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Global Options and Linkages[1]: Towards an Evolutionary Complex Systems Approach to International Development

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Development takes place as people learn how to change/improve their daily actions/behaviour. **Innovation** takes place when the new behaviour results from a change in values and beliefs – that is, when change on the ground is not simply a superficial external behaviour but a reflection of an internal change in people’s way of thinking, mind-sets. This leads to sustained change through time and implies a continuous process of change as people’s value systems evolve as they cope with life conditions and the environment in which they work.

“**Development innovation[2]**” is about the process through which:

- A change in how development professionals think about development is reflected in how they act / behave on a daily basis in order to better cope with development issues; and / or
- A change in how social groups think about their activities leads to a sustained change in how they act / behave in their daily activities to better cope with their work environment and life conditions.

Our work draws on theories of evolution of human value systems (Spiral Dynamics Integral – SDi), Innovation and Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). We firmly believe that “the map is not the territory”, that we have to “think different”, that “no one is ever 100% wrong”, and that “if we do what we have always done, we will get what we have always got”!

Some Fundamental Issues

We seek to discuss issues based on our subjective perception that development approaches have not had the desired impact on human development.

1. One factor is that development should be viewed from a complex systems perspective taking into account the value systems, thinking styles and motivation traits prevailing within systems and sub-systems.
2. A second factor is the dynamics and interaction of systems – all stakeholders and their leaders change and couple as they cope with and adapt to changes in their work environment and living conditions. In so doing, their interrelationships often determine how systems change and how leverage points are found – they are not static but evolving continuously.
3. A third factor is that interactions are not linear (such as Logical Framework Approach, Results-Based Management used extensively today by development agencies), but systemic so that small changes can lead to large changes. Systems evolve with each other as they integrate their past with their present in a continuous evolutionary process.
4. Furthermore, it is counter-productive to impose solutions from outside a system implying that leadership of such complex adaptive systems has to be internal to those systems, and different from leadership approaches and styles that are in fashion world-wide.
5. Leadership of complex adaptive systems cannot be based only on “egocentric”, “authoritarian”, “enterprising” or “harmonious” ways of thinking – but rather on “complexity leadership” that is integrative, recognising the existence of all these thinking styles and not judging the values of each of these[3]. The question is; how can existing complex dynamic systems be “led” or “supported” so that they evolve to bring about change that can lay the basis for further change from one stage to the next in the evolutionary process?[4] Are multi-stakeholder processes (MSP) an answer through appropriate facilitation? The SevenPlus Forum is currently discussing this question on the basis of SDi.

“Think Different” – About People

In our view, human beings are not “resources” like technology, finance, materials, and equipment. . They have a life of their own and must be placed at centre-stage of development with all their complexities.

1. We need to focus on people’s specific ways of thinking, their value systems, beliefs, and motivation and working traits. We tend – for reasons of efficiency or expediency – to “impose” our own values and beliefs etc that are imbedded “unwittingly”, “unintentionally” or “unconsciously” in programmes and mind-sets of our experts.
2. In our experience, beneficiaries have their own values, beliefs, motivation and working traits given their living conditions and cultural environment. They also have their own knowledge, capabilities and skills. These need to be recognised, understood from their perspective, respected and accepted. We

need to communicate with them at their level (that is, by addressing their values and motivation and working traits) – and to support them moving from that level rather than attempt to superimpose our own values and thinking styles. The meaning of communication is the effect it has on others – this is what is important, not the words we use.

3. Focus on the evolution path of human development – we are moving on it all the time – on how we can support / nurture / accelerate the evolution of those social groups anywhere in the world. We believe that the distinction between developed, emergent and developing countries is no longer useful today, as the gap between have's and have-nots exists in all societies.
4. Our society and its institutions are organised to achieve planned results based on linear approaches rather than on complex systems. Development agencies (multi- and bilateral, NGOs) are driven by and judged every 2 years on the achievements of planned results, their impact and its sustainability (how is it measured? Base-line data?); individual staff performance is based on the number or value of the programmes for which they are responsible – rather than the sustainability and impact resulting from their programmes.
5. We need to think differently about development – that is, long term, about 20 to 30 years. This is difficult to do – because our administrations and budgets operate on the basis of biennia. In addition, project managers will probably not be deeply committed to a project that will be completed only after their retirement.

To “think different” is of course easier than “acting different”. Co-evolutionary complex adaptive systems (CAS) have been studied for some time. Together with psychosocial studies and field research on the stages in the evolution of human value systems, CAS can provide an excellent framework for discussing an alternative to the current linear approach to development.

How Development Institutions Think and Act Today

Our subjective perception of development institutions' ways of thinking can be summarised as follows – based on the SDi theory of the evolution of human development comprising some 8 stages of evolution. They tend to fall in stages 3 to 6:

1. Some tend to be “**egocentric**” – a way of thinking that is negative when driven by personal or organisational interests – when status, image, larger budgets and number of staff, influence, promotion in the hierarchy, etc. are the hidden agendas. Egocentrism applies equally to partner institutions in beneficiary countries / social groups with equally negative consequences for human development.
2. Some are “**authoritarian**” – largely thinking in terms of “applying all rules and regulations” in a somewhat rigid hierarchical way – by implication, they focus on the correct application of such rules in accordance with established responsibilities and hierarchy – rather than the effect they may have on the specific situation / circumstances at the level of the beneficiaries. This applies equally often to the institutions of the beneficiary social groups.

3. Some are “**enterprising**” – largely thinking in terms of organisational efficiency, meeting their set of organisational goals – this thinking style is driven by the delivery of services rather than by the need to ensure the sustained impact of results for the benefit of human beings.
4. Some profess to be “**harmonious and integrative**” – while their values and responsibility are to support minority groups, inclusiveness, environmental protection, climate change etc, they sometimes tend to act with **egocentric** motivation traits.

In general, development agencies have evolved their own culture, values and attitudes in the course of time. These include competing rather than working together for the benefit of the intended beneficiaries. Some development experts consider the **informal** aspects of this culture to be akin to those of a “tribe” / “clan” / or “family”.

One result is that “ownership” – a critically important concept – remains illusive. While beneficiaries are invited to discuss, participate, propose, criticise, etc., they very often feel inhibited (“inferior” in terms of knowledge, know-how, status.) in front of foreign diplomats and experts on whom they know they depend for support and small individual benefits. “Participatory” workshops, meetings and substantive papers, including some of our own, have sometimes been unconsciously or consciously “manipulated”.

Concepts For Discussion

GOAL has identified 3 **options** (Complex Adaptive Systems, Integral and Innovation theories) that can be **linked** together to formulate an evolutionary and dynamical systems approach to world development rather than the linear approach inherent to the heretofore use of the Logical Framework Approach (LFA).

- Innovation and Integral theories demonstrate that changes of knowledge and value systems are key to sustainable development.
- Integral theory shows how the internally and externally manifested value systems of individuals and collectives affect each other as they cope with changes in their living conditions and environment. This is shown for example in the social integration study carried out by GOAL[5]. Complex adaptive systems (CAS) coincide with the worldview of Spiral Dynamics Integral theory’s stage yellow / turquoise (and beyond?) on the path of human evolution: systemic, flex-flow, integrative.
- CAS can demonstrate how evolution takes place from one stage to another – through knowledge (centres) and their dynamic interaction, formal and informal networks, as they cope with their living conditions and environment. CAS are co-evolutionary.
- With Spiral Dynamics Integral theory, this co-evolutionary path seems to be predictable given the proven stages along this path – as demonstrated by the Soroti community’s development and by human development in general – both in terms of individuals and social groups.
- The UN Secretary General called for “revolutionary thinking” about world

development in the interests of survival. The use of CAS, Integral and Innovation theory can lead to a drastically new and different approach – however, its success depends almost entirely on Complexity Leadership, a concept that is only today in the process of study and development. Facilitation of MSP may provide useful insights in this regard.

A Possible Research Agenda on Development Innovation

1. Formulation of CAS/SDi-based action research programme to examine:

- How development innovation can become the rule rather than the exception in national and international development programmes
- How the evolution of the human development process can be sustained
- How people take on new value systems to enable them to better cope on a daily basis with the living conditions prevailing in their environment.

2. At present one university institution[6] is exploring the systemic approach to development described in this paper with regard to innovation by smallholder farmer communities in Uganda. It is part of a wider effort that will pose the following research questions:

- How do value systems drive the actions and behaviours of people; and how they are influenced by people's actions / behaviours and by the accumulation of knowledge and interactions with other people?
- How can people with different values and beliefs work together for improved livelihood, income and wellbeing? What might be the role of change facilitators?
- How do creativity and innovation in smallholder farming communities influence:
 - Farmers' daily actions/behaviours in coping with their living conditions?
 - Increased interactions (qualitative and quantitative) among main stakeholders?
 - The accumulation of knowledge, capabilities and skills?
 - Broader cognitive awareness (time – short, medium and long term; the space they are concerned with; multi-perceptual positions)?
 - Mindset change in terms of value systems and beliefs about these values?
 - The role of the main stakeholders and of their community in the district or region?
 - Improved livelihood, income and well being of an entire community?

It is expected that an action research programme of this nature will lead to the:

- Organisation of innovation symposium to discuss and validate findings
- Publication of results – including in web sites, research and social networks
- Fund-raising in support of further research and of innovation proposals submitted to the CDR Innovation Fund

- Training of change facilitators/ coaches supporting the co-evolution of complex systems such as smallholder farmer communities
- The formulation of new University courses on applied creativity and innovation supporting sustainable human development
- Contribution to the efforts of national and international organisations to reform their approaches to sustainable human development.

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Notes

[1] U GOAL – Global Options and Linkages, Vienna, Austria. Web: www.goalnetwork.net GOAL undertakes research supported by case studies to elaborate an alternative approach to human development together with the SevenPlus Forum Europe (www.sevenplus.org).

[2] Based on lectures delivered at the Centre for Development Research/CDR at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences/ BOKU (Vienna), 2011/12, and on related field work in Uganda.

[3] This coincides with the “Integrative” stage of evolution of the Graves / Beck SDI model of the evolution of human development.

[4] For any organisation tempted to work on complex adaptive systems, it is important to remember that change needs to start within these organisations themselves – “it is not possible to ‘lead’ others if you are not able to ‘lead’ yourself”.

[5] See A. de Faria: “Spiral Dynamics Integral in Action in a Roma Community in Romania” in the Integral Leadership Review, October 2011.
<http://integralleadershipreview.com>

[6] The Centre for Development Research/CDR at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences/ BOKU in Vienna.

About the Author

Alexandre (Rico) de Faria and friends are primarily concerned with the evolution of people’s value systems, sustainable change and well-being on the basis of Integral Theory and SDI: (www.sevenplus.org). As Managing Director of GOAL—Global Options and Linkages (www.goalnetwork.net), a think-and-do tank in Vienna, Austria, Rico and friends carry out action-research projects using SDI. He also leads “Quality Performance” (www.quality-performance.eu), the consulting arm of GOAL, on the leadership and management of people and organizations across the world. Prior to 2000, as Chief of Project Appraisal/Quality Assurance at [the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation](http://www.unido.org) (UNIDO), Rico worked over 15 years on the quality of management of international development programmes. He has a degree from the Graduate Institute for International Studies, Université de Genève, Switzerland. Contact: defaria@quality-performance.eu.

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