Interventions as change management

Winning hearts, changing mindsets

International development, humanitarian and military interventions aim to bring about change, but with mixed results. The fields of change management and complexity science offer useful lessons for those engaged in poor and fragile states.

M uch has been written about *what* should be done to help poor and fragile states. What will spur economic growth? What is the best way to fight malaria? What will prevent state failure? Far less has been written about *how* to find out which solutions may work, or *how* to sustain a process of change.

Several recent articles in *The Broker* on complexity science and systems thinking have dealt with the 'what' and the 'how' of interventions. While they offer valuable insights, the challenge remains how to translate them into practical guidelines for people working in countries in distress.

The international community lacks an appropriate framework to guide interventions aimed at changing the structures and processes within a country, as well as individual behaviour, perceptions and values. The conceptual framework presented here could help ask the right questions and make interventions more effective. It brings together insights from the fields of change management and complexity science that are relevant for systems at any scale, from small organizations to fragile and failing states.

Change management can be defined as a structured approach to transitioning individuals, teams and organizations from an existing to a desired future state. Originally, the approach was applied to businesses, but it has been increasingly applied to nonprofit and government organizations.

The framework outlined here contains elements that are common to most theories of change, and consists of five iterative phases: understanding the system that needs changing; imagining the future; sensing the urgency of the

summary

- Change management and complexity science offer valuable insights into the complexities of interventions in other countries.
- Those involved in international interventions often do not have a thorough understanding of the problems they are dealing with, sometimes with disastrous results.
- A possible framework for future interventions consists of five phases: understanding the system; imagining the future; sensing the urgency to change; six strategies for implementing change; and sustaining change.
- Unless interventions are based on realistic visions and appropriate change strategies, with sufficient resources for as long as it takes, their achievements will always fall far short of expectations.

need for change; six strategies for implementing change; and sustaining change.

Understanding the system
Any intervention intended to bring about change must start with an understanding and framing of the system: What is the problem? How do local people perceive the things that are happening? What internal processes of change are taking place?

Those engaged in international interventions need to understand the type of problem they are dealing with, yet this phase is often skipped, sometimes with disastrous results. If a particular problem is not recognized as such, the wrong strategy and tactics will be used, and thus the opportunity to bring about positive change will be lost. In the case of Afghanistan, for example, according to some observers the Taliban have been so negatively stereotyped that any effort to try to transform their behaviour is bound to fail.

By **Jeroen de Lange**, a senior economist currently working in Africa.

WITH GOD, DISARMAMENT WILL MAKE LIBERIA 1000% BETTER

Different methodologies, disciplines and perspectives are needed. Political economic analyses of the realities underlying government institutions will help understand what political forces are at work. An anthropological perspective will help uncover people's needs and interests as they themselves see them. First, however, a systems understanding of the society is needed. Most problems the international community is faced with are complex or even chaotic. The actual outcomes of interventions in complex systems are often completely different from those envisaged at the outset. Continuous learning about the effects of interventions is therefore essential to determine the course of action.

Perhaps most important is to know when to act and when not to act. Many problems are resistant to policy. Some may resolve themselves more effectively if outsiders do not intervene. In such cases, interventions may do more harm than good. Edward Luttwak, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, argued that war should be allowed to run its course, as it may achieve sustainable peace in the end. A military intervention may stop violence in the short term, but it can create problems for years to come.

Imagining the future

Any effort to achieve change needs a vision of a future that is an improvement of the present. That vision will help to determine strategic goals and the principles to steer processes of change. For example, is sustained economic growth most likely to be achieved through agricultural transformation or by promoting export industries? In Afghanistan, is the goal to build a fully fledged democracy or to prevent new terrorist attacks on the West?

Interventions may either have a vision to achieve fundamental transformation, or to deliver direct results or relief for a target group. Another distinction is between a vision of top-down change, or of participatory bottom-up processes. The most effective interventions combine different visions of change at different stages in the process.

But whose vision are we talking about? That of a poor farmer, a local NGO, or the country's president? Most change management theories recognize the need for a shared vision that resonates with people within the system as well as with outside stakeholders. The wider the gap between the vision of the interveners and that of the local people, the harder it will be to achieve lasting results.

Without a good fit between the vision, implementation capacity and commitment, a vision is likely to be little more than a pipe dream. Politicians often resort to the principle that 'at least doing something is better than doing nothing', even if there is insufficient capacity to achieve their strategic goals. But for any intervention, military or development, the credibility of the commitment to deploy resources until the ultimate goal is achieved is crucial.

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Sensing the urgency to change

The tension between the current reality and the realization that a better future is possible creates a sense of urgency to change. This is a core concept in change management. On one side, we have a group of people who understand their current situation, their needs and interests, and on the other we have a vision of a better future. This creative tension can lead to a commitment to work towards change.

At the point of intervention, some crucial questions need to be asked. Who feels a sense of urgency to change a given situation? Who cares about the problem – the aid workers, the local poor people, the local elite? Or are constituencies in the intervener's country demanding action after seeing starving people on CNN? All too often, interveners end up becoming the owners and paymasters of a problem. Change management experience shows that if the client doesn't care, very little will be achieved.

Can people be made to care, if they don't already? Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, is an interesting example of a deliberate attempt to create a sense of urgency about the need to combat climate change.

Implementing change

The drivers of change, then, are the shared vision held by those involved, alongside the level of urgency they feel about the need for change. But only by implementing and sustaining change will a different reality emerge. The key questions are what to do to solve a problem, how to implement change and determine the sequence of actions to take. When faced with complex or chaotic problems, the international community often tries to apply linear approaches – analysis, best practice, blueprint designs and implementation – that will only work if the problem is known or knowable, and to drive change from the top down. However, with complex problems, the most practical strategy is to analyze and interpret, to find patterns, learn from ongoing interventions and move ahead incrementally. For William Easterly of New York University, the only way to arrive at a solution is through experimentation and trying out what works.

Western countries have learnt something about state-building and democratization, such as the crucial role of taxation in building accountable government institutions and the role of war-making in building states. Domestic accountability has never been the product of administrative reforms alone, but the outcome of political struggle.

The most effective interventions build on these immanent processes of change that lead to political stability, accountability and wealth. Donors who undermine these local processes probably do more harm than good in efforts to build a state accountable to its citizens.

One issue that is often overlooked concerns sequencing and timing – determining what to do, and when. People and systems need to be ready for change. Paul Collier of the University of Oxford, UK, has argued that development aid is most effective in the immediate post-conflict reconstruction phase, and that attempting to introduce multiparty democracy in a fragile society can often lead to renewed violence. In undemocratic societies, ensuring inclusiveness in a political system is often more important than the results of premature elections.

Six strategies

In its efforts to implement change, the international community may use various strategies. Based on the approach developed by Léon de Caluwé and Hans Vermaak of the Twynstra Group, these strategies differ in terms of who owns the problem, who senses the urgency to change, who initiates the intervention, whether the change is driven from the top down or the bottom up, etc. They can be seen as points along a continuum, ranging from those imposed by outsiders to those driven from within.
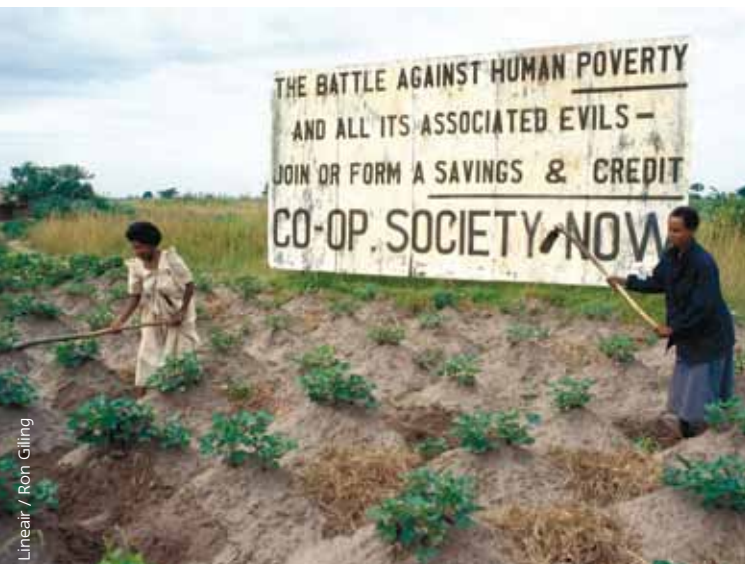
The first, most extreme, strategy involves *forcing a solution* – mostly likely through violence – on a system or people. Examples include military interventions, containment and embargoes. Change is brought about from the top down using extrinsic motivations to change the behaviour of the people concerned. A critical success factor is 'escalation dominance' – local militias need to be convinced the outsiders are willing and able to destroy them if they do not obey orders. The failure of Dutch troops to prevent the massacre at Srebrenica in 1995 is a painful example of the lack of credible escalation dominance.

The second strategy, *conditioning behaviour*, involves using positive and negative incentives to change. Examples include promises to provide or withhold budget support or entry to markets, and the conditionalities attached to the structural adjustment programmes of the World Bank and IMF. The intervener initiates the process, owns the problem and feels the urgency to act. The incentives need to be strong enough to change behaviour and outweigh the costs.

Coalition building, the third strategy, sees the world in terms of power, conflict and interests – in a word, diplomacy. Different groups are brought together in a political process of negotiation and consensus seeking. The intervener takes the initiative but focuses on building a coalition for change with stakeholders. Examples include the special envoys and peace brokers involved in international negotiations, such as IKV Pax Christi in northern Uganda.

Direct help, the fourth strategy, is self-explanatory: the intervener takes care of and becomes co-owner of a problem. The goal is to achieve a result: to deliver humanitarian aid, save a rainforest by buying it, or build a road. But direct help has its downsides. Large, costly projects driven by international agencies without an understanding of local needs and problems are doomed to failure. Direct help can create a culture of dependency, or remove the urgency of the need for real transformation.

The strategic goal of the fifth strategy, *direct support*, is transformation. This can be effective when, for example, a donor works closely with government officials who need outside support to implement change. These inside drivers of change are willing, but lack adequate capacity to design, coordinate and implement reforms. The downside of

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enforcement strategy are self-evident. Military forces that have just bombed a village will find it difficult to win hearts and minds if they then support the local administration.

Some observers argue that in certain situations sequencing of implementation strategies is to be preferred to simultaneous use of different strategies. In Afghanistan the Taliban have to be first defeated militarily – thereby creating a new power configuration – before development can begin, since a lack of security frustrates all development efforts.

Ultimately, sustainable change can only be brought about by winning hearts and changing minds. Enforcement, conditioning, coalition building and direct support are in essence all power strategies: the intervener drives the change. In the long run, change can only become sustainable by facilitation, by enabling people to learn, by supporting them to discover solutions themselves and by making sure they become (again) the owners of their own problems and drivers of their own change.

At least do no harm

Why have so many interventions fallen short of expectations? They have suffered from unrealistic visions that feed unreal expectations, or go too much against the grain of the system, or lack persistence and commitment. Others have been carried out by fragmented groups of interveners with different understandings, visions, interests and objectives. *The* international community clearly does not exist. Another reason may be that, all too often, interveners fail to employ the right change strategies. Despite the rhetoric about ownership, empowerment and capacity building, power strategies have been used more than real facilitation.

The international community could achieve more than it does now if it were to base its interventions on the framework presented, instead of on grandiose policies and plans. But given the messy reality of interventions by a fragmented international community, and the manifold preconditions that have to be met, the chances that the framework will be applied in full are slim. However, deeper insight into the complexities of interventions in other societies should lead to simpler, less ambitious policies and interventions. When the conditions for effective interventions cannot be fulfilled, no intervention is better than upsetting endogenous processes of change. The least we can do is do no harm. ∎

interveners playing a prominent role is that it hampers local ownership and the long-term effectiveness of change.

With the sixth and final strategy, *facilitating change*, the local people are the sole owners of the problem. They want change but may lack specific knowledge or capacities to bring it about. The intervener acts as a process consultant offering feedback, ideas and financial or technical assistance if needed. The assumption is that sustained change happens through learning, and that learning happens only when people decide they want to learn. One example of an NGO that has adopted this strategy is SNV, whose advisory services are aimed at strengthening the capacity of local governments. Other opportunities for facilitating change may arise when a department within a central bank seeks advice and support from a donor, or when a law reform commission wants to learn from experiences in other countries.

Sustaining change

Once the intervention has set in motion a process of change, 'quick wins' and easy successes are important to maintain the momentum. And successes must be communicated. Those not yet convinced need to be shown that they *can* make the leap to a different future, thereby enlarging the coalition for change.

But sooner or later resistance to change will emerge as the system 'pushes back'. Change is upsetting. Some groups will lose out and oppose it. Interveners must continually strive to recognize the warning signs. Why is the system pushing back? Have the interveners become the sole owners of the problem? Have the interests of those in the system changed? Perhaps the implementation strategy needs to be changed?

Interveners should be aware that some implementation strategies, if used in combination, can undermine each other. Donors cannot expect government officials to be open to learning after cajoling them into accepting a policy by threatening to cut aid. The negative consequences of an

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