delhi: CREA, 2010), www.uc.edu/content/dam/uc/ucwc/docs/CREA.pdf.

within the traditional gendered roles of women. In contrast, a feminist approach seeks to transform relations of power, paying close attention to 'power within' and 'power with', as well as hidden and invisible power.

In many ways, the feminist understanding of leadership seems well suited to the approach advocated by this book. At the end of a lecture in Washington a few years ago, I was rather disconcerted by my thank-you present—a copy of *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women* by Hanna Rosin.[25] Hopefully I'll be retired and gardening by the time that process is complete.

Thought leaders

This chapter has focused on leadership among the 'doers', whether in positions of power or within grassroots activism. Another important form of leadership revolves around thinkers, who can, like Joe Sungi, align the iron filings, but this time around big narratives, directions, and inspirational messages, rather than particular personalities. Many of them have appeared in this book—Robert Chambers, Donella Meadows, Ha-Joon Chang, Amartya Sen. Their books have changed the ways people understand the world and their role within it.

It has to be said that a lot of authors, in particular, aspire to this status, but most fall flat. I have a personal acronym 'IIRTW', standing for 'If I Ruled the World', for books that come up with some new (or recycled) solution without giving any great thought to what might enable it to be adopted or implemented in the real world.

But sometimes ideas can be so powerful that they can trigger change all on their own—I was forced to eat humble pie[26] after concluding that my 'exfam' colleague Kate Raworth's brilliant book *Doughnut Economics* lacked a 'theory of change' that spelled out how its ideas could be implemented. Such was the power of her arguments that people all over the world started to set up 'doughnut economics' experiments, persuading Kate to set up the

[25] Hanna Rosin, *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

[26] Duncan Green, 'How can a book change the world? The theory of action behind Kate Raworth and the Doughnut Economics Action Lab', From Poverty to Power blog, 23 February 2021, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/how-can-a-book-change-the-world-the-theory-of-action-behind-kate-raworth-and-the-doughnut-economics-action-lab/.

Doughnut Economics Action Lab[27] to bring all the experiences together and push for change. Check it out.

Leadership, power, and systems

It's easy to forget that when Nelson Mandela was finally released from prison in the early 1990s, South Africa was teetering on a knife's edge. Fighting between Inkatha and ANC supporters threatened to tip over into civil war; fragile state status beckoned. At one early event, ANC supporters called for Mandela to 'give us weapons. No peace'.[28] Mandela reprimanded his fired-up supporters: 'Listen to me. I am your leader. I am going to give you leadership. If you are going to kill innocent people, you don't belong in the ANC.' What would have happened if he had opted for the populist route and stoked the fires?

Mandela was no King Canute, standing futilely against the tides of history. He was an expert navigator in a complex system, forging personal and political alliances with erstwhile enemies, publicly denouncing attempts to pervert or prevent the transition to black majority rule. He built unity among the different factions of the ANC and turned it from a protest movement into a dominant ruling party. Like all good leaders, he could 'see' how power is distributed and fought over in society and spot opportunities to seize and shape the tide of events. One can only wonder what would have occurred had he died in his Robben Island prison cell.

For institutions promoting change, training and supporting local leaders should be an attractive proposition. It is pleasingly tangible and puts a human face on the often amorphous process of development. But few aid agencies invest in individuals. Why not emulate the few schemes, such as the MacArthur Foundation's Fellows, that identify and back outstanding leaders?[29] Or offer work experience, internships, or teaching opportunities for students likely to become tomorrow's progressive leaders?

Among activists, many of whom have a deep commitment to egalitarianism, words like leadership and leader elicit mixed feelings. Most of us would

[27] https://doughnuteconomics.org/.

[28] Robert Rotberg, *Transformative Political Leadership: Making a Difference in the Developing World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 40.

[29] MacArthur Foundation, MacArthur Fellows Program, https://www.macfound.org/programs/fellows/.

prefer to build the capacity of organizations rather than invest directly in individuals with high potential. Indeed, even talking in terms of high-potential individuals can feel somehow contrary to principles of fairness and equality.

But addressing leadership much more systematically need not imply being seduced by a simplistic Big Man approach to politics. On the contrary, acknowledging and supporting the crucial role leaders play in how change happens is a vital step in amplifying the voices of groups that currently go unheard.

Now that we have looked at both the grassroots citizen activists and the leaders that inspire them and others at all levels of society, we move on to a subject that involves both of them, and which I have been most involved with over the years: advocacy.

Further reading

H. Lyne de Ver, 'Conceptions of leadership', DLP Background Paper 4, 1 March 2009, https://dlprog.org/publications/background-papers/conceptions-of-leadership/.

N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (London: Little Brown, 1995).

M.A. Melo, N. Ng'ethe, and J. Manor, *Against the Odds: Politicians, Institutions, and the Struggle Against Poverty* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1995).

Robert Rotberg, *Transformative Political Leadership: Making a Difference in the Developing World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Further viewing

The Developmental Leadership Program, http://www.dlprog.org/.

12
The Power of Advocacy

The bacon rolls were to die for. They sat alluringly at the entrance to the 'breakfast meeting' at Number 11 Downing Street, the residence of then Chancellor of the Exchequer (i.e. finance minister) Gordon Brown. But the risks of grabbing one on my way in were too high: lobbying the number two in the UK Government was scary enough without bacon fat dribbling down my chin. I walked resolutely by. Such are the heroic sacrifices of the lobbyist.

The occasion was one of Brown's periodic breakfasts with faith groups (I was working for the Catholic aid agency CAFOD at the time). About thirty people were around the table, each of us given two minutes to pitch whatever was on our minds. On mine was an obscure but important issue in the nascent Doha Round of talks at the WTO: the EU (which at the WTO negotiates on behalf of the UK) was intent on adding investment to the already overloaded agenda, probably to distract attention from Europe's notorious Common Agricultural Policy. A large number of developing country governments were opposed, backed by international NGOs.

I was armed with a short summary of the arguments and academic evidence for our position.[1] As the paper made its way round the table, I used my two minutes to summarize its contents. When it reached him, Brown scribbled something and the spotlight moved on. I later discovered that as he left the room, he said to his officials, 'Why are we supporting this?' The UK subsequently distanced itself from the EU position, a small victory perhaps, but as good as it gets for an NGO lobbyist.

A couple of months later, this seemingly obscure topic was a major factor in the spectacular collapse of the WTO summit in Cancún. The media

[1] ActionAid, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children, and World Development Movement, 'Unwanted, unproductive and unbalanced: six arguments against an investment agreement at the WTO', May 2003, https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/unwanted-unproductive-and-unbalanced-six-arguments-against-an-investment-agreem-115059/.

room was a shouting, shoving frenzy of journalists on deadline, desperate to find someone to interview; some were even interviewing each other. I was in spin-doctor mode, regurgitating the same sound bite—the EU is 'chief suspect number one and number two for the collapse'—to anyone who would listen. We were hoping to pre-empt the inevitable attempt to blame either developing countries or NGOs for the collapse. My quote made *The Guardian*, so CAFOD was happy.[2]

Dodging bacon sarnies in Downing Street or spinning at global trade summits are hardly the kinds of activities the public normally associates with international NGOs. When CAFOD asked its younger supporters for a picture of its work, they drew cartoons of nuns throwing bags of food out of planes. But since the 1990s, CAFOD, Oxfam, and others have devoted a rising proportion of their efforts to influencing government policy through campaigns and lobbying (although this still amounts to only 2 per cent of Oxfam's spending, far less than long-term development and emergency response).[3]

The turn towards policy work came partly as a result of hard lessons learned during the 1980s and 1990s heyday of World Bank structural adjustment programmes, when it became apparent there was little point in constructing islands of project success only to see them swept away by a tidal wave of bad public policy decisions. Growing size, capacity, and self-confidence no doubt also played a role.

The rise of campaigns and lobbying has produced a proliferation of training courses and toolkits. This chapter will steer clear of the fine detail and instead sketch in the broader nature of advocacy, as well as addressing some of the dilemmas it poses for activists who want to bring about change.

First, some definitions: 'advocacy' is the art of persuading someone with power to do something they would not otherwise do;[4] 'campaigning' usually refers to mobilizing the public or influencing the public's attitudes and behaviours; and 'lobbying' is going directly to policy-makers to get them

[2] Larry Elliott, Charlotte Denny, and David Munk, 'Blow to world economy as trade talks collapse', *The Guardian*, 15 September 2003, www.theguardian.com/world/2003/sep/15/business.politics.

[3] Oxfam GB, 'How we spend your money', https://www.oxfam.org.uk/donate/how-we-spend-your-money/#:~:text=oxfam%20spends%20all%20of%20its,invested%20to%20generate%20future%20income.

[4] Jim Shultz, 'The art of advocacy strategy', *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 6 February 2017, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_art_of_advocacy_strategy.

to do something in particular. For simplicity, I will use 'advocacy' as an umbrella term for both campaigning and lobbying (although if that's too edgy for you, feel free to use the more anodyne 'influencing').

The tactics employed usually fall somewhere along a continuum from sitting down with those in power to help sort out a problem (at the 'insider' end) to mayhem in the street (at the 'outsider' end). One study defined five points on that spectrum: co-operation, education, persuasion, litigation, and contestation.[5]

Advocacy typically involves a combination of these elements, and the balance shifts over time. One reason Gordon Brown was willing to listen to me prattle on about trade rules was the public pressure and media coverage generated by campaigners in the Trade Justice Movement, a large, noisy, and media-savvy civil society coalition. Often a public campaign is required to get an issue onto the table, at which point a more insider approach can help move it towards a decision on policy or spending. And public action may be needed at any stage to prevent backsliding and foot-dragging.

When it comes to campaigning, the playbook was pretty much written two centuries ago, after a dozen people met in a print shop in London's East End, brought together by Thomas Clarkson, a twenty-seven-year-old Quaker. Thus began a campaign to end the slave trade that lasted fifty years, brilliantly captured in Adam Hochschild's *Bury the Chains*.[6] The abolitionists invented virtually every modern campaign tactic, including posters, political book tours, consumer boycotts, investigative reporting, and petitions. Fast forward two centuries and today's energetic activism on issues from climate change to disabled people's rights, to corruption, to same-sex marriage is built on the foundations laid by Clarkson and his colleagues.

The abolitionists combined immense stamina and courage with an inspirational moral vision and a deep understanding of power and systems. Over their fifty-year campaign, they adapted to massive critical junctures, in the shape of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and Caribbean slave revolts; they combined insider–outsider tactics between street petitioners and parliamentary debate; they recruited 'unusual suspects' as allies, such as repentant slaver John Newton who wrote 'Amazing Grace' to work alongside freed slaves and Christian ministers.

[5] Valerie Miller and Jane Covey, *Advocacy Sourcebook: Frameworks for Planning, Action and Reflection* (Boston: Institute for Development Research, 1997).

[6] Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2012).

How advocacy works

Advocacy typically targets the institutions described in this book, be they formal (states, courts, political parties, corporations, and international bodies) or informal (norms and public attitudes). During my brief spell as a civil servant at the British aid agency DFID, I witnessed good and bad advocacy in action in the space of a morning spent shadowing the Secretary of State, Hilary Benn. The Minister's first visitor was an NGO that seemed content to bask in the presence of power, with no clear asks beyond (to a Labour minister!) 'We hope you will take a strong position on labour rights'. Benn was charming and kind, small talk took up most of the time, and nothing was agreed.

A few hours later, the Fairtrade Foundation bustled in, led by its dynamic boss Harriet Lamb. She politely curtailed the introductions, gave the Minister some of the Foundation's new products to play with, and moved on to a series of specific asks: since Asda's headquarters were in his constituency, would the Minister kindly sign a letter asking them to do more on Fairtrade? She would of course be happy to draft something for him. As she left the room, Benn turned to me and said DFID should definitely fund them, a promise we 'civil serpents' subsequently managed to turn into a £750,000 grant.

Harriet's half hour was well spent because she followed the rules of good lobbying: know what your targets can and can't deliver; treat them like human beings; and persuade by appealing to both altruism and self-interest.

Often advocates are unable to reach decision makers themselves and instead reach out to those who do have access. These 'influentials' might include journalists, members of parliament, donors, faith and business leaders, public intellectuals (often academics), and key people in other government departments or trade unions. And celebrities, of course—even world leaders love a selfie with Bono or Angelina Jolie.

Perhaps the most impressive (if disturbing) exercise I ever witnessed of 'influencing the influentials' came during an internal British government seminar in the run-up to the 2009 climate change summit in Copenhagen. The Foreign Office hired former Greenpeace campaigners to help it identify a hundred individuals from the Indian elite best placed to influence India's climate change policy; for each of them, they put together a dossier on how best to persuade them to act.

Retired influentials, sometimes known as 'grey panthers',[7] can make great advocates. The Amnesty International Business Group was founded by a classic old-man-in-a-hurry, Sir Geoffrey Chandler, a former senior manager at Royal Dutch/Shell who was more than willing to march into boardrooms and unleash his cut-glass accent to promote human rights in the private sector. Such people understand how to get around internal obstacles and spot management excuses for inaction, but the brand risk posed by a bunch of stroppy pensioners doing their own thing would challenge any organization.[8]

When the advocacy target is the public at large, star power can draw massive attention to an issue. I have worked with some great 'celebrities' over the years, like Bill Nighy (Robin Hood tax) and Gael García Bernal (global trade rules), who lent themselves to the cause with dedication and humility. In Peru, celebrity chefs have been at the forefront of changing public attitudes towards the merits of traditional Peruvian foods, challenging the burger culture that is depressingly omnipresent in Latin America.[9]

The range of possible advocacy tactics is limited only by the imagination of the advocates: street protest, art installations, litigation, insider persuasion, media campaigns, demonstration projects, and many more.

In his delightful book *Blueprint for Revolution*,[10] Srdja Popovic, a leader of the Serbian uprising that overthrew Slobodan Milosevic, surveys tactics from non-violent protest movements around the world and concludes that food is one of the best entry points. Activists have built movements around cottage cheese (Israel), rice pudding (Maldives), and, most famously, salt (India) and tea (the US). 'Food has a special way of getting people to come together', he writes, and is low-risk in dangerous places.

[7] Duncan Green, 'Are grey panthers the next big thing in campaigning?', From Poverty to Power blog, 2 November 2010, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/are-grey-panthers-the-next-big-thing-in-campaigning/.

[8] The Amnesty group was wound up in 2007, partly because, as one insider told me, 'a semi-autonomous group of grey eminences was rather more than [NGO managers] were prepared to accept'.

[9] Leila Nilipour, 'Even Peru's top chefs are addicted to fast food', Munchies, 13 October 2014, https://www.vice.com/en/article/xy79qq/even-perus-top-chefs-are-addicted-to-fast-food.

[10] Srdja Popovic, *Blueprint for Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Non-Violent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

But there are other small starters too: in San Francisco, future City Supervisor Harvey Milk's political career took off when he switched from campaigning for gay rights to campaigning against dog excrement in city parks. The trick is to learn what people really care about, even if it's not top of your priority list. If you don't, you will only rally the people who already believe in what you have to say—a great way for coming tenth at anything (as Harvey Milk initially did).[11]

Tone and language matter too. I find that a combination of tactical self-deprecation and humour can disarm critics expecting a bout of self-righteous NGO finger-wagging. The British comedian Mark Thomas specializes in the subversive use of humour. Dressed as cartoon character Shaun the Sheep, he protested against the privatization of public space by walking up and down outside the London Stock Exchange in a square owned by Mitsubishi. Baffled security men ended up wrestling a cartoon character to the ground on camera, before frogmarching him from the square, bizarrely addressing him as 'Shaun' throughout.[12]

Humour can add an edge even in altogether riskier protests. In Aleppo, Syrian protestors buried loudspeakers broadcasting anti-regime messages in smelly dustbins, so the police would make themselves look ridiculous, and less scary, rummaging around to find them.[13]

Often, however, protest movements succeed by provoking repression from the authorities, which acts as a catalyst for further protest and can motivate reformers within government. In 1967, US police beat demonstrators demanding national civil rights legislation. Martin Luther King Jr commented: 'Sound effort in a single city such as Birmingham or Selma, produced situations that symbolized the evil everywhere and inflamed public opinion against it. Where the spotlight illuminated the evil, a legislative remedy was soon obtained that applied everywhere.'[14] Provoking

[11] Srdja Popovic, *Blueprint for Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Non-Violent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

[12] Mark Thomas, 'Trespass', Edinburgh Fringe, August 2015.

[13] Srdja Popovic, *Blueprint for Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Non-Violent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

[14] Quoted in Mark Engler and Paul Engler, 'When the pillars fall—how social movements can win more victories like same-sex marriage', Waging Nonviolence blog, 9 July 2014, https://wagingnonviolence.org/2014/07/pillars-fall-social-movements-can-win-victories-like-sex-marriage/. Original source: Martin Luther King Jr, *Where Do We Go From Here?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

violence from the system is, of course, a dangerous game, especially when there are few checks on the state's power.

Because getting new laws onto the statute books is so difficult, many campaigns zero in on enforcement of laws and policies that already exist. Decision makers have a harder time publicly opposing things they have themselves approved. Getting down among the weeds of existing legislation and policy can be unattractive to campaigners seeking more fundamental 'transformative' change and it can be highly technical. But done right, it can set the stage for larger changes.

One example comes from India's new state of Chhattisgarh, home to marginalized traditional communities that make a living from forest products. Despite the protection of the 2006 Forest Rights Act, their livelihoods were under threat from mining and other commercial activities. An impressive local NGO, Chaupal, launched an advocacy campaign based on this 'implementation gap'. After negotiations, petitioning, and community protest, backed up by solid research, dozens of villages gained the forest and grazing rights promised under the Act.[15]

Research is often an effective weapon in the advocate's armoury. Pleas to Gordon Brown over the Downing Street breakfast table would have had little impact without credible analysis to back them up. Since 2014, my Oxfam colleagues have hogged headlines and shaped the policy discussion at the annual World Economic Forums in Davos with a series of 'killer facts' on the extreme levels of inequality in the contemporary world.[16] That said, in democracies decisions are made rather more often on the basis of power, institutional inertia, received wisdoms, and vested interest than by a dispassionate review of the evidence. As noted in Chapter 9, good research may be more persuasive in closed political systems like China's, Russia's, and Vietnam's, where government technocrats and political leaders are more insulated from political pressures.

In the ideas ecosystem, new approaches and concepts bubble up all the time. Many remain on the fringe, but some start to have real influence. I find

[15] Duncan Green, *The Chhattisgarh Community Forest Rights Project, India*, Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-chhattisgarh-community-forest-rights-project-india-338434/.

[16] Nabil Ahmed, Anna Marriott, Nafkote Dabi, Megan Lowthers, Max Lawson, and Leah Mugehera, 'Inequality kills: the unparalleled action needed to combat unprecedented inequality in the wake of COVID-19', January 2022, https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/inequality-kills.

the image of a 'policy funnel' helpful.[17] At the broad, open end are ideas that are only starting to make it into public debates and onto decision makers' radars. An example would be the impending threat of climate change in the 1990s and 2000s. Broad general messages on such ideas are more important than detailed policy proposals. In the early years, the climate change debate was dominated by its impact on Arctic wildlife. Oxfam's first, and to my mind still most effective, contribution was to send activists to the climate meetings dressed up in polar bear outfits, carrying placards that said 'Save the humans'.

Once ideas start to move down the funnel and be incorporated into policies, laws, and spending decisions, the task of activists is to build alliances, target blockers, and win over waverers. We also need to find means to express our concerns in ways that fit the policy process under way. 'Stop the world and start again' is unlikely to get much traction, whereas 'Change the agreement on agriculture by adding this paragraph to allow governments to protect small farmers' is more likely to get a hearing.

At the tip of the funnel, when negotiations over policy changes are well advanced, we need to grapple with the fine details, pushing for very particular demands, which requires working closely with allies inside the institution, all the while maintaining public pressure to prevent backsliding.

Advocacy has lifted much from the field of advertising, since it is, after all, a form of salesmanship. An essential lesson is to craft the message to fit the audience. What we say to a finance minister may not work for a parliamentarian or allies like health professionals, and certainly would not suffice for the general public.

Activists need to stand in the shoes of the people we are trying to influence and view the world as they do. Empathy is critical if we are to build a bridge to people who see the world very differently from ourselves. I have seen government ministers visibly turn off when preached at by finger-wagging activists more interested in 'speaking truth to power' than building a relationship.

The messenger is often as important as the message. You need staff or allies that either have existing relationships or are natural networkers—nodes not nerds. Ex officials or politicians are good, or else you can

[17] Duncan Green, 'The policy funnel—a way to sharpen up our advocacy?', From Poverty to Power blog, 3 August 2011, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/the-policy-funnel-a-way-to-sharpen-up-our-advocacy/.

emulate Coalitions for Change in the Philippines,[18] which hired a bunch of senior/retired university professors. I watched with amazement as they strode into the office of ministers who were former students. The powerful men behind the desks shrank before our eyes and asked their former profs, 'How can I help you, madam?' Elsewhere, captains of industry are likely to listen to (and believe) something from a fellow master of the universe (like Amnesty's Sir Geoffrey) or a leader of their church, rather than a nerdy researcher or zealous campaigner.

Recent years have also seen increased focus within advocacy on changing social norms (as discussed in Chapter 3) and shifting public narratives[19] on issues such as the care economy.[20] This marks a recognition that targeting tangible goals like changing rules and regulations is only part of the story—the underlying system needs fixing too, even if the impact of advocacy is harder to measure.

Advocacy and systems thinking

Advocacy has been my natural habitat for most of my working life, whether in think-tanks and NGOs, or government departments, or, most recently, teaching courses on advocacy and influencing at the LSE[21] and beyond.[22] The way I have presented advocacy up to this point fits well with the central argument of this book regarding how change happens. But what led me to write the book was partly my dissatisfaction with the way advocacy was practised in the 2000s by northern NGOs and others.

I joined Oxfam in the middle of a massive global campaign, 'Make Poverty History'. The campaign's implicit premise was that increasing aid, forgiving debts, and making trade rules fair could end world poverty. But I was becoming increasingly convinced that real change happens at

[18] https://asiafoundation.org/tag/coalitions-for-change/.

[19] For excellent examples of advocacy campaigns to shift narratives see Nicole Walshe and Anne Mai Baan, 'Hope, play, relate: changing narratives for greater solidarity and open civic space', EADI Debating Development Research blog, 26 January 2022, http://www.developmentresearch.eu/?p=1112.

[20] Nick Gadsby, Silvia Galandini, and Anam Parvez Butt, *How to Talk About Care in the UK: A Framing Toolkit* (Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2023).

[21] https://www.lse.ac.uk/resources/calendar/courseguides/dv/2023_dv455.htm.

[22] https://www.geli.org/programmes/regional-training-programme/influencing-senior-leaders-analysis-strategy-and-practice.

the national level, and that such a campaign was aiming at the wrong target.[23] I remember standing in Trafalgar Square listening to Nelson Mandela declare in his magnificent way to an overwhelmingly white, European crowd: 'Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation.'[24]

All I could think was 'right generation, wrong audience'. Not only had the campaign mistakenly (in my view) drawn attention and resources away from the national arena, but also it had arrogantly imposed its analysis on affiliated national campaigns around the world.

In many ways, this book is a response to my doubts about Make Poverty History. Allow me to conjure up a caricature of an old-style advocate: he would be arrogant, sure that he knows best both what poor people need and how to bring it about; he would know in advance who to work with (probably people just like him); he would concentrate on generating media coverage and speaking 'truth to power', even if power wasn't listening. And no matter the problem, he would know the solution lies with the great global powers. A caricature, certainly, but not without some ring of truth.

Alex de Waal argues compellingly that Western campaigners tend to dumb down the complex realities of messy conflicts into simple narratives of good and bad to be remedied by simple solutions (preferably deliverable by the West).[25] Such narratives squeeze out the more nuanced views of local people and the deeper, underlying causes of conflict and end up promoting superficial victories rather than real change.

Exhibit A is 'Kony 2012', a campaign by a US NGO for military intervention by the US to defeat Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony, which went viral. The campaign made a huge splash in Western media and activist circles, but had little or no impact on the ground. Make Poverty History was certainly not as misguided, but still it downplayed the crucial arena of national politics.

When I got to Oxfam, I was told that good campaigns require three things: a problem, a solution, and a villain (heroes are largely optional,

[23] My book, *From Poverty to Power*, was, in many ways, an implicit critique of Make Poverty History. Duncan Green, *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2008).

[24] Nelson Mandela, 'In full: Mandela's poverty speech', *BBC News*, 3 February 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4232603.stm.

[25] Alex de Waal, *Advocacy in Conflict: Critical Perspectives on Transnational Activism* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

it seems). It is a remarkably good guide to which campaigns succeed and which flounder.

Systems thinking, on the other hand, suggests problems are multiple, interrelated, and complex; solutions are unknowable in advance and likely to emerge through trial and error; and at least some villains are likely to also be indispensable allies in bringing about change. Alex Evans, a former Whitehall policy wonk, founded an organization called 'Larger Us' because, he believes, 'Them-and-us campaigns may be great for firing up the base, securing media coverage, or raising money. But on a lot of issues—like climate change, international development, or migration—just firing up the base isn't enough. Real breakthroughs depend on broader consensus, across the political spectrum. Polarisation prevents that. And it can harm our democracies, too.'[26]

When I say this to campaigners, their eyes have a tendency to roll: you really want us to launch a campaign by admitting we don't have a solution? What should the media team say to journalists who ask what we're recommending to fix the problem we've highlighted?

By becoming more attuned to power and systems, do we risk losing our edge as advocates, unable to distil complex issues into simple, powerful demands for change? I don't think so. Acknowledging the lessons of systems thinking obliges us to reflect deeply about what issues are truly ripe for campaigning and what proposed changes might address the problem. It means we look in more places for those ideas—history, positive deviance, the lived experience, and ideas of people on the sharp end. It keeps us alert to any unintended consequences of a victory. It should sharpen our edge and make our campaigns more compelling, even as it makes us suspicious of dumbed-down slogans.

Fortunately, the world of advocacy has moved on since the hubristic heights of Make Poverty History, shifting away from global summitry and towards a much greater emphasis on national influencing, as well as away from a 'command and control' campaigning style and towards nimble, locally generated strategies and tactics.

An acknowledgement that social and political changes are largely driven by internal forces and players is difficult for international agencies like Oxfam. Is it right for organizations to try to influence affairs in a country

[26] Alex Evans, 'Why we need to build a larger us', From Poverty to Power blog, 12 July 2022, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/why-we-need-to-build-a-larger-us/.

that is not their own? Is there truth in the accusation frequently levelled by developing country governments that aid workers are stooges of a foreign power?

Think back to the example of ex-Greenpeace campaigners advising the British Foreign Office. However laudable their intentions, how would the effort to change India's climate change policy be seen by Indian politicians and activists? How would Her Majesty's government (let alone the British press) react if the Indian government used similar tactics to change UK policy on, say, migration?

In my experience, most international organizations doing advocacy in developing countries think very hard about these issues of legitimacy and what to do about imbalances of power between them and their local partners, despite the alarming exceptions noted above. The level of self-questioning and doubt has risen sharply in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and critiques of aid's 'white saviour complex'[27] and the need for 'decolonization' to shift power and funding to southern organizations. For northern activists, especially someone like me who enjoys multiple levels of privilege (male, pale, stale …), it's painful but necessary to remember you are not always on the side of the angels.

But I have come round to thinking that global campaigns still have their place. They can't solve an entrenched national dilemma, but they can stop an international activity that is clearly causing harm. A good example is the Arms Trade Treaty discussed in Chapter 7. Campaigns can tackle global problems that require concerted action by several or all countries to succeed, like climate change or ending the 'race to the bottom' when countries try to undercut each other to attract investment by lowering taxes.

Foreign organizations can also be an asset in national campaigns where the levers of change are susceptible to outside pressure. To improve wages and conditions for workers in Indonesia's vast network of sportswear factories, the Indonesia Labour Rights Project (ILRP) provided support to local trade unions and others and managed to broker conversations between them and companies making brand-name sports gear for export. When the talks were only getting workers suspended or dismissed, the project mobilized its supporters in the countries that were buying the factories'

[27] Themrise Khan, Kanakulya Dickson, and Maika Sondarjee, *White Saviorism in International Development. Theories, Practices and Lived Experiences* (Wakefield, ON: Daraja Press, 2023).

shoes. Under pressure from consumers, in 2011 the companies signed an industry-wide Protocol on Freedom of Association, which also had the happy side-effect of improving communication between the brands and the unions.[28]

Organizing exchanges between activists working on similar issues in different countries is another useful role for international organizations. Oxfam's *Raising Her Voice* programme promoted visits among women's rights activists in seventeen countries to swap notes and ideas.[29] The *We Can* programme discussed in Chapter 2 was born as an Indian adaptation of work on violence against women in Uganda.[30]

I'm not sure if a power and systems perspective requires us to abandon the old ways or just treat them with caution, but it certainly has a number of implications for activists wishing to get better at 'dancing with the system'. Let's explore a few.

Critical junctures

In Chapter 1 we discussed 'critical junctures'—windows of opportunity provided by failures, crises, changes in leadership, natural disasters, or conflicts. At such times, decision makers and the public may become painfully aware of the inadequacies of the status quo and cast around for new ideas. A well-prepared advocacy campaign can spot and respond to such moments, with striking results.

The People's Vaccine campaign prompted by the onset of the 2020 Covid pandemic, discussed in Chapter 8, was an activist response to a devastating global critical juncture and revealed some important underlying factors common to a lot of effective activism. First, it built on the memories and

[28] By exposing the vulnerability of Nike's brand, the Indonesia campaign played an important part in the company's 2011 decision to reduce exposure to toxins (toluene) in all its factories and in 2012 (along with Adidas) to limit the use of short-term contracts. Duncan Green, *The Indonesian Labour Rights Project*, Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-indonesian-labour-rights-project-338442/.

[29] Duncan Green, 'The Raising Her Voice global programme', Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/cs-raising-her-voice-global-programme-160115-en.pdf.

[30] Duncan Green, 'The "We Can" campaign in South Asia', Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015 https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-we-can-campaign-in-south-asia-338472/.

experiences of earlier campaigns, in particular the HIV/AIDS access to medicines movement of the early 2000s. Second, it rapidly assembled a coalition that was able to combine national and global campaigns to target key governments and companies at different levels. Third, it built a network of allies in positions of formal power and influence, such as South African president Cyril Ramaphosa and Winnie Byanyima, who had just left Oxfam International to become Executive Director of UNAIDS when the pandemic struck.

While the campaign failed to achieve its overt goal, due to a dogged counter-effort by Big Pharma and its allies in Europe, its *unintended* consequences may have a more lasting effect. Widespread concern over the inequalities and injustice of the global Covid response led to the start of negotiations on a 'Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response Accord'to govern future outbreaks.[31] In 2023, over 200 participants gathered in Cape Town (South Africa) for the first face-to-face meeting of a new mRNA Technology Transfer Programme, presided by WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, which aims to enable autonomy in the development, manufacture, and distribution of mRNA vaccines in low and middle income countries.

Finally, although hard to prove, the widespread condemnation of Big Pharma over its pandemic profits, alongside countless scandals domestically, may also have contributed to the US Government's 2022 decision to allow Medicare to negotiate the price of certain prescription drugs for the first time to limit the growth of drug costs.[32] All of these 'wins' will doubtless be contested and partially reversed, but they still represent a remarkable response to the shock of the pandemic and (hopefully) steps on the road to a new model of access to medicines based on equity and human rights, rather than profit and greed.

Spotting and responding to critical junctures is just as important at national level. In 2002, the Malawian chapter of a regional women's rights NGO, Women in Law Southern Africa (WILSA), proposed and drafted legislation on violence against women, but got nowhere promoting it to

[31] WHO, 'Pandemic prevention, preparedness and response accord', 28 June 2023 https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/pandemic-prevention--preparedness-and-response-accord.

[32] CNN, '5 ways the Democrats' inflation bill could lower drug prices for seniors', 11 August 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/08/11/politics/democrats-inflation-bill-lower-drug-costs-seniors/index.html.

the government. Three years down the line, the media reported a spate of incidents of violence from across the country, ranging from wife-killing to grievous bodily harm and rape. Oxfam's Malawi team put out a press statement condemning the violence and calling on key leaders to take action. A range of different groups echoed Oxfam's message, most strikingly the Blantyre police, who drove up to Oxfam's offices in a van with loudspeakers on top broadcasting messages against gender-based violence. Following a very difficult debate in parliament, with opponents accusing the bill's supporters of attacking Malawi's culture, it passed.[33]

Coalitions and alliances

One of the skills of a good advocate is knowing how to construct effective alliances—and to distinguish powerful engines of change from soul-sapping talking shops. Similar organizations sometimes ally effectively, especially in the initial stages of building 'power with'. But interesting things happen when unusual suspects join forces.

The press conference organized by developing-country delegates to the 2001 WTO ministerial was a disaster. Not only was it scheduled late in the working day, long after all the European and American journalists had filed their pieces and retired to the bar, but also it had a dull technical title that belied the importance of the issue—how to protect poor farmers from being crushed by an avalanche of cheap, often subsidized food imports. Hardly anyone showed up.

After a hurried discussion, the policy and media teams from international NGOs offered to rerun the event. The 'alliance of food insecure developing economies' was rechristened 'the G33' (no journalist wanted to be blindsided by a new 'G'), a suitably eye-catching title and news release was bashed out, and NGO press officers fanned out to round up their contacts in the media room. The next day's event, on exactly the same topic, was standing-room only. The delegates purred with satisfaction and gave barnstorming presentations.

[33] Duncan Green, 'Seizing the moment: a successful campaign on domestic violence in Malawi', From Poverty to Power blog, 23 June 2009, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/seizing-the-moment-a-successful-campaign-on-domestic-violence-in-malawi/.

Activists working alongside government delegates in the WTO is just one example of the uncomfortable alliances that seem to get results in complex systems. We NGOs were worried about supporting governments with questionable human rights records, and the governments were highly suspicious of NGOs that had criticized them in the past. But both sides saw potential in a tactical alliance on an issue they agreed on.

Unorthodox alliances can involve an element of holding your nose. After the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010, Oxfam and its local partners were determined to seize a classic critical juncture to ensure the reconstruction effort benefitted the poor coastal communities disproportionately affected by the oil spill. Big prizes require big compromises. Oxfam worked closely with private companies and conservative evangelical church leaders, and even spent $120,000 on lobbyists who had access to Republican politicians. Campaigners had a hard time swallowing it, but they won investment in vulnerable communities and preferential hiring of local people.[34]

Insider vs. outsider tactics

An enduring tension exists between 'outsider' and 'insider' activists. Suppose you have uncovered some dirt on a corporate target and written a hard-hitting briefing on it. You need to give the corporate a chance to see it before publication. The outsider campaigner would hand it over the day before the launch (if at all), so that the company is caught all but unaware and a good press story is assured. The insider, on the other hand, would do so several weeks in advance, hoping the company would take action to clean up the problem and avoid a public scandal. The outsider prizes the opportunity to build public awareness of the wider issue, while the insider favours maintaining good relations and sorting out a specific problem.

Systems thinking suggests that both play important roles. Outsiders keep important issues alive and fight to get new ones onto the table. They work in public, where mass mobilization often needs stark, unchanging messages.

[34] Duncan Green, *Advocating for Gulf Coast Restoration in the Wake of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill: The Oxfam America RESTORE Act Campaign*, Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/advocating-for-gulf-coast-restoration-in-the-wake-of-the-deepwater-horizon-oil-338441/.

Insiders, on the other hand, take issues forward into the necessary fudges involved when turning ideas into policies.

In what are euphemistically termed 'closed political spaces' (dictatorships, autocracies, or countries where raising particular subjects is impossible due to the workings of hidden power), outsider tactics can be dangerous and counter-productive. A study of coalitions working on gender rights in Egypt and Jordan concluded that the most effective advocacy engaged in 'informal backstage politics' often based on activists from elite family backgrounds networking with old friends and classmates. An acute understanding of the degree of political space (which opens and closes over time) was an essential skill.[35]

The balance between insider and outsider tactics often varies over the course of a campaign, imposing real strains on activists, because of the very different tactics and language each uses. In the conflict phase, these are often polarizing and confrontational, and the alliances are likely to be among similar groups. By contrast, in the co-operation phase, the language and tactics are more propositional, and alliances need to be forged with actors in other spheres. Messy compromises replace clarion calls for revolution.

Individual activists tend to prefer one or the other of the two mindsets and find it hard to change gears. Many tacitly opt for a division of labour, specializing in either the conflict or the co-operation phase. I am a co-operator: conflict makes me anxious and I like ambiguity; yet I have friends and colleagues who much prefer the clarity and adrenaline of a good punch-up.

The tensions that arise can be asymmetric. Outsiders often think the insiders are sell-outs who muddy the waters through compromise or hijack their issues, while insiders often view outsiders as politically naïve purists, but recognize that the threat they pose often drives decision makers into their arms. Such tensions become particularly acute when the disagreement is between 'outsiders' in the South and 'insiders' in international NGOs. In 1999, on the eve of an historic victory, winning debt relief for dozens of developing countries, the international Jubilee 2000 movement dissolved in acrimony, with Southern activists accusing Northern lobbyists of losing

[35] Mariz Tadros, 'Working politically behind red lines: structure and agency in a comparative study of women's coalitions in Egypt and Jordan', DLP, 1 February 2011, https://dlprog.org/publications/executive-summaries/executive-summary-working-politically-behind-red-lines-egypt-and-jordan/.

sight of politics in their obsession with policy. It brought home how divisive 'success' can be—what looks like victory to a reformist can easily appear as betrayal to a more radical mindset.

These tensions echo a more fundamental (and to my mind largely insoluble) dilemma: expediency versus long-term transformation. Does signing off on limited reforms legitimize the current distribution of power, forestalling deeper change? My own view is that a reform that expands the 'freedoms to be and to do' of poor and excluded people is almost always worth pursuing. I am too old and impatient (and perhaps too European) to hold out for 'all or nothing' approaches, which sadly often end up with the latter. If anything, systems thinking should improve our capacity for understanding just how much we are likely to win at a given time in a given situation, and therefore when we should bring one campaign to an end before we regroup for the next.

In practice, many activists spend much of their time trying to bring about change *within* their organizations and, to be blunt, they are often not very good at it. Advocates seem to find it easier to be cold blooded and analytical when influencing others. But when it comes to their own institutions, they often leave all their toolkits at the door and shout/cry/rage against their machine. Sometimes the conversation resembles a particularly dysfunctional family Christmas. Maybe we're just too identified with our organizations to be dispassionate—why don't they listen to (our) reason? Bringing about change by taking into account incentives, coalitions, narratives, critical junctures, etc. should somehow not be necessary. But it is. Once again, the same questions and ways of thinking about power and systems can help shift our own organizations.[36]

Conclusion

Many of my advocacy colleagues will look askance at this chapter. Too much self-doubt, too much navel-gazing. Why not just get out there and change the world?

[36] Duncan Green, 'Why is internal advocacy within our own organizations so hard?', From Poverty to Power blog, 27 April 2021, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/why-is-internal-advocacy-within-our-own-organizations-so-hard/.

I believe introspection is both warranted and necessary. Advocacy can backfire when campaigners become stuck in a hubristic bubble of tactics and media hits and lose touch with the views and needs of the supposed 'beneficiaries' of their frenetic activities. Advocates need to be acutely conscious of their own power and position in the system, and the biases and behaviours those induce. We need deep connections with local communities.

Getting advocacy right requires political maturity, the right combination of tactics and allies, and making the most of windows of opportunity as they come along.

More subtly, good advocacy requires a mindset that finds each different context fascinating, that embraces ambiguity and complexity, empathizes with how different people see the world, learns from mistakes, and responds to changing events—all that, while maintaining the passion and energy needed to win.

Further reading

D. Brockington, *Celebrity Advocacy and International Development* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

A. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2012).

W. Mwamba, '"Think chess not checkers": Wilf Mwamba on the role of analysis in effective influencing', From Poverty to Power blog and podcast, 18 October 2022, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/think-chess-not-checkers-wilf-mwamba-on-the-role-of-analysis-in-effective-influencing/.

S. Popovic, *Blueprint for Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Non-Violent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

A. de Waal, *Advocacy in Conflict: Critical Perspectives on Transnational Activism* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

PART IV
PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

Reading books is hard work. I suspect that fewer and fewer of us have the concentration span to read the whole thing from beginning to end, but maybe that's just me – I've become a chronic speed reader/skimmer. But now you've got to the all-important 'so what?' bit. What do the previous chapters suggest for activists seeking to be more effective in their efforts to change the world?

This concluding chapter will try to strike a delicate balance between the complexity of real life and the 'intentionality' of those trying to make change happen. When this book came out in 2016, I was very reluctant to provide too much direction—I wanted to explore the importance of power and systems and the limits to our ability to change them, but also to show that by learning to dance with such systems, we can contribute to some of the wonderful changes going on in the world (and help defend against the dark stuff).

But since the book was published, I have worked with inspirational civil society organizations around the world, along with hundreds of brilliant LSE students, researchers, and senior aid sector leaders to discuss and refine these ideas. What they've taught me allows this new edition to be a bit more propositional. Working with people from around the world trying to bring about change in the most difficult of circumstances, I think we have some useful ideas on how to bring about intentional change.

This chapter offers a methodology for how to unpack complex problems; identify points of entry for activism; then use power analysis and stakeholder mapping to better understand the individuals and institutions you are seeking to influence. It cautions against being overly linear, arguing that, in order to flourish in complex systems, activists should cultivate curiosity, humility, self-awareness, and openness to a diversity of viewpoints. It explores the obstacles such an approach faces, in terms of conventional ways of working, thinking, and funding activism. It encourages us

to nurture a genuine curiosity about the complex interwoven elements that characterize the systems we are trying to influence, without abandoning our desire to take action.

I hope it's useful, or at least interesting.

13
Making Change Happen: How Do We Put It All Together?

Commenting on an early draft of this book back in 2015, Masood Mulk, who runs a large NGO in what he calls 'the badlands' of the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, provided this memorable example of what can go wrong:

> I will never forget a Princeton graduate who was brought in to undertake a change programme within an educational institution in a remote region. He started by throwing out 'inefficient people'. But he started moving those who represented the tribal balance in the region out of their jobs, the people from the mountains descended and surrounded him in his house. He was a virtual prisoner for days. I remember going to meet him and he kept shaking his head: 'They never taught me this at Princeton, they told me the villagers were simple people.'[1]

Such stories of failure to understand culture and context are unfortunately all too common in the world of aid and development, and among activists more broadly. Diagnosing what went wrong is always a lot easier than suggesting what activists should do differently.

But let's give it a go. This chapter will try to strike a delicate balance between the complexity of real life and the 'intentionality' of those trying to make change happen. When this book came out in 2016, I was very reluctant to provide too much direction—I wanted to explore the importance of power and systems and the limits to our ability to change them, but also to show that by learning to dance with such systems, we can contribute to some of the wonderful changes going on in the world (and help defend against the dark stuff).

[1] Masood Mulk, personal communication, email, January 2016.

Since the book was published, I have worked with inspirational civil society organizations around the world, along with hundreds of brilliant LSE students,[2] researchers, and senior aid sector leaders[3] to discuss and refine these ideas. What they've taught me allows this new edition to be a bit more propositional. Working with people from around the world trying to bring about change in the most difficult of circumstances, I think we have some useful ideas on how to bring about intentional change. Here goes.

Most advocacy starts with a problem: climate change risks, violations of rights, absent or inadequate public services—the list of things we want to fix is endless. The trick is not to jump straight to our preferred solution, but to spend time unpacking the problem—there is even an apocryphal (sadly) quote attributed to Einstein: 'If I were given one hour to save the planet, I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem and one minute resolving it'. How I wish he'd actually said it!

There are several ways to unpack problems, which all basically do the same thing—start to unpick the many contributory factors in order to identify some promising 'points of entry' for influencing. In 2022, participants in one of our aid leader influencing courses gave up their lunch hour to construct an Ishikawa or 'fishbone' diagram[4] around a problem they were all facing—vaccine hesitancy among the populations they were working with, mainly in East Africa. Here's what they came up with (see Figure 13.1).

They identified broad categories of causes (in the boxes at the end of the larger bones), and within those, sub-causes. They then looked for suitable points of entry based on some criteria: Is it important for your goal (in this case reducing vaccine hesitancy)? Does it look winnable? Do you or your organization have credibility/leverage on this issue? Are other organizations already doing it or are better placed than you?

This kind of starting point allows you to wrestle some sense out of a complex problem such as the reluctance to get vaccinated, without oversimplifying the causes. It uncovers some entry points you may not have thought of (if pharmacies are spreading rumours because they are annoyed

[2] LSE International Development Masters module on Advocacy, Campaigning and Grassroots Activism, https://www.lse.ac.uk/resources/calendar/courseguides/dv/2023_dv455.htm.

[3] Global Executive Leadership Initiative, Influencing for Senior Leaders: Analysis, Strategy, and Practice, https://www.geli.org/programmes/regional-training-programme/influencing-senior-leaders-analysis-strategy-and-practice.

[4] https://asq.org/quality-resources/fishbone.

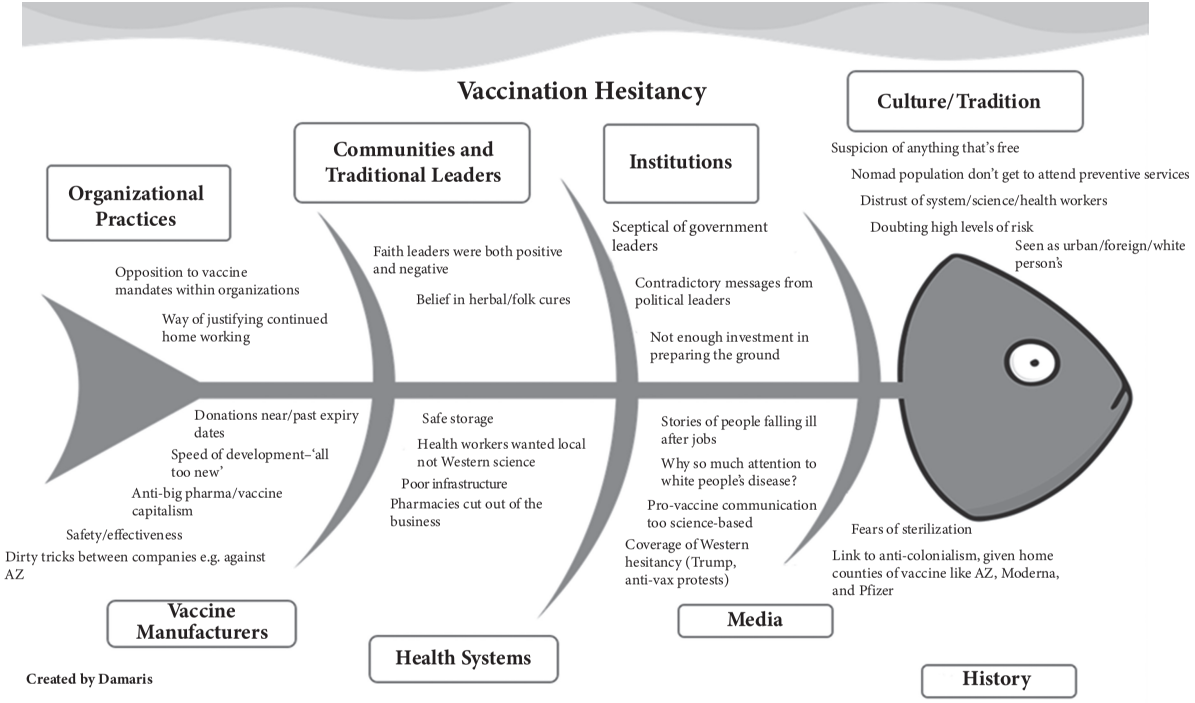

Figure 13.1 Unpacking the Problem

Source: author.

about being cut out of the business, let's get them involved). Finally, if, as often happens, your first efforts fail, it is easy to go back to the fishbone in search of other points of entry that might prosper.

Once you've picked a point of entry, it's time to go back to the discussion on power in Chapter 2. What kinds of power (e.g. visible, hidden, invisible) are relevant in solving/perpetuating the problem? What kind of redistribution of power is required?

The next step is to think about that clunky word, the 'stakeholders'. Who makes the decisions you are trying to influence? Who might want to block them? Who are the 'influentials' who can sway both decision makers and blockers?

Think back to the Tajikistan village water problem in Chapter 2. Invest time in understanding the stakeholders, then map them on a simple 2×2, where the two axes represent level of influence and level of support for the thing you are advocating for. Here's an example from one of my LSE students on removing taxes on menstrual products in Malawi (see Figure 13.2).

In this case, the goal is changing formal rules (laws, policies, spending commitments), but mapping stakeholders is equally helpful when addressing norm shifts, as discussed in Chapter 3—it's just the players that are different.

Once you've identified the broad stakeholders, keep digging. Take the Malawian Ministry of Health—who is more important in getting rid of the tax on menstrual products? The Minister? The Permanent Secretary? A more junior civil servant? Is there a parliamentary health committee that can apply pressure?

Next, put yourself in their shoes: what might persuade them to support your campaign? Conversations with those affected? A piece of well-communicated research? The right messenger—someone they fear or respect? Or is it better to wait for a 'critical juncture'—a moment when change becomes more possible, such as an election, or a crisis? Some influences are more below the radar: is your issue part of a historical legacy? How does it resonate with prevailing ideologies, religion, culture, and values?

Then (and only then) is it time to move on from analysing the problem and the system to 'so what do we do?', a combination of overall aims (strategies) and specific actions (tactics). The key point here is that the strategy

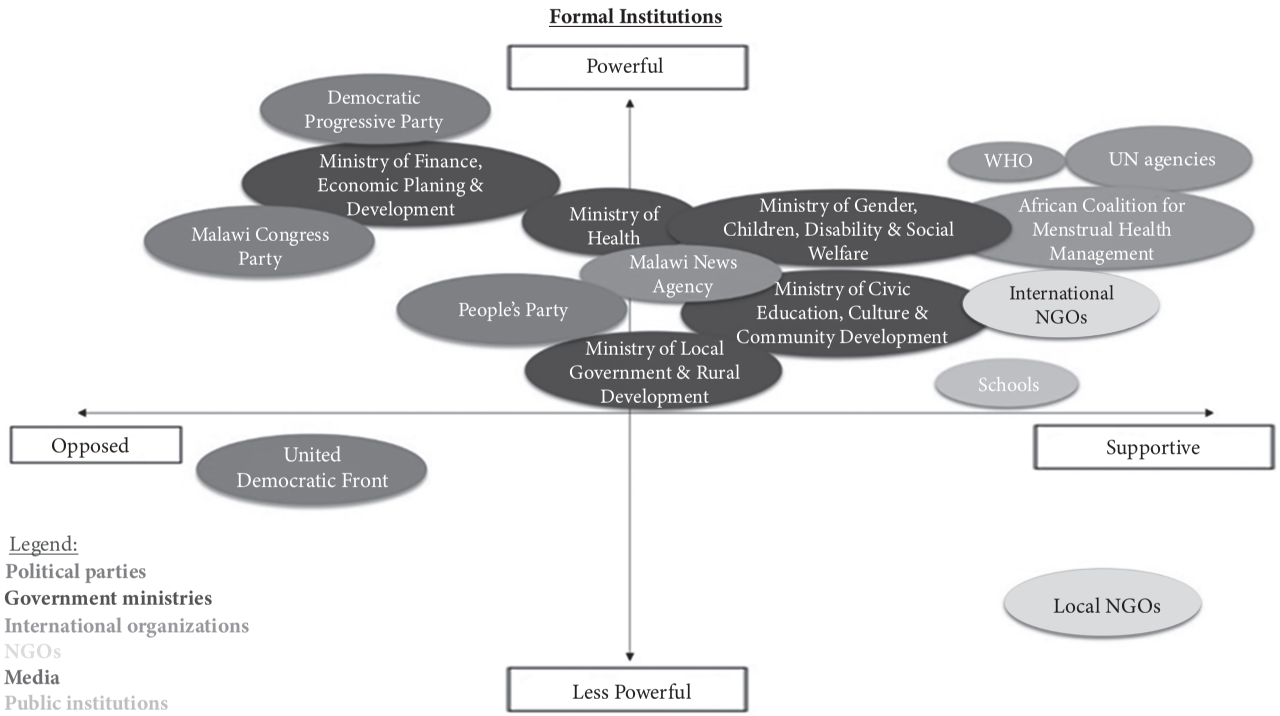

Figure 13.2 Stakeholder mapping (formal institutions)
Source: author.

and tactics need to reflect your understanding of the problem and the stakeholder mapping. If you just default to the kind of activism you always do, you've just wasted a lot of time doing the fishbones, etc.!

Going back to the stakeholder map, I make a pretty crude distinction between different clusters, which require different kinds of strategies:

- Group: High Influence, High Support
  Possible strategies: convene 'unusual suspects' to talk to each other; gap fill, e.g. on evidence
- Group: Low Influence, High Support
  Possible strategies: build power with/within to increase confidence and organizational voice; link them up to more influential players
- Group: High Influence, Low Support
  Possible strategies: Think about the messenger not just the message; seize windows of opportunity

Here is where countless options suddenly open up—the range of possible strategies and tactics is as wide as your imagination. Figure 13.3 shows a non-exhaustive list from the Social Change Project, with examples of tactics for individual and societal change, across both informal and formal spaces. This is just the tip of a very large activist iceberg.

The choice of tactics also needs to reflect the wider context. Here I'd like to suggest the third and last 2×2 diagram in this book (see Figure 13.4). Although designed by international aid policy people at a USAID workshop I attended,[5] I think it is relevant to national and local activists as well. I like it because it acknowledges that not every situation is complex—sometimes you should just vaccinate kids, build roads, or distribute voting registration forms.

To use the framework in Figure 13.3, think about both the context and your proposed strategies and tactics. If you are operating in a stable or predictable context with a well-understood change strategy (in the upper right quadrant), it may be entirely appropriate to use a traditional linear planning approach. In the end, some change processes are relatively straightforward,

[5] Duncan Green, 'Doing development differently: a great discussion on adaptive management (no, really)', From Poverty to Power blog, 4 November 2015, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/doing-development-differently-a-great-discussion-on-adaptive-management-no-really/.

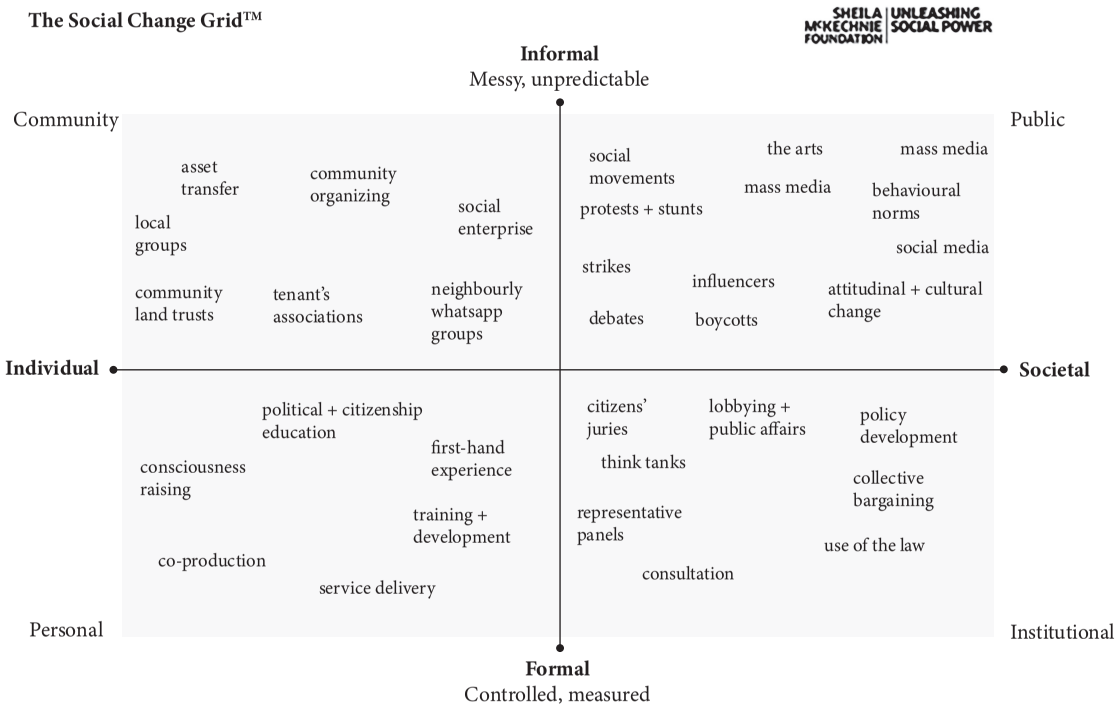

Figure 13.3 The Social Change Grid
Source: Sheila McKechnie Foundation.

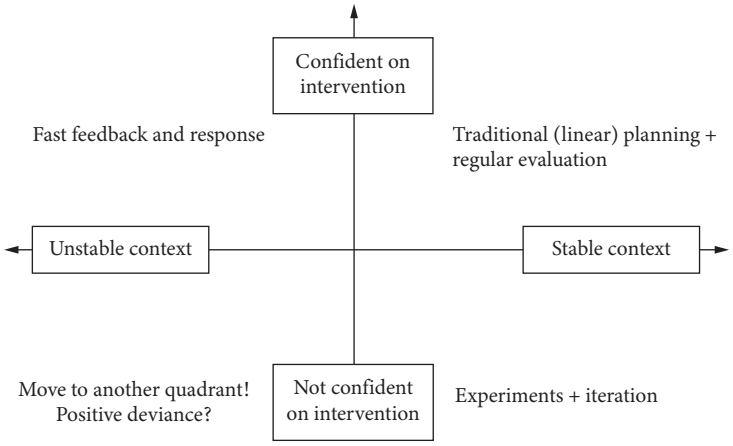

Figure 13.4 Adapting your change strategies to the system
Source: Adaptive Management workshop, NESTA, November 2015.

and there, KISS ('keep it simple, stupid') is not a bad approach. But remember the need for humility—too many interventions assume certainty exists, only to find things are much messier than anticipated. How will you continually gather evidence to check that things are indeed as predictable as you initially thought?

If the context is stable but you are not sure what kind of change strategy might work (bottom right quadrant), then experiment with several different ones and iterate according to the results. If you are fairly sure about the strategy but not about the context (upper left quadrant), the emphasis should include setting up fast feedback systems to detect and respond rapidly to sudden changes.

Finally, if you are not confident of either your understanding of the context or your change strategies (bottom left quadrant), you clearly have a problem! It may be worth adopting a positive deviance approach, as discussed in Chapter 1. Alternatively, you can look for a simpler or more tried-and-tested intervention to get you into the top left quadrant, or spend time understanding the context much better, so you can move to the bottom right.

You've now worked all the way through from a broad problem to some strategies and tactics that you think are worth trying. Have a cup of tea. One final thing that might be worth doing before getting stuck in is to write them

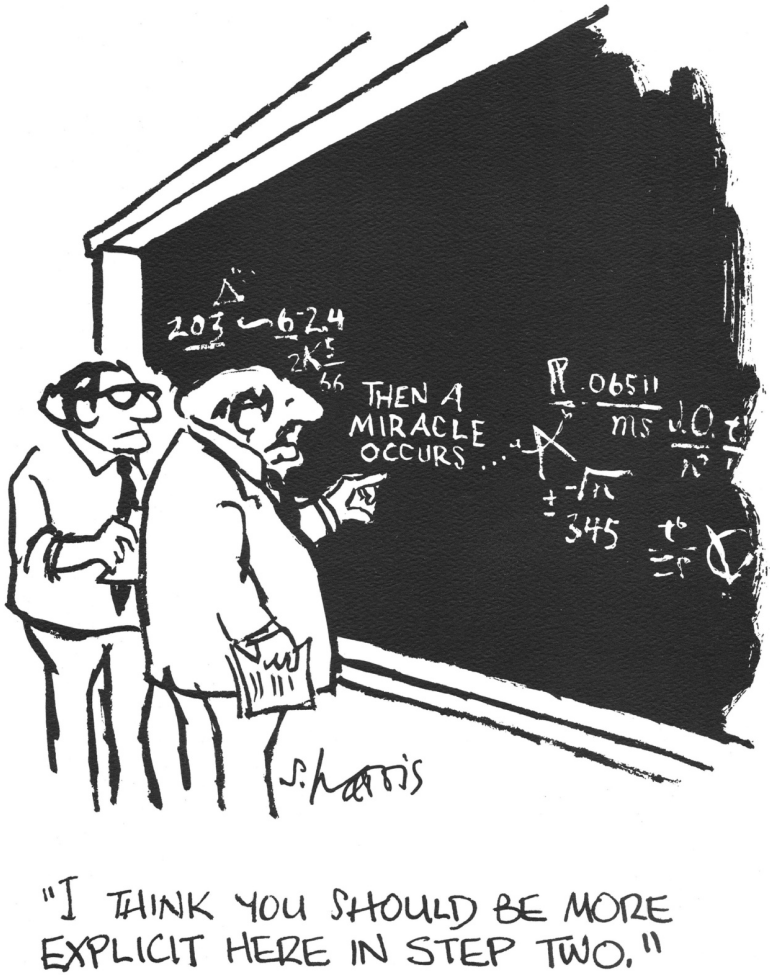

Figure 13.5 Then a miracle occurs

Source: Sidney Harris, Science Cartoons Plus.com.

down as a set of 'I/we will do x to achieve y' statements. It's time to go back to the cartoon in Chapter 6 (see Figure 13.5) and look at your assumptions. For our course on influencing for senior aid leaders, Anna MacDonald reviewed a number of real-life campaigns to identify their 'if a, then b' strategies. These included:

- If we write a well-evidenced report about the food crisis in the Sahel, decision makers will read it and act on the recommendations.
- If we raise awareness of the refugee crisis in Bangladesh, donors will respond.
- If women participate in politics, they will advance women's rights.
- If we take diplomats to see the humanitarian impact, they will take action to lessen future incidents.
- If we strengthen civil society organizations, they will influence governments.

Each of these is riddled with assumptions about how decision makers operate (in the first example: Do decision makers not already know about the hunger crisis? Do they have any budget to respond?), and those assumptions are worth interrogating, as they may well hold the key to why your campaign succeeds or flops.

Depending on the context, it can be even more complex than that. Irene Guijt argues that

> Working with basic assumptions works when you've got a course of events you can anticipate or imagine—the known. But what about when you are working under complex or chaotic conditions about which much becomes clear after the fact? All kinds of assumptions will jump out and catch you by surprise. Those situations ask for more frequent reflections and corrective action. In fact, under such conditions, action might be the only way to reveal an assumption. You try out something and see what happens. Whatever surprises us or does not happen as expected will reveal what our assumption was and is the basis for rapid reflection and identification of a new action based on a corrected assumption.[6]

At this point, activists are likely to breathe a sigh of relief and finally jump into action. What can they expect? Above all, that things are highly unlikely to go to plan. One of the main lessons I drew from researching ten case studies in 'active citizenship' in preparation for writing this book is the

[6] Irene Guijt, 'Working with assumptions in a theory of change process', internal document for Hivos, March 2013, https://content.changeroo.com/wp-content/uploads/academy/2017/07/toc_notes_3_working_with_assumptions_in_a_toc_process.pdf.

importance of unpredictable events and accidents:[7] the arrival (or loss) of champions in positions of power, unexpected changes in laws and policies, crises, and scandals.

Dancing with complex systems is like navigating through traffic—success depends on fast feedback to detect new situations and having the ability to respond quickly (a pedestrian has stepped out into traffic—hit the brake!). If I tried to cycle across London with a pre-planned route and velocity and no adjustments according to feedback, I would be lucky to get to the end of the street. We have to spot new windows of opportunity, learn from failure, develop useful rules of thumb to guide decision making, and take multiple small bets until we find something that works. Analysis of the system, then, is not a one-off upfront engagement, but a mindset, a continual process of analysing and reanalysing the context in which the programme or campaign operates.

What are the obstacles to working in this way?

Three ubiquitous forces in the aid business and other sectors stand in the way of widespread adoption of this kind of approach. First is the lure of the top-down, whereby philosopher kings (or queens, or at least consultants) from universities and think-tanks contemplate a political and economic system and, like Hermione and her Elf Liberation Front, derive the perfect theory of change without actually talking to anyone on the ground. Rarely it seems do experts show interest in marginalized people's own understanding of change (after all, it might do them out of a job). The ever-more elaborate 'political economy analyses' they produce for aid donors seem to pay more attention to the economy than the politics,[8] and thus induce a helpless acceptance of the status quo in their readers.

Second is the wrong kind of toolkit. Activists are busy, stressed people who need support. Most do not take kindly to being told 'every situation is

[7] Duncan Green, 'Promoting active citizenship: what have we learned from 10 case studies of Oxfam's work?', Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/promoting-active-citizenship-what-have-we-learned-from-10-case-studies-of-oxfam-338431/.

[8] David Hudson and Adrian Leftwich, *From Political Economy to Political Analysis*, DLP Research Paper 25 (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2014), https://dlprog.org/publications/research-papers/from-political-economy-to-political-analysis/.

different—go study yours, and come up with some stuff to try'. They want an idea of where to begin, what questions to ask, what success looks like. This natural instinct has prompted a proliferation of 'toolkits' and best-practice guidelines that, while better than a single 'right' answer, are often incompatible with the kinds of systems thinking that underpins effective activism. At least to some extent, the best activists make it up as they go along. But making it up as you go along requires a considerable degree of self-confidence and chutzpah, a level of intellectual independence our educational systems do not always prepare us for (not to mention a degree of flexibility that few organizations or their funders will tolerate).

Good toolkits (here's one[9]) should provide a 'cookbook' (to extend the cake metaphor on linear thinking from Chapter 1), leaving it to the activists to select promising recipes to try out in any given situation. Other tools (including the logframe) started out with the same noble intentions, only to be boiled down in the crucible of bureaucracy and time pressure into largely uniform checklists. In recent years, efforts to work in a more flexible, iterative way within the aid sector have become much more widespread, captured in unappealing names such as 'adaptive management'[10] and 'thinking and working politically'.[11] Let's hope that trend continues, and that such efforts do not degenerate into logframes on steroids.

The third force is the demand for evidence of quick results and value for money. While upward accountability to donors is necessary—it justifies aid spending to funders or taxpayers and promotes learning and improvement—the top-down pressure for results can have some deeply negative consequences for how such new approaches play out in practice. It is much easier to 'prove' results by assuming the world is linear, reinforcing the 'if *x*, then *y*' mindset. In complex systems, on the other hand, it makes more sense to be accountable for what you have learned and how you have adapted to it, and for the emerging signs of change (including the unintended variety) than for results against a pre-set plan. But that can be a tough sell with traditional funders.

[9] Richard English, *Influencing for Impact Guide: How to Deliver Effective Influencing Strategies* (Oxford: Oxfam, 2020).

[10] J. Lonsdale, *Guidance Note: Practical Introduction to Adaptive Management* (DT Global, 2022).

[11] G. Teskey, *Thinking and Working Politically—Are We Seeing the Emergence of a Second Orthodoxy?* (Atlanta: Abt Associates, 2017).

The need to demonstrate results in order to obtain funding also pushes activist organizations to work on issues where such 'islands of linearity' are to be found (distributing bed nets, registering voters, vaccinating kids), rather than ones that may matter more (women's empowerment, fighting corruption) but are harder and more expensive to measure and require a completely different kind of antenna and approach.

How to be an effective activist

This way of thinking about change requires activists to work in different and potentially difficult ways. The characteristics they need to cultivate in order to flourish in complex systems include curiosity, humility, self-awareness, and openness to a diversity of viewpoints.

But people become activists not to analyse the world, but to change it. We are impatient with anything that smacks of navel-gazing (one Oxfam head of advocacy dismissed my job as head of research as 'beard stroking'). Consequently, we often fail to make enough effort to understand the system we are facing.

The world needs many more people with a mindset that encourages genuine curiosity about the complex interwoven elements that characterize the systems we are trying to influence, without abandoning our desire to take action. We need to be 'reflectivists'—simultaneously observers and activists, which can be tough.

There is a scene in one of my favourite TV series, *The Wire*, when Bunk, a dissolute but brilliant detective, advises a new recruit that the key to success is cultivating 'soft eyes', learning to spot the important clues that lie in your peripheral vision or that you weren't looking for.[12] Being a good observer is harder than it sounds. It's easy to see what we are looking for, but much harder to notice and register the unexpected or the evidence that contradicts our assumptions.

Curiosity about the system needs to be laced with humility and self-knowledge. We don't—can't—have all the answers; we can't predict events; what works in one place won't work in another. We need to become comfortable with (maybe even enjoy) messiness and uncertainty, and give due

[12] *The Wire*, 'Soft Eyes', Season 4, Episode 2, aired 17 September 2006.

weight to local knowledge and feedback. We need to include a more diverse range of people and viewpoints in any discussion, and (however busy we are) take regular time-outs to assess what is or isn't working and change course accordingly.

We need to recognize that 'we' are not lofty, disinterested observers. We make decisions at least partly based on our default models of the world and assumptions not based on evidence. We are wielders of power in our own right as are the organizations we work for. Power flows within our networks, influencing our relations with partners and allies. Let's recall Robert Chambers' question from Chapter 2: 'Am I an upper or a lower in this conversation?'

Implications for funders

Activism costs money, and money is power. Funders can support activists to adopt a power and systems perspective. Of course, funders are often activists themselves, both through the way they allocate cash and negotiate with recipients and through their own role as influencers. Nevertheless, there are a few additional points funders need to consider if they are to get behind this new approach.

The first, discussed earlier, is their standards regarding results and reporting. Is a funder willing to accompany a grant recipient as the organization navigates a complex change process, with changes in both direction and expected results, or does it insist 'This is the plan we funded, so you must stick with it'?

There is good news here, in the shape of an emerging world of grantmaking that is much more based on trust and goal than detailed plans. Examples include the Mackenzie Scott Foundation[13] and Mama Cash.[14]

Funders, even more than individual activists, should think of themselves as ecosystem gardeners. They should sow diversity to encourage innovation and resilience, rather than institutional monoculture. Funders must embrace the fact that giving an activist organization $10 million may be

[13] 'How MacKenzie Scott's $12 billion in gifts to charity reflect an uncommon trust in the groups she supports', The Conversation, 28 March 2022, https://theconversation.com/how-mackenzie-scotts-12-billion-in-gifts-to-charity-reflect-an-uncommon-trust-in-the-groups-she-supports-173496.

[14] https://www.mamacash.org/en/en-homepage.

more damaging than not giving it anything. Can they find ways to break up their funding into numerous small grants? (I'm a fan of a very old school variant of this—scholarships.)

The good news is that although activists are often pessimistic about funders' readiness to work in new ways, many of the innovative examples of new approaches described in this book actually grew out of 'good donorship'. In Tanzania, DFID was willing to fund a 'venture capitalist' theory of change involving multiple parallel experiments and the expectation that many of them would fail.[15] In Tajikistan, the Swiss Development Agency supported Oxfam with a ten-year grant to convene and broker national and global institutions working on water and sanitation, described in Chapter 2.[16] I hope activists working for funders and their grantees will collect and publicize such examples to make the case for wider change.

More broadly, some of the big funding bodies are in the vanguard of new ways of thinking about change, particularly in the area of governance. The networks around 'Adaptive Management', 'Doing Development Differently', and 'Thinking and Working Politically' are made up largely of aid donors.[17,18]

Implications for international activist organizations

Can you take a supertanker white-water rafting?[19] The agility of 'guerrilla' organizations like Global Witness and the single-issue focus of institutions like the Ethical Trading Initiative make them prime candidates for

[15] Duncan Green, 'The Chukua Hatua Accountability Programme, Tanzania', Oxfam Active Citizenship Case Study (Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International, 2015), https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-chukua-hatua-accountability-programme-tanzania-338436/.

[16] Duncan Green, '"Convening and brokering" in practice: sorting out Tajikistan's water problem', From Poverty to Power blog, 17 January 2013, https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/convening-and-brokering-in-practice-sorting-out-tajikistans-water-problem/.

[17] http://doingdevelopmentdifferently.com/.

[18] David Booth, *Thinking and Working Politically*, GSDRC Professional Development Reading Pack no. 13 (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2015), https://gsdrc.org/professional-dev/thinking-and-working-politically/.

[19] Jo Rowlands, 'Do we drive a supertanker or go white-water rafting? A brief exploration of complexity in change strategies/types: plugging a gap', unpublished paper for Oxfam GB's UK Poverty Programme, 2005.

the ways of thinking and working discussed in this chapter. In contrast, large organizations, whether NGOs or government departments, feel very cumbersome. As one Australian government aid worker complained, 'We have to be like the incredible elastagirl, stretching between what our political masters demand and what communities need and want'.[20]

But size brings advantages too, in the form of large knowledge bases and economies of scale, which allow organizations to experiment and exchange ideas between countries and programmes. And when it comes to influence, small is seldom beautiful: governments are more likely to listen to bigger players, particularly when they have 'skin in the game' (programmes and staff on the ground). What kind of hybrid combination of scale and subsidiarity provides the optimal blend of flexibility and clout?

One option might be a 'conscious uncoupling' in which a large international organization transitions from a supertanker to a flotilla, with a medium-sized mother ship and a fleet of small, independent spin-offs and start-ups. As noted above, the smaller, more nimble crafts could include individuals in addition to projects. A flotilla structure could potentially conserve the advantages of scale while fostering the agility and innovation that are essential to success.

Large international organizations will probably continue to have the ears (and cheques) of Western donors, but the real arena for advocacy in national and local development will increasingly be the interaction between nation states and diverse domestic players. Big agencies should take care not to usurp that space, adopting a supporting role rather than the star part. This is the backdrop to the heated debates on 'localization' discussed in Chapter 9 on civil society.

That leaves several important roles for international activist organizations, noted in Chapter 12. They could choose to focus on the growing number of collective action problems that have so far stymied the chaotic/sclerotic institutions of global governance, like climate change, the arms trade, inequality, and restrictive intellectual property rules.

When they spot new trends and successful innovations, thanks to their on-the-ground presence in low and middle income countries, they can give them greater exposure and ensure the ideas underlying them enter the open end of the 'policy funnel'. And they can raise the alarm when necessary, such

[20] Personal communication, December 2015.

as when governments crack down on civil society organizations. They can become 'fundermediaries' (sorry), able to take the large chunks of cash that northern donors need to hand out due to their limited staff numbers, and (skimming off as little as possible) divide it up between local organizations who often need smaller, more flexible amounts of money. But please note, sceptics believe such intermediaries are unnecessary and will always end up skimming money that is better spent on local organizations.

The Washington-based Center for Global Development has made a virtue out of lobbying for policy improvements in high income countries as a way to promote development.[21] In areas such as aid policy and tax havens, there is certainly scope for international NGOs to expand their engagement, as well as for taking on new and pressing topics such as migration.

Up to now, international organizations have had a fitful engagement with debates on social norms and citizen rights. Although measuring effectiveness is a challenge, striving to accelerate normative shifts that enhance the rights of groups currently facing discrimination is an important activity that lends itself to an international approach.

International organizations are also well positioned to help activists link up across national borders, for example, via multi-stakeholder initiatives in global supply chains, such as the Ethical Trading Initiative.[22] On the new generation of health challenges in developing countries, such as obesity, tobacco, and road traffic accidents, international organizations could facilitate contact and exchanges between southern and northern campaigners who have a track record of success.[23]

Conclusion

Contrary to the standard rhetoric of management gurus, the status quo probably *is* an option for activists and their organizations. It's just not a very good one. If we stay stuck in logframe linearity, we will become ever less effective. New, disruptive organizations and approaches will eventually take our place or, at the very least, take part of our turf.

[21] http://www.cgdev.org/.
[22] https://www.ethicaltrade.org/.
[23] John Gaventa and Rajesh Tandon (eds), *Globalizing Citizens: New Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion* (London: Zed Books, 2010).

Thinking more deeply about how change happens should change everything: the way we think and work, the things we try to change, and the structure and activities of our organizations.

It isn't easy. Examples of new approaches and mindsets already exist in the work of many activists from local to global level, but rarely do they catch on and spread. One of my biggest frustrations at Oxfam has been how seldom great new ideas and activism (including many described in this book) have been picked up, replicated, and adapted elsewhere. Harking back to the 3i's explanation of inertia (see Chapter 2), I suspect the problem lies not so much in interests or ideas but in institutional culture: activist organizations and funders need to change if they are to make these insights work and take them to the scale they deserve.

The prize for doing so is potentially enormous. It could unleash a wave of energy and creativity among activists at all levels, as they both dance with the system and change it utterly.

Further reading

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R. English, *Influencing for Impact Guide: How to Deliver Effective Influencing Strategies* (Oxford: Oxfam, 2020).

D. Green, 'Fit for the future? Development trends and the role of international NGOs', Oxfam Discussion Paper (Oxford: Oxfam GB, June 2015).

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A. Rao, J. Sandler, D. Kelleher, and C. Miller, *Gender at Work: Theory and Practice in 21st Century Organizations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

C. Valters, *Theories of Change: Time for a Radical Approach to Learning in Development* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2015).

Further viewing

Oxfam, Make Change Happen, online course (MOOC), https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/make-change-happen.

Conclusion

Congratulations, we're nearly done. What you have read thus far (assuming that you haven't skipped to the end, as I often do) is an attempt to make some sense out of the many things I have done, seen, read, talked about, and thought about for decades.

The story of how change happens is an inspiring one, filled with little-known heroes. And it is a story that never ends. As long ago as the sixth century BCE, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus noted, 'Everything changes, and nothing stays still.'[1]

But before you throw down the book and rush out to make change happen, some caution is advisable. Progressive change is not primarily about 'us' activists: it occurs when poor people and communities take power into their own hands; shifts in technology, prices, demography, and sheer accident can be far more important than the actions of would-be change agents. The first lesson for activists is humility.

That said, activists do play a crucial role. We put new questions into the endlessly churning stream of public debate, and we can help those on the sharp end raise their voices, shifting some degree of power from those who have too much to those who have too little.

Such work is a joy, a privilege, and a responsibility. We need to study the systems in which we operate, immersing ourselves in the complexities of the institutions (states, private sector, international system) that shape the pathways of change. We must get to know the players, both our targets and fellow activists, whether they work for the state, the private sector, or civil society organizations: how they see the world and how we can work with them. We have to understand the underlying force field of power that links them in all its varied manifestations.

[1] Quoted in Plato's *Cratylus* (dialogue).

We will have more impact if we are prepared to take risks, try new, uncomfortable things, question our own power and privilege, and acknowledge and learn from our failures, all the while continuing to work with the zeal and commitment that characterize activists everywhere.

That goes for organizations every bit as much as for individuals. Researching and writing this book has convinced me that my organization, Oxfam, along with many others involved in promoting progressive change around the world, needs to change. We have to work in ways that reflect our evolving understanding of power and systems, becoming smarter, quicker to react, and more innovative. If we don't, then just like any other sclerotic company that resists change, new, bolder start-ups will enter the fray and eat our lunch (which may be no bad thing, of course).

Finally, I want to go back to what this is all about: human development, so brilliantly captured by Amartya Sen's definition, 'the freedoms to be and to do'.[2] Despite setbacks and the grim filter of the evening news, that story is overwhelmingly positive. The expansion of those freedoms over the last century has been unprecedented: millions, even billions of human beings leading healthier, better educated lives, freeing themselves from poverty and hunger, expanding their rights, living richer, more rewarding lives. For me, nothing gives life more meaning than being an activist, doing what we can to support that historic struggle.

[2] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

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