Complexity, contradictions and struggle

Facilitating change in the international development sector

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Most people in the international development sector know how difficult it is to achieve change, given real-world complexities. But while people acknowledge complexity in their rhetoric, they do not necessarily follow this through in their practice. And people who do take complexity seriously are more likely to do so in their engagement 'out there' with external actors, but not 'in here' in the facilitation of change in their own organisations. In this article, drawing on an autoethnographic approach, I reflect on my own experience of delivering pre-packaged solutions to key development challenges; learning about their limitations, in light of being exposed to complexity 'ideas'; and then bringing these ideas to the group of people I worked with. I describe how I tried to persuade colleagues to take more seriously the complexity of human interaction, not only in relation to the support that we were providing to other agencies, but also to the management of our own organisation. I explain the strong reactions this stirred amongst senior managers, and the painful memories this evoked in me of difficult relationships I encountered during my childhood. Ultimately, I highlight the risky nature of organisational development; the need to be curious about where others 'stand' in relation to anyone who seeks to serve as an OD facilitator, and the support that a mentor and support group can play during this endeavour.

Keywords

international development, organisational development, think tank, influencing policy, complexity, control and predictability, taking complexity seriously

The context

For nine years I worked for an organisation which called itself an international development think tank, in a programme which over the years involved between 10 and 15 staff. Our work aimed to help others in the 'development sector' to get research findings 'off the shelf and into policy and practice'. When I joined the programme, much work had already been done in exploring how change happened in various contexts and, in particular, in understanding the role played by research evidence in influencing (primarily) government policies. They concluded that policy was complex, non-linear and multifactorial and that, in many contexts, policies were only weakly informed by research evidence.

Programme staff published various papers over the years, on how research was used to inform policy change, and explored what complexity concepts meant for international development and humanitarian practice more generally. When I took up my post in 2008, others in the team had already done a lot of thinking about what this complexity might mean in practical terms - for supporting people to promote change, using research as the primary resource. Soon afterwards, this thinking and practice was made explicit in a step-wise approach in which each step was accompanied by suggestions of tools and frameworks which could be applied at the relevant stage. The assumption was that one could plan one's policy-influencing work using this methodology. The alternative to this was to engage in 'strategic opportunism', where one would exploit critical junctures to persuade powerful stakeholders to adopt certain policy positions. We documented the process through which this was put together and the methodology was further developed over time.

Managing the performance

For several years, our programme had benefited from a large organisation-wide grant. When I joined the team, this funding was coming to an end and efforts were increasingly having to be made to make ends meet through securing paid projects and commissions. As a result, within a year and a half, I found myself jet-setting around the world to run workshops with researchers and practitioners, in ways that would satisfy the needs of funders and clients. This involved taking people through the specific steps of the model and showing them how to use the associated tools and frameworks. The 'stage' was provided by a host of local organisations dotted throughout Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and the Balkans. My focus was on learning the script and ensuring that the performance went smoothly. This sometimes took only a few hours; more often, it lasted several days.

New insights – but a mountain to climb!

Performing in this way was no easy task for me, given my introverted nature, the premium I placed on how I was perceived by others and, not least, because my recall was poor! However, it was during this time that I flew to Bonn for a workshop on complexity, project management and evaluation, hosted by the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI). The event was led by Professor Chris Mowles, from the University of Hertfordshire.

Fresh insights into organisational complexity

Here, I acquired a more in-depth understanding of what complexity *really* means in social and political terms. Nonetheless, some of the participants expected to return to work fully armed with practical methods to ensure success and a clear understanding of the sorts of situations in which these could be applied. To underline this point, even one of the organisers expressed the hope that people would say, "Yes, that is how it is done". For my own part, I learnt to sit with a group in silence with my own thoughts, and noticed the anxiety that I felt in the absence of clear guidance and structure.

A few days later, Chris Mowles sent a message to those of us who had attended the workshop. This included a link to a video showing a murmuration of starlings over Oxford.

He used this to illustrate the dynamic of “stable-instability” that he had talked about during the workshop. This is a situation in which, despite there being no plan, no blueprint and no-one in overall control, order had nevertheless emerged. Importantly, though, he added that the murmuration analogy is, in his view, mistakenly taken-up in much of the organisational development literature. In particular, this is perpetrated by those who claim that managers should set so-called “simple rules”, within which staff can respond creatively to the challenges that they face. I was naturally curious about what this meant for the central theme of our work; that is, how organisations used research evidence to promote (external) change. But I also wondered about the implications of this for what I saw going on in my own organisation.

Starling Roost: Photo -Tony Armstrong

More of the same – in pursuit of structure, predictability and control

As it happened, senior staff in the organisation, who were keen on ‘processes and systems’, were exploring what a more ‘systematic’ approach to project management would look like. They had discovered PRINCE 2 and were raising awareness amongst staff about its use. They also trained staff, who could take a (multiple choice) test (and receive a certificate, if they passed). I was one of those trained (and I did get a certificate!) One of PRINCE 2’s proponents was an older and more experienced member of my team. Another was the former head (and founder) of the programme, who had been promoted into a newly-formed position at the ‘top’ of the organisation.

Challenging conventional wisdom – and the established power structure

During a staff retreat, the recently promoted and relatively young Head of Programme (HoP) provided space for each member of the team to present on an issue that they were interested in and/or curious about. Given my new perspectives around complexity, I decided to go ‘off-script’ and critique PRINCE 2, directly engaging the person who brought PRINCE 2 into the organisation. Drawing on some of the ideas Professor Mowles’ had articulated, I argued that the approach was based on concepts of linearity, predictability and control.

This assumed that it was possible to set goals in advance of undertaking a piece of work, and to achieve the intended outcome through a series of interventions aimed at correcting deviations from the desired path. I went on to argue that we, as a team, had repeatedly highlighted the fact that policy processes, and in turn social change (whether in organisations or wider society) was messy, non-linear, multi-faceted and hence a complex process. In short, I argued that the 'if - then' causality implicit in the PRINCE 2 methodology generally did not apply in the circumstances with which we were dealing. The acronym, PRINCE, stands for PRojects IN Controlled Environments. Our projects did not take place in controlled environments. They were complex.

I went on to say that, in seeing work solely in terms of progress against pre-determined targets, PRINCE2 led the 'manager' to focus excessively on targets, on possible impediments to achieving them, and on how these constraints might be managed away. This encouraged a much-reduced discussion, by promoting a dualistic way of thinking – your behaviour is perceived as either being right or wrong, objectives are either achieved or not achieved. Projects are either on target or not. The approach discouraged discussion, exploration and debate. And so, "being professional" was then reduced simply to conforming to 'what the plan says'; it was very little about spotting latent issues, exploring options and being surprised (See Guijt, 2008).

Challenging myself – and being challenged

Giving this critique in a group environment wasn't easy. I tended to struggle in groups. In my relationship with my parents (who struggled themselves as immigrants in London working 'hand-to-mouth' in a stuttering, arranged marriage) and as an only child, I switched between feelings of superiority, particularly in relation to my passive father, and inferiority, with low self-esteem, in relation to others. I tended to hide myself in group situations, feeling that I had little to offer to discussions. I only contributed if I was asked to and if I had prepared notes to speak from. Coupled with this, I was averse to conflict. As a result, I did not have the 'courage of my convictions' or the will to 'show up' and engage. I feared the consequences of doing so, and doubted my ability to rebuff counter arguments. Given this, critiquing an approach advocated by an older and more experienced colleague – and doing this in an open, group situation - was certainly a risky endeavour!

In any case, my colleague responded by asking, "Well, what do we do then?". This reflects the taken-for-granted assumption that managers must be in control – and that they must be able to 'do' things that will deliver the sought-after result - complexity or no complexity. This reminded me of the rhetoric of many right-leaning politicians in recent decades, who argue that there is no alternative to neoliberal economic policies. In any case, this perspective was further underlined by the Deputy Director, who had been absent from our retreat. After I shared my critique with all programme staff, he responded by saying that PRINCE 2 was specifically designed to help people to maximise the chance of success in very complex environments. He maintained that the approach ensured that decision-makers, along with all relevant stakeholders, were able to manage the project in chunks of time that were reasonably sensible. Decision-makers could do so, he argued, in stages or phases in a way that allowed them to review the situation at the end of each stage and decide what to do next. He was adamant that it was not a 'blueprint' approach. He ended his response by highlighting the seven principles underpinning PRINCE 2 and – for good measure – providing a link to an "idiots' guide".

However, although senior managers were sold on the need for, and efficacy of, a systematic approach to project delivery, to my knowledge they were not able to roll-out and enforce such a system across our organisation's fourteen-or-so programmes. For various reasons, approaches continued to be chosen in an *ad hoc* manner and informed by the individuals involved.

Keep chipping away

One of the things that I used to say during the workshops I ran with researchers and 'policy entrepreneurs' was that it would be a mistake for them to expect central government to adopt research findings as policy and then assume that these would inevitably be delivered as planned. I stressed that things did not progress in straightforward stages, from evidence-based problem identification to evidence-based solutions.

Highlighting the contradictions

I found myself participating in a project that was intended to help policymakers in South Africa to improve their use of evidence. As part of this, we were expected to conduct a diagnostic assessment of a particular government department, drawing on the expertise of external researchers. We were to have this assessment translated into a strategic plan, and then have the plan adopted by senior management. They would then enforce its implementation through top-down controls, based on a sender-receiver mode of communication. The contradictions in our approach were stark. Although we acknowledged that *policy* change could not be achieved through linear, top-down methods, the project was based on the assumption that such an approach would work in organisations. This would be the case, even in large government departments, employing thousands of staff who were scattered throughout the country and who were operating at multiple levels of governance.

An alternative way forward

Encouraged by Chris Mowles, and with more confidence than I had mustered in the past, I engaged the project leader and our South African counterpart. I went 'off script' again and questioned their perceptions of how change was likely to unfold in a government department. I suggested that we should focus less on a producing a detailed plan, and work instead on ways of engaging key groups of people on the topic at hand. In this case, our focus would be on the use of evidence in support of change. This would include, for example, encouraging them to pay attention to what they were doing and to ways in which they were already using evidence. We would be identifying and working with 'front runners' – i.e. people who were already using evidence in their work - and concerning ourselves less with trying to convince senior managers to adopt a plan produced by others. As before, though, my arguments fell on deaf ears.

I drew on these arguments in reflecting on the project during an internal programme seminar, designed to share experience, develop capability and build relationships within the team. After the event, I once again wrote an email summarising my concerns, to all programme staff including the then HoP, who had not been present at the internal programme seminar. He was the founder of the programme and had returned to his

former role after a restructure and the departure of the previous programme head. He reacted negatively to my arguments. Copying-in the programme team, and rather than engaging with the critique, he insisted that my reflections were a “diatribe”. In future, he added, I should share a more balanced set of follow-up notes, which represented everyone’s contributions and views. This deliberately public put-down provoked difficult feelings in me, most particularly those of shame and powerlessness.

If at first you don’t succeed …

Another attempt to explore alternative approaches to organisational change came in relation to a strategy process within our own programme. My immediate line manager was in charge of the process and assigned specific individuals to lead on different components. My previous attempts to present alternative ways forward came at something of a price. A colleague was put in charge of an area in which I had arguably more experience, whereas I was asked to lead in an area in which I had less interest and limited recent experience. Nevertheless, in facilitating the work of a small group of colleagues, I continued my quest to shift people’s understanding and practice in relation to the challenges involved in bringing about change. In this case, I asked them a series of questions which focussed on the ‘here and now,’ including what they found interesting and difficult. It was less about idealising the future. Following an engaging discussion, I wrote-up the main points and sent these to my manager as she had requested. Her response suggested that she had engaged very little with the content. Instead, she said that my report was not what she was expecting, and dismissed it as being of poor quality.

Seeing light at the end of the tunnel – but still being held up by ‘red signals’

An important moment was my attendance at the Complexity and Management Conference, run annually by the University of Hertfordshire at Roffey Park. I found myself with a group of fifty or so people who were curious about managing change in the same way that I was. I was able to get into conversation much quicker about taking complexity seriously, without having to deal with defensiveness about why conversations of this sort were worth having in the first place. And, through listening and interacting, I was able to consider practical ways in which I could take seriously the ‘complexity’ of organisations and the practical implications of group dynamics. Most importantly, I was now part of a community, surrounded by allies who could provide practical and emotional support in my endeavours, even though we were working in diverse organisations, sectors and countries. Yet I still found aspects of the conference uncomfortable. As always, I found it intimidating to have to converse in large groups and in plenary. It became clear to me, though, how important it was to have my voice heard, if I was to deliberate, negotiate, and be visible to and with others. It was also at this conference that I was introduced to the OD Innovation Network (ODiN), which was another community of practice that offered solidarity, ideas and support.

Feeling emboldened, opportunities for me to explore alternative approaches to promoting change came with two new projects. The first entailed my working with policy officers from the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) from around the world. The second involved a group of policymakers who were working with the Zimbabwean Ministry of Youth. Both of these groups were persuaded by my arguments that

conventional approaches were unlikely to lead to a successful outcome. This opened the way to my working with what turned out to be supportive and curious clients. I was therefore able to put into practice approaches which enabled ‘beneficiaries’ to pay attention to, and reflect upon, their own practice, and to suggest possible ways forward, based on their own experience and understanding. This included facilitating loosely structured group discussions, which combined action learning with story-telling and live scenario planning.

At the same time, I had to reconcile these approaches with the desire of funders and clients for clear objectives, strategies and outputs. This proved difficult and required some creative reporting. Sharing this approach and its effects with programme colleagues also resulted in a variety of responses from senior staff. These included surprise and bewilderment at how different the approach was to the more conventional methodologies applied in similar projects. They also included the by-now-familiar criticism of my approach to sharing and reflection, rather than engaging with the content. And as before, I experienced overt hostility from my organisation’s founder, during another internal seminar.

‘Hitting the buffers’

Consumed by frustration, I ‘hit back’ by writing articles for an external platform run by the ex-HoP, who was supportive of, and receptive to, alternative viewpoints. I began by writing a lengthy post on how organisational development was more of an art than a science. This was published here (Datta, 2016a) - ‘under the radar’, without my securing approval from senior managers. I followed this up by writing about strategy, making the case for focussing more on the present than on some long-distance future. This contradicted the approaches set out in formal documents that had been published as part of the programme over many years. I suggested that there was little or no evidence that clients actually put such approaches into practice, following the training workshops that I and others had delivered. However, before I could publish this, my manager discovered the earlier post of mine that had gone out without approval, and tightened-up controls on the publishing of online articles.

Eventually though, my manager did offer a critique of what I was arguing (but only after labelling my critique ‘Mowlesian’ and stating my article featured too many words), suggesting that I had set two things in opposition to each other, characterised by “doing what you are currently doing but doing it better” versus “focussing on what you do in future”. On this basis, she argued that the present and the future needed to be addressed using different approaches. Welcoming feedback on content, I responded by, amongst other things, suggesting that the future was informed by what was happening now, and inviting her to write a formal response to my article, so as to promote an open and transparent debate. Although this never materialised, I was able to publish an edited form of the article about three months later here (Datta, 2016b).

Relations between me and senior colleagues deteriorated further. I got caught up in a struggle between me, my line manager and the founder, in which interactions became increasingly adversarial and emotionally charged. Some while later, I was overlooked for a promotion opportunity, which went to a recent arrival to the programme. Feeling ‘pushed out’, I concluded that my career with the organisation had ‘hit the buffers’ and that - to mix my metaphors - I’d come to the ‘end of the road’.

What was going on?

A ‘think tank’ which rejected internal discussion and debate?

So, what do I think was really going on? I was consistently criticised for the nature of my reflections or criticisms – and very rarely for content. And when I tried to publish my thoughts, there seemed to be a high degree of policing. Clearly what I said and did provoked strong feelings in senior colleagues. If there was no substance to my critique, then there would be no reason to respond angrily. So, perhaps there was something substantive in what I was saying. But why the strong reaction? One would have thought that a ‘think tank’ which aims to promote policy debate externally, would embrace discussion and debate internally. Apparently not. So perhaps it was how I offered critique and made my suggestions, omitting to acknowledge where my colleagues were to begin with?

Applying to ‘them’ but not to ‘us’

Nevertheless, I was struck by how there was a growing movement of people in the aid world who were willing to conceptualise and adopt new approaches to address persistent problems in the international development sector. These included, for example, the Doing Development Differently and Thinking and Working Politically communities, in both of which my own organisation was a prominent member. Against this backdrop, the notion of ‘complexity’ became a buzzword across the development sector and, inevitably, therefore, infused our programme. Seemingly, though, approaches that took seriously the implications of complexity were not considered to be applicable to the work of those actually delivering aid and trying to promote change, with only lip service being paid to the implications of complex problems and challenges internally. Instead, there appeared to be a high premium placed on conformity within the formal programme, with ‘speaking out’ being a risky prospect.

THE DDD MANIFESTO

ON DOING DEVELOPMENT DIFFERENTLY

Too many development initiatives have limited impact. Schools are built but children do not learn. Clinics are built but sickness persists. Governments adopt reforms but too little changes for their citizens.

This is because genuine development progress is complex: solutions are not simple or obvious, those who would benefit most lack power, those who can make a difference are disengaged and political barriers are too often overlooked. Many development initiatives fail to address this complexity, promoting irrelevant interventions that will have little impact.

Some development initiatives, however, have real results. Some are driven domestically while others receive external support. They usually involve many players – governments, civil society, international agencies and the private sector – working together to deliver real progress in complex situations and despite strong resistance. In practice, successful initiatives reflect common principles.

- They focus on solving local problems that are debated, defined and refined by local people in an ongoing process.
- They are legitimised at all levels (political, managerial and social), building ownership and momentum throughout the process to be ‘locally owned’ in reality (not just on paper).
- They work through local conveners who mobilise all those with a stake in progress (in both formal and informal coalitions and teams) to tackle common problems and introduce relevant change.
- They blend design and implementation through rapid cycles of planning, action, reflection and revision (drawing on local knowledge, feedback and energy) to foster learning from both success and failure.
- They manage risks by making ‘small bets’: pursuing activities with promise and dropping others.
- They foster real results – real solutions to real problems that have real impact: they build trust, empower people and promote sustainability.

As an emerging community of development practitioners and observers, we believe that development initiatives can – and must – have greater impact.

We pledge to apply these principles in our own efforts to pursue, promote and facilitate development progress, to document new approaches, to spell out their practical implications and to foster their refinement and wider adoption.

We want to expand our community to include those already working in this way.

We call on international development organisations of all kinds to embrace these principles as the best way to address complex challenges and foster impact. We recognise the difficulties, but believe that more effective strategies and approaches can generate higher and lasting impact.

Visit http://buildingstatecapability.com/the-ddd-manifesto/ to see signatories and sign up

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Figure 1: The DDD Manifesto

Challenging the established narrative and power relationships

What might explain this? Complexity ideas are difficult, and threaten orthodox ways of understanding the world. By critiquing conventional ways for promoting change, I was seen as actively undermining all the tools and techniques that senior managers had been promoting up until then. This was even though the *Doing*

Development Differently manifesto (as in Figure 1 above) explicitly acknowledges that, "Many development initiatives fail to address this complexity, promoting irrelevant interventions that will have little impact." Furthermore, the principles for action that are embodied in the manifesto also resonate strongly with the sort of locally-led approach that I have been advocating.

There was also a lot invested in conventional ways of working, of course. Amongst other things, this included: the drive to secure funding (and the fear of losing income); the desire to be seen as 'professional' (as everyone else seems to pursue conventional approaches); and a challenge to a constructed sense of identity (some people had spent their careers offering conventional techniques to address problems). People and professionals are also often part of a particular 'thought collective', which is characterised and sustained by a certain style of thinking and acting, often policed by its members, and often reprimanding or excluding members who question the fundamentals. Ironically, it is the complex interplay of factors such as these that renders overly structured and prescriptive approaches unworkable, and why the resulting "irrelevant interventions … have little impact", whether in the broad field of international development or within particular organisations such as mine.

The collective thinking that influenced my senior colleagues was itself shaped by concepts of control and predictability (which stem from the engineering science and cybernetic systems thinking). This, as we know, continues to be dominant in so many parts of our life and times. Creating the space for alternatives in the programme was not just a case of convincing senior colleagues with an argument. It was also a political exercise, in which differences in race, age, class and gender identities played out. Consistently speaking my own truth came to be seen as an act of rebellion, which ultimately ended in the doling-out of punishment and left me somewhat isolated.

Triggering past patterns

But my struggles were not just political, they were emotional too. We are brought up in specific families, with specific emotional and behavioural patterns, which influences the way in which we understand and interpret our experiences. The fact that senior managers were seemingly not listening to me, nor treating me with respect, took me back to my childhood and to the relationship with my father. I found this unhelpfully familiar and couldn't let go of it. This created deep resentment in me. This went unresolved (partly because my father passed away before I could effect a reconciliation) and so contributed to the ensuing struggle with senior managers, who took on the role of parental figures in my unconscious.

Conclusion

Ultimately, trying to change the perspectives or others, especially those who had more power than me, was a risky endeavour. Nevertheless, I found that having knowledge and understanding of the concepts behind orthodox approaches to organisation and management practice was crucial to my ability to offer a credible critique of them. And, through my struggles, I found communication and encouragement from the University of Hertfordshire's Professor Chris Mowles invaluable – you could call him a mentor of sorts. He was able to put what I was experiencing into perspective, and could offer alternative approaches underpinned with a

credible rationale. I also gained tremendous solace and solidarity from the community which formed around the University of Hertfordshire's annual Complexity and Management Conference as well as from ODiN, whose members were able to help me develop arguments and curate appropriate approaches. I'm not entirely sure whether I've made any difference to the people around me throughout my struggles, but I did come to appreciate the importance of understanding the 'position' of those I'm engaging with, and what might underpin that. And crucially, I learnt a great deal about myself and my history, and about how this shaped my experience in the present. In the process, I improved the way I conducted myself within groups, and I've learned to deal with - and recover from - difficult situations. Knowledge of myself has given me the power (that I arguably 'lost' as a child) to be more 'in choice' about how I go on with others.

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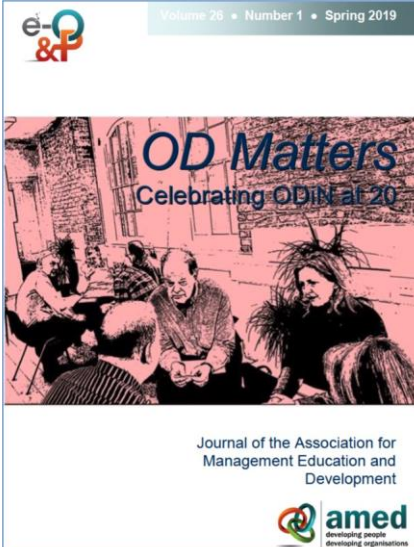

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