

PROCESS ORIENTED THEORY OF CHANGE FACILITATION. SURFING THE WAVES OF COMPLEXITY

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I live history as a time of possibility, not of predetermination

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between complexity thinking, group process facilitation, and the use of Theory of Change (ToC) from an action-learning perspective. For the purpose of this paper, Theory of Change is understood as a transformative action-thinking non-linear approach applied to complex social change processes. It relates key concepts of complexity theory with group process facilitation, analyses the relationship between change and conflict transformation, proposes innovative ways of learning embedded in multi-stakeholder contexts, looks at how we understand and relate to the future, and then suggests certain premises and metaskills we should always consider when facilitating theory of change and complex group processes.

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1. OPENING WORDS¹

Some of the ideas and practices commented in here are already well known, used, and accepted in the development cooperation world. Some are not. I believe there is a compelling need for trying out innovative ways of enriching development cooperation action-thinking by bringing in more ideas and ways of doing which are practiced in other realms (social anthropology, social psychology, organisational management, systemic coaching, process oriented psychology, conflict transformation, group facilitation, quantum physics, complexity theory, Buddhism, adult critical learning, embodied learning, etc.). I am not proposing implementing best practices that worked elsewhere. From a complexity perspective best practices harvested in one context cannot be replicated in a different socio-cultural context². What I am saying is that we can feed our thinking and action from many sources and come up with new and creative ways of improving our professional practice.

Throughout these years I have identified different approaches to the use of ToC: from a linear planning tool substitute of Log-Frame (functional, project-based) to a semi-structured navigation chart aimed at contributing toward social change (transformational, process-based). This document seeks to explore the latter (Process Oriented Theory of Change, POTOC). It puts special attention on issues related to human relationships and interaction, behavioural change, action-learning, conflict, group process facilitation, complexity, assumptions and mindsets, reflective³ and flexible⁴ action-thinking, and (self)awareness. This particular Theory of Change approach is used as a framework that pretends to bring together all these ideas and practices in a coherent and purposeful way. This is still work in progress. The challenge also lies on developing user-friendly analytical frameworks and tools that can be used to facilitate change processes from this ToC approach. This is also work in progress.

This paper is mainly directed to those individuals and organisations facilitating, promoting, fostering, assisting, or funding social change processes. They may be supporting these processes as development workers or as social change activists.

¹ This document comes to life as a result of my involvement in the action-learning group on Theory of Change supported by Hivos (see www.hivos.net/toc). I would like to thank my action-learning colleagues Marjan van Es, Karel Chambille, Irene Guijt, Isabel Vogel, Alfredo Ortiz, Juan Carlos Giles, Jan Brouwers, Esther Koopmanschap, Simone van Vugt, Seerp Wigboldus for all the great inspiring moments we shared along these years and with whom I learned so much about Theory of Change. Special thanks to Jan Brouwers and Marjan van Es for their detailed comment of a previous draft version of this paper.

² See Kurtz C.F and Snowden D.J,2003, "The new dynamics of strategy: Sense-making in a complex and complicated world", in *IBM SYSTEMS JOURNAL*, VOL 42, NO 3, See also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7oz366Xo-8> for a very didactical explanation of the Cynefin Framework developed by David Snowden and his team at Cognitive Edge

³ See Bolton G., 2010 (3rd ed.), *Reflective Practice. Writing & Professional Development*, London: SAGE Publications; Schön D. A., 1983, *The Reflective Practitioner. How professionals think in action*, London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd

⁴ See De Bono E., 1996, *Water Logic. The Alternative to I am Right You Are Wrong*, London: Penguin Group; Gardner H., 2004, *Changing Minds. The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People's Minds*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press

2. COMPLEXITY, HUMAN INTERACTION, AND ACTION-LEARNING PROCESSES

The first time I heard about the word *complexity* I associated it with something messy, complicated, not totally known, conflictive, misty, and twisted...even esoteric. A new jargon that found its way through the development cooperation community, so eager always to adopt and adapt new buzzwords and concepts. Basically, many of us understood complexity as a nuisance needing to be simplified so to cope with and/or explain it to others. Later on I understood that complexity deals with emergence, uncertainty, interdependence, non-duality, non-locality and other concepts and phenomena that are part of our daily lives; and which unfold and come to life as we interact with the different parts of our self as well as the ones present in our surrounding environment, both human and natural.

My work as facilitator and the workshops, learning events, and other longer action-learning oriented group processes in which I have been involved during these last 20 years have given me a wonderful opportunity to learn about human interaction, learning, change, and conflict from a complexity perspective. This lens is making my facilitation style change as I action-learn more about it; and I am enjoying the challenge. So, how to integrate a new paradigm, a new way of looking at everyday life, into our own daily work as group process facilitators?

Workshops or any other contained short group process are a great place to start with. They give us the chance to deal with a “manageable” amount of people who happen to be diverse in many more ways than we initially might think of. Even when we are dealing with a group whose individuals know each other quite well (a long time established organizational team, neighbours, family, etc.) we find always so much diversity within it. Somehow, every group is a multi-stakeholder group in itself; even the ones we believe they are not so because of their cultural or organizational homogeneity. Diversity is always present in the room waiting to manifest itself through our interactions and what emerges out of them. So, these contained and face-to-face spaces/processes are a great place to start working from a complexity perspective. They are just a microcosmic representation of our social and institutional field; many of the patterns shaping our reality are alive and kicking in these spaces too. We can make them explicit and work on them as a way of learning how to deal with complexity and change. This is very important because achieving social change depends on a variety of factors relating to each other (in known and unknown ways) in many places at the same time (non-locality⁵). This is how complex our reality is. So understanding a little bit more about how humans interact with each other and shape what is possible or not, seems to me a good starting point for acting afresh in this complex reality we are living in. I believe this is of importance when working from a Theory of Change approach.

⁵ “In physics, nonlocality is the direct influence of one object on another, distant object, in violation of the principle of locality, which says an object is influenced only by its immediate surroundings. In psychology, nonlocality is an experience of closeness or interconnection beyond the parameters of space and time”, see Mindell A., *ProcessMind. A user’s guide to connecting with the mind of God*, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House

3. COMPLEXITY AND GROUP PROCESS FACILITATION

I find it necessary to frame this complex lens by focusing our attention in a few but very useful ideas and concepts coming from complexity theory. These are ideas/concepts we can use when facilitating any group process; either a workshop or a longer (non-localized) group process. We can share them with the group (explicit) or we can keep them for ourselves and use them as a reference when facilitating the process (implicit).

3.1. Human interaction and emergence. The origin of all things

From a systemic point of view we are entangled in a web of interactions. Many of them are predictable because they are somehow institutionalized and well known (family, religion, democracy and other collectively agreed forms of governance, users services, statutory by-laws, Constitutions, etc.). Nevertheless, many others are not predictable or stay hidden from the hegemonic eye because they are being marginalized by these dominant structures/cultures; or because they address new situations happening continuously in real time, and we just don't know how to deal with them at that precise moment. Many times we lack the knowledge, experience, willingness, creativity, mandate or institutional arrangements necessary to deal in a creative and non-violent way with the sort of changes we presume the world demands from us nowadays. Some of these interactions demand or push for new institutions that are not yet in place. Same sex marriage (gay/lesbian marriage) could be one of these new institutions emerging nowadays as a result of collective action confronting and influencing dominant institutions (state, catholic church, traditional marriage, etc.). Every (new) human interaction in present time is a window to a possible future reality, and not other. Our future reality starts taking shape as a result of our present interactions. Nowadays, there are a number of countries that have institutionalized formally this particular type of marriage. Ten years ago there were none. This is social change in the making.

Ralph Stacey⁶, a renowned expert on complexity and management, explains the importance of communicative interaction as the source of the new emergent future. He points out that “the future is a perpetual construction through human interaction and emergent construction derived from it”. Therefore, the future is an emergent phenomenon resulting of our past and present human interacting; and the quality of that interaction shapes the sort of future that most probably will come to life. Qualities and values such as creativity, diversity, mindfulness, cooperation, openness, awareness of the whole, dialogue, interdependence, justice, and so on help to shape a different future than the one coming from other qualities such as competition, hegemony, homogenization, domination, egotism, regulation, denial, injustice, revenge, discrimination, etc. It is obvious that the latter are not qualities and values most human beings would sign for. Sad to say, history reveals to us how human beings keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again.

Therefore in terms of our Theory of Change it is important to consider the quality of the process that any ToC is implemented with. Despite the participatory fever of the 90's, we

6 Stacey R.D., 2001, *Complex responsive processes in organizations. Learning and knowledge creation*, London: Routledge

fall into the temptation of designing our interventions in small rooms with little interaction with other actors, perspectives, interests, and fragmented truths. We seem to believe that we already know enough about the context and what needs to be done. Sad to say, we usually put more attention to the completion of the final product in itself than to the quality of the on-going process shaping that very same product. Many local NGOs in the South supported by international donors and INGOs implement projects using small technical teams, which relate in a distant manner (physical, emotional, cognitive, social, cultural, etc.) with those very actors to whom those projects are aimed to; and thanks to whom they got the funding in the first place. Along with this, it must be said that gender issues are not always included/visualized in a ToC⁷. Therefore, using ToC does not automatically mean that we are also addressing gender unbalances. Furthermore, when used uncritically ToC action-thinking may reproduce existing gender inequalities. This needs to change. Our ToC must be a result of a genuine and inclusive multi-consultation and implementation process embedded in real and legitimate on-going emergent processes. We use our Theory of Change thinking-action to create a space where new and innovative patterns of interaction can take place so that new possible futures may emerge (more collaborative, dialogic, gender sensitive and inclusive). We have the opportunity to use the space provided by our interventions to help actors interact more generatively with each other. Facilitating organisations and individuals should be aware of the responsibility they are taking when initiating, supporting, fostering, funding, assisting, and/or promoting these processes.

In conclusion, as we human beings start to interact in new and more qualitative ways, new patterns of interaction and realities start to emerge and consolidate. This is good news for us, social change practitioners; good motivation to keep us going! But we development workers have to become more solid and professional to assure quality and effectiveness in change processes.

3.2. (Non)Linearity, prediction, and surprise

Many times when I am hired to facilitate a group process my client already “knows” what the outcome of the workshop/process will be. He/she believes that once the workshop/process outline is designed there is no room for surprises that could affect the already predicted (and “needed”) outcome. He wants to believe, and acts accordingly, that the map is the territory. This is non-contradictory linear thinking. But reality is not like that; when we start a process we are not in the position to know what will come out of that workshop/process. We may foresee or predict part of the outcome, but we will never know beforehand with accurate certainty what we will get out of it. And we should not want to know it in advance; we need to open space for surprise. So we are open to surprise and the unexpected because we are aware we don’t control all the factors and the way they relate to each other. We may know that two people in the group dislike or like each other because of different reasons; but we don’t really know how that fact will affect the way these two people think, feel, and interact in the group.

⁷ van Eerdewijk A., Brouwers J., 2014, *Gender and Theories of Change*, 4th e-discussion End Note, Hivos, available at www.hivos.net/toc

I remember various multi-stakeholder initiatives that I facilitated in Guatemala some years ago when working for UNDP. Some of these initiatives were happening in the midst of social conflicts related to the subject being analysed in the dialogues (i.e. Health and Nutrition National Agreement convened by Oscar Berger, former Guatemalan President). It was amazing to see how relationships changed between Guatemalan government officials, indigenous women leaders, union leaders, researchers, and NGO practitioners as we moved along during the six-month process. A diverse set of actors who never met together before, many of them in long and deep rooted conflict with each other, were willing and able to hold repeated dialogue sessions happening month after month achieving a National Agreement on Health and Nutrition. This was happening while national public hospitals went on strike demanding better working conditions. Some leaders of that strike were part of our dialogue group, moving between the dialogue space and the strike. Therefore we couldn't know nor could predict what could come out to the public space. This sort of situations obliges us to be open to changing the script (our Theory of Change) or spending more time than planned in one (new) activity/interaction or another. This is complex non-linear thinking. Applying it has major implications in terms of how our organisations design their interventions and processes: it requires new facilitation (meta)skills and innovative organisational and/or institutional arrangements.

3.3. Not-knowing and uncertainty. Dealing with anxiety and control

The non-linear nature of many of the human interactions taking place in any given social change process causes a lot of stress to many of those people promoting that process. Many facilitators, conveners, donors, and promoters of social change believe they can control (parts of) those processes. They get stressed out when things come out of hands or things happen in different ways that were not planned (the unexpected). So, from a linear action-thinking perspective these leaders believe they can manage a social process and actually they put all their effort in doing so. But reality, again, show us something different. In the non-linear action-thinking approach we believe the best we can do is learn how to manage ourselves within that process so we can deal better with it and with ourselves in it.

We can surf the waves of the process but we cannot give shape to the waves we are surfing. We are not in control of the sea streams or the influence the moon has over fluids in planet earth. Actually, we are almost in control of nothing. We can learn about patterns and behaviours, and then we may come up with a way of dealing with ourselves within that web of patterns and behaviours manifesting in a system that transcends us. Consequently, when we support any social change process we need to be humble when it comes to our contribution, the impact of our intervention, and our personal and organisational capabilities. Learning to let it go, burn our organisational/personal ego, and not sticking to any initial idea for too long is a good way to go in this regard. These are metaskills we need to develop as social change process facilitators.

3.4. The whole, the parts, and non-duality

Myriads of waves (the parts) break into a sea of foam everyday all over the world. They are all different from each other, but again they are all part of the same mass of water present in planet earth (the whole). Nature does not separate waves from oceans; humans do. Ultimately, both phenomena are the same in the objective world: water, H₂O. From a non-dual perspective we are all connected to a field that comprises everything everywhere all the time. Yes, our mind is able to discriminate the part (wave) from the whole (ocean). But it does so for analytical purposes. The problem comes when we *believe* that those two phenomena (wave and ocean) *are actually* separate entities from each other (dual thinking). David Bohm⁸, a renowned British quantum physicist and philosopher who developed his work during the second half of the last century, set the frame for this challenge:

“The notion that the one who thinks (the Ego) is at least in principle completely separate from and independent of the reality that he thinks about is of course firmly embedded in our entire tradition (...) such division cannot be maintained consistently. But this confronts us with a very difficult challenge: How are we to think coherently of a single, unbroken, flowing actuality of existence as a whole, containing both thought (consciousness) and external reality as we experience it?”

Eastern traditions knew about this non-dual interdependence long ago too. Thich Nhat Hanh, a worldwide known Vietnamese zen master, warns us about the reductionist view of reality:

“People normally cut reality into compartments, and so are unable to see the interdependence of all phenomena. To see one in all and all in one is to break through the great barrier which narrows one’s perception of reality, a barrier which Buddhism calls the attachment to the false view of self.”

So in any group may happen the same when we use the dual logic (“us” and “them”, the “good” and the “bad”, “right” and “wrong”). A facilitator may see the group as an ensemble of individuals who don’t belong to the same field (dual thinking), or else as a physical and emotional microcosmic representation of that field in that very moment, including herself (non-dual thinking). In my experience, we usually have different identities or ideas present in the room. Actually they are all different but interdependent parts manifesting in the same field; that is why a facilitator needs to acknowledge and promote deep democracy and diversity as a way of coping constructively with asymmetric power dynamics and fragmented truths present in the room.

Deep democracy requires *all* voices to be heard and considered; not only the hegemonic or the alternative⁹ ones, but also the marginalized ones. Realizing this level and quality of integration is a real challenge we seldom accomplish. So we need to look at the field, feel

⁸ Bohm D, 1980, *Wholeness and the implicate order*, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul

⁹ I use the term “hegemonic” for the dominant structures, mindsets and behaviours imposed on us by the establishment and its dominant institutions and public spaces. The term “alternative” is used for those voices contesting the hegemonic structures but having a public space to express. The term “marginalized” is used to represent all those voices which are being historically denied, repressed by hegemonic and alternative voices and do not have the possibility of being expressed in a public space.

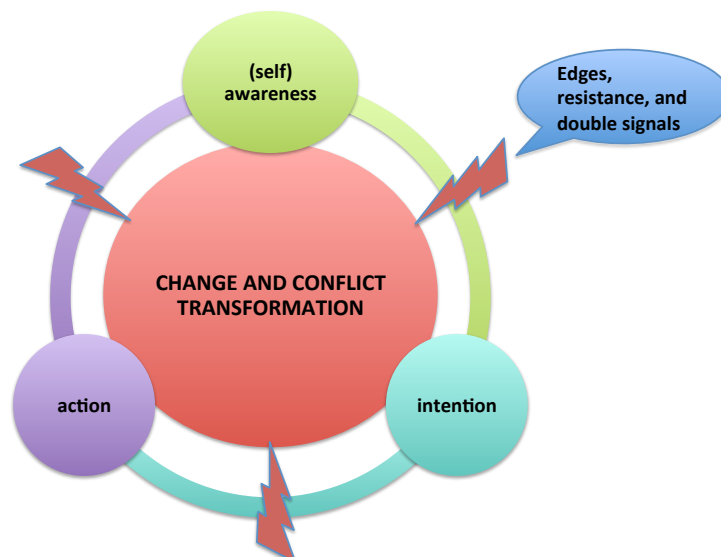
it, sense it, and be aware of it at all times to really understand what's going on in the group; and then see what parts of the social field are being either expressed or on the other hand, marginalized.

4. DEALING WITH CHANGE AND CONFLICT: EDGES, RESISTANCE AND DOUBLE SIGNALS

We all love change. At least, we all love to *talk* about change, such a fancy word! There's a sort of idealization about change processes, as if all changes were good news. But in the "real" world, most of the time change comes with conflict or manifests in unexpected ways. And then change is not so nice anymore. In these situations, when conflict arises either we repress it (repression), ignore it (denial), or else we face it (action).

There is a lot of literature about change and conflict the reader can refer to in case she wants to go deeper into the matter. I just want to set a frame that can help us deal with change and conflict more consciously and strategically in our processes. In my experience, this is important when designing and implementing a Theory of Change since we aim at changing certain mindsets, attitudes and behaviours. And we already know by now these sorts of changes seldom are free of conflict and resistance (internal and external).

I would say that there are three interdependent moments affecting each other in any change process directed to achieving intentional, deep rooted and sustained change. One moment has to do with *becoming aware*: individual and/or group self-awareness of the need to change. Another moment relates to *intention*: having a proactive and positive attitude towards change. A third moment is based on *action*: self-awareness and intention are aligned and push for new behaviours and actions noticeable by other actors in the system. When we promote a change process, we want to move from a static unconscious state to a more dynamic conscious state. However, this is not a linear process; as said before, all these moments affect each other interdependently at all times.



Moving from self-awareness to intention and then into action can be a short easy path or a long tortuous pilgrimage; it depends to a big extent on how we as individual, organisations and/or societies deal with our edges and resistance to change. It all depends too, with the motivation (intrinsic and/or extrinsic) we have for moving towards change. What do I/We/They gain from that change? This is a common question going on in everybody's minds when mapping actors and defining strategic alliances in a Theory of Change exercise.

We all have edges¹⁰; that is, conscious or unconscious barriers that hinder our personal, organisational, or social change process. So it is not only about motivation and putting in place more effective incentive systems for behavioural change to happen; it also has to do with working systemically with deep-seated constraints and believe systems that express themselves in contradictory ways (double signals). The director of a Northern European INGO working in a South American country once hired me to help her with some internal organisational conflict she had due to some top-down decisions taken in the Headquarters in Europe. This organisational change process imposed by HQ affected the southern branch both at programmatic as well as relational level (both internally and externally).

In the initial exploratory round of individual interviews I undertook before entering a retreat with the whole team, everybody was aware of the conflict; they also let me know how authoritative the Director was. They all said they were eager to work on these issues in the best way possible by helping the Director with the organisational change process (she was appointed Director of the National Office one year before). But when we went for the retreat, people did not want to talk about the conflict and it turned out to be a really hard work to come up with some agreements on how to go about it. Dwelling in an organisational ecosystem full of fear and uncertainty was a hard time for staff and also for the Director (and for me too).

But we got something out of the retreat... or so I thought by the end of the event. Later on they went on for one more day with a planning exercise. I stayed in the same hotel while they were working on this planning session. In the morning break I asked some of the staff how they were doing. One of them told me "the retreat was useless, she (the director) went back to the same behaviour she had before coming to the retreat. I just disengaged from the planning process". Indeed, she was a bit authoritative; but in the retreat she seemed to reflect on her behaviour and publicly admitted she needed to work on it. Of course change does not happen right away, but one could think she could have done some conscious effort during the planning exercise putting in practice what she learnt in the retreat (moving from self-awareness to intention and then into action). I would have expected more genuine collaboration from staff during the workshop too; especially regarding the support they told me they would give to the Director. As we already know by now, for successful organisational change to happen we must face a number of obstacles and edges present in the organisation, both at individual-personal level as well as group level.

¹⁰ Mindell A., 1987, *The dreambody in relationships*, Portland: Lao Tse Press

So, change takes time, awareness, intention, and a bit of courage to try out new ways of behaving. Even though the retreat did help us all to become openly aware of the issue, the Director went back to her old ways of behaving; and so did many of the staff. These are *double signals* we facilitators need to perceive to better understand and manage the underlying dynamics going on in the field. On one hand we want/need to change but on the other hand we (“us” and “them”) resist because of conscious and unconscious barriers/constraints we have (the so called *edges*). Double signals are always a good entry point for critical analysis and disclosing what’s hidden unconsciously in groups. The conflict went on and I was never called back again. I still wonder nowadays whether the way I managed the process was the right way to go or on the contrary it did not help at all. Sometimes when the conflict is hot there is nothing we can do but wait and see. Anyhow, I still have my own doubts about the appropriateness of the methodological approach I used at that time. All those elements affected the final outcome.

So it is not only about “them” (staff and Director) but also about “us” (facilitators). This is why non-dual reflective action-thinking is so important: “them” and “us” understood as parts of a unified field affecting the final outcome.

Then, it is not that we consciously don’t want to change (which may also be the case); we just have to learn how to deal with our unconscious barriers/edges towards changing our own and others’ mindsets, behaviours, attitudes, positioning, discourses, etc. This happens in all levels: intra-personal, inter-personal, organisational, social. It happens in a workshop as well as in a longer-term group process. This is part of our human condition; we can repress it or ignore it, but it is better to face it sooner than later because in this way we can move forward in a transformative way.

5. MULTIPLE REALITIES, LEARNING AND CHANGE. EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE

So far we understood that dual approaches to group facilitation are not a good way to go when looking at group dynamics from a complexity perspective. We need non-dual facilitation approaches that allow for all parts to be considered: both the ones inhabiting inside of us as well as the ones outside of us. This shift in our facilitation calls for more innovative and comprehensive ways of facilitating meaningful and transformative human interactions.

5.1. Three levels of reality. Integrating our whole self

Arnold Mindell, founder of Process Oriented Psychology, talks about three levels of reality: consensus reality, dreamland, and essence. *Consensus reality* is about the inter-objective world, the one we all know about and read in the papers; the one we agree upon (there is a war going on in Iraq, your neighbour works as a fire-fighter, my organization is structured in four departments and a coordination unit, there is poverty and hunger in Sudan, there is corruption in our local government, etc.). At this level there is common agreement about how things actually are and function. *Dreamland* relates to the world of emotions, fears, traumas, feelings, intuition, sensation, perception,

emotional or mental associations, past experiences, dreams, body symptoms, etc. This is the (inter)subjective world that determines how we relate to our self and the world around us. Then we have *essence*, the deepest level that is connected to the bigger field, the Whole. This is a transpersonal dimension, the so-called quantum field; it goes beyond our self and its many parts. This is something eastern traditions knew all the way, and we westerners just got to know about it thanks to modern physics.

This is a critical level because all successful social leaders feed from this level to lead and change the world. They are able to connect themselves to the bigger field (a specific social need shared by thousands of individuals) and mobilize enormous amounts of energy, people, and resources in different times and places because of this connection they had with the transpersonal Whole (Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Chico Mendes, Vandana Shiva, Rigoberta Menchú, Václav Havel, Martin Luther King, Aung San Suu Kyi, many community and indigenous leaders all over the world, Dalai Lama, etc.). This is indeed the never-ending source for transformative leadership.

Many group process facilitation approaches used in the social change and development field are based mainly on the consensus reality level. This happens a lot within development cooperation in those group processes wherein any sort of consensus is required (a plan, a manifesto, a statement, a working or strategic agenda, a project, etc.). In these cases the facilitator usually focuses her attention more in the product (accomplishing the agreement/product) than the process itself (dealing with emotions, fears, quality of interactions, needs, past associations, motivations, projections, aspirations, her own biases, making explicit mindsets and assumptions, unexpected turns and events, etc.). Many times both participants and facilitators do not want to acknowledge emotions and other subjective manifestations happening in the group because they may fear it will get them out of the track of accomplishing the agreement. In other cases, they themselves are not trained, used, or willing to deal with theirs' and others' emotions, past associations, or projections and therefore resist to work on these issues within the group. Usually when these issues are not addressed, acknowledged, or dealt with right in that very moment and place, they show up later on disguised as some sort of group conflict, resistance, or unpredicted hindrance to the process. Conflict can play a very powerful creative role, but also a very destructive one!

5.2. Three levels of transformative learning and change: personal, group, whole

Gandhi said, “be the change you want to see in the world”. And during my masters studies my thesis supervisor told me “start with yourself” when I asked her about what could I do to help people change. In our non-dual world the easiest and most immediate way to start making changes in the world is by working in ourselves (inner work). In the dual world we always want to change something else but ourselves: a law, a constitution, a social behaviour, an education system, how women or youth are treated by public institutions, the neighbour, a family member, etc. In the dual world change is always “out there”; we don't need to change, *they do, it does*. But reality doesn't work that way; long-lasting change is not only sustained by what is changed outside. We also need to change at individual level; and this may be painful and conflictive sometimes. Paradoxically, many development workers supporting social change don't want to go

there, they resist it. But so far I don't know about any other way to achieve and sustain long-lasting transformative change.

In any change process, people feel more confident trying out new behaviours in a container/space they feel is safe for them (a workshop, a pilot project/initiative, a collaborative learning group, a small working team, prototyping exercises, etc.). Going back to our basic starting point, a workshop could be a safe space if properly managed by combining individual self-reflective exercises with subgroup and whole group dynamics. Nevertheless, this is nothing but an assumption because sometimes people, in a professional context, assist at these sort of spaces somehow "obliged" because of their job position or professional performance, not because they believe that sort of space may be useful for promoting deeper learning and change. Despite this, in my view we need to integrate this *personal* level of learning and change with the *group* and *social* levels to really achieve sustainable and meaningful outcomes out of the group process. We need to consider these three levels when designing and facilitating reflection and learning activities in our workshops: the part (individual), the whole (group) and the space for deeper and more creative human interaction in between (peer to peer, subgroups, commissions, working teams, etc.).

5.3. Embodied learning. Opening the channels and deepening democracy

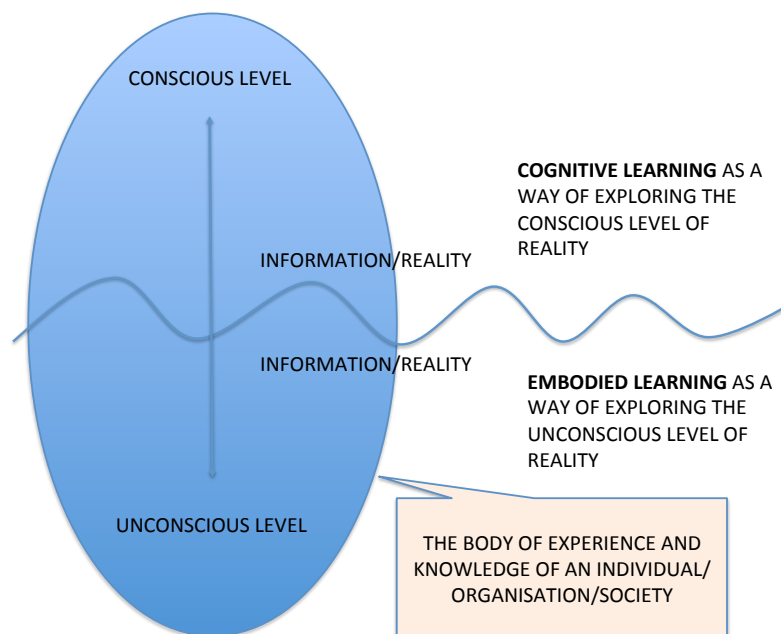
We humans not only have different ways of knowing, but also express that body of knowledge in many different ways; not just within ourselves but in relation to others too. Individuals belonging to western countries as well as non-western individuals living in post-colonial countries influenced by western culture give supreme importance to the use of reason, writing/reading, and dialectic as the main way of learning and interacting with others. Besides, this way of learning gives them a lot of power and rank when relating to illiterate people and others who are not so rational (i.e. many artists and cultural activists, marginalized youth, women under post-traumatic stress due to gender violence, indigenous people, children affected by war/family trauma, etc.). In our westernized culture we contrast orally or in written form different points of view (thesis and anti-thesis). By these means we learn about their differences/similarities and come up with a commonly accepted idea (synthesis). Sometimes I feel we are obsessed with achieving consensus or in trying to homogenize the body of knowledge present in the room as if this would be the ultimate goal to be accomplished in a group process. Nevertheless, in many cases what we really get is the imposition of an idea, worldview, or action over others. Again, Bohm¹¹ throws some light on this matter:

"Now, if we are not aware that our theories are ever-changing forms of insight, giving shape and form to experience in general, our vision will be limited (...) It is clear that we may have any number of different kinds of insights. What is called for is not an *integration* of thought, or a kind of imposed unity, for any such imposed point of view would itself be merely another fragment. Rather, all our different ways of thinking are to be considered as different ways of looking at the one reality, each with some domain in which it is clear and adequate"

¹¹ Bohm D, 1980, *Wholeness and the implicate order*, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul

This is even truer when different cultures are confronted in the same room (western and non western, indigenous and non indigenous, literate and illiterate, patriarchal and matriarchal, horizontal and vertical, communitarian and liberal, youth and adult, rural and urban, violent and non violent, etc.). And even more when the group is embedded in a post-colonial context wherein we have part of the group belonging to the hegemonic culture (i.e. white, masculine, patriarchal, western, non-indigenous, literate, etc.) and the other part belonging to the marginalized part of that particular society (i.e. women, youth, indigenous, poor, illiterate, GLBT, etc.). I would say that normally most people find themselves somewhere in between or away from these two polarities. In any given group process there is always an asymmetric power dynamic going on. Sad to say, it seems we are not so deeply democratic after all.

There are many people, even within the hegemonic culture, who feel that their way of learning is more experiential and embodied than rational, written, or oral. Then, how can we facilitate the manifestation of all those ways of making sense and learning within a diverse group of individuals? Along with this, different people have different bodies of experience/knowledge as well as learning styles. We need to make them explicit and bring them all together to be able to mobilize as many ways of learning and bodies of knowledge as possible. Since reality is so complex we should not assume that oral-written and rational ways of interacting and learning are enough to understand all dynamics taking place around us (and within us). So we, both as individuals and also as a group, need to use other channels of information to really make sense of the whole system.



This means using multisensory approaches for opening other channels for learning and sense making (drawing and other artistic expressions, embodied learning, symbols, touch, creative visualization, mindful breathing, body symptom work, meditation, singing, sounds, gestures, humor, etc.). In my experience, people who have undergone a

materialistic-structuralistic education or any other modernistic “ideologization” process find much more difficult to acknowledge, accept and access the knowledge expressing through their bodies.

Recently I co-facilitated a workshop for a European social change oriented INGO in a Central American country. A group of selected staff and consultants attended the three-day event. I applied several body movement dynamics for enhancing learning. Some of these dynamics were aimed at illustrating how complex systems behave and adapt (complex adaptive systems); and some other ones were directed to support some of the participants in coping with dilemmas they had about being a donor and at the same time also an activist for human rights. In the final wrapping up round there were two women who expressed their initial resistance to do these embodied learning dynamics. One of them, the younger of the two, admitted that at certain point she was about to leave the workshop but decided to give it a chance. Their final impression was very positive because of the insights they got from the exercises.

“Embodied or somatic learning is a way of learning that relies on the body’s knowledge. Our most basic form of learning in childhood is preverbal; however, traditional schooling forces us to check our bodies at the door, requiring us to sit at a desk and raise our hands, focusing primarily on cognition to exclusion of other ways of knowing. By the time we reach adulthood, “being in our bodies” is a foreign concept and a source of discomfort for many of us.”

Randee Lipson Lawrence¹²

They felt embodied learning helped them to obtain very useful insights for becoming aware and improving their professional performance and the roles they were playing. Some other participants did not accept the embodied learning approach. They resisted and felt uncomfortable while going through the process.

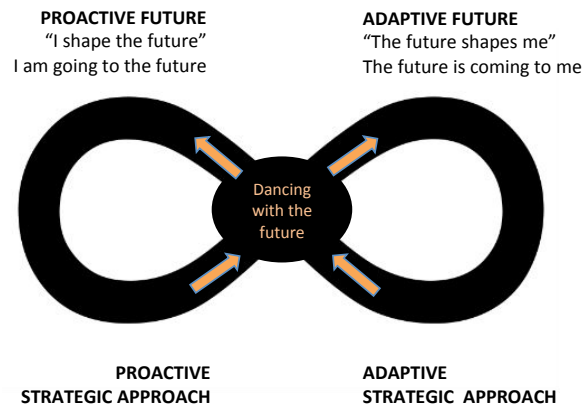
In brief, because of cognitive as well as democratic reasons, agents of social change need to enrich and improve facilitation skills by integrating multisensory approaches that allow for richer, and more democratic and diverse ways of creative human interaction. This means learning how to do it and un-learning how not to do it.

6. DESIRED CHANGE AND WAYS OF RELATING TO THE FUTURE

Theories of Change always have a direct relationship with changing something we believe has to be changed for a better future. So we interact with the future affecting it from the present, but also being affected by it in the present. Therefore, there seem to be, at least, two ways of dealing with the future: either we shape it with our actions (*proactive future*) or else we adapt ourselves to it (*adaptive future*). In the first case the operating premise can be summarized as “I don’t like how present reality is and I want to

¹² see Lipson R. (coord.), 2012, ‘Editor’s Note’ in *Bodies of knowledge: Embodied Learning in Adult Education*, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, Number 134, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. For more information on Embodied Learning see Mindell A., 2002 (reprinted), *Working on yourself alone. Inner dreambody work*, Portland: Lao Tse Press ; Strozzi-Heckler R., *The Art of Somatic Coaching*, 2014, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books; Hamill P., 2013, *Embodied Leadership. The somatic approach to developing your leadership*, London: KoganPage Limited; Gendlin E., 1980 (rev. ed.), *Focusing*, New York: Bantam Dell

change it”. And for the second approach, “I accept the world as it is and I learn from it to change/adapt myself”. So, on one hand we work to shape things the way we want them to be; and on the other hand we adapt ourselves to whatever it is emerging. These are different ways of relating to the future. We can combine these two approaches and get the best out of the (creative) tensions going on between the two.



Generally speaking, a proactive strategic approach is best in those situations where recurrent patterns are known and can be predicted. In these cases planned and straightforward interventions affecting the causes of those dysfunctional recurrent patterns can be useful. In those situations where emergence and not-knowing are strong, an adaptive strategic approach will be more useful.

Action oriented actors such as social leaders, politicians, and other players (NGOs, human rights and environmental activists, etc.) find themselves more comfortable working from the *proactive future* approach. They believe they can shape the future through advocacy, social mobilization, lobby, networking with like-minded, massive awareness-raising campaigns, collective action, etc. There are many evidences of the effectiveness of this approach. Other actors such as visionaries, some qualified politicians, social innovators, market analysts, massive consumption product developers, progressive academia, etc. look at the tendencies coming from the future and adapt their actions/products to it. They use tools such as scenario analysis, future trend lines, innovation maps, simulation software, time lines, prototyping, and other prospective instruments that help them see what’s emerging in different countries or situations which may suggest new ways of doing things (innovative public policies, market products, citizen/user likes and behaviours, social needs, migratory flows, etc.). Some combine the two, for example using scenario methodology to design a project directed to behavioural change (water and sanitation, HIV/AIDS prevention, etc.).

These new ways can be used as a basis for adapting organisations and institutions to the emergent context (“institutional re-design”, organisational change, etc.) because they see clearly that those innovative/alternative tendencies may become mainstream or

fashionable in the coming years. The proactive future approach is mainly founded on the known (past experiences, documented facts, best and good practices, etc.) and the adaptive future approach is more related to the unknown (creative visualizations, prospective projections, unexpected facts, simulations, etc.). Generally speaking, the first uses straightforward action plans and the second more flexible navigation charts. The first works better for complicated problems and the second for complex situations. One and the other are useful resources for us if we are able to apply each approach adequately to each situation.

What are the implications of this two-fold approach in relation to our ToC? I would dare to say that development and social change organisations have traditionally based their planning and monitoring exercises from the proactive future approach: very proactive action plans directed to changing situations, contexts, objective realities, etc. The monitoring of these action plans has been mainly directed to checking whether that particular action plan took place in terms of delivering the outputs and outcomes promised in the first place; they did not put too much attention about the impact (positive, negative, expected, unexpected) those actions had in the surrounding environment. This is about monitoring the past as told to our donors, our constituencies, and/or ourselves. In these monitoring exercises we usually disregard the unexpected or treat it as an anomaly, something to be neglected, disregarded, or hidden.

This type of monitoring is not really designed to adapt those action plans to unpredicted and emergent phenomena. Somehow, we are missing the chance to look into the unpredicted and search for new ways and solutions to our daily problems. In this regard, complex thinking stresses the importance of integrating the unpredicted/unexpected as a way forward in terms of problem solving.

On the other hand, the adaptive approach understands and accepts the way the future unfolds and is quite uncertain and unpredictable. So it proposes a more flexible navigation chart; elastic enough to accept uncertainty and the unknown but structured enough as to provide a clear sense of direction. The monitoring approach also changes. We ask other actors to come and join us when monitoring to receive information about other fragmented truths present at the same and different time and place in the process. This helps us comprehend better what we understand as an anomaly expressed in the form of an unpredicted and/or unexpected phenomenon. The adaptive monitoring approach looks at the proposed action plan (monitoring output/outcome indicators) *and* also considers and integrates the unpredicted emergent phenomena in the new action plan/navigation chart. This requires lots of flexibility on behalf of donors and lots of responsibility from funded actors. It requires also changes in how projects/programs are conceived, implemented, and monitored; both at process level (multi-stakeholder engagement and diversity management) but also in terms of products (planning and monitoring tools and learning oriented reporting).

7. PREMISES FOR EFFECTIVE THEORY OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Based on what has been said so far, I want to propose some key premises to consider when designing and facilitating a theory of change process from a complexity perspective.

7.1. *Reflective practice. The foundation for transformative change*

Simply speaking, by reflective practice I mean any personal or professional practice that enhances our self-awareness about who we are and what we do; and the relationship we have with our natural and human surrounding. These practices can be undertaken by ourselves alone and also in company of others. We already know by now that reflecting mindfully and critically with others results in enhanced self-awareness about our individual parts, identities, attitudes, mind-sets, behaviours, etc. Co-operative inquiry¹³ affects also the quality of the interactions we develop with our different inner parts as well as with the immediate external surrounding (natural and human).

In my opinion, every facilitator should work on himself as part of his personal and professional development: (Zen Buddhist) meditation, bio-dance, shamanic practices, mindful breathing, journaling, mindfulness practices, yoga, tai chi, drawing, art therapy, gestalt (group) therapy, constellations, process oriented psychology (Process Work), contemplative (silent) retreats, periodical breaks into nature (nature solos), body movement, peer-to-peer coaching, systemic coaching, meditative trekking, walking meditation, etc. We can easily integrate in our workshops many tools and practices coming from these introspective approaches for amplifying participants' awareness about who they are and the effect they have in the world; as well as the effect the world has on them and who they are.

7.2. *Integrative diversity. Deep democracy in the room*

We already talked about non-duality and the interaction between the parts and the whole. We also discussed the impact this has in i) accepting non-hegemonic (and non-western) ways of learning as valid and pertinent, and ii) promoting more democratic and transformative human interactions. The way I understand integrative diversity is not limited to having the alternative voices in the room. We need to have all voices heard: hegemonic, alternative, *and* marginalized. Experience tells us that the ones marginalizing now may become the marginalized in a different context or time, and vice versa¹⁴. The Bolivian case and the way Evo Morales' ¹⁵ government is exercising his power over many indigenous populations and organisations nowadays is a clear example of this. All these voices, needs, and interests demand to be heard since we cannot assume that the only good proposals and reflections may come from one part or the other. Besides, minorities, marginalized or not, are a great source for innovation and creativity because

¹³ Heron J., 1996, *Co-operative Inquiry. Research into the Human Condition*, London: SAGE Publications

¹⁴ See Orwell G., 2003 (new ed.), *Animal farm*, London: Penguin

¹⁵ Evo Morales, current Bolivian President, has an indigenous origin and became the first indigenous President of Bolivia in 2005. Nowadays he is facing a deep conflict with a significant number of the indigenous organisations that supported him earlier when getting into power. Many of these conflicts are related to the policies Morales is implementing in terms of disrespectfully exploiting natural resources present in sovereign indigenous territories without considering current international and national legal frameworks and agreements protecting indigenous rights.

they challenge hegemonic ways of thinking and doing in unconventional ways.

This understanding and practice of democracy is not about majority based representative democracy (50+1, the winner “owns” the field), but about deep democracy (51+49, we all “own” the field). In our ToC workshops and larger group processes, we should try our best for all these views and interests to be present, heard, and taken into consideration somehow during the group decision-making process. It is quite difficult to accomplish this but it’s not impossible. There are many practical ways of achieving this: social mapping, complex systems thinking group dynamics and games, gallery walks, minority and majority reporting, polarity exercises, sociograms, psychodrama, participatory theatre, world café, mixed groups based on diversity, open space, etc.

7.3. Dynamic interaction. Weaving the web of creativity and innovation

In every workshop or any longer term group process it takes time for people to open up and work together effectively. This is even truer when these spaces are embedded in a conflictive or wary context bringing together actors who don’t know or mistrust each other. We as facilitators need to build a safe container/space wherein people are not afraid, but willing, to interact with one another (not known, non like-minded, etc.). We need to promote group dynamics that balance differentiation and integration within the group. This means combining difference-based groups (like-minded groups, homogeneous in nature, same interest and worldviews present in the group) with integrative groups (non like-minded groups, heterogeneous in nature, different interests and worldviews present in the group). These creative interactions can be effectively triggered by rotating groups throughout the process, rotating facilitation, peer-to-peer interview dialogues, learning trios, buzz conversations, rotating sitting positions, fostering spaces and dynamics for informal interactions, setting up diversity-based working commissions, multidisciplinary team work, systemic coaching techniques, etc. All in one, we look for unconventional and innovative ways of differentiating and integrating people so they can learn from each other and make sense of their differences and similarities as they create something new that wasn’t there before they met. All these dynamic interactions nurture a space wherein people become less afraid of dropping away their own ideas, suspending (pre)judgements and picking up from others what they consider useful for themselves as a result of these new interactions with non like-minded actors.

This hybridization and cross-fertilization of ideas between different sectors, needs, worldviews, and interests have enormous creative and transformative potential. In this way, we can create new proposals, ideas, knowledge, intentions, realities, shared motivations, etc. that would not be possible to create unless this particular group came together in this particular way. And that’s precisely what we need and seek to stimulate as group process facilitators.

7.4. Iterative action-learning. Learning as a non-linear process

As we have seen in the previous section, one way to foster collaborative learning and innovation is by differentiating and integrating groups in a very dynamic way

(interaction). Another way is going back and forth in time through continuous cycles of action and reflection wherein the group stops periodically to reflect and make (new) sense of a particular issue as the process moves on (iteration). Incorporating an iterative approach to interactive adult learning processes is key for updated and situational understanding of contexts embedded in emergent social change. Because of the emergent and non-predictable nature of reality, we need to constantly revisit our assumptions and the ways of thinking we used when looking at that particular reality in the past (the initial version of our ToC, so to say). The new experience gained during the unfolding of the process provides us with new insights, experiences, ideas, ways of looking, etc. that should be used to revisit our Theory of Change and the work we do around a particular issue.

Sometimes we may find out we took the wrong decision based on wrong assumptions, or assumptions we disregarded at that time because they were coming either from the marginalized or from anybody else. Actually, this happens all the time. Learning may be very painful...but so liberating when we let go of fixed mindsets and predetermined ways of looking and behaving. Observing together and repeatedly at our assumptions along with using the experience gained over a longer period of time helps quite a lot in this regard. This is what I call dynamic assumption management.

ToC workshops are a very good chance to work on dynamic assumption management once we integrate throughout the workshop several moments for this matter. This is iterative learning based on repetitive analysis of key assumptions and experiential evidences; as we already know, adults also learn by revisiting assumptions or undergoing recurrent and periodical analysis. By doing this, participants every now and then identify and analyse repeatedly new and old assumptions they use, consciously and/or unconsciously, to elaborate and sustain the initial version of the Theory of Change shaping their organizational worldview and action. In a workshop situation, wherein a ToC is being elaborated, identifying and looking periodically at the main assumptions participants have about what they assume the purpose of the workshop is for becomes a very practical and pedagogical way of experiencing the importance assumptions have. They just (pre)determine how we look at the world and thus how we behave in it!

Once this experience is extrapolated to the ToC under design, it becomes much easier for participants to identify and analyse theirs' and others' assumptions; and understand the importance of critical thinking and dynamical assumption management when looking at social change processes. Workshop participants (or social change actors in case of real life processes) can do this on their own or with others, be they like-minded or non like-minded individuals or organisations. But just a reminder, at certain stages of the process we do need to bring together the non like-minded because each of them has part of the picture others marginalize or resist to see and acknowledge, consciously or unconsciously.

Therefore, when other worldviews and perspectives are brought together in these iterative cycles of action and learning, the learning deriving from the interaction has higher impact when it comes to understanding reality from a complexity perspective. This is also true when it comes to our Theory of Change. This is so because complex

thinking sustains that there is not a big and absolute truth but many partial and situated truths belonging to the same field and which interact constantly whether we are aware of it or not. When these assumptions are brought together into the same learning field/container everybody's capacities for grasping reality more comprehensively and inclusively are enhanced. Of course this integrative approach has political considerations too. On one hand we need to convince actors to come together and share a common space/process. And on the other hand all parts present are forced to negotiate their meaning of reality for coming to a consensus-based understanding of reality without disregarding their differences. This would be the best-case scenario, which is not always achieved. That is why bringing the whole system to the room to make sense of the whole and the interacting parts is so important, and difficult, when conducting ToC group processes from a multi-stakeholder perspective. Here again, we strive for integrating as much as possible the cognitive with the political.

7.5. Emergent PIM&E. Fostering constant communicative interaction

Since we use concrete projects, programs, and other action-oriented platforms to support emergent and uncertain social change processes, now and then we need to check how we Plan, Implement, Monitor and Evaluate (PIM&E) them. It is commonly accepted that periodical project/program review and adjustment throughout these stages enhances effectiveness of our performance. Due to the uncertainty of future reality we need some milestones to help us define the path of change to follow/support. And again, because of this uncertainty there is no point in going for thorough in-depth planning processes wherein everything is planned in advanced to the maximum detail. It is not an effective way of spending our time and resources. We require more flexible planning methods and tools (*Outcome Mapping* and its variations are very helpful in this regard). From a Theory of Change perspective, it is better to invest more time, resources, and effort in bringing actors together more often for monitoring, evaluating and readjusting the program than in a traditional project management logic. By doing so we foster a culture of constructive and co-creative communicative interaction that goes beyond the mutual accountability approach used in a conventional project management logic. Once again, the cognitive meets the political by fostering a culture of conversation among multiple actors.

7.6. Process visualization. Making sense of what's emerging

How do we express and communicate our way of thinking about how change happens and our contribution to it (our Theory of Change)? How do we know what's going on as we move on? How do we know whether we are achieving what we assumed we could achieve when designing our Theory of Change? What un-expected events are affecting or are affected by our process? Donors and development organisations managing development programs and projects usually use output and outcome indicators for this matter (Key Performance Indicators, Output Indicators, Outcome Indicators, and so on). Nevertheless, these indicators mostly belong to the consensus reality realm and many times are expressed in a Log-Frame format. This is, they are objectively verifiable indicators defined in a linear planning process. But as we have seen so far, many of the changes we strive for belong to the subjective realm. Therefore, we need to develop

ME&L systems capable of integrating and “measuring” both. This way we can understand and make sense more effectively and comprehensively of what’s going on at individual, organisational, and social/societal level. This is not new, but it seems that the message did not get through to the extent needed at this stage.

How do these processes manifest themselves? How can we reify them so we can articulate them better? How can we check whether the initial assumptions we used to sustain our Theory of Change were accurate and pertinent (or not) at that time? From a Theory of Change perspective we can do it in many ways. A ToC facilitator can use graphics, flowgrams, body movement, drawing, writing, story-telling, photos, video, participatory reporting/video, e-monitoring, wide array of analytical frames and models, power analysis tools, Participatory Action-Learning tools, report cards, questionnaires, surveys, etc. Any creative way that helps us express and make sense in a simple way, but not simplistic, of the complexity we are dealing with. It is not realistic to think that a ME&L system based primarily in a Log-Frame format-logic will give us all the information we need to make sense of what’s emerging as a result of our intervention in the process. It is time for us all to move beyond that approach and tool. We need other ways (too). We need a multisensory and interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond linear and dual ways of looking and making sense of reality.

Due to our rationalistic education system, we have repressed other ways of learning that are related to our own body-mind connection. These other embodied ways of learning give us lots of information about how the learning process is taking place in ourselves and in our interactions with others. We can enhance the body channels to give room for other ways of expressing and making sense of our own and others’ learning processes too. Embodied learning happens all the time, but many of these times we are just not aware of what our body is telling us. For that purpose we can use constellation work, process work, bio-dance, body symptom work, applied somatic arts, body movement, gestalt group work, authentic movement, somatic coaching, systemic coaching and many other methodological approaches directed to explore the action-learning relationship between body, emotions, and mind. Anyhow, it must be said that embodied learning is mainly experiential; hence conceptual and rational thinking becomes insufficient to really explain it. We need to go through the experience of listening to our body to make sense of what embodied learning means.

7.7. Results-based approach. Intended and unintended consequences

This premise relates not only to the traditional understanding of “results” or “outcomes” as understood in the mainstream development practice dominated by linear causal thinking. This is, “outcome” understood as something tangible or measurable that we predict will happen because of our “intervention”. Usually we have intentionality when doing or not-doing something and as a result of this (non) action we get a whole bunch of unintended and unpredicted results too. These are very important results/outcomes to be identified and analysed. Actually, they may be telling us what we did not see then but need to see now; for painful or disturbing that may be. Mindell¹⁶ reminds us of this too:

¹⁶ Mindell A., 1989, *The Year I. Global process work. Community creation from global problems, tensions and myths*, London: Penguin Group

“The solutions to all sorts of human problems are often hidden in our unintended behaviour, and in the unexpected events surrounding our groups and organizations, even when these events seem at first to be disturbances”

They are our windows of opportunity to enter a new action-learning ground, a wonderful chance for changing the way we see the context by adding new elements to our analysis. This is why iterative action-learning is so important (i.e. dynamic assumption management through continuous cycles of action-reflection). And again, this is why is so important to come together periodically with other people who do not think or see things the way we do but are part of our system (interactive diversity management). Even if these people are the marginalized minority or the powerful few; often they have the key to new and meaningful knowledge about what’s going on or needs to be done. In Brazil, a small project which elaborated cosmetic products based on medicinal plants and indigenous local knowledge transformed into an international firm selling natural cosmetic products in many countries. The creative and respectful interaction that happened between these two set of actors (indigenous communities and private company) resulted later in a major endeavour showing unexpected results. That’s why deep democracy is so important too. Therefore we should not monitor only the results we intended to produce initially, we also want to look at what actually is happening/emerging regardless of where this is coming from or who is saying it. This is, regardless of our initial ToC framing. Methods such as Most Significant Change¹⁷ are very useful for achieving this. For example, we could develop a sort of “Most Significant Assumption” exercise as a way of introducing assumption analysis in our M&E system.

8. METASKILLS FOR COMPLEX GROUP PROCESS FACILITATION

As part of my action-learning I have come to identify a set of metaskills I find useful when facilitating complex group processes. Again Mindell¹⁸ gives us a clear and simple explanation of what a metaskill is,

“When I learn to hammer a nail, I have learned a skill, but the way in which I use the hammer is a metaskill. The same is true in developing skills in working with individuals and groups. We need to learn skills and techniques, but these cannot be applied without the proper metaskills of deep democracy.

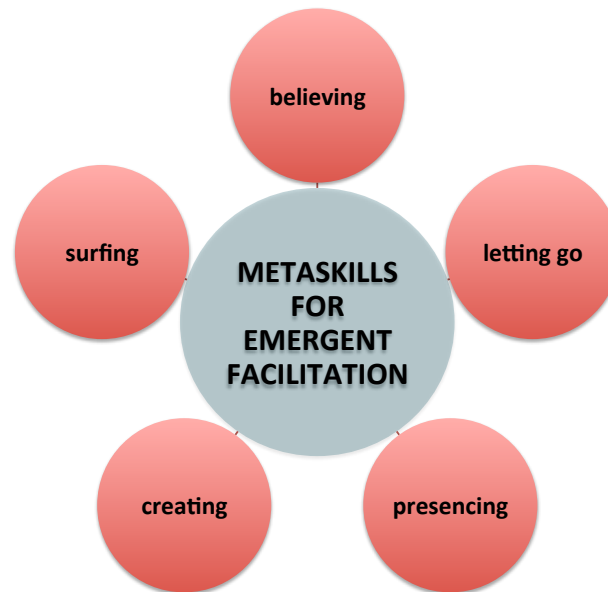
In working with groups or organizations in serious trouble, either with themselves or with other groups, the decisive factor for the facilitator is not the skills or methods she uses but the attitudes she has toward the group. These attitudes and beliefs are what I call *metaskills*. They generate tools for dealing with any situation”

The exploration of these metaskills, these attitudes and beliefs, is still work in progress for me and it will require further action-learning. I introduce a first approximation to a set of metaskills I found necessary developing for an effective emergent approach to facilitation. Somehow I find them all intertwined so there is not a straight sequence in

¹⁷ Davies R., Dart J., 2005, *The ‘Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique*, available at <http://mande.co.uk/special-issues/most-significant-change-msc/>

¹⁸ Mindell A., 1992, *The leader as martial artist. Techniques and strategies for resolving conflict and creating community*, Portland: Lao Tse Press

terms of which metaskill needs to be mastered first. They unfold themselves as we move forward in developing our facilitation skills.



8.1. Believing. Change is possible and depends entirely on us

If a facilitator does not believe in the transformative potential of the process she is facilitating there is no point in being there. We need to believe change is possible when we engage ourselves in these sorts of processes whatever that change process may be: inter/intra-personal, organisational, social. People need to believe change is possible and we as facilitators have a role in rooting that belief deeply and widely in them through our own attitudes and behaviours. There are no shortcuts: if we believe then we will irradiate that belief to everybody around us. Otherwise people will suspect we are there just for the money or power even if that's not the case. If we don't believe in what we are doing it is better to disengage from the process as soon as possible and leave room for the believers.

The day Nelson Mandela died I was facilitating a training on Impact Assessment and Theory of Change in Bangkok. That was a very sad day for all of us at the training. Starting the morning session we came together in a circle joining hands to share our grief and invoke Mandela's presence among us. Mandela believed in social change. And because he believed, he was able to change himself and South Africa in a way no one would have expected. He changed South Africa because he changed himself. He was not preaching about change, he was practicing it. We need to believe change is possible. We need to believe in what we are doing. We need to do what we believe in. Holding on to the possibility of plausible changes in odd circumstances, and infusing this belief onto others when in times of difficulty, uncertainty, or doubt is a valuable metaskill.

8.2. Letting go. Unlearning the way we think and do things

We all carry a lot of a baggage everywhere we go. From early age our family, education system, society, culture, religion and other hegemonic institutions present in our lives shape us. When facilitating multi-stakeholder processes we need to be aware, suspend and/or let go off those mindsets, deeply established assumptions, attitudes, habits, and behaviours that may hamper our role as facilitators in any given group process. Every group process is different, so every time we start these processes we need to start identifying within ourselves what sort of mindsets and behaviours may affect negatively our performance and role.

From a social change perspective, letting go is directly related to un-learning those mindsets and behaviours imposed by hegemonic and dominant institutions constraining the possibility for transformative change to happen. Critical, transformative, and experiential learning¹⁹ approaches become very powerful when working with adults engaged in social change processes.

Letting go is not an easy task. It demands a considerable effort on our side because of our natural resistance to change. This resistance to change, the need to stop doing things in a certain way, and the uncertainty of what's emerging triggers a whole set of emotions which need to be acknowledged. Becoming aware of these emotions is the first step to let them go in terms of not allowing them to hinder our connecting role as facilitators.

Developing this metaskill requires meta-observation of our practice, which can be done by ourselves (self-reflection through journaling, walking reflection, drawing, body movement, meditation, etc.), and also with the help of others (coaching, mentoring, learning peers, therapy, communities of practice, etc.).

8.3. Presencing. Co-existing mindfully in the here and now

I have seen many times how some facilitators send people to subgroups during workshops and then use that “free” time for emailing, reading the news, or doing some other activity not related to the workshop. Then “connecting” again to the group at the plenary time or when starting a next session. The facilitator is there (physically)...but she is not (body, mind and heart). In longer processes may happen something similar when we launch an initiative and then look elsewhere until a monitoring session or some other formal activity calls our attention and requires our time. Or when we are in a meeting but

¹⁹ Freire P., 1996 (2nd ed.), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London: Penguin Books; Brookfield S., 2005, *The power of critical theory. Liberating adult learning and teaching*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass; Heron J., 1999, *The complete facilitator's handbook*, London: Kogan Page; Mezirow J., 2001, *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers; Moon J., 2004, *A handbook of reflective and experiential learning. Theory and practice*, London: RoutledgeFalmer; Illich I., 1970, *Deschooling society*, New York: Marion Boyards Publishers Ltd; Castells M. et al, 1994, *Critical education in the new information age*, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc

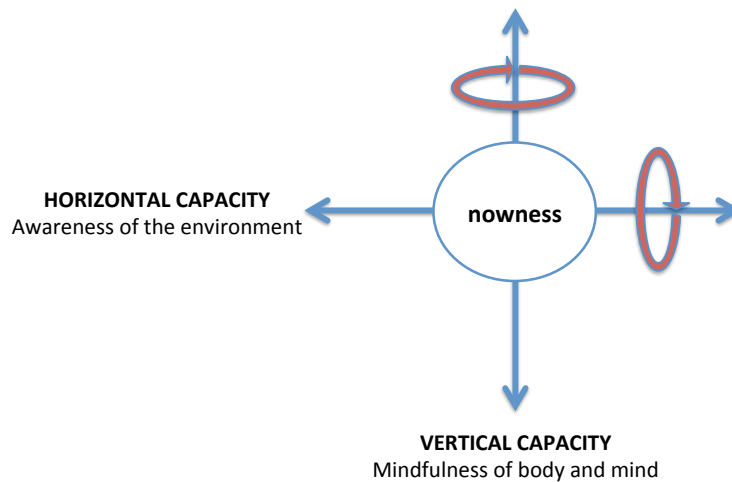
just paying attention to our smartphone or laptop. Our own mental dispersion and hyperactivity turn out to be the first barrier to overcome for staying connected and fully aware of what's going on around and within us.

Being present has to do also with sensing the group process: tensions, competition, collaboration, hotspots, flow, emotions, easiness, confusion, group energy, stuckness, level of understanding, body language, gender issues, etc. Becoming aware and staying attentive to the group process, whatever the shape or nature of it, is of paramount importance for the facilitator. Being present and aware supports others' and our process of making explicit and dealing constructively with our assumptions and prejudices, emotions, associations, projections, intentions, etc. When working in multicultural and multi-stakeholder contexts we, facilitators and group members, need to nurture a habit of being aware about the diversity in the group since some group members may tend to experience this diversity as a "problem" to be managed instead of a creative potential for transformation to be nurtured.

Sometimes in the plenaries and circles of conversation people stay in silence; sometimes they have nothing meaningful to add, sometimes they are still "afraid" of making their voices heard, and sometimes people just need some time for deep reflection and listening to the insights coming from their inner self. Other times, the group process demands full action from facilitators: networking, reporting, meeting, convening, facilitating workshops, sharing documents, etc. We need to stay present in the process to perceive what it demands from us as facilitators. It is only when we are fully present and mindful of the field that we are able to sense and perceive unexpected events and other subtle moves in the group process that could affect group dynamics afterwards. This may sound obvious and easy to accomplish, but in my experience this is a major metaskill in need of further development among facilitators.

Arawana Hayashi, co-founder of Presencing Institute²⁰ and lead practitioner on the application of the Theory U from an embodied perspective, calls *nowness* to this ability of being present in the here and now. The practice of *nowness*, or being present in the here and now, is based in a two-fold capacity. On one hand, the vertical capacity of being mindful of our own body and mind. On the other hand, there is the horizontal capacity of being aware of our surrounding environment and our inter-connection with it. This capacity of *nowness* is a very powerful tool for leaders and facilitators when it comes to helping groups move forward in a mindful and respectful way.

²⁰ See www.presencing.org. Arawana Hayashi has developed an embodied form of practicing presence called "Social Presencing Theatre". For more information on Presence and Theory U see Scharmer O., 2007, *Theory U. Leading from the future as it emerges*, Cambridge: SoL; Scharmer O., Kaufer K., 2013, *Leading from the emergent future. From ego-system to eco-system economies*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Ltd



8.4. Creating. Dealing constructively with uncertainty and not-knowing

Bringing together people who have not a habit of working together and getting something meaningful out of it is always a challenge. Bringing together people who belong to different social and cultural identities, have different rank and are not used to work together and getting something meaningful out of it is even a greater challenge. Therefore, as we can imagine, supporting multi-stakeholder processes in multi-cultural contexts entails a lot of creativity on both sides (facilitator and group members). This becomes even more difficult and challenging when the group finds itself in a situation that is uncertain (i.e. foreseeing changes in the near future as done when designing a ToC). When people don't feel safe in the space, they are hesitant of showing their vulnerability in front of others.

In the late 90's I lived several years in a remote rural indigenous region in Bolivia (North Potosí Department) supporting community development and more participatory municipal governance systems at local level. We²¹ launched the Municipal Development Councils²²²³ (MDC) as a mechanism to bring together non-formal community-based organisations (farmer unions, women organisations, producer associations, etc.) with formal municipal institutions (municipal development planning, electoral processes, municipal council, legal framework and procedures, etc.). Because of historical mistrust institutionally marginalized indigenous-farmers and local elites managing the municipal government were reluctant to work together. The MDC were dialogue and deliberation

21 The NGO I was working with along with other progressive NGOs, local leaders, and mayors.

22 The idea of supporting these MDC was an unexpected outcome coming out of a participatory mid-term review process which took place in the project I was managing.

23 Retolaza I., 2008, 'Moving up and down the ladder. Community-based participation in public dialogue and deliberation in Bolivia and Guatemala', in *Community Development Journal*, Volume 43 Issue 3, London: Oxford University Press; Retolaza I., 2003, *El municipio somos todos: gobernanza participativa y transparencia municipal*, La Paz: PLURAL Editores.

spaces where local NGOs, municipal staff, community leaders, government agencies (health, education, national programs present in the locality, etc.) and other development organisations (UN agencies, international donors, etc.) came together to discuss local development, public policies, and community-based projects. Later on these spaces became the channel through which the formal 5-year municipal planning was defined with full participation of indigenous organisations. As a result of continuous coaching and training, many community leaders mastered basic skills for participatory local governance and later on became council members, mayors, and members of the National Parliament and Constituent Assembly. On the other hand, supporting and training municipal authorities and technical staff created an institutional attitude towards a more inclusive, transparent and effective public management. To a certain extent, our intervention contributed to this un-expected outcome when supporting MDC that initially were not part of our project. We just followed the process and trusted the un-expected.

The supporters of this initiative faced a lot of difficulties in the process because of deep-rooted prejudices and lack of a more democratic relational habit between main actors (marginalized rural citizens of indigenous origin and local mestizo elites coping municipal power structures). Along with this, at that time MDC had no place in the existing normative; there were no laws, decrees or any other formal regulation acknowledging nor supporting the implementation of these spaces. But we had to be creative in terms of finding non violent and more “neutral” and shared spaces for them to come together and be mutually accountable to each other. The MDC were our alternative to fill that relational gap and historical mistrust. It took us a few years, but local actors made the space theirs’ and lots of good initiatives for improving municipal and community development came out of those meetings. Sometimes creativity requires out-of-the-box-thinking and proposing new institutional arrangements as a way of developing more responsive public institutions and enhanced citizen participation. And sometimes we just need to innovate the current way of thinking and doing things without necessarily proposing new institutions or mechanisms (innovating in-the-box thinking and doing). In any case, creativity and innovation demand a big effort from all sides (facilitators and group members).

So far I have been engaged in a number of ToC processes in different parts of the world, some from a multi-stakeholder approach and some engaging just a small group in one organisation. Some of them were framed in a training format and some embedded in real life program planning and strategic analysis. In all these cases I saw people struggling hard to come up with innovative and creative ways for tackling the challenges they were facing. I found out that linear and non-contradictory thinking and its operative expression (i.e. Log-frame) have damaged people’s capacity to address creatively and non-linearly their challenges and problems²⁴. This is a major issue when considering that these are social change organisations trying hard to influence the shaping of a not-known desired future as visualized in a ToC exercise (desired change, pathways of change, etc.). I learnt that there is a need for un-learning and coming up with more

²⁴ Retolaza I., Rozo P., *Local NGOs and their contribution to social change in Latin America: paradoxes and contradictions*, Critical Reflection Note, La Paz: HIVOS, available at <http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Theory-of-Change/Resources> (Spanish and English versions available)

creative ways of working among social change actors. The same ones who have been involved for so many years in the use of Log-frames and short-term projects as the main mechanism used by them to support social change. These are individuals and organisations that have over-developed their left side of the brain (analytical, compartmental, rational, concrete, masculine) and under-developed their right side of the brain (holistic, creative, intuitive, relational, feminine). To put it in provocative terms, these are brain-damaged organisations in need of non-linear surgery. We need to complement both sides of our individual-organisational brain. These capacities of being creative and complementing generatively linear and non-linear thinking are part of a major metaskill to be nurtured by us facilitators of social change.

8.5. Surfing. Managing ourselves through the waves of complexity

It is clear by now that we live in uncertain times demanding from development cooperation actors new conceptual and methodological approaches for supporting social change more effectively. I have learnt that we must include, and not deny or marginalize, uncertainty and not-knowing in our equation and become familiar with it. The non-linear nature of these socio-political processes demands lots of creativity and flexibility from our side (facilitators and direct stakeholders). This is a lot to ask from our side because we are always facilitators in the making; every new process demands new and old capacities, mindsets and behaviours from us.

Becoming familiar with uncertainty is always a challenge too. Not knowing with precise certainty how the process will unfold, or having to deal with all the undisclosed tensions and conflicts naturally emerging as we move along the process is a hard task for any facilitator. Sometimes we facilitators achieve the purpose and everybody is happy, sometimes we fail and find ourselves attacked by some of the actors or even by the conveners of the process. This happens even if we are not responsible for the failure of the process. Many times I feel manipulated not only by members of the group, but even by the conveners of these group processes. Being manipulated and/or put on the spot when things are not running smooth is part of the facilitator's life. It comes with the job, so to say. We usually are the scapegoat when the process is not running as expected or when dormant conflicts arise unpredictably affecting negatively the process. To the extent possible, we have to develop the metaskill of dealing with all these ups and downs as mindful and resilient²⁵ as possible at any time. We need to irradiate this attitude to all members of the group to help the group move forward safely.

A few years ago I was working as a long-term consultant for two UNDP Regional Projects in Latin America. Part of my work had to do with facilitating multi-agency dialogue spaces for strategic analysis and monitoring of shared initiatives and planning; which usually fell under the overarching Development Assistance Framework (DAF)²⁶. We

²⁵ "Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences" (American Psychological Association, <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>, accessed on 02/01/2014); "The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness", Oxford Dictionary, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>, accessed on 02/01/2014).

²⁶ The DAF is the results-based management tool used by the UN System to coordinate and monitor effectively the work of all UN agencies present in a country.

received a request from a Central American UN office to support its UN Coordinator²⁷ in a multi-agency process convened by him as a mean of fostering the implementation of the One UN approach among the UN agencies²⁸ working in the country. I was part of the team²⁹ set up by these two Regional Projects to address the demand: a two-day workshop with all UN agencies working in the country. In our first interaction with the UN Coordinator we asked about any dormant or active conflict going on between UN agencies (mainly between the different Resident Representatives). He repeatedly told us that everything was OK and that it was not necessary for us to interview anyone coming to the workshop. He had it all under control, so to say.

The initial assumption that everything was all right was completely wrong! The UN Coordinator incorrectly informed us about the overall situation and the problematic relationships he was having with other major UN players in that country. I could breathe the mistrust and fear of speaking openly present in the room³⁰. So at the end of the afternoon session I was a bit desperate because nothing meaningful was happening and we were about to finish the day. At this stage, the predetermined outcomes of the workshop were already compromised.

While thinking about all this in the midst of my frustration, an idea came to me. I threw two questions to the plenary to be answered anonymously in cards placed upside-down in the centre of the circle. *¿What are we thinking that we are not saying? ¿What are we saying we will do that we know we will not do afterwards?* People went into silent reflection, wrote on the cards, placed them in the centre. I shuffled them all and handed back randomly to participants. They read and share them with their neighbour and then we convened the plenary again. This was a major breakthrough in terms of people expressing what they really wanted to say, what they really felt about the One UN approach as managed by the UN Coordinator. The UN Coordinator, along with some other UN agency Representatives, was there too. Unfolding what people were really thinking and disclosing it explicitly, although in an anonymous way, opened the possibility for a more honest and meaningful conversation. It also helped us all to make explicit some of the wrong assumptions on which High Management was sustaining the whole One UN process. It was a way of leveraging power/knowledge dynamics in the group too. This is how powerful assumption management can get when used from a ToC approach. I felt good after this exercise. I saw the group engaged again (some of the participants thanked me covertly for the exercise). I gained back the confidence I needed as facilitator; and I became more secure and clear about the group process too.

So, I got a lot of learning from this experience. On one side I realized it is possible to use basic and quick ways and techniques for unfolding the underlying group field. On the other side and looking in hindsight, a major personal learning had to do with the power of resilience and the capacity of surfing the process despite the difficulties, misinformation, ego wars, lack of transparency, our own biases, and other deceiving

²⁷ A role usually played by the UNDP Resident Representative, RR

²⁸ The One UN initiative was launched as part of the UN Reform as a way to foster a more conducive environment for UN agencies to work together more often and more effectively.

²⁹ The facilitation team was comprised by the Director of one of these Regional Projects and myself.

³⁰ The group was comprised by some UN agency RR, Program Officers, Regional Delegates, and other technical staff belonging to different UN agencies.

phenomena that usually are so present in these sort of group processes. Sometimes we have to be soft and let it go, and sometimes we have to be strong and take over and lead. Or as Shunryu Suzuki³¹ pointed out so beautifully:

“We refine silk by washing it many times so that the threads are white and soft enough to weave... We temper iron by hitting it while it is hot – not to forge or shape it, but to make it strong.”

These are metaskills that were tested in the midst of a tough and quite emergent process. This is how it goes in real life.

9. A FINAL WORD

All in one, we had a way of thinking and an intention when designing the Theory of Change the way we did it. But when implementing the process afterwards some other unintended or unexpected results will come out to life whether we like it or not, whether we predicted it or not, whether we are capable of dealing with them or not. Guaranteed!! We need to accept reality as it is, not (only) as we believe it is or would like it to be. And this obvious but often neglected fact (“reality is as it is whether we like it or not, whether we are aware of it or not”) takes us back to our reflection on assumptions, learning, edges, resistance, and conflict.

A way of seeing is always a way of not seeing³². And this overarching principle applies to this paper too. Some development practitioners may resonate with the reflections of this paper and feel motivated by it. Some may think this is rubbish and resist it. Some may become curious and decide to explore further. Some things I am not able to see yet. Ways of seeing.

³¹ Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971) was one of the first leading Japanese Zen masters who introduced Zen Buddhist practice to lay Americans in the early 1960's. See Suzuki S., 2002, *Not always so*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

³² Wolcott F. H., 1999, *Ethnography: a way of seeing*, UK: AltaMira Press

Colophon

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