CHAPTER 2

Context

Abstract This chapter gives an overview of the paradoxical dynamic that shapes the World; with on the one hand an ever-wider inequality gap; over-exploitation of natural resources and climate change; and on the other hand, a growing understanding of the possibilities and promise of the future connection, collaboration, and complementarity between people and countries—both propelled by the combination of science, wealth, and technology. This chapter points out some of the reasons for the insufficient progress made by traditional approaches to development and humanitarian aid. It offers arguments why nonprofit institutions whose justification is to help, must begin by helping their staff to help themselves. Organizations with an inspiring social mission must practice internally what they preach externally. Whether these organizations live up to the inspirational potential that goes with their mandate, is conditioned by their ability to place the aspiration for meaning at the center of their action, internally and externally.

Keywords Dynamic · Nonprofit organization (NGO) · United Nations (UN) · Society · Inequality · Causality
1 A Brief Overview of Paradoxical Dynamics

The World is constantly evolving. Historically, through the ebb and flow of changes, there have been good, peaceful, and prosperous periods, and others marked by violent conflict, despair, and unequal social and economic outcomes. In our time, the prospects seem ominous (Brown and Selvadurai 2011). Fortunately, every trial contains an opportunity.

For instance, ninety percent of the projected population growth between now and 2050 will be in the developing World, with a correlation between youth bulges and armed conflict (Urdal 2006). This trend will increase the demand for food, energy, water, and space, eventually outpacing supply and the various nation-states’ management ability and capacity to resolve the dilemma. This is likely to further exacerbate local and global tensions. At the same time, the massive mobilization of youth-led movements against climate change that began in 2018 illustrates the positive and transformational power that the global community has at its disposal in the form of young aspirations and fresh minds.

Technology is another double-edged sword. Scientific progress and interconnectivity are accelerating ever more rapidly. Artificial intelligence and machine learning exponentially increase the capacity and speed of hardware and software power that we have at our disposition. These tools represent an unlocked treasure trove that could either transform the Planet into a more equitable place or turn into a wide-open Pandora’s box. Either way, we will all bear these consequences: sooner or later, directly or indirectly, and individually and collectively.

Globalization, technology, and the internet have transformed us from members of various nation-states into citizens of the World. There has only ever been one Planet for Humanity to live on, but in the past, this was easier to overlook or forget than now. Today everything, from the internet to air travel, is a reminder that all of Humanity’s destiny is connected. We are interdependent, whether we want to be conscious of this interaction or not, and whether we want this connection or not (Fig. 1).

1.1 How Are Development Players Dealing with These Issues?

While calls for change and collaboration have become part of the standard rhetoric of think tanks and global philanthropic fora (Parker 2019), the shift from preaching to practicing remains in limbo. ‘The goal should be a shared sense of challenges in a world where all people are equal’ (Brown and Selvadurai 2011), as stated in the Wilton Park conference report. However, ‘should be’ does not equal ‘is’. Lingering phenomena
Fig. 1  Spiral. Everything is connected and constantly changing. What materializes around us has started at the center and is nurtured from the periphery. Experience results from a continuum in which seemingly opposites complement each other

like inequality and climate combusting ‘will not be brought down by paying more lip service to it or by conducting more research that stays in an ivory tower’ (Vandermoortele 2019). Resolving challenges which engender harm, be it to ourselves or others, requires a triple shift: from acknowledging the issue, to mustering the courage to addressing it, to actually translating the desire for change into concrete behavior change, beginning with our own personal action.

Words leave ample space for altruism and open-mindedness. Paper is patient, and strangely, so is the internet, despite its frenzied publication speed. Impact measurement differs from output volume. While the sheer quantity of data coming from Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms is gratifying for results-oriented activists, tangible evidence to prove the influence of online mobilization on human behavior remains sparse. Beyond clicks, likes, and short-term donations, the sustainable
transformation of attitudes and belief-systems remains one of the unexplored frontiers of social change. There is little evidence that, once a Twitter storm has raged for a time and the calm has returned, there is any real and meaningful change.

Geared towards development or humanitarian assistance, myriads of aid groups, non-governmental organizations, social enterprises, and bi- and multilateral institutions exist. Amid this abundance and diversity, one common parameter seems to characterize and connect those rare institutions that have outlasted the start-up stage and moved past log frames and matrix madness, donor domination, and implementation illusion. This parameter is the level to which their staff personifies the values that the organization pursues. Beyond funding level and mission statement, marketing creativity and positioning skills, at the heart of aid groups and non-profit organizations that survive and leave their mark is the mindset of those who work inside the organization. This mindset matters more than anything else, with organizational performance linked to whether the personal aspirations and the subsequent behavior of the staff are in synch with the mission of their employer. Do their inner values match those of the organization? Do they live by the code of these values in everyday life, both in the spotlight and the shadows? Do they practice what they preach?

The quest to influence the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of so-called beneficiaries of aid programs has gradually led to the field of Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC). As understood already in the 1980s, ‘social marketing is an underutilized yet powerful means of changing behavior’, and thereby changing Society. But even though the scientific research that many SBCC approaches use to understand their target adopters makes them a resource to learn from, the present state of the World seems to indicate that their impact is limited. One shortcoming is that they have failed to delve deep enough to pierce through to the level of understanding into implementation. Even in the cases where in-depth Knowledge Attitude Practice (KAP) studies were conducted to understand the factors that underpin certain behavior patterns and the social norms underneath, action usually fell short (Zaltman 1971). The current fast-paced, short-lived nature of most aid programs is not conducive to the implementation of systematic long-term programs dedicated to behavioral change. Results-based management can be a blessing or a curse, depending on the orientation behind it. It may nurture a culture of seeking concrete and meaningful transformation, but it can also lead to a
focus on material assets that can be touched, counted, and photographed. The abundance of clinics and community health centers that were built with the funds of well-intentioned donors but subsequently abandoned for lack of staff, equipment, medication, or demand is just one illustration of this phenomenon. As the absence of large-scale sustainable transformation seems to indicate, a different approach is required rather than more of the same. As the popular saying goes, ‘If you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got’ (O’Toole 2019).

The questions that need to be asked in this context are uncomfortable, at an institutional level as well as at an individual level. These questions require an honesty that does not come naturally or easily to institutions or individuals. Human nature is geared towards the path of least resistance, while soul searching is cumbersome and awkward. A most obvious question for all concerned: ‘Do those who defend human rights as part of their profession, such as United Nation officials, Government agents, or NGO workers, inspire by example?’ At the beginning of their career, those who choose to work in the aid sector are usually driven by genuine passion. They believe that making the World a better place can and must be done. But as time passes, experience intrudes, disappointments are encountered, and habits take root; things change. Slowly passion fades; cynicism, fatigue, and disillusionment creep in. Standing up for change, beyond institutional campaign orchestration, no longer comes intuitively. Some leave, many stay. Material considerations, paychecks, promotions, and pension perspectives become criteria when earlier they were not.

2 THE PRACTITIONER’S DILEMMA

As we grow older, we become increasingly reluctant to touch that which hurts. The question of identity is buried under ever-thickening layers of conscious blindness and wishful thinking. Working in the nonprofit sector is more than a job. It becomes part of who you are, how you see yourself. Questioning whether our daily work is in harmony with the aspirations that had initially motivated us to enter this sector is painful. It raises unsettling questions not only about what we do, but about who we are and what we have become. It requires delving below the surface, down to our self-understanding and the values that underpin who we are. The causes and consequences of aspirational death and revival in the humanitarian sector are discussed further in the section on Compassion for Change (C4C).
The United Nations, which is mandated to connect the dots on the stage of international politics, is one of many large organizations that follow a paradoxical dynamic. It recruits and compensates highly educated and highly skilled intellectual brain-power and yet fosters an atmosphere of repeating past patterns and reinforcing antiquated structures, preventing these willing participants from using the entire range of their abilities for true innovation or impact. Rather than critical or creative thinking that pushes the collective envelope toward inclusive prosperity, it leaves personal agendas and reactivity to set the pace of change. Change is needed, and yet it will not come easily because changing the status quo is not a one-step quick fix. This is a difficult sell in a World that is turning ever faster, with a populace that has matured with the need for instant gratification. Big-picture thinking will be needed to prioritize the steps forward. This focus of prioritization is a useful intermediary stage for chipping away at the ballast and eliminating the excess and trivial distractions holding us back.

No one wants to be cast in the role of the victim, the helpless recipient of assistance (Granger 2016). We want to see ourselves as strong and independent, as kind and generous. We aim to be perceived that way by others, especially by those who matter to us. However, we are also prone, if the occasion presents itself, to follow the path of least resistance, slipping easily into the role of the passive bystander (Sommers 2011). Taking this two-sided coin and our natural inclination into account, the all too common portrayal of populations as poor, desperate, and helpless with the objective of triggering generosity may work in the short term by generating pity. Yet, in the long term it causes alienation, because it establishes separation between those who have resources and those who are in need, widening the gap between the donor and the so-called beneficiaries. This distance is among the primary reasons why assistance is not given in the first place or leads only to short-term support. The more we perceive ourselves as different from the person in need, the less likely we are to help (Manning et al. 2007).

We may have been traveling in a certain direction for a while before we finally come to realize the track we are on is not headed to our destination of choice. The length of the preceding journey and the various investments that we have made along the way may discourage us from even contemplating the possibility, or worse, the necessity, of change. This, combined with inertia, and the ‘sunk cost fallacy’ whereby humans seek to avoid lost cause realization, usually results in ‘loss aversion’
‘Loss aversion’ prevents us from choosing to think about uncomfortable choices and the related consequences. Even though we all have moments of quiet where we realize the discrepancy between our aspirations and our present orientation, ‘loss aversion’ increases the likelihood that we will not move toward the first step of such introspection. This first step is to honestly admit to ourselves that we are on the wrong track. Only once we have passed this stage of inner awareness can we move forward, transcending the instinctive justification of the status quo, including monetary circumstances, relational obligations, age, etc. Subsequently, if our personal aspirations are clear and present in our heart and mind, then the last step flows calmly, naturally. The described change process smoothly leads us to translate awareness not only into desire for change, but into concrete action to make it happen. Enacting our values, pursuing our dreams, and realizing our existential aspiration for meaning, which necessarily involves others, are possible at any time.

A framework to address these issues, trends, and questions is needed. Its basic elements and principles are discussed in the next chapters.

**Notes**

1. COVID-19 is a drastic reminder that the reality that we used to know is not an acquired asset, but an accumulation of factors that can snap out of balance in a short laps of time. At the same time it illustrates that we are all the same. Beyond nationalities and income, gender and culture everyone is at risk of getting sick.

2. ‘We have extra responsibilities, which means that we have more need to act cooperatively’. See Stiglitz’s (2008) Geary Lecture, Making Globalisation Work.

3. ‘The issue is really whether it will change in the face of a crisis, or a series of crises, like the crises we had in 1997 and 1998, lurching from one patch-up to another, with each patch-up leading to a crisis maybe two years down the line, maybe ten years down the line, or whether we should approach it from the point of view of trying to understand why globalization has not been working and how we might fix it’. See Stiglitz’s (2008) lecture on globalization.

4. The 5 steps of a traditional social marketing management process include: (1) analyzing the social marketing environment; (2) researching and selecting the target adopter population; (3) designing social marketing strategies; (4) planning social marketing mix programs; and (5) organizing, implementing, controlling, and evaluating the social marketing effort. See Roberto and Kotler’s (1989).
5. In parts of this book, I will use the ‘we’ form when writing about the humanitarian sector. Having been a humanitarian worker for 18 years, I now seek change from the inside out, while pursuing it from the outside in.

6. The beginnings of organized international humanitarian aid can be traced to the late nineteenth century. The most well-known origin story of formalized humanitarian aid is that of Henri Dunant, a Swiss businessman and social activist, who upon seeing the sheer destruction and inhumane abandonment of wounded soldiers from the Battle of Solferino in June 1859, canceled his plans and began a relief response. Refer to Haug’s (1993) *The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*.

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