

IDEAS FOR THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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Dr. Hoyer has contributed to various magazines on development issues.

The conventional approach to development and social change is an attempt to efficiently manage individual or sectoral aggregated projects toward a previously determined goal expressed in terms of a higher standard of living. The median consumption patterns and resulting life style of Western, and especially the U.S. industrialized societies constitute the norm for development. Relatively higher and lower standards of living are equated with being more or less developed. Conventional social development efforts define needs in terms of distance from that norm. Therefore, project objectives are geared, if objectives exist at all, to increasing productivity and earning power to make a higher standard of living more affordable. The emphasis is placed on learning job skills, expanding markets, gaining access to credit, increasing agricultural yields, etc. The underlying philosophy of social change is that improving poor people's life experience/perspective (employed not unemployed, fed not hungry, healthy not sick, etc.) motivates them to keep what has been gained and expend greater energy to get more. Conventional social change strategists are confused, frustrated and angered when providing a higher standard of living does not trigger the anticipated acquisitive drive. The fault is attributed to a character defect of poor people which is allegedly responsible for their poverty: e.g. they lack achievement motivation.

Social change can be imposed. However, when behavioural change is not a

manifestation of a compatible change in attitude it must be sustained directly through repression or indirectly by using the reward system to reinforce "acceptable" behaviour. It is expedient conformity rather than preferred behaviour and must be maintained by direct or indirect socialization.

Preferred social change (self-defined and self-initiated) requires the formation of a new rationality. This requires a new perception (different way of seeing and understanding) the costs and benefits implicit in the way an individual and / or group inter-relates with its total life environment. Without a new rationality, the thought processes which produced the original inequities will replicate them. Such pseudo-change may temporarily alter behaviour (expedient conformity). But attitudes and values remain unchanged and will reassert themselves when socio-economic, political and/or cultural pressures diminish and allows them to be expressed and actualized. A silenced man has not been converted. Self-defined and self-initiated social change cannot be accomplished by altering the physical environment nor by manipulating people's observable behavior. Such changes are merely events. Authentic dynamics cannot be contained nor explained within the finite parameters of an event.

Lets examine the social change process in an attempt to better understand how and why people change their lives. People react and relate to their perception of reality and not to the objectifiable reality itself. People change for their own reasons, at their own

pace and in accord with an internal cost-benefit analysis in which economic gain is only one aspect of their evolving concept of what constitutes risk centered. When people are given the opportunity to be their own change agents, rather than defer that responsibility to traditional authority figures, they confront the issue of risk. Confronting risk often results in immobilization which has the external appearance of passivity, fatalism or laziness.

The fear which immobilizes is not the fear of unendurable loss of someone on a bare subsistence standard of living. Experience has taught poor people that things can and often do get worse and that they can endure the suffering and survive. The external observer, whose background is generally middle class or above, believes that one more adversity will cause the poor to collapse beneath an already too heavy load. The poor know better.

The fear which immobilizes them is the fear of failure which would expose the risk-taker to humiliation, ridicule or some loss of the fragile self-esteem required to cope with the stress and frustration of daily life. Self-esteem is the critical commodity which allows him/her to continue struggling. Self-esteem (the feeling that you are a valued and valuable person) requires peer group acceptance and reinforcement. It is the peer group and not the dominant culture which defines success and failure in meaningful terms. Positive peer group reinforcement allows the marginal person to maintain a positive self-image despite the power for a minority who benefit from the prevailing economics of scarcity.

I mentioned earlier that the poor require a re-ordering of the reward system in order to gain more psychic free space: a reinforcing climate of peer group acceptance in which costs of failure become manageable. In addition, re-ordering of the reward system is also required to gain more free space; empowerment leading to increased access and control of the opportunity structure.

Desired (self-defined and self-initiated) social change will not occur if the objective is not consonant with the people's value and reward system. However, it must be both desirable and attainable otherwise the people are being asked to expend energy an accept risk in an effort that is certain to end in frustration. The opportunity structure (amount of available free space) determines whether or not that desirable opportunity is attainable.

This is why I believe that agencies should begin to stress the need for individual and / or group critical reflection to identify and assess the anticipated consequences of an effort to obtain a desired social change. Critical reflection centers on the amount of free space available to the group seeking change.

It is an attempt to realistically assess whether the opportunity structure is elastic enough to permit them to attain the objective they seek or whether they lack sufficient power to overcome the anticipated resistance. This is a key component of the internal cost-benefit analysis performed by those who will assume the risks implicit in social change. This also could be the focus of 'agencies' attempt to discover whether or not this is the appropriate historical moment. Can outside funding provide sufficient empowerment to overcome resistance and achieve desired social change?

There is another component of the social process in addition to the prerequisites of psychic space and free space. The third component is "life space" which allows a group experience to continuously expand without experiencing physical growth which often overextends management and support capability.

Life space is an essential consideration because I would say that social change projects, like all living organisms, are either growing or dying. Confusion may be caused by the apparent contradiction of a social organism which could grow without getting bigger (small is beautiful, little can be big, etc.)

Life space can best be understood in terms of an analogy with regions of the human brain. It is known that we utilize less than 20 percent of our brain. Therefore, we experience "growth" when we succeed in utilizing previously dormant regions of the brain thereby gaining new insights and the ability to understand and appreciate new concepts, stimuli, etc. The brain is no larger, but we can experience life more fully and intensely by utilizing previously inactive regions.

The experience of many projects may indicate that the social change process simultaneously operates on all these levels (psychic space, free space and life space) in synergistic interaction. The social change process also apparently has stages which overlap and interact. For purpose of

explanation, these stages are presented in sequential inter-relation which fallaciously infers linear causality. What appears to be causality is actually receptivity to change stimuli at a time when the aggregate of conditions offer sufficient reinforcement to make risk manageable.

Stage One: Creative Dissatisfaction

There is a new perception that the prevailing life experience is undesirable and that change is possible.

Stage Two : Needs are Identified

Needs are identified in terms of the desirable/attainable and ranked in accord with action priorities.

Stage Three : Cost-benefit Analysis

The benefits of obtaining this desirable / attainable need are contrasted with anticipated risks.

Stage Four : Problem Solving

Critical reflection on the consequence (more or less satisfying / fulfilling, consonant with values, cost effective, efficient) of problem-solving life experience, One is selected which is judged to be more appropriate for obtaining the desirable / attainable need.

Stage Five : Critical Reflection

An assessment of resources and resistance (power analysis, is made and an estimate of how much and what kinds of additional resources will be required. A determination as to whether or not this is the proper historical moment.

Stage Six : Action Reflection

The social change action is completed. The benefits and costs and the efficiency and appropriateness of the problem-solving methodology are evaluated by the group and become the subject for on-going critical reflection and dialogue.



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