**Can we change the world?**

**(discussion starter: Terry Gibson, 20th October 2017)**

People working in the aid and development industry can see that change is needed. The lives of the people they serve seem to stay the same despite the huge sums and many programmes devoted to improving their lives. As well as doing the day to day work, many of these people are involved in advocacy, campaigning and networking to try to make a difference by changing this huge system. But what if it is impossible to change? What if we are going to carrying on working and carry on pushing and yet will see no more progress in the future than we have done in the past?

The experience of GNDR is one example of the frustrations of trying to change the system – in their case UNISDR and its Hyogo and Sendai frameworks. Case studies show that despite a concerted programme of campaigning and action centred round its Views from the Frontline (VFL) and Frontline programmes UNISDR has been resistant to change. For example after an initial push by GNDR with its first VFL presentations at the UNISDR Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in 2009, where a clear impact was made with its message that little was changing at the Frontline, UNISDR quickly absorbed GNDR’s messages and even its slogan, making them their own and burying them in their policies, resulting in their impact being blunted:

‘Since the last Global Platform in 2009, *local action* is delivering results and drawing increased attention. The Making Cities Resilient campaign has signed over 150 to date, illustrating the commitment and contribution of mayors, local governments and their supporters worldwide. A new Community Practitioners Platform for Resilience is being used by policy makers and community organizations to build alliances between them. *The Global Assessment Report 2011 recognizes local perspectives and incorporates ‘Views from the Frontline’ from civil society organizations.*

But, to what extent do our interventions lead to improved conditions in the places where the vulnerable live and work? Are all our programs and policies targeted enough at supporting local action and building on local assets? How can we accelerate finance and *increase investment in local action***.** What do we need to do to make this happen?’

(Extract from second announcement of UN Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, 17 November 2010. UNISDR, 2011. Italics added)

The quote above shows how the ‘system’, in this case UNISDR, can ‘bounce back’ from the shocks of campaigning and advocacy, absorbing them. It is in fact very ‘resilient’ to change.

Looking more widely, key players including UN agencies, INGOs and others similarly do their utmost to avoid challenge and change. For example at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit the ‘system’ was challenged by South based networks ADESO and NEAR along with many others working at ground level in the south to make more than the paltry 2% - 4% of aid directly available at local level (According to NEAR: 2016), rather than trickling it through the ‘system’ of government, UN agencies and INGOs. A ‘grand bargain’ was announced with the goal of increasing this figure to 25% by 2020. This would have a huge impact on the cashflow and income of INGOs through whom much of this money flows. In response they established ‘charter4change’ which attempts to reassure partners that they are ‘cleaning up their act’ but which can also be read as protecting their role as intermediaries, disbursing funds to ‘partners’ who are more often treated as service providers. INGOs, like the UN and Governments, are very ‘resilient’ to change and are likely to attempt to bounce back and preserve the status quo.

Why does this matter? Firstly local NGOs and local communities clearly think so because they see how top down thinking which doesn’t understand local contexts, complicated organisational structures, project cycles, heavy accountability, and false participation all leads to huge waste of resources. What we can do about this?

Firstly we can state what *can’t* be done about it. We can’t change the system from within. The examples above of how system resisting such change can be multiplied by other examples of government and institutional behaviour. There are theories underpinning this, such as organisational theory, political economy and even philosophical theories of the ‘disposive’ – a multidimensional structure which resists influence and change (Deleuze: 1992) . They have been applied not only in our ‘world’ but in the world of big business and they show why it is that organisations resist change, and how it is that powerful institutions do it. They all lead to the conclusion that working within the system in ‘invited’ spaces doesn’t work. The systems bounce back. I wonder whether as you read this it resonates with your experience?

In the world of industry it has been increasingly recognised that this tendency brings businesses down, because if they can’t change they fail. Big computer companies, big car companies and so on all face this challenge, and business gurus such as Christensen have shown that the escape route is through ‘disruption’ (Christensen and Raynor: 2013), which echoes a philosophical idea, ‘dissensus’ (Rancière: 2004). Both suggest that to create change you’ve got to get outside the system, not play their game, but disrupt it to create a fresh voice or a freshly created political space (Gaventa: 2005)).

What might this mean in practice? In industry Christensen shows that only new startups with the freedom to change (as were Microsoft and Apple originally when they started out in garages) can do so. Only if a big business creates a completely autonomous unit, able to do the things it can’t, can change be achieved. And change is disruptive, which is exactly why big organisations don’t like it. UN agencies, for example, like to keep civil society in boxes, and even when they seem to give civil society space and voice it’s on their terms, as GNDR found when it was handed resposibility for a major event by UNISDR and then found the event changed so much by UNISDR during its preparation that its message was completely blurred and blunted. At the time that happened I wondered if we should have instead been staging ‘flashmobs’ in the entrance hall, Attracting attention to challenge the status quo – creating disruption.

So the argument is simple. Working within the system, fitting within the institution’s timetables, financial structures, reporting, programmes and so on changes nothing, and no amount of advocacy and campaigning will do so. If change is really what we want then disruption is needed. It seems that ‘community philanthropy’ which we will hear about from TEWA in Nepal, is one such example as it changes the rules by drawing resources from local level and cutting free from the system. Can this small disruption lead to ripples of change which affect the system? *How can networks such as GNDR, ADESO or NEAR create disruption, pushing for the changes they want to see? In our own work locally does this idea ring true?*

**Christensen, C. & Raynor, M.,** (2013), *The innovator’s solu on: Crea ng and sustaining successful growth*, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston.

**Deleuze, Gilles**. (1992) What Is a Dispositif? In Michel Foucault Philosopher, edited by Timothy Armstrong. New York: Routledge.

**Gaventa, J**. (2005) *Reflections on the use of the power cube approach for analysing the spaces, places and dynamics of Civil Society participation and engagement.* MFP Breed Network, the Netherlands. http://www.partos.nl/uploaded\_files/13-CSP-Gaventa-paper.pdf. (Accessed 4/05/2011).

**NEAR** (2016) http://www.near.ngo/home/detailview?id=36)

**Rancière, J.** (2004), The Politics of Aesthetics, Continuum, London.