



How Change Happens by Duncan Green brings together the latest research from a range of academic disciplines and the evolving practical understanding of activists. Drawing on many first-hand examples from the global experience of Oxfam, one of the world's largest social justice NGOs, as well as the author's 35 years of studying and working on international development issues, it tests ideas on how change happens and sets out the latest thinking on what works to achieve progressive change.

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HOW CHANGE HAPPENS: A SUMMARY

This summary is for those busy people who want to grab the main messages of the book in as condensed a form as possible. Boiling down a book into a document one-twentieth as long inevitably does violence to the original – it airbrushes out the nuances, ambiguities and dilemmas I try to address in the book. It also omits references and sources. Go to the book for the many real-life examples, experiences and books that shaped my thinking about change.

First, the target audience: *How Change Happens* is aimed at activists, broadly defined – not just campaigners but that wider group of lobbyists, entrepreneurs and officials, both individuals and organizations, who are set on transforming the world. Now on with the summary.

Duncan Green, May 2016

PART 1: SYSTEMS, POWER AND NORMS

Ways of thinking (categories of analysis) are helpful whether considering change in a community, a country, or on a global level. Understanding complex systems, power, and social norms can help us understand how and why change happens.

Systems thinking changes everything

The essential mystery of the future poses a huge challenge to activists. If change is only explicable in the rear-view mirror, how can we accurately envision the future changes we seek, let alone achieve them? How can we be sure our proposals will make things better, and not fall victim to unintended consequences? People employ many concepts to grapple with such questions. I find ‘systems’ and ‘complexity’ two of the most helpful.

A ‘system’ is an interconnected set of elements coherently organized in a way that achieves something. It is more than the sum of its parts: a body is more than an aggregate of individual cells; a university is not merely an agglomeration of individual students, professors and buildings; an ecosystem is not just a set of individual plants and animals.

Change in complex systems

A defining property of human systems is complexity: because of the sheer number of relationships and feedback loops among their many elements, they cannot be reduced to simple chains of cause and effect. Think of a crowd on a city street, or a flock of starlings wheeling in the sky at dusk. Even with supercomputers, it is impossible to predict the movement of any given person or starling, but there is order; amazingly few collisions occur even on the most crowded streets.

In contrast, many of the mental models activists use to think about change are linear – ‘if I do A, then B will happen’ – with profound consequences in terms of failure, frustration and missed opportunities. Society, politics or the economy rarely conform to linear models. As Mike Tyson memorably said, ‘everyone has a plan ‘til they get punched in the mouth’.

Instead, change in complex systems occurs in slow steady processes such as demographic or technological shifts, punctuated by sudden, unforeseeable jumps. Often these jumps, also known as 'critical junctures' are driven by crises, conflicts, failures and scandals, which disrupt social, political or economic relations, creating an appetite for new ideas and opening the door to previously unthinkable reforms.

Another lesson of systems thinking is that you cannot understand and plan everything in advance. If each situation is different, so must be the response. One of the founders of systems thinking, Donella Meadows, talks of the need to learn to 'dance with systems.' But even that may be too choreographed. Perhaps a better analogy is that activists should switch from being architects and engineers to becoming 'ecosystem gardeners', nurturing richer and more diverse systems of change without trying to control them.

Power lies at the heart of change

Seeing development as the continual negotiation of power sheds new light on how change happens. Walk into any household, village, boardroom or government office, and you will enter a subtle and pervasive force field of power that links and influences everyone present. Friends and enemies, parents and children, bosses and employees, rulers and ruled. No matter the political system, power is always present.

Studying and understanding that force field is an essential part of trying to influence change. Though largely invisible to the newcomer, power sets parameters on how social and political relationships evolve. Who are likely allies or enemies of change? Who are the uppers and lowers in this relationship? Who listens or defers to whom? How have they treated each other in the past?

Thinking in terms of power brings the true drama of development to life. In contrast to the drab portrayal of poor people as passive 'victims' (of disasters, of poverty, of famine) or as 'beneficiaries' (of aid, of social services), 'empowerment' places poor people's own actions centre stage. In the words of Bangladeshi academic Naila Kabeer, "From a state of powerlessness that manifests itself in a feeling of 'I cannot'; activism contains an element of collective self-confidence that results in a feeling of 'We can'."

Using power analysis

Activists use 'power analysis' to explore who holds what power related to the matter, and what might influence them to change. It can help identify a wider range of potential allies. All too often, we tend to default to working with 'people like us', when alliances with unusual suspects (corporations, traditional leaders, faith groups, academics) can be more effective. Power analysis can help us consider upcoming events that may open the door to change: Is an election in the offing? What influence would a drought or hurricane have on people's attitudes? What happens when the Old Man dies?

Although my book is about 'how change happens', often the important question is 'Why *doesn't* change happen?' Systems, whether in thought, politics or the economy, can be remarkably resistant to change. I like to get at the root of the 'i-word' (inertia) through three other 'i-words': institutions, ideas and interests. A combination of these often underlies the resistance to change.

Shifts in social norms often underpin change

The mechanisms of formal power are important, but change often begins at a deeper level, when people who have previously internalized feelings of subordination or inferiority achieve 'power within' and start to organize to demand their rights. In recent decades, such change has been partly triggered by profound shifts in social norms – fundamental understandings of the rights of hitherto marginalized groups, including women, children or people with disabilities. Promoting norm change at both global and local levels has been a major part of activism, and could constitute one of its most enduring achievements.

PART 2: INSTITUTIONS

Understanding how institutions work; their history, politics and internal structures can be the key for activists to find new ideas for influencing, for promoting change and for seizing moments of opportunity.

People seeking change are often impatient, intent on addressing the problems of the world. In the words of Martin Luther King, they are consumed by 'the fierce urgency of now'. That means they can underestimate the importance of changing institutions. Institutions appear to be permanent and unchanging; in fact they often depend on that appearance for their credibility. But 'now' is merely a moment on the continuum of history, and history shows us that the status quo is far less fixed than it appears. Yes, institutions are inherently conservative, but their normal functioning provokes changes in the world, changes that buffet them and oblige them, over time, to either evolve or fail.

How states evolve

As both drivers of change and targets for influencing, states are often central. To a greater or lesser degree, states ensure the provision of health, education, water, and sanitation; they guarantee rights, security, the rule of law, and social and economic stability; they arbitrate in the inevitable disputes between individuals and groups; they regulate, develop, and upgrade the economy; they organize the defence of national territory. More intangibly, they are an essential source of identity – the rise of nationalism and the state have gone hand to hand, for good or ill.

States may be ubiquitous, but they are far from static. A constant process of conflict and bargaining shapes their contours and responsibilities, and a flux of power determines both what changes and what does not. Activists need to look under the bonnet of states, and understand them as complex systems that can be influenced.

In recent years the actions and courage of strong and cohesive non-violent civic coalitions has proven vital to the political transitions that presage state change. Since the 1980s, successive waves of civil society protest have contributed to the overthrow of military governments across Latin America, the downfall of Communist and authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the removal of dictators in the Philippines and Indonesia, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the upheavals of the Arab Spring. Effective tactics have included boycotts, mass protests, blockades, strikes, and civil disobedience.

Even the most repressive states cannot ignore such movements for long. Confucius wrote that every ruler needs arms, food and trust, but that if any of these had to be forfeited, the

first two should be given up before the last. Even unelected governments need a degree of trust to do their day-to-day work. Without it laws will more often be evaded and broken, taxes harder to raise, and information harder to gather. 'Legitimacy' – when citizens accept the rights of states to rule over them – lies at the heart of the social contract between rulers and ruled. States' desire to maintain or regain legitimacy provides activists with avenues for change even in apparently closed political systems.

Activists need to adapt their change strategies according to the nature of the state. In fragile states, where power resides mostly outside national governments, activists may be better off working at a local level, with municipal officials and non-state bodies like traditional leaders and faith groups. In developmental states with strong, often autocratic, governments, engaging directly with efficient bureaucracies, using research and argument rather than street protest, often makes for a better (and safer) influencing strategy. In more 'clientelist' systems, based on relationships (sometimes including corruption), the best influencing strategy may be to network directly with those in power.

Aid-financed state reform

Over the last thirty years aid agencies and international financial institutions have devoted considerable attention to reforming states in developing countries. Their efforts to bring about 'good governance' have restructured budgets and ministries, rewritten laws and even spawned new institutions, but by and large they made little change to the way states operate.

Aid-financed state reform failed because Western donors tried to graft liberal-democratic and free-market institutions onto countries with very different traditions. Governments became adept at passing rules and creating institutions that look good on paper, but are in practice entirely cosmetic. At one point Uganda had the best anti-corruption laws in the world, scoring 99 out of 100 in one league table, yet came 126th in the 2008 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index.

In contrast, countries that successfully reformed state institutions did not follow some Washington or London-decreed 'best practice'. Instead, they created hybrid institutions that combine elements of traditional, nationally specific institutions with good ideas from outside.

States exemplify the challenges of complexity. The interactions, alliances and disputes between politicians and civil servants, between one ministry and another, or between different tiers of government, and how each of them in turn respond to citizen demand and other external pressures, provide the political landscape upon which decisions are made. Learning to 'dance with the system' – understanding how the state in question evolved, how its decisions are made, how formal and informal power is distributed within it and how that distribution shifts over time – are essential tasks for any activist intent on making change happen.

The law as a driver of change

The machinery of the law – courts, police services, customary and international law - acts as an important counterweight to the state, but is often underestimated by activists. Like many institutions that at first sight appear fixed and monolithic, the law is a system in

constant flux. Not only are old laws replaced by new, but the interpretation of laws evolves, including the weight assigned to customary systems.

Some legal systems remain rigid and inflexible but, in what some lawyers call a 'legal social justice revolution', progressive lawyers and activists around the world have increasingly harnessed the law to promote human rights and equality and to address privilege and discrimination.

The legal system, like any institution, is not a level playing field. The rich and powerful can hire better lawyers, can lobby law-makers, and generally get a better deal. But not always – if people organize, build the right coalitions, pursue the right argument and tactics, laws and lawyers can bite back, governments and Big Men can lose cases. The law will remain an essential weapon in the armoury of activists around the world.

Accountability, political parties and the media

Other checks and balances on the state offer ways for activists to hold it accountable and promote progressive change. They include political parties, the media, and social accountability initiatives.

Countries with stagnant or corrupt party systems do not remain so forever. Instead, they constitute an ever-evolving system, driven by pressure from below, changing norms, new leaders and critical junctures. Activists need to learn to dance with that system, using the media, and direct pressure on authorities, but also working with parties by building alliances, identifying and working with champions and seizing moments of opportunity, because parties carry the potential to achieve changes on an otherwise impossible scale.

How the international system shapes change

In many ways, the international system is an extraordinary success story. Every day sees huge amounts of largely smooth interchange between nation states: people cross borders; emails, letters and postcards arrive at the correct destination; freighters load and unload containers of goods in foreign ports in an ever-expanding cycle of global trade. Remarkably, these smoothly functioning exchanges occur under a fairly loose system of governance – a combination of norms, rules, procedures and institutions – and without any recognized world government.

The international system has a critical role in shaping society's norms and beliefs. Moreover, many of the most pressing challenges facing humanity are 'collective action problems' that cannot be solved by single countries alone.

Activists' movements in the national and local arenas can make it politically feasible for governments, as well as enlightened leaders in the international system, to address climate change, pandemics, crime, weapons proliferation, migration or race-to-the-bottom competition between nations on taxation.

Transnational corporations: drivers and targets of change

Ubiquitous global brands epitomize widespread concern about globalization, and hold significant power. TNCs drive change both through their normal business operations and through their behaviour as political players. Beyond the direct impact of a company's capital investment, jobs and taxes (when they pay them), there can be spill-over effects

on the local economy from training of local staff to the introduction of new technology, both of which can influence local firms, especially when the TNCs source their materials and services from local suppliers.

While many firms are diligent in obeying the law and treating their employees and customers with respect, others abuse their power, causing lasting damage to the environment, public health and local politics. Others lobby for government handouts, excessive patent protection, exclusive contracts, tax breaks, trade rules and other state interventions that favour their bottom lines.

Activists seek to influence TNCs with strategies that run from cooperation to confrontation. At one end of the spectrum, NGO types sit with corporate executives, academics and government officials in a proliferating number of 'multi-stakeholder initiatives' on pressing problems like climate change or food security. At the other, activists use litigation or public shaming to oblige governments to act. In between these poles lies the burgeoning realm of lobbying and campaigns to influence particular aspects of corporate behaviour.

It is not enough for activists to declare ourselves either 'anti-corporate' or 'pro-business'. Whatever the starting point, we need to understand the traditions and mindsets of particular companies, the new variants, positive deviants and critical junctures that dot the corporate landscape, and the variety of ways corporations can be influenced.

PART 3: THE ROLE OF ACTIVISM

Throughout history individuals have made a difference; on their own, or by coming together to seek change, within institutions and from outside them. Building alliances, recognizing 'critical junctures', and the role of leadership are important elements in advocacy and change processes.

Citizen activism and civil society

Citizen activism includes political activism, but goes much wider, to include any action with social consequences. Much of it involves collective activity, including participation in faith groups or neighbourhood associations, producer organizations and trade unions, village savings and loan groups and funeral societies. Such participation is an assertion of organized 'power with', and is both an end in itself – a crucial kind of freedom – and a means to ensure that society and its institutions respect people's rights and meet their needs. Active citizens provide vital feedback to state decision makers and exert pressure for reform.

The local organizations people form, known as civil society organizations (CSOs), complement the more traditional links of clan, caste or religion. Coming together in CSOs helps citizens nourish the stock of trust and co-operation on which all societies depend.

Civil society and the state

Since the 1980s, citizen activists have become prominent in the global media for another reason – leading protest movements that have ousted dozens of authoritarian regimes across Latin America, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. They have removed dictators in the Philippines and Indonesia, ended apartheid in South Africa and most recently brought down

oppressive governments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Many autocrats must live in fear that one day tear gas from the protests outside will invade the comfort of the presidential palace, as thousands of citizens gather in the square to demand justice, vowing to remain until they get it.

Protest movements exhibit a particular rhythm and structure. One historian of European social movements sees them as passing through 'cycles of contention', moving between explosions of protest, victory, repression, reform and demobilization.

While outsiders often see protest movements as homogeneous (journalists and politicians often lament their lack of easily identifiable leaders), on closer inspection, they contain 'granularity' – smaller, more durable organizations that emerge at vital moments, and then disperse.

Citizen activism and markets

Most day-to-day efforts of citizens' associations are more mundane than the overthrow of governments, but they are equally important to how change happens. Factory workers, state employees and small-scale farmers around the world have long realized that getting organized will give them the bargaining power they need to exact a better deal out of markets. Trade unions, producer associations, cooperatives, small business associations and the like can win fairer wages, prices or working conditions for their members. Many of them take up lobbying for state regulation or other measures to limit the excessive but hidden power of vested interests.

CSOs' work is often local and below the media radar; pushing authorities to install street lighting, pave the roads or invest in schools and clinics. CSOs often run such services themselves, along with public education programmes on everything from hand washing to labour rights. Even in the chaotic, dangerous world of the Eastern Congo (DRC), Community Protection Committees made up of six men and six women elected by their villages have brought new-found confidence and resilience to conflict-affected communities. They identify the main threats and the actions to mitigate them. When people are forced to flee renewed fighting, these committees are often instrumental in getting people organized in their new refugee camps.

Leaders and leadership

At every level of society, from the village committee or women's savings group to great nation-builders, leaders reinforce group identity and cohesion, and mobilize collective effort toward shared goals. Successful leaders know how to inspire and motivate, and they intuitively understand that to turn a vision and a mobilized following into a transformational force they, as leaders, must retain that difficult-to-define quality known as legitimacy.

Some leaders have managed to be more transformational than transactional. Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Gandhi in India, Martin Luther King in the US or Julius Nyerere in Tanzania all emerged at critical junctures in history – moments of abrupt change, crisis or external threat – and they seized the opportunity to alter the balance of power in their societies. When structural constraints to action are weakened, great leaders can help remake societies, rather than simply make them work a bit better.

Leaders must play a two-level game—building bridges among constituencies and driving bargains with those in power—while constantly maintaining and boosting followers’ morale. They must lead but look constantly over their shoulder because, as a Malawian proverb has it, ‘A leader without followers is simply someone taking a walk’.

Discussions of leaders and leadership customarily fixate on the people at the top – the habits and psychologies of CEOs and presidents, be they saints or sinners. But leaders are everywhere, nowhere more than in the movements for change active in poor communities across the world.

Leadership at the grassroots

In dozens of countries across several continents, I have met and talked to grassroots leaders; men, and (increasingly) women. Like leaders at the top, they are shaped by experiences of travel, struggle and conflict, and are thrust forward by the historical moment (‘cometh the hour’). Many are inspired by their faith and equipped with skills by their experiences in choirs or as preachers, both Christian and Muslim. Scripture helped them form a personal narrative about the sources of their deprivation and repression, galvanizing them into action.

Among activists, many of whom have a deep commitment to egalitarianism, words like leadership and leader elicit mixed feelings. Most of us would prefer to build the capacity of organizations rather than invest directly in individuals with high potential. Indeed, even talking in terms of high-potential individuals can feel somehow contrary to principles of fairness and equality.

But addressing leadership much more systematically need not imply being seduced by a simplistic Big Man approach to politics. On the contrary, acknowledging and supporting the crucial role leaders play in how change happens is a vital step in amplifying the voices of groups that currently go unheard.

The power of advocacy

‘Advocacy’ is an umbrella term for both campaigning and lobbying to influence decision makers to change their policies and practices, attitudes or behaviours.

The tactics employed usually fall somewhere along a continuum from sitting down with those in power to help sort out a problem (at the ‘insider’ end) to mayhem in the street (at the ‘outsider’ end).

When it comes to campaigning, the playbook was pretty much written two centuries ago, after a dozen people met in a print shop in London’s East End, brought together by Thomas Clarkson, a 27-year-old Quaker. Thus began a campaign to end slavery that lasted fifty years, brilliantly captured in Adam Hochschild’s *Bury the Chains*. The abolitionists invented virtually every modern campaign tactic, including posters, political book tours, consumer boycotts, investigative reporting and petitions. Fast forward two centuries, and today’s energetic activism on issues from climate change to disabled people’s rights, corruption or same-sex marriage is built on the foundations laid by Clarkson and his colleagues.

Critical junctures

Critical junctures – windows of opportunity created by failures, crises, changes in leadership, natural disasters or conflicts, play a major role in advocacy and change processes. At such times decision makers and the public can become painfully aware of the inadequacies of the status quo and cast around for new ideas. A well-prepared advocacy campaign can spot and respond to such moments, with striking results.

In 1972, Nobel laureate economist James Tobin suggested introducing a small tax on all financial transactions between different currencies, which, he argued, would curb short-term speculation and raise a lot of money for good causes, such as development assistance. The idea got nowhere, but continued bubbling on the margins of political debate for over three decades. It took the global financial crisis of 2008 and some inspired advocacy to bring the Tobin Tax in from the cold. Crushed by debt repayments, finance ministers were desperate for new sources of revenue for their cash-strapped governments, while the banks and currency traders who opposed the tax had suddenly become political pariahs.

A coalition of trade unions, church groups and NGOs cleverly rebranded the Tobin Tax as the ‘Robin Hood Tax’ and waged public campaigns across Europe featuring a series of hilarious, hard-hitting videos by top filmmakers and actors. By 2011, the European Commission had proposed a Europe-wide tax on financial transactions. Though whittled down to 10 countries it was scheduled to come into force in 2016 and represents a historic breakthrough as the first truly international tax.

Coalitions and alliances

One of the skills of a good advocate is knowing how to construct effective alliances –and to distinguish powerful engines of change from soul-sapping talking shops. Bringing together ‘unusual suspects’ is fast becoming a core skill for activists, as proliferating ‘multi-stakeholder initiatives’ often involve building relationships and keeping people in the room with very different outlooks on politics, society and morality.

A POWER AND SYSTEMS APPROACH TO MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

Although I avoided boiling down the messages of the book into a blueprint or toolkit, my activist son demanded that I summarize it in a form he could remember in the next meeting. A wise parent listens to their children, so I have summarized the book’s ‘takeaways’ as a Power and Systems Approach (PSA).

A PSA encourages multiple strategies, rather than a single linear approach, and views failure, iteration and adaptation as expected and necessary, rather than a regrettable lapse. It covers our ways of working – how we think and feel, as well as how we behave as activists. It also suggests the kinds of questions we should be asking (non-exhaustive – the list is as endless as our imagination)

How we think/feel/work: 4 steps to help us dance with the system

- Curiosity – study the history; ‘learn to dance with the system’
- Humility – embrace uncertainty/ambiguity
- Reflexivity – be conscious of your own role, prejudices and power
- Include multiple perspectives, unusual suspects; be open to different ways of seeing the world

The questions we ask (and keep asking)

- What kind of change is involved (individual attitudes, social norms, laws and policies, access to resources)?
- What precedents are there that we can learn from (positive deviance, history, current political and social tides)?
- Power analysis: Who are the stakeholders and what kind of power is involved (look again – who have we forgotten?)
- What kind of approach makes sense for this change (traditional project, advocacy, multiple parallel experiments, fast feedback and rapid response)?
- What strategies are we going to try (delivering services, building the broader enabling environment, demonstration projects, convening and brokering, supporting local grassroots organizations, advocacy)?
- Learning and course correction: How will we learn about the impact of our actions or changes in context (e.g. critical junctures)? Schedule regular time-outs to take stock and adapt accordingly.

CONCLUSION

Before you leave off reading and rush out to make change happen, some caution is advisable. Progressive change is not primarily about ‘us’ activists: it occurs when poor people and communities take power into their own hands; shifts in technology, prices, demography and sheer accident can be far more important than the actions of would-be change agents.

That said, activists do play a crucial role. We put new questions into the endlessly churning stream of public debate, and we can help those on the sharp end raise their voices, shifting some degree of power from those who have too much to those who have too little.

Such work is a joy, a privilege and a responsibility. We need to study the systems in which we operate, immersing ourselves in the complexities of the institutions (states, private sector, the international system) that shape the pathways of change. We must get to know the players, those we want to influence, whether they work for the state, the private sector or civil society organizations: how they see the world and how we can work with them. We have to understand the underlying force field of power that links them in all its varied manifestations.

We will have more impact if we are prepared to take risks, try new, uncomfortable things, question our own power and privilege, and acknowledge and learn from our failures; all the while continuing to work with the zeal and commitment that characterize activists everywhere.

Finally, I want to go back to what this is all about: human development, so brilliantly captured by Amartya Sen's definition, 'the freedoms to be and to do'. Despite setbacks and the grim filter of the evening news, that story is overwhelmingly positive. The expansion of those freedoms over the last century has been unprecedented: millions, even billions of human beings leading healthier, better educated lives, freeing themselves from poverty and hunger, expanding their rights, living richer, more rewarding lives. For me, nothing gives life more meaning than being an activist, doing what we can to support that historic struggle.

How Change Happens is published by [Oxford University Press](#). It is also available in e-Book and Open Access formats.

The [How Change Happens website](#) offers extra content: case studies, presentations, video, etc.

Also planned for later in 2017 is a MOOC (massive open online course) in partnership with the University of Birmingham [Developmental Leadership Program](#) and La Trobe University, Australia.

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