

## Planning for uncertainty: development practice in awareness of complexity

Workshop report and reflections, produced by Hannah Beardon,

This is an edited collection of briefings, discussion documents<sup>1</sup> and conversations developing in and around the ‘practice based change’ workshop held by IKM Emergent in London in February 2012. IKM Emergent is a development research programme which has spent five years examining many aspects of how knowledge is understood, ‘managed’ and used within the international development sector. It has attempted, along with others, to articulate and test new approaches which might lead to development assistance being applied more effectively. This work has led to a perceived need for a number of radical changes in development practice. Firstly, development discourse and practice needs to take place in the first languages of the societies in which development is taking place. This is not currently the case in most of Africa or much of Latin America and Asia. Second, the development sector is, in many senses of the term, an environment of multiple knowledges. Trying to work on the assumption that development can be built on notions of knowledge as ‘verifiable objective truth’ ignores both the multiple influences on developmental change and their often contested nature. We need to work in a way which is open to multiple interpretations and perspectives whilst still able to assess critically their value as evidence. The idea of multiple knowledges in turn contributes to an understanding that the world in which we operate is a complex and unpredictable one. Our practice needs to reflect this understanding. The workshop was held to share and draw on learning from the IKM Emergent programme and from our practice as development workers about what it means to work in awareness of complexity and uncertainty in the development sector, what needs to change and how.

### Introduction: uncertainty, complexity and development

*“As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain, and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.”*

Albert Einstein, German born physicist

*Why does the development sector plan and act as if the world were simple, when we know it is complex?*

This was the underlying question which brought a small group of people involved in the IKM Emergent programme together to reflect on our learning and identify challenges and opportunities for change in the development sector. After five years, and through the contribution of many people across the sector, we had a wealth of information, stories, hypotheses and insights about the contradictions in development practice. We talk about complexity, rights and social change, but we plan as if change is linear and predictable. We recognise the need to experiment and learn, but evaluate our work by looking for proof that we were right in the first place. We come together and recognise these contradictions, yet return to our work and feel overwhelming pressure to conform to, and even replicate, the structures which sustain false certainty. At the workshop we drew on some of these insights and conclusions, and our own experiences, to create a clearer picture of what ‘awareness of complexity and emergence’ means for development practice, and the kinds of changes that it implies.

<sup>1</sup> These can be found at

[http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/Workspaces:9\\_Practice\\_Based\\_Change](http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/Workspaces:9_Practice_Based_Change)



*Are development organisations more geared towards sustaining the myths of development than purposely engaging in the messy reality of power, politics and social change?*

Our particular focus was on the way knowledge is conceived and used in development. We noticed that the sector creates and sustains its own myths about development, largely through an exclusive and self-referential conversation happening in powerful, international development institutions. But we also recognised that there are conversations taking place amongst a wealth of different actors, sometimes at the periphery of the aid 'system', with the tip of the iceberg emerging now through blogs and social media, alliances and movements inside and outside of the traditional development arena. We are particularly interested in how these different voices can be better integrated into the understanding of what development is and how to do it, at how the 'development conversation' can be broadened given the interplay of knowledge and power.

*What have we learned that might impact on the practical management of development work? What can we, as development practitioners, do about it?*

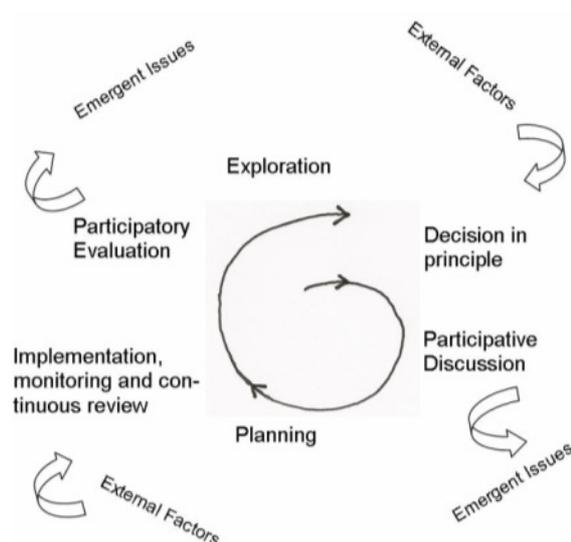
We were looking for recommendations, ideas and examples of how development practice might change to accommodate the reality of complexity and uncertainty. Our experience tells us that working with reality requires flexibility to respond to what we are learning. Being open to flexibility, we believe, requires mutual trust, which in turn is fed by a capacity to act with and to recognize integrity. We recognise the challenges that come with the interlinked nature of the problems development tries to address, the multiple actors with very different relationships and interests, the political nature of many of the underlying issues, the divergent views on what constitutes 'good' change. We found that much of the tendency to plan and report as if the world were simple came from an understandable need to control how (other people's) money is spent (on others), and yet this control often undermines work which depends on flexibility and responsiveness. We thought about how change happens on a large scale, and what we are capable of changing. Is it enough to act differently ourselves, and influence those around us? Can we, should we, attempt to create full structural and systemic change in the sector?

### **The scenario: what does fair and 'realistic' development look like?**

*"As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world - that is the myth of the atomic age - as in being able to remake ourselves."*

Mahatma Gandhi, Indian philosopher and activist

Development is a complex business. It can be a single project with a 'simple' objective, or support to complex and emerging autonomous processes and social movements. It includes everyone on the planet, as consumers and producers of goods, donors and recipients of aid, and citizens of governments making national aid and trade policies or participating in global bodies forming and promoting social and economic agendas. Any development process or project requires multiple actors to engage, together or in parallel. Many of the connections are random or informal, making the sector impossible to map or describe as a single entity.

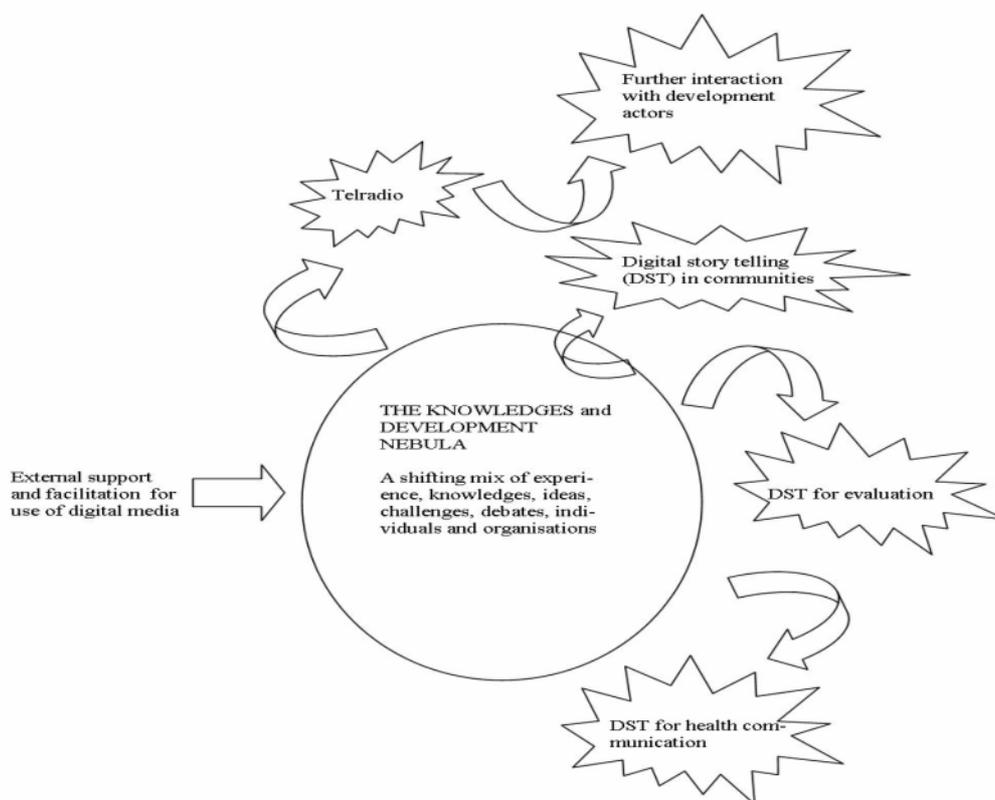


**Fig 1: Project cycle assuming participation, emergence and uncertainty. Mike Powell IKM Emergent.**

It follows then, that it is easier to find examples of what is wrong, or going well, than to paint a picture of how the sector as a whole might work better. But any pocket of practice we examine is also linked to many other processes, local development practice linked to the relationships of sponsoring INGOs and their donors, for example. Amongst the workshop background papers and discussions we shared lots of clues as to the fundamental elements of our vision of a more effective and fairer development sector. From those clues and examples, we start to develop a bigger picture.

### Examples from our practice:

The background papers provided several examples of programmes which have been planned and managed in awareness of complexity and uncertainty. In Mike Powell's paper he describes the overall management cycle of the IKM-E programme, the typical project cycle conceived as a spiral, iterative process (fig 1 right), to incorporate awareness and responsiveness to new external factors and to emergent issues. He also describes the shape of a project funded under the IKM-E programme, Digital Story Telling project in Sri Lanka (fig 2 below). The focus is on what the project can provide, in this case support for the making and dissemination of digital stories, and the goal – to create opportunities for the expression of the voice and knowledge of poorer communities. Very little effort is made to predict what will happen, but instead to observe what happens and find within the activities of many players doing many unanticipated things the best partners and the best ideas to take the intervention further towards its goal. Thus, the model abandons any pretence of control, but follows the consequences of empowerment of the poor, paying attention to the attention on observation and reflection of what is happening and on how the intervention can respond.



**Fig 2: Pilot method for generating capacity through locally generated spin-offs rather than through an externally planned 'solution'. MJR David, Digital Storytelling Case Study. IKM Emergent.**

Michael Drinkwater describes the approach CARE Nepal has taken to facilitate emergent, rights based and empowering processes, rooted in the participatory analysis of the underlying causes of poverty and local poverty mapping, and linked to the formation of REFLECT solidarity groups (especially with women) in the poorest areas of the village. The process is led by local NGOs and the groups set up and facilitated by social mobilizers drawn from the local community. Care and the local NGOs support the groups to deepen the analysis further, to develop 'community led social analysis for action'. Michael explains how this local planning process has been at the heart of (documented) changes at personal, village and broader levels, and the potential and challenges for wider institutional orientation to support such processes.

## **Building blocks and capabilities for realising this vision of development**

The latter two examples give a strong sense that development should be focused on supporting local processes. This requires a focus on relationships and clarity over the contribution or added value you / your organisation is able to make. Digging a bit deeper, we can see that the nature of these relationships (who you support, work with) and the contribution depends not only on opportunity, but also on our specific goal, intention or values. In the case of Sri Lanka this goal is clearly expressed, in Care Nepal there is a clear value of supporting and empowering the poorest and most marginalised to be drivers of local development.

The iterative nature of the IKM model is also an attempt to allow 'reality'. New opportunities, shifting external dynamics, new ideas and relationships, influence the way the project is planned and implemented. In our discussions we felt that it is more useful to consider that we are working to a hypothesis – consisting of a goal and a set of ideas as to how that goal might be achieved - rather than a plan. The idea that we have only a hypothesis encourages us to actively seek evidence or insights as to its validity. This allows us to acknowledge uncertainty, but also get better at dealing with it over time. We define desirable outcomes; and we learn to tentatively predict how such outcomes might happen based on our learning from the past and on our understanding of the unique conditions in which we are acting. This understanding is never complete, but any useful idea is bound to require the inputs of people with different aspects of knowledge – local and particular – and regular review and revision of any frameworks which arise to support such process, to prevent ossification. This process was summed up in the Care Peru case study:

*“In responding to a world that is constantly generating new possibilities and obstacles, models must be imagined, tested and modified in real time. Organizations capable of doing this are those that maintain a clear understanding of the principles guiding their direction, use that clarity to navigate and nurture transparent relationships among diverse and often contending actors and interests, and use a range of information streams in ways that are guided by the directions required by these orienting principles and relationships.”*

The workshop discussions revolved around these processes and relationships which underlie this type of planning and programming approaches, from which several building blocks emerged. I am not trying to present these as any kind of framework or linear process, but as basic principles which emerged from discussion of our experience and learning, and gained some consensus in our group.

### Clear intent and values:

*“When you are guided by your heart, there is little you can do wrong when dealing with change.”*

Frank LaMere, Winnebago community leader

*“Don't let your special character and values ... get swallowed up by the great chewing complacency.”*

Aesop, ancient Greek storyteller

We discussed how our own, or our organisations', values and vision guide our decision making and choices of relationships, and yet are often implicit in what we say and do. Mike Powell's background paper explains that *“development interventions are always based on an intent of the person/ organisation making them”*, and ideally the intent of the 'donor' matches the intent of the 'recipient' perfectly. Although this is not always possible, explicit negotiation of different intents should be the foundation for partnerships and collaboration.

Fundamental to all of our plans and actions is an idea of the kind of change we want to see, and if we are able to express this clearly it is a good foundation for forming relationships, negotiating intent, enabling open communication and collective sense-making and the development of collaborative plans and actions. By surfacing the deeper values and principles that unite us (or not), we are building a foundation for trust – which we considered a prerequisite for relinquishing control of our partners and grantees to allow the kind of flexibility needed to respond to change, new learning and opportunities. The conception of development as being results-based or relationship-based influences this, and so does the 'funding time span' in which we implement our initiatives.

The Care case studies show that principles that guided their efforts to ensure multiple accountabilities were not only a foundation, but also part of the edifice or content of their work. For that reason, the same principles which underlie their internal accountability practices could be the basis for their work to increase the accountability of public institutions. Equally, Hannah and Daniel's work on practice-based change found that participatory approaches need to be mainstreamed throughout an organisation in order to allow conversations and collective sense-making to take place across the organisation and partners. To interpret the output of participatory processes in a space which does not work on those principles inevitably ends up as a more extractive process. Large, complex institutions such as INGOs may struggle to achieve perfect coherence across their work, but spaces for staff discussion, reflection and interpretation of organisational values are important to support this.

And just to put the cat amongst the pigeons... another quote from US comedian Groucho Marx:

*“Those are my principles, and if you don't like them... well, I have others.”*

### Making a contribution to a wider change process:

*"Nothing endures but change."*

Heraclitus, ancient Greek philosopher

Social change is happening all the time, as a consequence of many actions and actors, some purposeful others unintentional. To actively engage in a change process, which development interventions do by their nature, implies you have a specific idea of the change you want to see and how you can contribute to making that happen. But we have found that this important background to project plans or justifications are often implicit or unstated. Clarity over your (organisation's) specific contribution should include clarity about the roles and actions of others, and this highlights the interdependence of the work and results. This has implications both for accountability and evaluation, as specific projects can limit the evaluation of their success or progress to their specific contributions, whilst assessing the value of their contribution in relation to wider goals and vision. It also allows different actors to identify and respond to opportunities emerging from combinations of actors. Pete shared the example of Veterimed, a Haitian NGO, which observed the use of mobile phones by local farmers and adapted plans for a supply-chain management system to fit onto these existing resources and practices – saving money and enabling greater participation and reach.



### Assessing your contribution

The Care case study from Nepal highlights different elements of an organisation's character or nature which will define the contribution they can make to a change process, including identity politics, resources and knowledge. The *identity* can change, but an organisation's historical identity will inform the range of roles it can play at any given time, and the potential for changing, and unearths tensions between playing multiple roles and maintaining coherence. Thinking about the resources necessary for social change to happen, it is apparent that money can enable but is not sufficient. Many of the resources are outside of the organisation, social activism and organisation, individual energy and motivation for example, which has implications for the role and contribution, of an INGO. In awareness of multiple *knowledges*, choices of who contributes to developing the narratives of development and social change are political, and organisations need to position themselves in the emergence of counter narratives.

### Long-term, flexible (funding) relationships:

*"The prosperity of the trees is the well-being of the birds."*

African proverb (exact source unknown)

Good relationships, trust and collaboration, need to be built over the long term and this requires something beyond project cycles to sustain relationship building and allow flexibility to respond to opportunities and ideas arising from the partnership. We felt that this depends in large part on funding mechanisms and relationships, which have in the past been more flexible but are becoming more tightly restricted to certain plans and results. IKM has modelled a more flexible kind of funding relationship, investing in people who have good ideas, energy and motivation to do what they think is worth doing. Others have put aside a statutory amount of any budget for 'unexpected opportunities'.

On the one hand this has implications for INGO's relationship with their donors, to move away from the contractual nature of the relationship which encourages us to look 'up' for authorisation to donors rather than partners and allies on the ground, and to create more space for long-term funding and flexibility. To do this, we felt we need to acknowledge the need for accountability to donors, provide evidence of the benefits of flexibility, and include them in the conversation about how to deal with uncertainty for best results. After all, we all know that reality is complex, and we need to develop a culture which considers recognition of, and preparation for, complexity and uncertainty as sound management practice. Mare Fort, of Care Asia, has been exploring new sources of funding which may invest in processes and relationships, rather than predicted results, but this has additional challenges for large organisations with an imperative to survive.

On the other hand, INGOs act as donors themselves in their relationships with partner organisations on the ground, and tend to '*assume we have a role to deliver, to intermediate between donors and local NGOs*', and in that way create more contractual relationships in the aid chain, as Mare reflected. The group felt that an ideal funding mechanism would be to support autonomous (e.g. civic-driven) movements over a long period to encourage local capacity to self-organise, similar to the model shared from Care Nepal. But reciprocity is also important - if we want to link to local organisations to support their own models of change, we need to be very careful how we create our funding relationships so that we engage without dominating, contribute without imposing. And this means being very clear about what we can contribute, and negotiating our role with others...

#### **Equal and reciprocal relationships:**

*"Any change process can only come from outside, and can only start from inside."*

Paolo Freire, Brazilian educator.

*"Europeans assume that, given the right knowledge and ideas, personal relations can be left largely to take care of themselves, and this is perhaps the most fundamental difference in outlook between Africans and Europeans."*

Jomo Kenyatta, Kenyan politician

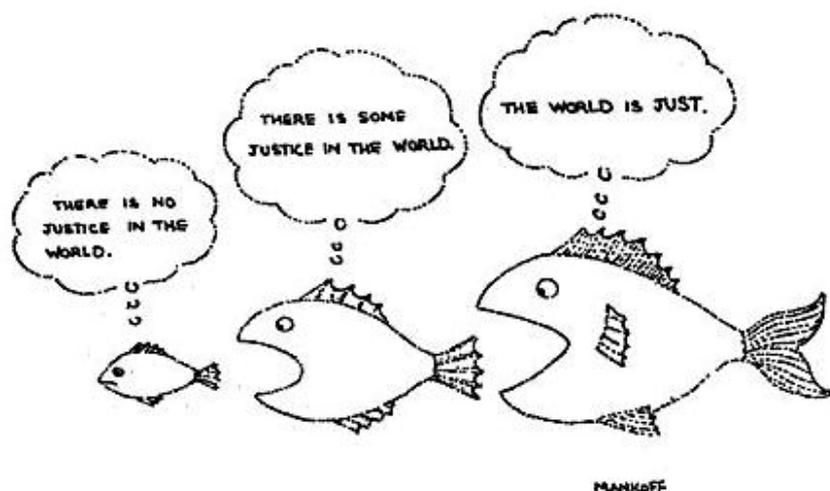
The issue of power was raised in several contexts at the workshop, often related to the inequalities inherent in the dominant knowledge paradigm which dictates to a large extent what is considered valid or useful knowledge within the development sector. This issue emerges not only in relation to the types of knowledge we seek and use to inform our programming, but also on the people we include in making sense and taking decisions. Pete's paper quotes colleague Charles Dhewa explaining the relationship between knowledge and power in international development processes:

*"Due to the colonial narrative that knowledge moves from those who know to those who do not know, local indigenous knowledge is invisible because it is from the powerless who are often willing to ignore their knowledge in order to accept gifts from foreigners. Through raising the profile of local content, poor communities in developing countries can be empowered to think of themselves as owners of solutions and problems."*

We recognised that development in complex environments requires many types of knowledge, and the simultaneous efforts of many different actors. There will also be conflict and contradiction. Who is involved in the discussions and at what point, and how spaces are facilitated in order to enable equal participation and input is key to the outcome, but also the orientation of a process. Michael noted a tendency in the sector to conceive of power as a zero-sum equation, in which increasing power for one group reduces that of another. He

explained how the case studies from Care show how power can be incremental, that by recognising and redressing power inequalities in our collaborative work we all gain.

Continuous multi-stakeholder processes, whereby different actors come together to share knowledge, collectively analyse and construct theories of change, reflect and learn together and develop joint action are ideal for long-term change processes. We recognise that not every action taken by a development practitioner or organisation can be subject to such lengthy collective planning. However, given the long-term reciprocal relationships between actors, a collective theory of change can provide the framework for smaller interventions to take be planned and evaluated. The actors involved in constructing this collective 'big picture', theory or shared vision also provide a focus for accountability other than the donor – and a forum for discussing and establishing other accountability lines.



**Power and perspective in development?**

**Multiple knowledges and collective sense-making:**

*“All things are subject to interpretation whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.”*

Nietzsche, German poet and philosopher

*“History, like beauty, depends largely on the beholder, so when you read that, for example, David Livingstone discovered the Victoria Falls, you might be forgiven for thinking that there was nobody around the Falls until Livingstone arrived on the scene.”*

Desmond Tutu, South African religious leader

A recurrent theme in much of the work happening within IKM-E, and the background papers and discussions, was how knowledge is created and interpreted, or made sense of, and who is involved in that process. Local knowledge is incredibly important to the success of any intervention, as Pete described ‘it is both how we make sense of the world and how people can make sense of us.’ Yet too often ‘local’ voices are documented and used by others, far away, to tell stories about development, without that process allowing any real engagement in constructing the stories or mythologies on which development is based. Powerful discourse is not much altered. On the other hand, Pete and others have documented the effects of ‘expert’ or ‘technical’ knowledge from outside being introduced to (globally) marginalised communities and dominating the local development discourse and undermining local knowledge. Charles Dhewa, quoted in Pete’s background document on local content, described this process from a personal perspective:



**“ I KEEP THINKING IT’S TUESDAY.”**

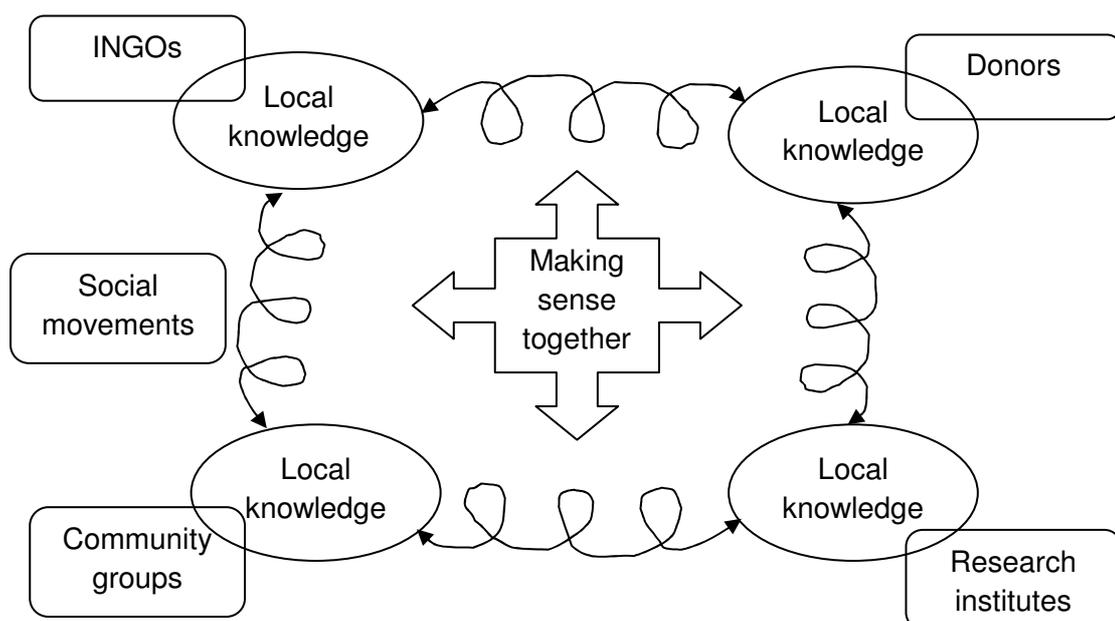
**Making sense?**

*“Local content has been my software from childhood when I started walking and talking. Only that we did not call it local content because there was no other content we knew and could compare it with... When I started going to school and became exposed to English language-based subjects such as mathematics, environmental science and geography, I became aware of other content besides our own local content. At school, there was a sense that what we were learning was superior to our local knowledge used at home and in communities”.*

Our understanding of development is premised on the recognition that *all* knowledge, however widespread its use and application, is generated and applied in local and specific contexts.. Knowledge from other ‘local contexts’ only contributes to development as it goes through a process of comprehension, validation, adoption and, often, adaptation in its new context. If this process is allowed, the external knowledge becomes an embedded part of the new local knowledge.

One implication of this understanding is the requirement it imposes on us, as externally based development actors, to do all we can to understand the local context in which we are working. We need to work with others to get anywhere close to understanding the conditions in which we are operating, identifying the causes of problems and potential solutions and so on. Equal and reciprocal relationships, or multi-stakeholder processes, form the basis for this and such relationships cannot be based on any assumptions of the superiority of one set of knowledges over another, at least in the contexts in which people are working together.

Another implication is that if local communities are to be able to participate in a process of collective engagement and sense-making, they need to have confidence in their own powers of assessment and decision making, which in turn requires some self-confidence in their own knowledge. There are many examples within the IKM-E programme of work to strengthen confidence in local knowledge, and the development sector as a whole needs to open up concepts of valid and rigorous evidence to allow multiple knowledges to meet and inform each other on equal terms. This does not invalidate high cost and highly technical research methodologies, such as large scale surveys or the use of satellite imaging, but it does imply a need to present their findings in ways which allow comprehension and questioning rather than simply asserting their superiority over other forms of evidence..



**Fig 3: Multiple knowledge flows in our development scenario.**

We recognise that often taking on or creating new knowledge is a process which includes some amount of conflict and discomfort, and therefore requires trust and careful facilitation. Siobhan noted that we need to pay attention to supporting and linking the relationship between knowledge supply and demand, creation and consumption in development practice, the interplay of conflict and power in these knowledge creation and sharing relationships, and the problems of valuing the knowledge of others in a hierarchical context. This came up again in discussion of the metaphor of a knowledge ecology – which illustrates nicely the interconnected and interdependent nature of different types of knowledge and information, but suggests also a Darwinian ‘survival of the fittest’ scenario, where tall trees get the most light and less powerful players are drowned out. We need to actively support the integration of marginalised actors not only as ‘voices’ but as sense-makers.

Charles Dhewa has developed a framework (fig 4 below) showing the different inputs and influences on the way we make sense of knowledge or information that comes our way. He explains that sense making, grounded in contextual exploration and participation, “*aims to enhance self-awareness among farmers rather than encouraging over-dependence on ‘expert’ advice. Farmers need to have confidence, self-belief, and a dynamic culture and society in order to selectively and intelligently borrow knowledge from elsewhere.*”

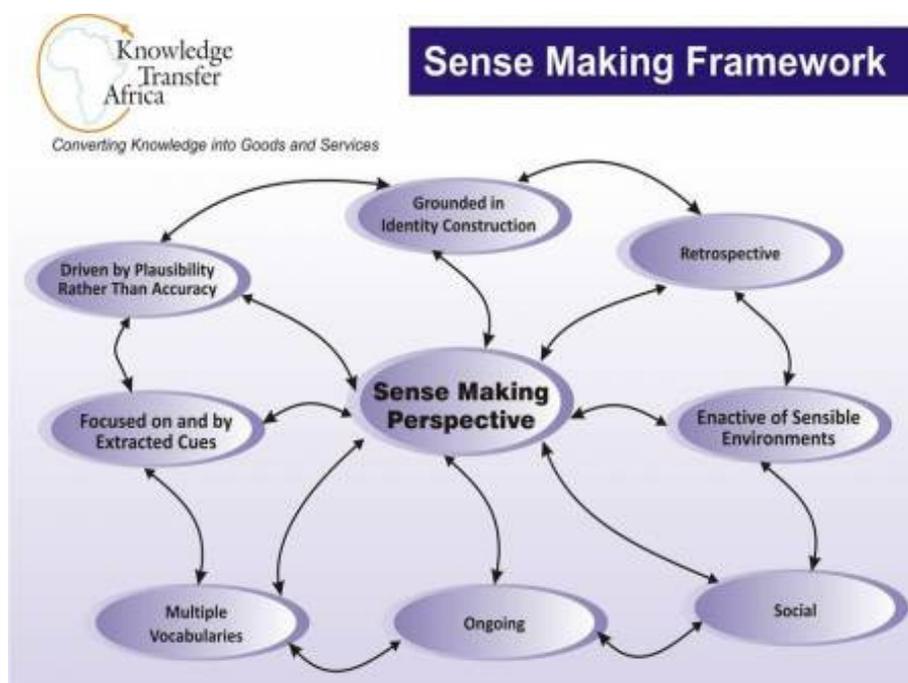


Fig 4: Charles Dhewa's sense making framework

Considering that all of us have particular, local and limited knowledge, we would all benefit from engaging in such a process and framework.

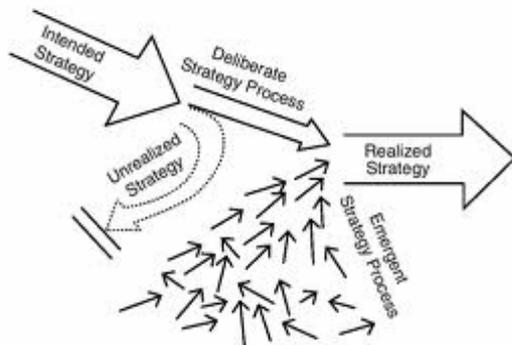
#### Flexible, iterative and participatory planning

*“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better”.*

Samuel Beckett, Irish playwright

Complexity and uncertainty require us to be open to new opportunities, adaptive and reflexive, but action also requires a certain amount of planning and prediction, as does our accountability to our collaborators and partners. Discussing our experiences, we noted that we can balance the need to predict with openness to react and change, by recognising that we are working to a theory of how change happens. Our theories are based on assumptions of causality and desirability of different outcomes, and these assumptions are based on, and

improved by, our observations, learning, and discussions. We acknowledged that it is liberating to accept that we don't know everything but are setting out to experiment and learn, to be comfortable with uncertainty and learn how to deal with it better. As Ewen blogged on the workshop:



**Fig.5: Minzberg on strategy formation**

*“Perhaps development should grow up to be more about ‘ignorance management’, an insatiable thirst for new knowledge. The humility about our own ignorance and curiosity might lead us to unravel ever sharper questions, on the dialectical and critical thinking path, rather than off-the-shelf (and upscale-friendly) answers – which we tend to favour in the development sector.”*

To paraphrase Mike’s background paper, in our ideal development scenario achieving the goal, not meeting the plan, is the objective of the exercise.

From our theory and analysis we can plan actions, but rather than limiting us by determining what can and will be done, they need to allow for innovation, flexible relationships and changing course based on new learning and opportunities (see fig 1 above). Iterative plans, which develop as we act, and develop our relationships, reflect and learn provide such flexible guidance and a framework for different actors to coalesce. Siobhan noted her experience that using seed funding for detailed, multi-stakeholder planning processes, and staged processes increase possibilities for collective sense-making and participation, and Mike noted how this reduces angst and unmet expectations of participation, writing that: *“Knowing that, subject to due processes of governance and of accountability, the plan can be completely revised and the money spent in different ways gives people the confidence, as well as the authority, to work in reflexive and responsive way.”*

#### **Learning and continuous improvement:**

*“He who does not expect will not find out the unexpected, for it is trackless and unexplored.”*

Heraclitus, ancient Greek philosopher

*“A man should look for what is, and not for what he thinks should be.”*

Albert Einstein, German-born physicist

Acting on a theory is only effective if we can reflect on the outcomes of our actions and feed this back into validating and improving our theory. In this way, we can get better at working in uncertainty as we are able to draw systematically on our experience and learning – and that of others participating in our reflection and sense-making processes. Hannah’s and Michael’s background papers both share clear evidence of the need for, and value of, spaces for stepping back from our action plans and reflecting on how we are doing, where we are going, and how well our plans and theories are guiding us.

Evaluation is an important moment in the project cycle to reflect and learn. Emergent or iterative planning can be rooted in our theory and vision, which gives us the ‘big picture’ against which to assess the value and impact of the results of our work. While indicators can help us to identify the kinds of information we need to track and monitor our work, evaluation needs to move beyond the ‘remote control’ function, and encourage accountability to our wider partnerships and constituencies, as well as accountability for fundamental aspects of our role – including the quality of our relationships and responsiveness of our planning.

This means not only tracking change we predict, but actively looking for and investigating the changes taking place around our interventions.

Michael and Hannah shared examples of this type of change documentation, and how it can feed into learning and quality assurance, including the use of 'critical stories of change'.<sup>2</sup> Ewen also talked about the value of process documentation<sup>3</sup> to actively ensure we are documenting and learning from *how* we work, as well as what we do. We also recognised the need to include different perspectives and voices in understanding the value of our contribution, to challenge our thinking and broaden our understanding.

### Enabling structures, space for responsiveness and leadership

*"There is no degree of human suffering which in and of itself is going to bring about change. Only organisation can change things."*

Susan George, French/US anti-poverty activist

Just like plans, tools and structures can enable multi-stakeholder processes, collective sense-making, and even flexibility. The Care case studies share pockets of work and organisational change, but also locate them clearly within the context of the wider organisation, which has been shifting to a 'programme approach' involving some restructuring of units of organisation and decentralisation as part of a broader shift to *"become part of a larger movement pursuing a rights-based approach to tackle poverty and advance social justice."*

This shows how structures can be designed to enable certain types of relationships and practices, but we also noted that structures in themselves are not sufficient<sup>4</sup>. They can ossify and be stripped of their intention and meaning, and become ends in themselves, and we recognised that in the end structures and tools need to be adapted and imbued with meaning by active practitioners. Theories of change, a tool which some found gave us the freedom to include uncertainty, complexity and multiple knowledges at the heart of project planning and evaluation, is a case in point. Many of us have seen this tool being promoted for planning in INGOs and even by donors, but can be used without intent for such awareness in much the same way as the logframe it is supposed to replace.

### Characteristics of development practitioners

*"Be daring, be different, be impractical, be anything that will assert integrity of purpose and imaginative vision against the play-it-safers, the creatures of the commonplace, the slaves of the ordinary."*

Cecil Beaton, English photographer

*I've never claimed to have the answers to life. I only put out songs and answer questions as honestly as I can... But I still believe in peace, love and understanding.*

John Lennon, English singer/ songwriter

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on critical stories of change see [http://actionaidusa.org/news/publications/stories\\_of\\_change/](http://actionaidusa.org/news/publications/stories_of_change/)

<sup>3</sup> See <http://learningforchange.wordpress.com/2011/12/02/process-documentation-for-learning-and-change/> or <http://www.irc.nl/page/67642>

<sup>4</sup> See PLA notes 63 'How Wide are the Ripples' section on structures and systems. <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/14606IIED.pdf>

Relationships, tools, structures and resources may provide the enabling conditions for development work, but again and again our discussions came back to the personal integrity and qualities which drive our action, and the use we make of the resources available. We felt that as development practitioners we can consider ourselves activists, rather than professionals, with our responsibility to our development goals and professional standards applicable as far as helpful, but to be challenged where they contradict or undermine our 'activism'. We are motivated by values such as equality and justice, and principles of empathy and respect. Michael's background paper illustrates how personal qualities and enabling structures can support strong development practice and impact:

*"CARE Peru and Nepal are wonderful illustrations of what can be achieved when intelligent, experienced and dedicated people are provided the space to innovate, in initiatives that are carefully crafted, extensively networked, and grounded in reflective, team-based work ... Dealing with complexity requires a sophisticated leadership over time."*

This reflects some of the characteristics we identified in our discussions: humility – to recognise the limits of our own knowledge – and creativity or curiosity – to keep relevant and find appropriate responses. We need to openness to new ideas, which requires listening, reflection, conversation and negotiation skills - but also to be rooted in our own values and beliefs – integrity. We need confidence to challenge rules and power, be flexible, but also to foster trust and respect between players rather than confrontation. As Ewen blogged:

*"humility or curiosity are great lights on the complex path to collective sense-making. They guide our initiatives by preserving a learning attitude among each and every one of us."* Pete also highlighted the importance of such personal and relational values in his background paper:

*"A dynamic, respectful engaging with local content and culture is a prerequisite for genuine engagement with the people at its centre; it delivers results, slowly and on a small scale, but in an enduring and sustainable way"*.

### **How change happens in the development sector:**

*"The future has never been more uncertain, but that's not all bad news. This moment could belong to those who want to articulate something that is...local, durable, human, imaginative, inclusive, and open to ongoing improvisation, rather than locked in place as a fixed ideology. The moment is ours to seize."*

Rebecca Solnit, US writer and activist

*"We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."*

Albert Einstein, German-born physicist

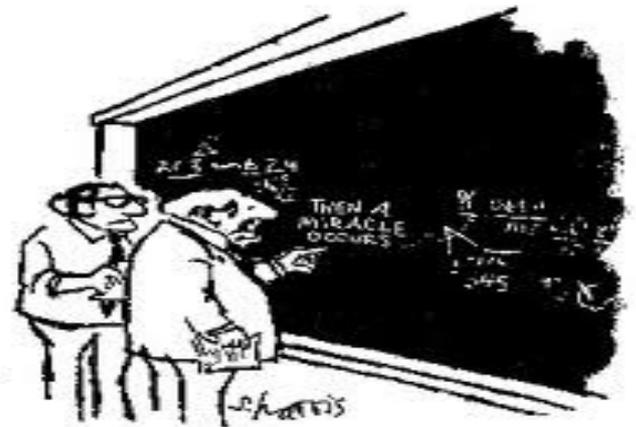
During all our talk of what goes wrong when we act as if the world were simple and predictable, and what we have done or seen that represents a more honest, responsible and realistic way of reaching development goals, we touched on strategies of how to make or encourage the necessary changes to come about. Are we dealing with large structural changes and/ or focusing on our own practice and change we can influence directly; do we need to change people's minds and/ or join forces with like-minded people? On the second



*"It's always 'Sit,' 'Stay,' 'Heel'—never  
'Think,' 'Innovate,' 'Be yourself.'"*

day we took pen to paper and sketched out our thinking of how change might happen, our 'impact pathways' or 'theory of change'.

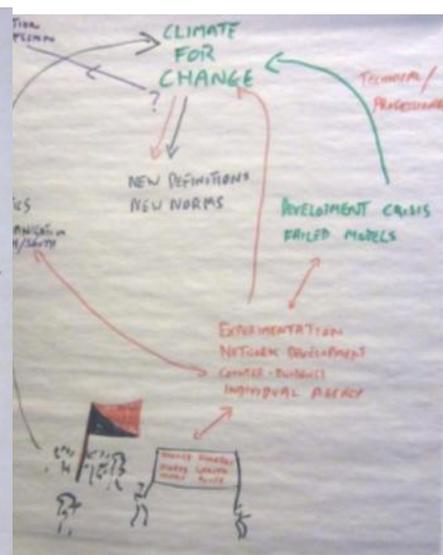
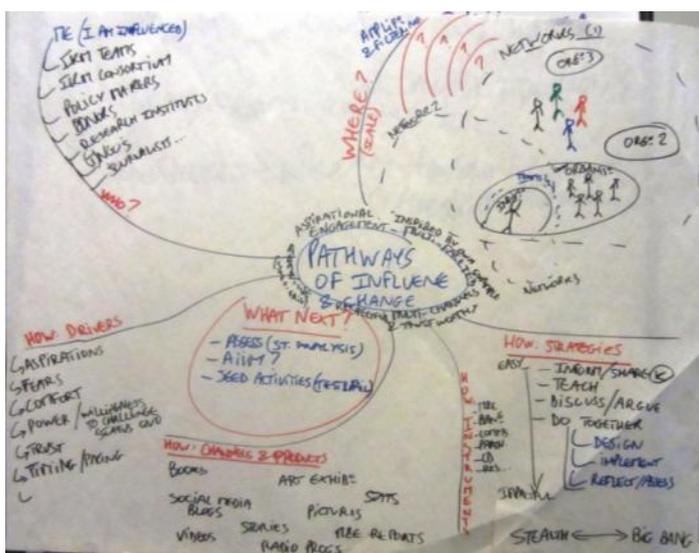
Our pictures were different, but there were lots of common themes and reflections. We are facing the same challenges we identify for the development sector – change happens at different levels, and follows different drivers and channels, and interrelates with larger social and political dynamics that affect the climate for change, some constraining the space for change, others opening it. Being alert and connected helps us to make useful connections to increase our impact. But we cannot force or control change, it requires changes in our attitudes and behaviours, our relationships as well as our practices, not just on the structures and mechanisms we rely on to 'manage' development. We put in what we can, we expect the best of others, we improve our analysis of what is wrong and what might work better, and (as Hannah and Daniel's picture half-jokingly noted) we hope for a miracle...



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

Our diagrams showed that we have to include ourselves in the picture of change, by reflecting on and changing our own practice, creating evidence and pushing back on restrictive structures we can make change happen, and by connecting with others we not only expand the scope of our influence but also have opportunities to gain strength and energy, new ideas and inputs into our own processes. These connections can be informal or through professional networks, but can also be created with the specific intention of creating a common theory of change in (and of) the development sector.

Finally, we recognised that there is lots of great development practice happening, much of it locally (Pete used Africa as an example), so we need to be able to support and protect space for that work, make it more visible to the wider sector, and support collective reflection and documentation to more strategically influence development discourse and practice.



A selection of our 'impact pathway' diagrams

## Strategies for change

*"God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference."*

Alcoholics anonymous common prayer

From the discussions and the diagrams, we identified various strategies to increase the chances of the kinds of changes we are looking for taking place. Ewen summed up some strands in his blog, including the need to look beyond traditional 'organisational change' dynamics and recognise we are operating in a much broader and more diverse system:

*"We are obscured by our scale: In politics it took us a long time to realise there were crucial dynamics below nation-states and above them. In a similar swing, in development **let's go beyond merely the organisational scale** to focus on the individual agency as well as the network scale – all organisations and individuals are part of various networks which impact both individuals and organisations engaged in them. **Teams** also play an important role to explore and implement new ways – it is at that level that trust is most actively built and activities planned and implemented. The riddles of impact from the teams emulate in sometimes mysterious ways to the organisational level."*

Just as we need to influence and interact with many different actors, we also need to adopt many different approaches, responding to people's awareness and willingness to adopt the types of practices we propose above, challenging, supporting, making evidence of productivity or sustainability gains, arguing for guiding principles of empathy and respect, presenting ideas, modelling actions and practices, for example.

## *Model the practice we want to see:*

*"Action expresses priorities."*

Mahatma Gandhi, Indian philosopher and activist

*"We are all meant to shine, as children do ... And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."*

Marianne Williamson, US author

Many of the diagrams focused on how we can influence others through modelling the kinds of practices, behaviours and relationships we are recommending to others. These highlighted how we all are in reciprocal learning/ influencing relationships with many different types of actors, who themselves have a set of relationships. In this way our change can ripple out to wider change. This is a slightly different emphasis than 'organisational change' as we are seeing change happening in the interaction among people in different development organisations. Almost all flipcharts suggest more potential for change in working with sympathetic individuals or collectives and where we have more influence – wherever they are - rather than directly confronting unsympathetic, but perhaps more powerful actors. We mentioned examples we had experienced of change being inspired by individual change-agents, and people influencing their peers and their working environments.

## *Influence and persuade:*

If we are lucky, and more so if we are in positions of power, our practice may have a great impact on others and create broad changes in the sector. More likely, we need to be strategic about how we influence the sector. The Care Nepal case study shows how a relatively small pocket of innovative work, embracing complexity, was not easily spread and leveraged by the wider organisation, which has more solid cultures and structures of thinking

and talking about their work. We talked about documenting processes we are involved in, to create a body of evidence about the value of these approaches; and linking with others to broaden the reach and create a stronger and louder collective discourse with more chance of being heard and influencing current ways of talking and doing things. The Care Peru case argues that this latter, in particular, requires us to build trust and let go of control of the message, in a reflection of the types of practice we expect of the sector more widely:

*“If persuasion is the central force in social change, then relationships matter, and persuasiveness is as much a function of social positioning and identity as it is of budget or technical expertise. The multiplicity of audiences that must be engaged to achieve system-wide change ... In the end, for society in all of its diversity to embrace sweeping changes, it is unrealistic to expect one message, and one messenger, to be the way forward.”*

We also recognise that, while our energy might go further engaging with like-minded people, attuned to the principles, values and approaches we promote, we also need to be prepared for arguments about these basic principles we hold dear.

### *Create evidence*

Building a good base of evidence, through documenting processes and reflections or evaluations of the impact they have had, will provide us with tools for influencing through dialogue as well as example. So as we model this type of practice, we document it, and we follow it up with a broad group of partners and colleagues both to improve our own theories, and to provide evidence to others. Looking back at the sensemaking framework in fig 4 above, we see that people are more convinced by what sounds plausible than what is accurate, by what fits with their experience and does not challenge their identity. We need to tell good stories about how development can work differently, as much as making sound arguments. The local content group are ahead of the game on this one: *“Our aim has been to gather stories and experience so that we can communicate the power of this approach in an attempt to attract attention from development interest and funders.”*

### *Engaging in networks:*

*“A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before.”*  
Jean-Francois Lyotard, French philosopher

A common thread was the growing importance of networks as spaces for practitioners to develop their practice, identity, knowledge and ‘professional standards’. These structures emerge organically outside of (as with the African networks Pete talked about, blogs etc) or alongside (as with IKM-E, KM4Dev network) powerful development actors and discourses and starts from the interaction of individuals. Through networks we influence each other, and in turn our organisations and areas of practice. We can step outside of our bureaucratic or organisational identities and try new things, hear new ideas, and take them back with us to our work. Mare recognised the value of the IKM programme network for just this:

*“IKM allows you to be exposed to different types of organisation. When you work in one organisation you begin to think the world works the way your organisation does. We don't look outside too much, and so we think everything we do is the best of the kind. We need to build more learning alliances, where CARE is not leader, but engages with others and inserts ideas, energy, resources into currents that reach far beyond our own capacities.”*

Using IKM as an example, we felt that the space and network had allowed us to experiment with openly navigating complexity and develop resilience, contacts, counter-evidence to broadly accepted development narratives, case studies of how change happens, innovative approaches to planning and evaluation and overall, the development knowledge commons. After the event, we also reflected that the practice-based change workshop itself had modelled many of the practices we promote: bringing different perspectives to reach common understanding of the problem, and potential solutions, constructing a joint theory of change based on somewhat articulated and explicit shared principles or goal, and using different techniques and types of communication (visual, dialogue, informal, formal) to come to collective sense-making and strategies.

### *Broadening our horizons:*

We particularly recognised the power and potential of external (f)actors, including the media, social movements, artists and certain potentially regressive forces such as the austerity discourse. We consider development discourse to be overly self-referential and slow to incorporate or be influenced by events and debates happening in social and political processes outside. Yet these processes are strongly influencing the space in which development happens, and the sector operates. More purposeful engagement with social media, social movements and progressive funders and foundations open to rights-based approaches can help us to redefine the space for development.

Pete emphasised that we have a lot to learn from what has been happening in North Africa, about how social media can enable people to connect, develop ideas and actions, build compelling stories, communicate with a wide range of people and across different contexts for different purposes, all in real time. He explained: *“If you’ve ever been in a crowd trying to decide what to do, to take action, it’s a combination of leaders (who keep trying to run forward) and people looking at and talking to each other: shall we, can we, should we, how can we, what if, are there enough of us, what shall we do if.....and then finally enough has been said and the crowd bunches together then creeps then surges forward!”*

### **Further resources**

- Documenting change: an introduction to process documentation (a document explaining the theory and IRC’s practice around process documentation over seven years);
- Getting to social (blog post by Harold Jarche, February 2012);
- Mid-term assessment blues (blog post by Patrick Moriarty from IRC on a flexible learning-focused M&E approach in the Triple-S project.
- Results from this IKM-E discussion on the wiki;
- Whose paradigm counts (blog post on Aid on the edge);
- Strategy safari - a guided tour through the wilds of strategic management;
- Henry Mintzberg’s books about management and other proofs from the corporate sector about the fact that top-down / command & control approaches do not work;
- Jerome Bruner’s two modes of thought in psychology.
- Results of this discussion on the IKM wiki

## Annex – introductions and key themes:

The workshop brought together a small group of people involved in IKM Emergent research and management over the last 5 years to reflect on what we have learned that might impact on the practical management of development work.

The workshop participants were:

- Daniel Guijarro : consultant and researcher
- Ewen LeBorgne: ILRI/ IKM-E
- Hannah Beardon: consultant/ IKM-E
- Jaap Pels (remotely)
- Michael Drinkwater: consultant
- Mare Fort (remotely): Care
- Mike Powell: IKM-E
- Pete Cranston: consultant/ IKM-E
- Robin Vincent: Panos
- Sarah Cummings: IKM-E
- Siobhan Warrington: Panos

Several background documents were prepared to feed into the discussion, available on the [IKME website](#)<sup>1</sup>, including two case studies from CARE looking at how organisational change has happened around monitoring and evaluation and planning in Peru and Nepal; a briefing on work on local knowledge in Africa; and two notes on planning for uncertainty based on the learning of the IKM programme. Other IKM papers were also shared, including work on complexity and evaluation. The themes that participants were interested in were:

### **Local knowledge and content:**

In several of the background papers, local knowledge is highlighted as an important area of work, valuable in itself, but also to help build the basis for more inclusive development planning. We considered that recognising the value of different knowledges of development, and the limitations of each, is central to ‘managing’ development.

Pete Cranston has been involved in conversations between people working on ‘local content’ on a small scale in rural communities in Africa. Things work, he said, people are doing it even where there is no money, but at the same time (perhaps because of the local nature of the work) people have been facing the same challenges and learning the same lessons for the last 12 years that Pete has been working on the issue. In particular, Pete was interested in exploring the potential role of technology to support processes of development organisations and connections between different stakeholders;

### **The creation and sharing of knowledge:**

Some of the background documents looked at how knowledge is constructed, valued and shared in the development sector, and the implications of this for management and relationships between actors. In Hannah Beardon’s paper this

Siobhan Warrington works at Panos to apply principles of oral history to community-based, participatory learning and documentation projects, for their own sake and to feed into the reporting of development issues in the media. She was interested in the relationship between knowledge supply and demand, creation and consumption and looking at how these relationships can be better supported and linked in development practice. She also

recognises the interplay of conflict and power in these knowledge creation and sharing relationships, and the problems of valuing the knowledge of others in a hierarchical context.

### **INGOs and complex social change processes:**

The workshop and background papers focus is on the implications of working in awareness of complexity and diversity on international development organisations and their practice. While some background papers document or analyse pockets of change – in our own practice and through case studies – we also recognise that the larger structures, policies and relationships of INGOs determine to a large extent the space for staff to listen and respond to different stakeholders in complex contexts.

Michael Drinkwater has been looking at these issues within Care for some time, firstly as staff and latterly as a freelance consultant. He has found little insightful literature on the nature of INGOs - which are complex beasts given their diverse and intangible outputs, structures which span countries and stakeholders and the fact that the clients are not the ones paying – and little guidance on how they can act and relate differently, in awareness of complexity. Michael, Rob and Sarah noted that the development sector has its own mythologies, including the idea that change is a simple process, which are to a large extent sustained by self-referential discourse created by (financially and ideologically) powerful players such as donors and journals. Similarly to Siobhan, Michael noted how power relations in organisations and their relationships affect the potential of grassroots work getting recognised institutionally, and how we can change the view of power from zero-sum to mutually supportive, how we can ‘grow the sum of power’ in development relationships. Any change process, or expansion of pluralism and diversity in organisational processes, depends to a large extent on the ‘authorising environment’ for change and innovation, and Michael feels that it is within the scope of INGOs to purposely spread this authorisation.

### **Evaluation for accountability:**

The background papers give evidence as to the problems inherent in planning as though the world were simple, but also recognise the systemic drivers of this approach. There is a tendency by donors and planners to see the world as simple, supported by the development ‘mythology’ mentioned above, and this is imposed on planners and through them on other stakeholders through tools such as the logframe, which encourages a simplistic and linear representation of change. By setting indicators we are attempting to predict the change which will happen, and get locked into those predictions from before a process starts – reducing the possibility of listening and responding to change and opportunity on the ground and reinforcing our accountability to donors and our plans before all else. We recognise the need for accountability to the money given, but are seeking ways to interpret this accountability in terms of quality rather than compliance and control. Robin Vincent, of Panos shared experience of how tendencies towards results-based management being promoted by powerful players in development are squeezing out space for developing more complex understandings of change, and countering the predominant model requires sophisticated strategies.

Ewen LeBorgne includes a focus on M&E in his work at ILRI because he considers this requirement for development programmes can be used to bring learning into the approaches we are using, and promote accountability to a wider set of stakeholders. Michael shared the case of Care Peru, which has been working to strengthen and embed accountability in different directions, including internal, donor and work to hold the government accountable. This begs the question of how this local exploration and practice change can be embedded in the wider organisation. The other case of Care Nepal relates innovative, participatory approaches to identifying and explaining impact, outside of the logframe. This case shows how by exploring impact they were able to provide credible and rigorous evidence of change, including quantitative information on money raised and people involved.

### **Changing development practice:**

The background papers give examples of change in practice, and to some extent try to extrapolate from those recommendations for change in organisations, relationships and practices. However, we all felt that the workshop was an opportunity to share ideas on how change might happen in the development sector, construct our own theory of change. Two main themes emerged: the changes we can make ourselves, model in our own practice, and how to be more strategic in spreading that change; and the changes which can be made at organisational or sectoral level, how we may influence or encourage these to happen and the changing context which defines the opportunities for change.

Hannah Beardon and Daniel Guijarro had prepared a paper based on reflections with people involved with IKM about changes to their own practice, as a basis for understanding what and how change happens in the development sector when working with concepts such as emergence and multiple knowledges. They had observed that individuals have scope for change within existing structures and systems, giving new meaning to existing tools and systems, expanding relationships and seeking different inputs to their sense-making, for example. IKM had been an interesting model to explore different structures in supporting 'emergent' planning in development, how we can support working based on trust, flexibility and integrity. Daniel noted that by seeing ourselves as agents of change, looking at our own practice and how we play out our roles, we can learn a lot about what it means to be a professional in a sector which understands change as a complex social issue. Siobhan noted that we can easily get sucked into and constrained by a system, whether donor requirements or organisational structures, and need to find ways to ask critical questions about the way development sector is set up in ways that can be heard and noticed. Pete also felt that a constructive engagement with the sector would be more effective than a too critical perspective which makes 'enemies' of some actors and practices.

There was a sense in the group that we needed to develop evidence of the impact of working in these emergent ways, a set of values which can provide a counterpoint to current practice and trends in the sector, and form the basis of a theory of change. We wanted to identify changes we could make within the time, resources and relationships available to us, to inform and challenge the practice of powerful players in the sector, and where we could plant ideas so that they may take root. We also wanted to explore ways of keeping this community of reflection, practice and support alive, including a potential second stage of the IKME network.

### **The outside environment:**

Finally, we recognised that the external environment in which development happens is dynamic, and strongly influences how internal changes and actions play out. Within the UK political and social context we identified a move away from our vision of working with uncertainty and diversity - towards results-based management, competitive tendering and privatisation of knowledge, and using voluntarism to remove much social and development work from the public sector. However, at the same time we identified emerging hybrid spaces to challenge this dominant logic, outside but possibly including development actors. Social movements are creating new languages and cultures through dialogue and negotiation, and development INGOs are slow to engage in this. This implies that we need engage in these spaces to identify, describe and share evidence of pockets of a different way of engaging with reality, and pull practical recommendations from this work. We also recognised that IKM had provided a plural, diverse space within the development sector for people to relate based on different identities than created in their organisations, and bring new attitudes and ideas back to their work.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/Workspaces:9\\_Practice\\_Based\\_Change](http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/Workspaces:9_Practice_Based_Change)