Stories and patterns of change

VOLUME 2

SILVIA CAPEZZUOLI · GIULIO GHIRARDO · DANIEL GUIJARRO · RUTH JOLLY
This publication is the second in our series to let organisations and friends know how our work-related learning progresses.

Here we share some reflections on patterns and trends we’ve observed in our consultancy work and concepts we hold to be vital in this work in service of international development. These views are brought to life in the highlighted examples of our work in 2017.

This Stories and Patterns of Change focuses on emerging themes that we have experienced as consultants in a particularly active year of consultancies and projects for our organisation.

In this publication we showcase examples from our global work and illustrate important patterns we see appearing in the development sector. Reviewing our experiences in these consultancies, we offer our views, beliefs and questions. And notice that this time of shared reflection produces not only insights, challenges and learnings, but renewed energy and enquiry into our continuing work around Leadership, Knowledge, Learning and Change, Systems Thinking and Complexity, Relationship and Conflict.

Some of our colleagues and friends define the international development sector as a ‘fashion industry’. Methodologies and tools become relevant and mainstream for a while, then fade away readily assigned to ‘past practices’. Some re-emerge once in a while and stay popular for a longer period of time. In our practice we believe that some methodologies stand the test of time and remain relevant today. We continue to work with participatory approaches which are vital to engage in any work on power dynamics; awareness; recognising multiple voices and diversity and gaining agreements for action.

We believe this sector is about contributing to transformational change; a change in relationships, identity and mind sets. To achieve this we need to ‘turn the camera around’ and look at our own daily practice as practitioners. Do we question our practice and tools enough? Do we ‘walk the talk’? Do we apply the learning during implementation or just at the end? Do we understand the difference between learning and being aware of our own mistakes? While running in a park recently, one of our consultants shared an idea: “There is change without learning, but there is no learning without change”. Although we think it is always important to question ourselves and to learn from our mistakes, actually questioning ourselves as individuals and practitioners is often an un-easy process. Learning, for us, means changing. To put into practice learning processes we need to change something within ourselves and outside of ourselves. If we do not change patterns of actions and behaviour, then we are merely aware of something. Learning always implies change.

We think a key component in bringing about transformational change is the concept of trust. Trust is key in all the work we do and we believe it is an essential part of social change. On reflection, we realise that more than half of our contracts in the past year came through organisations and individuals with whom we have slowly built trust. We take the discipline of consulting and facilitating seriously and know that trust plays a huge role in this work. Work which requires adapting to diverse contexts, mediating, creating safe spaces for meaningful conversations and making informed choices about applying flexible tools in a range of different scenarios. This is how we identify expertise – or better, the ‘art’ involved in this type of work. We appreciate that our clients continue to invite us in at key points in their own growth and regard us as consultants they can trust to work relationally with them and support their organisations, programmes and people in new and multiple ways.

So for us; trust comes from relationships; from the process of knowing individuals and organisations in a way which helps to construct and de-construct ideas and assumptions we strongly relate to and believe. Through this iterative and collective process of questioning, we think we can relate to our clients in a more realistic and meaningful manner, this allows us not only to question our own practice but also to act as a mirror for organisations interested embedding learning into their everyday processes. The great advantage of this approach is that as consultants, we do not act as service deliverers, but more importantly as learning partners, equally keen to be part of the positive evolution of our sector.
We are becoming increasingly convinced of the power of conversational approaches to learning. We realise that work (and other) relationships can only develop through meaningful conversations. So how can we facilitate conversations that matter?

In a sector under pressure from the demand for demonstrable results, diminishing funding and unpredictable global challenges, we need to remind ourselves of the value of space to talk, listen and reflect. As humans, we yearn for more personal interactions, more real communicating between people face to face. We also need time to reflect, to make the connections in our heads? As humans, we yearn for more personal interactions, more real communicating between people face to face. We also need time to reflect, to make the connections in our heads.

We hear that most of our clients are under pressure in environments where they are expected to be at their desks working, not ‘chatting’ with colleagues. Yet it is precisely these day-to-day conversations in the workplace, and outside it, sometimes formalised, many informal and ad hoc, which help us relate, learn and foster changes in mind set; all key elements for personal and organisational transformation. Such exchanges help break silos, promote connections and collaboration. Conversation is such an underestimated tool for learning.

When we offer our clients the chance to hold such conversations, we notice that shifts in organisational culture can start with individuals changing behaviour. As Chris Collinson says, what works are “techniques that bring about supply and demand of knowledge, around a conversation, in a culture of honesty and trust.”

In our work, we repeatedly see and hear that when sharing of knowledge and experiences does actually happen, the pressure remains to only share successes (as opposed to what did not work). We experience this even in organisations admired for their open, knowledge sharing culture.

Why is it that we are still very resistant to learning from our mistakes? Failing fast is an essential ingredient in building dynamic capabilities. So wouldn’t it be refreshing to be able to make mistakes, talk about them, be heard, get feedback and try something different.

As practitioners, we are interested in knowing, learning and changing. We've been increasingly struck this last year with the strength of the notion that “the way the problem is understood determines what you do.”

As we work with the determination and trials of our clients, we try to remind ourselves to return to first principles and ask: how are we and our clients understanding the problem? Can we recognise what lens we are using? What is the prevailing mind-set here?

It’s claimed we face volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) times – where ‘wicked problems’ abound – that’s to say problems whose solutions require a great number of people to change mind-sets and behaviour.

As individuals, we are all members of groups, teams, organisations, networks and even movements of some kind… isn’t it a good time to think a little about how we understand the nature of these groups – and what mind-sets we’re using – in order to best tackle contemporary times and challenges.

We are becoming more confident and convinced that Systems Thinking and Complexity Theory are hugely helpful concepts to use as we work in and with organisations. What do we think is required of being a member of such systems?

If this is a valid way of reading organisations, then how do members and leaders serve and flourish? What do we think is required of being a member of such systems?

When we offer this description and work with it, we’ve been noticing remarkable space opening up for insights, along with new directions and possibilities. And if language is truly generative than talking about an organisation as an open, complex (not complicated) living network, requiring healthy feedback loops, living with conflict and uncertainty as part of the terrain, produces different results from talking about organisations as if they were closed structures to be managed…

Funnily enough, it was back in 1960 that Douglas McGregor, in The Human Side of Enterprise, declared “It is probable that one day we shall begin to draw organisation charts as a series of linked groups rather than as a hierarchical structure of individual ‘reporting’ relationships.”

And more lately, Peter Senge, in The Fifth Discipline, illuminates Systems Thinking and Complexity Theory stating: “You can only understand the system of a rainstorm by contemplating the whole, not any individual part of the pattern… business and other human endeavours are also systems… Systems Thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools, that has been developed over the past 50 years to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively.”
Transformational processes of change often involve conflict. And this year, we’ve been called on as conflict mediators in various settings in our role as facilitators.

When a process challenges people’s mind-sets, identities and relationships, organisational status quo and culture can feel a bit shaken. It is not easy for any of us to leave our comfort zone and look at ourselves in the mirror as individuals or collectives. Neither is it easy for facilitators to manage this process. What can be done when people don’t like what they see in the mirror or just refuse to look?

Although organisations have visible structures, policies and procedures in place that help to regulate organisational life, there is still an invisible dimension of this life that we commonly refer to as the organisational culture. It relates to those unwritten norms and habits that we accept and follow unconsciously. This culture often establishes relationships of power, rank and privilege amongst people both on the inside and the outside of the organisation. When such relationships are unbalanced, organisations and individuals tend to lose part of their transformative potential. As Bill O’Brien reminds us and we use as a mantra: “The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor.”

Conflict arises when this imbalance is made explicit. Part of our work as facilitators is to make those relationship imbalances explicit through collective group work exploration. Our aim is to take people through a process in which they can reflect critically on these relationships to co-create the future of their organisation to its maximum potential. To frame the process, and to help groups become aware of the modes they habitually use, are inspired by Otto Scharmer’s Theory U and Adam Kahane’s Modes of Conversation tool.

The process has four stages, although they do not necessarily occur in a linear fashion (see diagram above). First is Talking Nice. This mode of conversation represents the comfort zone where all try to keep the status quo and avoid conflict and where unwritten rules are re-enacted. A second stage (Talking Tough) refers to conversations where unwritten norms (and power relations) are revealed. People stick to the social roles they traditionally play in the group and defend their points of view based on these roles. Normally there are debates and clashes here where conflict is made explicit.

As often happens in our work, in one of our recent workshops we were faced with a debate on upwards and downwards accountability.

To help frame this reflection, we developed a framework based on similar and recurrent discussions surfacing during assessments and evaluation processes which we have facilitated. Our experience suggests that social research processes which put too much emphasis on responding to (supposed or factual) donor demands on numbers and upwards accountability tend to result in a lack of legitimacy, ownership and transformative potential. Merely satisfying others’ expectations (and cognitive dissonances) or, for example, what it means to be poor, tends to transform communities into objects of study (help, aid) and providers of information. This often detaches them any sense of agency and generates aid dependency and passiveness.

However, too much weight on the other side of the equation does not help either. Research processes that only look for community ownership and legitimacy can result in excessive amounts of intangible qualitative data, which is difficult to interpret and is also difficult to communicate to headquarters, funders or donors. Given that highly contextualized data can only be understood in context, this would require donors, funders and HQs to come and see where the data actually originates – clearly an unrealistic option.

Unlike the public or the private sector, the nature of the development sector is that donors and end recipients (providers and clients, taxpayers) are physically and conceptually distant.

We think that a balance between accuracy and legitimacy should be explicitly and actively sought. What is the point of equilibrium? This is the question that researchers and facilitators have to keep in mind throughout any social research process.

Accuracy and Legitimacy

Donors

Community

GENERATIVE DIALOGUE
(co-creation)

REFLEXIVE DIALOGUE
(Inquiry–Curiosity)

TALKING NICE
(Softening)

TALKING TOUGH
(Debate/Clash)

Donors

Community

UPWARDS ACCOUNTABILITY

DOWNWARDS ACCOUNTABILITY

ACCURACY

LEGITIMACY

Managing Conflict

Transnational transfers of knowledge and capacity building often involve conflict. And this year, we’ve been called on as conflict mediators in various settings in our role as facilitators.

When a process challenges people’s mind-sets, identities and relationships, organisational status quo and culture can feel a bit shaken. It is not easy for any of us to leave our comfort zone and look at ourselves in the mirror as individuals or collectives. Neither is it easy for facilitators to manage this process. What can be done when people don’t like what they see in the mirror or just refuse to look?

Although organisations have visible structures, policies and procedures in place that help to regulate organisational life, there is still an invisible dimension of this life that we commonly refer to as the organisational culture. It relates to those unwritten norms and habits that we accept and follow unconsciously. This culture often establishes relationships of power, rank and privilege amongst people both on the inside and the outside of the organisation. When such relationships are unbalanced, organisations and individuals tend to lose part of their transformative potential. As Bill O’Brien reminds us and we use as a mantra: “The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor.”

Conflict arises when this imbalance is made explicit. Part of our work as facilitators is to make those relationship imbalances explicit through collective group work exploration. Our aim is to take people through a process in which they can reflect critically on these relationships to co-create the future of their organisation to its maximum potential. To frame the process, and to help groups become aware of the modes they habitually use, are inspired by Otto Scharmer’s Theory U and Adam Kahane’s Modes of Conversation tool.

The process has four stages, although they do not necessarily occur in a linear fashion (see diagram above). First is Talking Nice. This mode of conversation represents the comfort zone where all try to keep the status quo and avoid conflict and where unwritten rules are re-enacted. A second stage (Talking Tough) refers to conversations where unwritten norms (and power relations) are revealed. People stick to the social roles they traditionally play in the group and defend their points of view based on these roles. Normally there are debates and clashes here where conflict is made explicit.

* Taken from Wageningen University and Research webpage www.mspguide.org/tool/4-types-conversations
The third stage is when people start to challenge their own points of view and stop playing their traditional roles in the group and embrace a more empathetic mode of talking and listening. At this stage organisational unwritten norms are reflected on and challenged by the group. This is the door for a transformational change to occur. The last stage, the one we hope to take the group to, is called Generative Dialogue. At this stage, people listen not only from within themselves or from within others, but from a sense of collectivity that allows co-creation. Rules within the group change, relationships change and new individual and collective identities and potential are revealed within the group. Our big challenge as facilitators is how to support the group to move towards the upper quadrants modes of conversation.

As mediators, we have to tread a fine line between empathy and detachment. If we don’t manage our role well, we are in danger of undermining the process and being discredited by the group (or by the most powerful within the group). In this sense, we need to be careful how deeply we can dive into the organisational culture and always try to find a good balance between process and outputs. People need to feel that process is advancing and that is not us, the facilitators, who are creating the conflict.

We also realise that the process of personal and collective change needed to move through the lower quadrants lasts longer than the period we are hired for. People just don’t change after a workshop or two. Herein lies the big challenge: How much to dive in, and when to give up diving into organisational culture when we are convinced that transformational change implies changing the status quo and given that processes of personal and organisational change take time?
In one of our recent assignments we were asked to facilitate a participatory poverty assessment process aimed at identifying ultra-poor families in remote communities and to train fieldworkers and senior officers from different countries in participatory data collection and analysis tools.

We proposed a methodological framework inspired by the principles of Participatory Action Research, engaging with villagers not only to collect information and insights, but also to make (collective) sense and to seek for constant consensus and involvement during the process. The final output was to produce wellbeing ranking of the community agreed by all villagers through a transparent process.

We started by asking the community members: who considers herself/himself poor, and why? From there, we started identifying different categories such as Livelihoods and Assets (means of living), Capabilities (education and skills) and Power (dignity, self-confidence and leadership).

We used ranking and scoring techniques combined with qualitative tools to quantify the emerging dimensions of poverty and to score each family accordingly. ‘Visible’ dimensions of poverty such as livelihoods or capabilities were relatively easy to measure, i.e. number of livestock per household, regular income or level of education. Yet, measuring self-confidence, sense of dignity or self-awareness are much more complex issues since they are embedded in social norms and cultural beliefs.

The group experienced this complexity and struggled with the subjectivity remaining in the villagers’ answers to their ‘level’ of empowerment. Some participants, especially those in senior positions, started questioning the validity and accuracy of the exercise, claiming that the subjectivity was distorting the soundness of the assessment. They expressed their concerns on whether this lack of accuracy would be accepted by the potential donors of ultra-poor households’ programmes. Others argued that if the analysis of poverty merely relies on easily measurable factors, future programmes will fail to respond to the complex nature of poverty since structural issues such as class, age, gender, sexuality or ethnicity remain and will come up again. Furthermore, community participants had already validated data coming from the power analysis in plenary sessions. This exercise once again showed the importance of using participatory approaches for carrying out such assessments. Within the community, the approach created a sense of ownership of results generated as well as a reflection of what being poor means in such a context.

Following our collaboration with WWF Sweden in their global Theory of Change, we were invited to Russia to support the Barents Baltic Nature and People Programme.

In Murmansk we facilitated a workshop to design a participatory Monitoring and Evaluation system to better understand and underline what types of changes the Programme is contributing to in that specific region. We focused on qualitative approaches to integrate the already-existing quantitative part. Stories of Change and Most Significant Change methodologies were highly appreciated. Staff emphasised the need to understand and discover not only the ‘what’ aspect of monitoring, but also the ‘why’ and ‘for whom’ point of view.

We have recently been asked to conduct similar work for other organisations; these requests underline a need to give voice to the qualitative aspects of monitoring which often do not get captured during the classic activity of monitoring performance with quantitative indicators. In a programme such as the WWF one in Russia, it seems extremely relevant to try to understand what types of changes fisher folk and hunters face within a framework of nature conservation. Familiarisation with these aspects not only empowers the actors involved in the process, but also allows programme staff to better report on the type of impact the implementation is trying to contribute to. A flexible Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation system allows this to happen.
How do we know if training of trainers (ToT) really works? To what extent can we be sure that once people have undergone a ToT, they are ready to actually facilitate on their own, and even if they are, do they get this opportunity soon enough as part of their work? How much depends on people's initial profiles and skills, even before they come on a ToT?

These, and many more, are questions we are grappling with as we explore ways for our ToTs to have lasting, effective outcomes.

When we are asked by clients to design and facilitate a training course/event/programme, we prefer to ensure that in longer term, the organisation asking us has the capacity and skills to facilitate within its own network, rather than outsource the facilitation ‘function’ and process. So we offer a Training of Trainers (ToT) approach to fostering internal sustainability and ownership.

Our tailored ToT package is usually formed of a three day face to face workshop, followed by remote coaching and, where possible, further in-person support as the newly trained participants facilitate and deliver the course themselves. We recommend that the ToT run immediately after the course which participants need to be skilled up in, with a select group of participants (we provide criteria and support for selection).

EAFM for REBYC-II Latin America and Caribbean: Building capacity through Training of Trainers (ToT)

This is the model we have been developing and refining with the EAFM Consortium, a multi-agency effort promoting ecosystem approach to fisheries management in Asia and more recently in Latin America and the Caribbean. Numerous tiers of regional and national practitioners (project officers, agency staff, academics, department heads) have taken part in the Essential EAFM ToT, usually straight after the Essential EAFM course. And a good proportion of them go on to run the Essential EAFM course themselves in their country (usually with initial coaching support).

We know that this tailored ToT model which accompanies a training course, can result in a select cadre of internal staff/partners who gain the skills and exposure to be actively able to facilitate and deliver the course themselves, as well as the skills to design and develop further training. As a direct result of the EAF course and ToT in Costa Rica, four country teams decided that running the EAF course in their own countries was a critical step towards developing and implementing more sustainable fisheries. The Costa Rica team, working with CONAPESCA, the Colombia team, working through INVEMAR, the Mexico team working with INAPESCA, and the Brazil team are facilitating the EAF course in 2018, to include government agencies, small and largescale fisher organisations, NGOs and academia. The FAO REBYC-II LAC coordinator will provide on-going coaching to the teams, and also ensure cross-learning between the six project teams.

The framework for sharing experiences, learning from each other and collaborating to improve regional impact is already there in the form of the REBYC-II LAC project. The ToT therefore not only enhanced personal and group skills, it also has the potential to create a stronger facilitator network based on personal relationships. While the ToT ran simultaneously in Spanish and English, the likelihood is that sharing and exchanges will take place more frequently within each language group.

As practitioners and partners, we need to make an effort to remain part of, and contribute to, these networks, precisely to understand how they develop beyond the scope of the initial consultancy.

We recommend that the ToT run immediately after the course which participants need to be skilled up in, with a select group of participants (we provide criteria and support for selection).
During 2017 we were asked to support the World Food Programme (WFP) in Rome on two different occasions. In February we worked on the development of a Theory of Change for the new Nutrition Policy and in September we facilitated a Risk Management workshop based on systems thinking.

Following on from our 2016–17 work with the Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre for the development of the Theory of Change for the NMNAP, National Multi-sectoral Nutrition Action Plan, our team has developed quite a good understanding of nutritional issues and challenges in reducing malnutrition and stunting. We were therefore asked to support the Nutrition division at WFP’s headquarters in Rome. The final output of our support was the development of a Theory of Change for the Nutrition Policy which was to be rolled out during the whole of 2017.

Theory of Change is now mainstream in the sector and in many of our assignments; this is our choice methodological approach. It enables a group process for projects, programmes and organisations to question their work and rationale in terms of implementation, monitoring, evaluation and learning.

Our support was to facilitate the division’s clear understanding around the precise contribution of WFP work and activities around nutrition. As always, a major component of this work involved focussing our attention on the assumptions underlying the rationale of the whole process.

Later on during the year, the same division decided to focus on the types of risks the policy and the implementers might face. For this input we proposed a workshop emphasising Systems Thinking, with the aim of surfacing more systemic risks rather than the conventional categories which might immediately come to mind (financial, contextual, operational). Through this approach, the staff were able to identify risks which had not been thought about or considered, and consequently start thinking about a mitigation strategy to ensure efficiency and effectiveness.

The ensuing training of trainers (ToT) followed the IMA ToT model, building the capacity of a select cadre of participants in both RBM content and adult pedagogy and facilitation. This cadre will facilitate the implementation of the National Strategic Development Plan which will be rolled out during the spring of 2018. This programme design and set-up served multiple purposes. Participants from different ministries came together to contribute their knowledge and experience to how the NSDP will be developed and rolled out. All actors were under the same roof for several days; this helped in building relations, fostering trust and most of all gathering consensus around decision making processes. Having participants from different ministries and organisations also helped foster cross-fertilisation amongst sectors and the sharing of different practices. Crucially, the programme ensured that all sector participants have an agreed common RBM&E ‘language’ and shared understanding of key concepts, paving the way for a more cohesive NSDP implementation.

During the autumn of 2017 we ran a large programme on Results Based Management, commissioned by the Lesotho Ministry of Development Planning (MDP), through the Lesotho Data for Sustainable Development project, funded by UNDP and EU.

76 participants took part in the 5-day residential training at Mahale Lodge, Lesotho. 22 participants stayed on for a three day Training of Trainers to form a cohort of trainers who in future can deliver the RBM course. The 76 participants (40 women and 36 men) came from approximately 23 different ministries, academic institutions, training organisations and other bodies.

The Lesotho Data for Sustainable Development Project is aimed at developing capacities for collection, analysis and dissemination of development data. The training was designed to aid in building institutional support and technical skills for strengthening national and sectoral capacities to generate and utilize data for RBM&E. The participants were split into their sectoral sub groups, and developed their understanding of RBM with a focus on the strategic goals selected by each group taking guidance from the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP). Throughout the week, each sector shared their work to connect with the whole group’s collective experience.

The Lesotho Data for Sustainable Development Project