

REFRAMING INTERNATIONAL GOVERNMENT CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Jim Armstrong and Nigel Pont | March 2011

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Abstract

The majority of government capacity development (GCD) interventions in developing countries either fail to improve sustainable capacity or have generally unsatisfactory results, with predominant causes being poor local leadership and ownership of projects, transplantation of inappropriate best practices, over reliance on technical experts and related unsatisfactory contextualization of projects. This study explores GCD to better understand what is working, not working, and why.

We demonstrate that the nearly universally applied '*standard model*' approach to GCD which is based on the perception that capacity development is a technical problem for which experts can engineer solutions, is flawed. When GCD is reviewed against a comprehensive problem typology, it clearly emerges as a wicked problem. Approaches that are effective at grappling with such problems are significantly different from those that dominate the standard technical approach to GCD.

We set out to learn more about a number of emerging approaches struggling to deal with this flaw and to see if they offered more promise than standard model approaches. This led us to delve deeper into what donors, development organizations, and host governments themselves could do differently in order to improve the effectiveness of these interventions.

A framework for an emerging approach is presented in which external interveners play the role of learning coach, facilitators of internally led government processes of co-diagnosing, co-designing, co-acting and co-learning. Findings suggest that such an approach has been more effective than the standard model. However, it requires a far greater tolerance and deeper understanding of wicked problems, ambiguity, risk, contextual uniqueness, and confidence in developing nations than is the current norm. The emerging approach is not the new silver bullet, or quick fix. Rather it is a call for reframing the thinking and assumptions that underpin the standard model and to avidly explore alternative approaches that show more promise.

PART ONE.

RECOGNIZING GCD AS A WICKED PROBLEM

In May 2001 Jim participated in a conference on Public Sector Reform in Jamaica. He and other experts and change leaders presented papers and 160 interested citizens and organizational representatives gave up their weekend to hear about the exiting public sector modernization progress being made in their nation. Topics included the benefits of executive agencies, the burdens of bureaucratization and the beauty of user pay.

Following two days of presentation and discussion a distinguished Rastafarian near the back of the lecture hall took to his feet and with a captivating, Morgan Freeman like voice, he began to speak:

“We have listened for two days about technological advances, accrual accounting, user pay, cost recovery and private sector approaches to delivering public services. The 65,000 people I represent in one of Kingston’s poorest districts cannot afford the public transportation rates now let alone the 150% increase when user pay kicks in...We have heard about the greatness of public sector modernization, new public management, improved accountability, clearer lines of authority and better accounting. Not once, however,” he paused, “have I heard anything that will lift-up my life or the lives of any of the people I represent...Can the distinguished panel of experts give me anything to take back to the people I represent that will convince them that this public sector reform has something in it for them, some hope...anything that will up-lift their lives?”

We stumbled for answers, made jargon laden theoretically coherent attempts but fell hopelessly short. Bearing witness to ourselves fuelled our individual and collective discomfort. His question was profound and central to every public sector reform initiative. If reform is going to be sustainable; it needs to be based on the kind of capacity development that empowers individuals and organizations to act collectively and to take control over their own lives. From the very beginning, approaches to public sector capacity development must include benefactors in the learning, diagnosing, designing and implementing parts of the change process. That is what the following pages are all about.

CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The global international development industry is vast, and investments in lifting countries out of poverty, making them healthier, wealthier, more equitable and less conflict and disaster prone are growing. Traditional multi-lateral agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank, Inter-american Development Bank, African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, other regional development banks, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and all the other bi-lateral international development agencies are being joined by investors from the world of foundations and new philanthropy; from Google, to Gates, to the Omidiyars and tens of thousands of others. There are countless different organizations with different mandates, niche specializations and interests all working on different aspects of the myriad of development problems. There is consensus that irrespective of whether you are interested in agriculture, health, education, public security or economic development, in order for a developing country to raise itself out of poverty, and to stay that way, it needs a capable government that is responsive to the needs of the population. "Building effective and accountable public institutions is arguably **the** core challenge for sustainable poverty reduction" (World Bank 2000). The UNDP (2009) proclaims, 'capacity is development'.

The international community invests billions of dollars a year to develop capacity in developing country governments but results to date are poor. The failure rate, defined as an intervention not meeting its own objectives or not having benefits lasting beyond the length of the project, hover around 70%. "...: just 29% of the completed interventions, and 45% of those ongoing were rated 'satisfactory' in the OED review (the corresponding bank-wide figures are 33 percent and 38 percent)" (World Bank 2000).

Jun (2006) concludes, “Changing an organization is one of the most difficult endeavors because not only does change require resources, but, most important, it requires that people share knowledge, learn, and make a commitment to their plans.” The World Bank’s 1998 and 2008 extensive reviews of over 800 public sector improvement projects with combined costs exceeding US \$40 billion are examples of self-assessed accounts of enormous failure rates. “Capacity development remains a central issue that has not been well-addressed. Much capacity has been “bought in” at high cost but has not resulted in building sustainable core capacity in Government, and there are widespread concerns about the quality, cost, management, and capacity building impact of Technical Assistance (TA)” (World Bank, Byrd 2007).

One important nuance from these reviews is that the less developed the country, the higher the failure rate. The seemingly sound recommendations for improvement generated from these studies are remarkable only because they are rarely, if ever, implemented. Collier in *The Bottom Billion* (2007) observes that for the 60 poorest nations, the result of the billions of dollars of aid has been a significant and measurable drop in the standard of living.

It is no comfort to observe that public sector improvement initiatives fair no better than the private sector. Ruddle (CCC8) estimates that based on their own objectives, only 30% of change interventions can claim any degree of success in the private sector. Smith (2003) undertook an international study of successes and failures of 1,666 attempts of American and European organizations to change culture and found that only 19% were successful.

However, our research does not focus on demonstrating the existence or nature of this problem. Like St. Thomas Aquinas’s seven proofs for the existence of God—if one works—why do you need the other six? Vast amounts of research are churned out regularly about virtually every aspect of the international development industry including the dismal failure rates.

Like Collier, we are deeply concerned about improving the success rates of efforts to improve public sector capacity, a foundation essential for successful development in any nation. However, we take a different route. Where he explores the traps that inhibit nations from developing, we explore the emerging and hopefully more effective methods to develop capacity.

Our research is not about why traditional approaches fail or why the cumbersome institutions that perpetuate these approaches find it so hard to change their behaviors and adopt new approaches. However, it is important to establish that there is a widely accepted way of approaching GCD. We call this established approach, that we know is not working, the *standard model*.

One of the conclusions that both our personal experience and our initial explorations led us toward was that there clearly is a predominant paradigm or standard model for approaching GCD in international development. In its

simplest terms, it is a linear four step process: assess, plan, implement, and evaluate that is sometimes shown as a continuous loop, as in the logo used by the Inter-american Development Bank (IDB) illustrated here. In the IDB logo, preparation includes ample assessment and planning, almost always carried out by external experts.



Invariably, once the situation is assessed by external experts they continue to plan a detailed program of activities. This is converted into a call for proposals from other international experts who are charged with implementing the plan. While espoused theory is that everything must be context specific, theory in use shows that most often what follows is the transplantation of best practices into most often extremely difficult locales (Interviewee 4). Next the detailed program of pre-specified activities is implemented. Often this phase calls for the obtaining of local buy-in but rarely the flexibility to significantly alter the project according to experience and a greater understanding of the local context. After the project has ended there is always an evaluation, usually offering the first opportunity for learning. The new head of USAID (Shah 2011) recently referred to the relationship between implementers and evaluators as similar to that of banks and ratings agencies!

The standard model is mechanistic and rooted in the “rational sciences”. However, as Olsen and Peters (1996) point out, “It is an old dream that the quality and efficiency of public policy and institutional design can be enhanced by the use of objective knowledge, scientific methods, and dispassionate analysis...” without the incorporation of social and political realities. “An overemphasis on a science analogy contradicts basic assumptions of democratic politics about legitimate conflicts, citizens’ participation and representation, free public discussions of ends and identities as well as means, and the primacy of popular sovereignty...” Olsen and Peter also establish the importance of context noting that: “...science alone cannot replace the historically accumulated practices of political discourses and struggles”.

To be sure, there is more to be said about the standard model than the four-step process. It is a very much “outside-in” and “top-down” approach that most often ignores local needs and puts up barriers to local ownership and most agree that it is not working. Mintzberg (2005) challenges the development industry with the question: “Has any country ever developed primarily through the outside-in model ...based on the wholesale importation of beliefs, expertise, and capital?” With a sense of frustration he goes on to declare that the “...passive importation of techniques, controls, and beliefs, via outside agencies and experts that run around solving everyone else’s problems, may be the very problem of development”. He then proclaims:

“All too often it is forced development, imposed against the natural inclinations and even will of the people. Is that any way to foster a developmental mindset, let alone a democratic society? Pride, dignity, and corresponding confidence do not figure prominently in mainline economic theory: they cannot be measured....the trouble with the outside-in model is that it is based on imitation, and imitations are often second rate, because copying is a mindless activity.”

What is needed, argues Mintzberg is not outside-in or top-down but indigenous capacity development. As no nation has ever developed primarily through the outside-in standard model, why then are we forcing this model on developing countries? Perhaps a small part of the answer to Mintzberg’s question is that other approaches are not readily available or are poorly understood. Further on we demonstrate that most GCD

interventions are intended to solve wicked problems, or problems that cannot be solved with technical or simple solutions. Yet the tools (itself a mechanistic metaphor) used for GCD interventions are exclusively technical in nature. This suggests that a large proportion of failures may be attributed to the application of inappropriate approaches. Political and administrative theorists as well as practitioners are discovering what Dror (1968) observed decades ago: purely rational models tend to ignore the capacities of human devotion and human efforts to overcome apparently insurmountable barriers to achieve not only the improbable but the apparently impossible. Indeed there are what Jerry Sternin (Pascale 2010) calls “positive deviants” or “bright spots” (Heath and Heath 2010); isolated thriving successes in a sea of failed interventions. To date these bright spots have not garnered enough attention or had enough collective impact to make a measurable difference - but we hope they will. Hence, our primary purpose for undertaking this research is to draw attention to and enliven discourse on one of the biggest problems facing international development; that is, how to improve the success of GCD interventions.

Our intended audience includes the large number of foreign and domestic change leaders who, through improving the effectiveness of the governments of those countries, aspire to improve the lives of people in developing countries. We hope that they will be drawn into discussion and encouraged to experiment with emerging approaches that will contribute to, and increase the effectiveness of their individual and collective interventions. We know that there are a number of change leaders experimenting now and that there are many promising new approaches and isolated successes. The fact that so little is reported about these bright spots is a primary motivating force behind our efforts. We would like to help give these collective efforts expression, draw common themes from disparate experiences, and see growing attention given to improving such endeavors.

We also observe that donors are not too dissimilar from public institutions in developing countries in that both find alternative approaches threatening to the status quo. This is demonstrated by the fact that people have known for some time that current approaches are not working (Interviewee 4). However the standard model is so firmly

entrenched that getting the gigantic development industry to move in a different direction is an arduous undertaking – even when the problems are acknowledged by the donors themselves. We know how difficult these shifts are. We believe that the more voices heard and more bright spots revealed the better will be the chances of improving the dismal performance record of GCD interventions.

Due to the vastness of the international development industry we narrowed our examination to only one element: government capacity development (GCD). Within the context presented above, we hope to answer but one question: *Are there emergent approaches to building the capacity of developing country public sector institutions that show more promise than the current dominant paradigm?*

To answer this question, we draw from several sources including: related research; a number of illustrative mini case studies and one more in-depth case study; interviews of key informants; and our own experience.

Our field of study includes ministries of governments or entire public services. We made this decision in an attempt to get past the proliferation of accounts of heroic individuals who produced remarkable success in changing an aspect of a single purpose intervention such as Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, a micro enterprise, neighborhood juvenile delinquency, or a specific municipal economic development project. While each of these individual initiatives are instructive, of great benefit to their communities, and brilliantly captured in the literature, (the most noteworthy contributions being: *Getting To Maybe*, Westley, Zimmerman and Patton, 2007; and *Switch*, Heath and Heath, 2010), we wanted to look at interventions intended to develop capacity of public institutions to address these problems. Where Westley, Zimmerman and Patton and the Heath brothers focus on how individuals create extraordinary outcomes, our focus is on how public service institutions develop the capacity to generate exceptional outcomes, and on how the international development community is contributing to developing that capacity.

We define capacity as *“that emergent combination of attributes that enables a human system to create developmental value”* (Morgan, 2006). As such, Morgan explains, capacity is about empowerment and identity, collective ability, systems phenomenon, a potential state, and the creation of public value. Capacity he argues has five core capabilities:

1. Acting deliberately and self-organizing—it is about the ability to do something;
2. Generating results—this, the most widely used interpretation of capacity has to do with equipping governments and organizations with the attitudes, values and behaviors they need to make progress and or improve the work that they do and the services they deliver;
3. Relating to other actors within the context in which it functions in a way that gains support and protection—similar to Fukuyama’s (1995) argument that without inter organizational trust, societal development will be stunted;
4. Adapting and renewing—a systems capability to master change and adopt new ideas; and
5. Coherence—reigning in fragmentation and retaining focus.

Our extensive field experience led us to the unambiguous conclusion that some approaches to GCD achieve better results than others; however, these more effective approaches are not making it into the mainstream. Experience from around the world is that most often the theories espoused by development agencies differ sharply from the theories they practice. That is, there is an enormous gap between what Argyris, Putnam, and others label espoused theory and theory-in-use. This perhaps begins to explain why the approaches that achieve better results than others are most often not applied.

OVERVIEW

This dissertation is divided into three parts. **PART ONE: RECOGNIZING GCD AS A WICKED PROBLEM** includes three chapters: this introductory one; Chapter 2, Conceptual Framework and Methodology; and Chapter 3 GCD as a Wicked Problem. **PART TWO: ADDRESSING WICKED GCD PROBLEMS** provides details of what we call the phronesis approach, an emerging alternative to the standard model. We introduce key concepts for tackling wicked problems, followed by four chapters exploring the principles our research suggests are central to a new approach: co-learning, co-diagnosing; co-designing; and co-acting. **PART THREE: IMPLICATIONS, NEXT STEPS AND APPLICATIONS** examines the limitations and challenges, implications, and next steps of the alternative emerging approach. The sections below provide a brief overview of each of the following chapters.

Chapter 2. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

Chapter 2 outlines the intellectual framework for our research. Epistemologically we are clearly on the side of social constructivism. Our topic demands it. We are dealing with complex social systems not machines. In our discussion about positivism and social constructivism we draw on both academic and practitioner research.

GCD "...that relies on conventional pluralistic politics and modern management theories is inadequate for understanding today's crisis and complex human phenomena" argues Jong Jun who continues:

"Furthermore, mainstream public administration, which overly emphasizes the role of management, is incapable of developing democratic ways to resolve conflict or generate socially grounded solutions. What is required in the current crisis is a creative awakening to the dialectical social process—to the ability to join what is, what can be, and what should be—in order to alter the social and administrative structure and processes...in other words, an appreciation of social processes, of the interplay of instrumental and technical elements, and of collective and democratic means of creating a more humane and hopeful society is needed" (Jun 2006).

We draw our information from four sources: existing research; a comprehensive central case study; interviews of key informants from around the world; and our own personal experience which is also the source of many of the illustrative examples. The case study methodology was selected because it enhances our understanding of a complex capacity building problem and helps to generate new discoveries in relation to existing theories. Further, the case study method enables us to describe a unique situation telling the complex social situation from the inside with full engagement with conflicting humanistic values and adaptive capability (Amato and Thompson, CCC 8, 2010). This chapter discusses the methodology engaged to capture the knowledge offered by each of these sources.

Chapter 3. GCD is a Wicked Problem

Chapter 3 examines the type of problems that GCD in international development attempts to address thus situating it into a certain typology of problems drawing on literature describing: wicked and tame problems (Rittel and Webber); technical problems and adaptive challenges (Heifetz); messes, problems and puzzles (Ackoff); and simple, complicated and complex (Westly, Zimmerman and Patton). This chapter highlights that wicked problems are always embedded within complex adaptive systems and efforts to solve them must be imbued with an understanding of how change in such systems actually occurs. While maintaining that capacity building in our context covers the full range of problems, from simple, technical issues like implementing a system for clean drinking water or operating new criminal surveillance technology, to larger more complex issues like environmental degradation or reducing national crime rates and corruption levels; we establish that most enterprise-wide capacity building projects are intended to solve problems which are wicked, with some technical components. We argue that wicked problems cannot be solved by simple technical solutions alone.

In this chapter we introduce the main case study we use to illustrate our various points throughout the remainder of the dissertation. It is about the attempt to implement accountability and performance management into a national public service system where little existed before: Trinidad and Tobago's Ministerial Performance Management Framework (MPMF). Here we look at the political, social, and economic context in which

the case took place and illustrate, using the described typology, how MPMF was a wicked problem with technical components. MPMF explores the interconnectivity and co-dependence of the four principles - co-learning; co-diagnostics; co-designing; and co-acting.

Chapter 4. An Alternative to the Standard Model

Part Two (Chapters 4 to 8) is a thorough examination in theory and practice of the key components of an emerging alternative approach to more effectively deal with GCD as a wicked problem.

Having established that the sorts of problem we are dealing with are wicked and require adaptive solutions, Chapter 4 explores the theory of how wicked problems should be addressed. A survey of the leading academic journals suggests that well over 90% of the articles published are concerned with establishing basic causality behind certain phenomena. "Very few studies investigate whether a certain method or intervention used by management is effective or not" (Howard and Putman, CCC 8, attributed to Shani and Pasmore, 1985). As practitioners we are more interested in what works than the intricacies of causality. Furthermore, the nature of complex adaptive social systems and the wicked problems that GCD tries to solve, situates our topic outside the technocratic framework within which basic causality can be determined and upon which current intervention approaches are based. Hence, our literature review focuses on application and effectiveness.

This chapter draws on a diverse array of literature but emphasizes the importance of taking risks, experimentation, failure, leadership and collaboration when grappling with wicked problems. It highlights co-learning (interveners and government staff) as the fundamental cross cutting principle that takes place throughout the capacity development process. The 'co-' makes clear up front that change agents, be they internal leaders, or external helpers need to do this work with the system, not for it. Built on this co-learning foundation are three other interconnected primary principles: co-diagnostics; co-designing; and co-acting. These principles and related activities are not

for linear application. Rather they are applied simultaneously, with different weights at different times in an iterative, experimental process as opposed to a prescriptive sequential one.

Chapter 5. Co-learning

Co-learning explores the widespread agreement that change in capacity involves the system learning how to do things differently. Such learning takes time and requires revisiting the pedagogy of capacity development – it sees the entire intervention process as one of co-learning, and not a discrete element of training. We use Revans' concept of action learning (Lewin, Wesley et al) not so much as a methodology as it has recently come to be perceived, but as a philosophical approach (Morgan, Ramirez) for capacity building. As learning is so closely tied to monitoring and evaluation (M and E) in the development industry, we present some alternative approaches to M and E in the form of outcome mapping and developmental evaluation.

Chapter 6. Co-diagnosing

We explore what types of diagnostics are most important when trying to understand the meaningful dynamics of complex adaptive systems. We emphasize that co-diagnosis is not, like current assessment practice a precursor to a planning phase, but rather an integral element of a change process. We introduce organizational-self assessment, stakeholder and force-field analysis, social network mapping, positive deviance and other key examples of methods and approaches for systemic diagnosis. We challenge the effectiveness of traditional approaches of assessment against normative best-practice standards by external experts. Alternatives will be offered that combine the collection of traditional assessment data with social systems analysis. As vital data includes how systems respond to efforts to change them – data that is only revealed through action – a key element of the proposed diagnostic approach will be that diagnosis must be an ongoing process of learning about these hidden obstacles, interests and dynamics that are revealed during intervention.

Chapter 7. Co-designing

The chapters on co-designing and co-acting are closely tied to concepts of co-diagnosing and co-learning highlighted above, however in addition, they draw heavily on Heifetz's adaptive leadership and Grint, Roberts, Head and Alford's recommendations for handling wicked problems. Co-designing replaces what the standard model calls planning. However, unlike the planning stage, it is not a process with a discrete beginning and end. It is ongoing because wicked problems demand that we act and learn and adjust our plans as the dynamic context demands.

We discuss the power and political aspects of GCD because leading change is itself a political activity and because in GCD politicians and politics play critical roles. In this chapter we discuss a case of high-level co-designing in the development of the Guyana Public Sector Modernization Design Plan as well as exploring this element of our MPMF case.

Chapter 8. Co-acting

In Part Two, several real-world examples will be presented. These examples illustrate developing country institutions designing their own capacity development interventions and implementing them with the assistance of an external coach or facilitator, an approach we call co-acting.

Analysis of these examples through the lens of these four principles demonstrates that many of the problems of the standard model approach can indeed be overcome.

Taken from the World Bank and other donor assessment of their failure rates, the main problems presented by the standard model approach include:

1. Lack of local ownership
2. Absence of a roadmap and/or vision
3. High levels of competition among donors and their divergent agendas
4. Leadership: a) of change agents; and b) local leadership
5. Over reliance on technocratic approaches

6. Weak accountability between a government and its citizens
7. Inadequate governance structure for the intervention
8. Unreasonable time-frames

As the examples demonstrate, simply adopting a “co” philosophy from ‘before the beginning’ increases the opportunity for authentic local ownership and leadership because the “co” framework ensures that the complex problems and their capacity building solutions are the responsibility of the participants, not an external agency. More importantly, it includes people as subjects rather than treating them like objects. Following these principles goes a long way in creating an adaptive learning organization; one that will be capable of and have the confidence to address new unforeseen problems. Collectively and individually our examples demonstrate two factors that are central to the success of an adaptive capacity development intervention: ownership and leadership by internal change agents. As some of our examples will show, authentic local ownership and leadership can be threatening to both development institutions and organizations in developing countries that are accustomed to running the entire show. So threatening in fact, that extraordinary steps are sometimes taken by “helpers” to maintain power imbalances and ensure that those “being helped” learn dependent and subservient behavior.

Chapter 9. Challenges, Implications, and Applications

This chapter begins with lessons and conclusions about our exploration and central question. We then explore the limitations and challenges of the emerging phronesis approach, followed by the implications and recommended next steps.

From our research two major themes emerge that will be central to any efforts to build on the emerging approach we have outlined. 1) Change leaders need to play a different type of role in order for capacity development projects to effectively deal with the wicked problems, hence in this concluding chapter we highlight the implications for external and internal *change leadership*. 2) Donors need to become more opportunistic, flexible and

willing to both take risks and encourage risk-taking in order to generate better results and learning about what actually works. The chapter concludes with a summary of limitations and shortcomings of the exploration and suggested further study.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

We were not far into our 18 month learning journey in the combined Oxford-HEC *Coaching and Consulting for Change* program, when we discovered that our very different experiences in international development led us to remarkably similar conclusions. GCD interventions were mostly failures; we had experimented with alternative approaches that showed a lot of potential for improvement; we felt the need to discover and learn more about these bright spots; we were daunted by the size of the international development industry and the vastness of the topic. Combining our research efforts and experiences seemed like the natural next step.

Yet, Jim and Nigel's journeys in the field were vastly different. Acknowledging the futility of separating the social research from the researcher we recognize the need to make our biases explicit. Our respective backgrounds, beliefs and values are so intertwined with our thinking that we need, up front, to explore our personal journeys.

Jim's personal journey

I grew up a few blocks from the Pacific Ocean at the most south-western tip of mainland Canada. The only thing separating my home from the US boarder was the 328 acre Semiahmoo Indian Reserve, a place of great childhood adventure. I explored the abandoned fleet of fishing boats provided by the government but never used because of dwindling stocks. Twice I found the burnt remains of fabricated houses to poke sticks into. Occasionally I had conversations with one of the inhabitants. Other than the fact that they lived in a different way, they seemed quite normal. I went to Semiahmoo High School but don't recall any one from the reservation attending. Nevertheless, parents, teachers and school mates seemed to talk about Indians continuously. The talk was unkind and inflammatory. Aboriginal people were being talked about in the same way that the world objectified Koreans and Japanese as "gooks"—the war was still fresh in everyone's mind at the time. At 11 or 12 years old I knew instinctively that there was

another story to be told, another way to look at people different than ourselves. Intuitively I knew what I would find words for later in life: “[*Man*] must be acknowledged by other men. All consciousness is, basically, the desire to be recognized and proclaimed as such by other consciousnesses. It is others who beget us. Only in association do we receive a human value, as distinct from an animal value” (Camus, 1956).

Perhaps this impression of *interconnectedness* fuelled my appetite for discovering foreign cultures. As a young man, being part of a naively thought out development plan in India that failed miserably, taught me many lessons. The most important one was the uniqueness of context. *Foreign fruit seldom grows on native ground*. Even the best of practices cannot simply be transplanted from one place to another no matter how technically elegant they are. The external interloper most often must adapt at least as much as and learn as much as the individuals and communities they are intent on developing. Luckily I was destined to have many more opportunities to experiment with alternative approaches to development projects.

My public service career saw me quickly rise through the ranks in Canada’s then largest municipality, the City of Edmonton where I soon learned that I had no patience for routine administration. However, I had many opportunities to lead special projects upon which I thrived, such as preparing an award winning Master Plan; heading North America’s first successful bid to host the World University Games; and being put in charge of downsizing the city from 22,000 to 12,000 employees and 26 to 12 departments when citizens stopped paying municipal taxes because of an international collapse in oil prices.

Soon after, I was recruited to the Government of Saskatchewan as Associate then Chairman of the Public Service Commission. My mission was to implement an enterprise-wide personnel management modernization program including executive recruitment for the public sector and crown corporations, staff development, managerial development and assessment, introduction of performance management, labor relations, privatization, creation of government agencies and improved personnel services which included reducing the number of managerial classifications from over

600 to five, reducing the amount of time it took to staff a government position from 24 to two months, among other things. After three short years and amazing progress, Saskatchewan's economy imploded; oil prices fell again, potash prices tanked, and grain prices fell through the floor. I found myself again the leader of a massive downsizing effort, charged with cutting the public service payroll by 25%. I became a regular attendee at Cabinet Meetings—anything dealing with the public service or privatization.

Next I was recruited to the Federal Government as Vice Principle of Management Development of the new Canadian Centre from Management Development—an opportunity to be part of institution building. Following two years of developing and testing programs and learning materials (over 100 case studies some of which won awards) I accepted a job offer as Director General of Consulting and Audit Canada where we carried out approximately \$60 million of work annually and, at the time, produced a handsome profit for the government. That is where I developed my love for consulting. As the most senior consultant in the organization I was asked to undertake a number of high level international assignments including organizing, chairing, and writing the publication for an international panel of experts from 16 nations on public sector transformation for the OECD. The position was a springboard that I used to extend my expertise during a two year executive exchange program with a highly specialized consulting firm. During my time on exchange I learned a great deal about private sector consulting and hostile international take overs which happened on two occasions during my brief tenure.

I spent half my career trying to be a bureaucrat. It was an uneasy fit. The Centre for Creative Leadership's Leadership at the Peak program convinced me that the routine of administration was not the ideal place to nurture an entrepreneurial and innovative spirit. My decision to start my own consulting firm was however, made on principle. It is enough to say that I left two key government posts because of unabated corruption. In one case it was political and in another bureaucratic.

Twenty 20 years ago, I incorporated my own boutique consulting firm, The Governance Network™. What differentiated the firm was our combination of practical research with management consulting. We sought clients who, like me, were not convinced that the latest fad or management flavor of the month would get them the needed results. Luckily we had ample opportunity to research fresh approaches and test new ideas. The company grew quickly—too quickly in fact—and I soon found myself again doing hum drum administrative work. We restructured, and I began to lead major international development projects primarily in the Caribbean. I have been extremely happy in this career. Happy because: the challenges are real; the contexts unique; and the solutions waiting to be discovered. We will return to these examples in the following chapters.

Nigel's personal journey

I was born into international development. As missionary surgeons, my parents managed hospitals and educational institutions in Iran and Pakistan for more than 45 years. In most cases they were amongst the only internationals, working in predominantly local institutions with local staff. They were very successful and became much sought after for their ability to make these local institutions function better and develop the capacity to fulfill their missions of serving local communities.

While my parents are very good surgeons (of course!), that was not the defining characteristic of their success. There are many good surgeons who have failed miserably in their efforts to build thriving local institutions anywhere let alone in conflict situations. There was something about the way they acted in the complex social system they were part of that set them apart and made them particularly effective. I came away from my childhood living out these situations with an understanding that institutional improvement takes a very long time and that good local relationships, language skills, and an appreciation for national culture and institutional history are of critical importance. I also witnessed the fragility of the institutions that were largely dependent upon larger political and security developments outside of their control. We had to flee Iran due to the revolution and the hospital was taken over by the revolutionary guard and more recently in Pakistan, a border hospital in the town of Tank

that my parents invested fifteen years in has been reduced to a simple midwifery center due to rampant insecurity making recruitment and retention of qualified Pakistani doctors impossible.

I have been working in the field for seventeen years. I started as a nineteen year old in eastern Afghanistan in 1993 trying to manage a camp for 130,000 internal refugees, fleeing from the conflict in the capital city Kabul. I had no technical expertise and had no formal experience. All I could draw on was my observations of how my parents did things, and understanding of the people and some of their languages, and an urge to try to make a bad situation better. To my great surprise, my youthful exuberance, respect for human beings, experimentation and 'nothing to lose' attitude proved to be tremendous assets in a business where expertise and experience were so highly esteemed.

After these experiences in Afghanistan I went to university, studied engineering and then joined an international relief and development organization called Mercy Corps. I worked with them for 12 years in Central Asia, the Balkans, South Asia, South-east Asia, the Middle East and the Caucasus. I ended up as their Country Director in Afghanistan. During these years I learned a great deal about the development industry from a non-profit generalist's perspective. On one hand I learned the formal tools of the trade from logical frameworks, finance, administration, accounting, logistics, security management, monitoring and evaluation systems, performance management systems, proposals, fund raising etc... and on the other hand I experienced what types of programs and approaches actually made headway on thorny development and emergency response problems, and which ones didn't.

I learned that technical experts who had poor social and relational skills, a poor ability to contextualize their knowledge and relate to local conditions were not useful unless carefully guided and challenged. I ended up managing teams of experts, many of whom were twice my age and enabled them to plug into larger processes in a productive way. My lack of technical expertise seemed to be compensated for by a

relentless curiosity and a willingness to challenge deeply held assumptions and ways of doing business. I learned that technical expertise is essential, but only if it is focused and used as a tool within a larger and more complex social change process.

From 2006-2008 in Afghanistan I piloted a new initiative. I established a dedicated unit focused on staff development and learning. I raised the money and made the largest investment in people ever made in the history of the organization. Our national expenditure on staff development was greater than the rest of the global organization combined. Our focus was on building local capacity in order to reduce reliance on international staff. Hence we invested heavily in raising Afghans up within the system to take on ever more senior roles. Some initiatives were positive and some failed. Overall, however, the development of Afghan staff was impressively accelerated.

A major quest in the development industry is for post-intervention sustainability. How will a school remain operational after a project ends; how will a well be repaired? It seemed to me that the major question with sustainability should be: How will this society solve problems without outsiders? And THAT is the problem that we should be working on.

I became more interested public sector issues. In 2006-2008 in Afghanistan, it became evident to me that the public sector must be able to play a strong leadership role in addressing the social and economic challenges in the country if significant progress was to be sustained. I saw a huge amount of money being spent, and hordes of experts in ministries but only a few bright spots of progress, places where the capacity to solve problems for constituents did seem to be growing. The largest single factor appeared to be leadership—who the Minister was mattered a lot. There were very few competent ministers, almost all coming from NGO backgrounds. This experience prepared them to work collaboratively with international and Afghan constituencies. Further, they could establish and follow work plans, budgets, goals and objectives. The second part of the equation includes donors and external change leaders who are skillful with collaborative approaches, and who are willing to share ownership, leadership and vision.

I left Afghanistan for a research fellowship at Harvard where I proceeded to reflect on my experiences and explored how external change agents can best approach the

challenge of building the problem solving capacity of developing country institutions. After two years of reflection, I returned to Mercy Corps as Middle East Regional Director.

Conclusions about the topic and the authors

As Malcolm Gladwell points out in the *Outliers* (2009), among the many divergent defining characteristics of experts, they have one thing in common—like the authors, they have all put in their 10,000 hours, in the trenches, practicing their craft. Our personal journeys taught us that development, as individuals, organizations, or institutions is all about learning and change. From our two very different life journeys we developed a profound understanding of and respect for the uniqueness of context: individuals, organizations; their values, customs and cultures and ways of relating to each other and the outside world; conditions that frame each social group's capacity to learn and adapt to new challenges.

We came to the CCC program with a substantial body of experience and expertise in international development, looking to better understand how to make the development sector more effective – in particular efforts focused at improving the capacity of developing country public sectors. Through this program the ideas sketched out above have emerged, taken shape, been debated and in the following pages will be explored in more detail. By the end of this exploration we hope that the reader will have seen the problems of GCD through a different lens, have a new lexicon to debate the challenges the industry faces, have an understanding of the core principles underpinning a new problem solving approach, and an appetite whetting glimpse of how these principles can be applied in action.