

Irene Guijt November 2007

Assessing and
Learning for
Social Change:
A Discussion Paper



assess learn
critique
change
power
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listen
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strengthen



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Between May 2005 and November 2006, a small group of development professionals discussed the opportunities and challenges for assessing and learning about social change in ways that strengthen the change process.

This became known as the 'assessing social change' or ASC group. Central to the group's discussions was a common concern with the chasm between the need for reflective social change practice and the existing understanding and repertoire of approaches. What processes for assessing and learning about social change can help improve the strategies and results of social change organisations?

This document draws extensively on the experiences and reflections that were shared through e-discussions, documenting case studies and two workshops. However, the final synthesis remains my own interpretation of the diverse perspectives and additional readings. They are offered with the intention to encourage further dialogue and debate with key stakeholders (donors, citizens, activists, and facilitators), inspire methodological innovation and, above all, shift the dominance of the current paradigm of thinking on assessment and learning to one that helps rather than hinders social change.

The interest in the topic has emerged from three converging developments. A first development occurred in the late 1990s around clarifying the concepts and promising practices of participatory monitoring and evaluation but which appears to have now stagnated. A second development has been the strong debates on social movements, democracy building, governance and the role of civil society organisations, including non-government organisations – and the importance of ensuring they remain active learners. A third, and direct, trigger for the subsequent ASC dialogue was the Gray Rocks conference in September 2003 on 'Strengthening Social Change through Assessment and Organisational Learning' (Mott 2003).

The conference concluded that despite the emergence of some alternatives to mainstream monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches, many of the learning and assessment challenges faced by social change-oriented groups are still uncharted in many ways and remain largely unresolved. Many such organisations resort to mainstream M&E approaches that originated under pressure to show measurable and direct changes. These approaches have proven seriously inadequate when applied to efforts aiming to build capacities and social movements, shifting social norms, and strengthening citizenship and democracy. Furthermore, the almost exclusive focus on accountability to donors has often been to the detriment of self-reflection and internal learning that enhances social change processes and to the detriment of accountability to the grassroots.

Two challenges needed addressing. The first challenge is to make progress with advancing approaches that can better meet the assessment and learning needs of organisers and activists, donors, and the evaluators and learning partners who assist them – while remaining true to their visions and strategies for social change. The second is to create the

basis for a vibrant dialogue that can further the reform that is urgently needed in assessment and learning about and for social change. Hence, it was the strong desire for opportunities to delve more deeply into key issues and share and create useful assessment and learning methods that sparked the beginnings of the ASC discussions.

I am grateful to many individuals for their help in thinking through the notion of 'assessing social change' over the course of this dialogue. The biggest thanks go to those in the ASC discussion group for identifying critical issues – Marta Foresti, Valerie Miller, Sammy Musyoki, Mwambi Mwasaru, Natalia Ortiz, Sheela Patel, Molly Reilly, Roger Ricafort, Evelyn Samba, Ashish Shah, Ritu Shroff, and Lisa VeneKlasen. Ritu Shroff, Iñigo Retolaza Eguren and John Gaventa provided detailed feedback on the paper. Many thanks to John Gaventa for overall guidance and patience and to Sammy Musyoki for being a committed colleague and sounding board throughout the process. I am grateful to Laura Cornish for her meticulous copy-editing and publication support. The support of the Swiss Development Corporation (SDC) and the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) has contributed to the production of this publication, through the Participation and Development Relations programme of the Participation, Power and Social Change Team at IDS. Finally, only with the financial support of the Ford Foundation were the ASC outputs, including this publication, possible – for which my gratitude.

Abbreviations

ASC	assessing social change
CBO	community based organisations
CSO	civil society organisations
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
(I)NGO	(international) non-governmental organisation
PM&E	participatory monitoring and evaluation
SPARC	Society for the Protection of Area Resource Centres
SUCAM	The Sugar Campaign for Change

“ Social change is a collective process of conscious efforts to reduce poverty and oppression by changing underlying unequal power relationships. ”

What processes for assessing and learning about social change can help improve the strategies and results of organisations working to transform inequalities in favour of the poor?

Between May 2005 and November 2006, a small group of development professionals discussed the opportunities and challenges related to this question. The ‘assessing social change’ or ASC group shared a concern for the chasm between the need for reflective social change practice and the existing understanding and repertoire of approaches. This paper draws extensively on the experiences and reflections that were shared through e-discussions, documenting case studies and two workshops.

This paper is aimed at development professionals interested in social change processes and in issues dealing with assessment and learning. Four central themes guided discussions and provide the structure of the paper:

1. Understanding ‘social change’ and how this affects learning and assessment;
2. Frameworks, concepts and methods to ensure critical reflection;
3. Understanding and dealing with different actors in assessment and learning;
4. Issues of scale and interconnectedness.

The paper ends with an agenda for action for donors, social change activists and their organisations, and facilitators of assessment and learning.

Understanding Social Change and the Implications for Assessment and Learning

The term ‘social change’ is generic and neutral, hence easily co-opted and misunderstood. It needs to be qualified. Poor people, power and process are central to the understanding of social change in this paper, which essentially, and immutably, concerns transformational processes related to the (re)distribution of power.

Change, in general, is a given but pro-poor social change efforts require conscious actions. Social change is a collective process of conscious efforts to reduce poverty and oppression by changing underlying unequal power relationships. Social change efforts are characterised by multiple actions on multiple fronts that seek a systemic, structural impact.

Strategic adjustment and operational improvements of such efforts are ideally not driven by crisis but by deliberate, information and experience-based reflections. Assessment and learning are the processes of ongoing reflection about visions, strategies and actions that enable continual readjustment. However, by and large, the reality is that mainstream monitoring and evaluation approaches (M&E) do not serve the types of change processes discussed here.

Moving to assessment and learning that strengthens social change means recognising the specific features of such developmental processes and then accommodating these methodologically. Five generic features of social change hinder the use of mainstream approaches. First, progress towards social justice and transforming relations of power does

“ Assessment and learning are the processes of ongoing reflection about visions, strategies and actions that enable continual readjustment. ”

not follow a linear or predictable trajectory, with uncertainty beforehand about the impact and the most effective route. Second, the system-wide change that is being strived for requires efforts by and depends on multiple groups on diverse fronts; hence the utility of a focus on proving achievement in order to attribute impact to specific players is questionable. Third, drawing the lines in a process of social change with fuzzy and moving boundaries means valuing incremental shifts. Fourth, recognising a valid result requires valuing efforts. And finally, it is essential to acknowledge the timeframe of change (and divergence between realities and project lifespans) and, therefore, clarifying expectations of change.

Frameworks, Concepts and Methods: Towards a Purpose-built Assessment Process

The spread and evolution of participatory approaches in development has contributed to the interest and desire to move beyond applications for appraisal and planning to use for monitoring and evaluation. Increased attention to and experiences by some large and influential development organisations with more participatory forms of assessment and learning have helped to draw attention from a purely upward accountability orientation to more interactive accountabilities. As social change groups, particularly those involved in rights-based initiatives, begin to grapple with issues of power more directly as part of a repoliticisation of development, they are also looking beyond conventional tools and techniques to the experiences of social movements over the years. But despite the growing demand for alternatives and increasing attempts to develop new methods or approaches, few innovations exist that meet the needs and recognise the challenges as discussed in this paper. These new approaches will need to be constructed per individual context.

When confronted with the limitations of mainstream M&E approaches, many in the development sector seek solace in methodological alternatives. They hope that somewhere there is an approach that will overcome the paradigmatic tensions, enable clarity of analysis, prove effectiveness, and strengthen people's organisations. While there are some relatively innovative approaches emerging, assessment and learning requires more than a method. To be effective, frameworks, values and skills need to merge with a method to construct an appropriate assessment process.

In practice, creating an appropriate assessment and learning process requires mixing and matching and adapting a combination of frameworks, concepts and methods – to ensure they address information and reflection needs and match existing capacities. Methods do not need to be either comprehensive or complex. A simple case study can provide a valuable process that forces reflection, articulation and clarification. Popular education offers another example of how methods can be reconceived without requiring a complex 'new' methodological invention. Conventional methods may also make an interesting contribution, including (aspects of) the much-critiqued logframe or results-based management, or indicators. However, much caution is required with the use of any logic model due to the inherent assumptions about change that fit uncomfortably with the features of social change discussed here.

A critical methodological aspect is articulating the theories of social change that guide social change. This is an essential starting point for assessing it and learning what to do better. Considerable confusion abounds about what a theory of change actually is. The theory of change that guides personal choices is philosophical, historical, political, psychological and experiential, i.e. ideological.

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Being clear about the theories of change that individuals and groups have helps to strategise and provide a focus to learning and assessment. Assessing a pro-poor social change effort effectively requires building a shared, context-specific understanding of how power inequities may be challenged and in which diverse actors and strategies are located. For many, the idea of 'theory' and 'articulating one's theory' is a scary thought – and balancing it with practice is essential. Furthermore, even in the context of pro-poor social change, there will be competing versions of and trajectories for social change that require negotiation and acceptance of diversity.

6 *Assessment and learning go beyond methods to a way of being in relationships that matter. Therefore, critical for ensuring that assessment and learning serve the social change process is the quality of relationships and establishing a trusting (internal) learning environment.*

Methods will never be the full answer to the challenges of assessment and learning. Due to its system-wide nature and, therefore, the need to engage a range of actors, assessment and learning for social change will always require negotiating about information needs and about learning modalities. In these negotiations, awareness of the power dynamics inherent in any process that involves using methods, as well as in the overall development process, is central. Elitisms of various kinds will inevitably emerge, which need due attention to ensure that inequitable power relationships are not perpetuated or exacerbated. Assessment and learning go beyond methods to a way of being in relationships that matter. Therefore, critical for ensuring that assessment and learning serve the social change process is the quality of relationships and establishing a trusting (internal) learning environment. This includes being clear about where accountability lies in assessment and learning.

Four short examples offer a flavour of how methodologies can be of use in the context of organisations that support and value social change as discussed here. Mama Cash and ActionAid International use frameworks that allow for great flexibility and yet provide a general direction based on the values they consider important for development. SPARC's story from India and that of CTA-ZM in Brazil provide insights into how local organisations deal with the need for flexibility and rigour in learning and assessment.

Relationships Matter and Relationships that Matter

The relationships between actors in assessing a social change process are enormously diverse. The extensive range of relationships that influence and need to be considered in assessing social change determines what is possible and the quality of the assessment and learning. Any single relationship is subject to multiple variables – history of relationship, contextual issues, interpersonal connections, competence of those involved, perceived importance of the social change process being funded, etc. Individual positions in this web of relationships will differ, depending on whether being contracted to assess social change (in an evaluator's role) or assessing social change as part of a funded programme of activities in which they are actively engaged. Central among these are relationship with donors, those active in social change work on the ground, and professional evaluators and facilitators.

Relationships with donors can be particularly problematic when it comes to agreeing on what constitutes social change and how to assess it. A direct relationship between a civil society organisation and a donor is nestled within a more extensive hierarchy of accountability, with different emphases placed on accountability or learning at each level in the hierarchy. Stereotyping and simplistic assumptions that power only resides with donors and that the donors have certain views on social change opposed to those on the frontline inhibit open conversation and self-critical reflection.

Nevertheless, the core issue in the donor-recipient relationship does seem to be the different theories of change that guide decisions and actions. The differences in theories of change has consequences, such as differing expectations of what 'success' should be able to

Managing relationships with donors may never be comfortable and the approach taken with donors will depend largely on the donor itself. Different perspectives are inevitable – accepting them and working with that diversity can be healthy.

occur and how that can be seen, the rigid application of standardised frameworks, and the difficulty of bureaucracies to deal with cross-cutting work, integrated change or intertwined experiences of progress. Clashes in vision and resulting procedural emphasis are exacerbated by contextual factors. Large international NGOs, such as Oxfam and ActionAid International that espouse social change values, face very specific and tough challenges.

Managing relationships with donors may never be comfortable and the approach taken with donors will depend largely on the donor itself. Different perspectives are inevitable – accepting them and working with that diversity can be healthy.

In many locally driven social change processes, sooner or later an intermediary is inserted or invited to support the process. The position of the intermediary will vary, depending on whether it is through a short external input or embedded within the social change process. Working on social change and assessing it in ways that maintains core values requires attitudes and principles, knowledge and skills. Credibility and trust are essential to effective assessment processes and can be seen as a by-product of the main competencies and qualities. These start at the personal level but are ideally reflected in convergence within the organisation around core, non-negotiable values and practices for both social change and assessing social change.

Issues of Scale in Assessment and Learning

An often automatic association with the term 'issues of scale' is that of scaling up of impact. However, complications of scale quickly arise when seeking to implement social change at a larger geographic or population scale that can lead to dilution of original principles or strategies, exclusion of significant groups, high costs or long time frames due to the desire to ensure participation. Another set of issues arises in trying to scale up lessons from a specific context. How can lessons be shared meaningfully in other contexts, what are the pitfalls in conveying and taking up lessons from elsewhere?

The central challenge in scaling up is how to stay true to the original vision and processes despite the greater numbers involved and larger diversity of experiences. Can integrity of principles and focus be maintained across levels, with social change staying locally relevant? Can assessment and learning stay grounded in local endeavours, despite larger scales of analysis, thus informing and inspiring them?

Interconnectedness also encompasses the challenges of scaling down. Recently debates about development among bilateral aid agencies and the international financial institutions has fuelled an almost obsessive focus on the 'national level'. But what about local governance and local accountability? Who is paying attention to this to ensure that efforts to assess change at national level have local relevance?

A critical factor in scaling down of social change efforts concerns ensuring citizen engagement in development processes that originated from higher levels of generality and abstraction. National or international derived process or policies contain risks for assessment and learning in terms of who participates, who facilitates, and the focus of the learning. International donors are tending to support the strengthening of state bureaucracy but do not always sufficiently value and invest in what is needed for citizens to help build effective states. Whether one's challenge of interconnectedness lies in scaling down or scaling up, there are risks for both pathways of jumping between levels or scales. For many international development organisations, it is hard to find a good balance between investing in internal processes and global objectives, and keeping an ear to the ground and investing there. In the process of 'jumping across scales', the so-called intermediary organisations are often in a particularly tricky position.

A focus on 'assessing social change' as advocated in this paper can be helpful to bridge the disconnection between levels that lead to confusion and mismatches across scales. An 'ASC' perspective can also help in the debates about accountability, an ongoing critical challenge for international and national NGOs. Emerging practices such as 'downward accountability' can be the basis for a dialogue between national or global level strategising and local level needs that can reduce the current disconnect between scales. Accountability and transparency in the assessment and learning process itself is also crucial. Assessment and learning will only ever show part of the picture, and thus should not be burdened with unrealistic expectations. Organisations working at larger scales have an opportunity to merge diagnosis and critical reflection to create a change process in which assessment and learning is embedded. One unresolved issue is how to argue for the 'intangibles' as progress is made along the development chain, up and away from the local level. In such cases, intermediaries working on social change must understand and invest in their role as mediators between scales, which requires clarity about the discourses that dominate at different levels.

An Agenda for Action

A far more politicised understanding of development as social change is gaining strength in contrast to development as projects delivered by external agencies. Critical reflection in strategic alliances with unlikely partners, articulating theories of change, and the role of stories to clarify and convey the complexity of transformation are part of a new emerging discourse and practice. Social movements and evaluators are considered agents of change. The received wisdoms of monitoring and evaluation are being fundamentally challenged based on a different understanding of development itself as complex, emergent, and transformative. However, much is needed to arrive at assessment and learning processes that strengthen social change rather than hinder it.

Donors are critical partners and can make all the difference in development processes that recognise the value of local social change. However, notwithstanding the use of a discourse that refers to 'critical reflection' and 'learning', donors, by and large, favour a mode of M&E that is rooted in fears of non-compliance of agreements based on a development model that is considered predictable. In practical terms, donors need to rethink the principles on which they base their models of evaluation and learning. Amidst what might seem like a daunting agenda, one action point merits special attention, that of consistency – donors must be more rigorous in aligning their espoused values with the protocols and systems they use.

Intermediaries can play critical roles as innovators, challengers and bridgers – for many a continuation of roles they already take seriously. One critical task lies in dialogues with donors to rethink the basis of assessment and learning processes. As innovators, intermediaries have to scrutinise how they contribute to perpetuating problems. Many of the considerations for donors also apply to intermediaries, who often fulfil a funding role in the development chain and are part of hierarchies of power. A particular area of attention that can strengthen the bridging role concerns better understanding the issues of scale. Methodologically, intermediaries can make important contributions.

The challenges posed here offer many opportunities for facilitators and evaluators. Much has been written in this paper that can inspire those facilitating assessment and learning processes and those responsible for formal evaluations. The core shift that must be recognised is that infusing assessment processes with political consciousness will require new skills and capacities.

A far more politicised understanding of development as social change is gaining strength in contrast to development as projects delivered by external agencies. Critical reflection in strategic alliances with unlikely partners, articulating theories of change, and the role of stories to clarify and convey the complexity of transformation are part of a new emerging discourse and practice.

Cutting across these key players are actions in which all have roles to play to carry forward the challenge of assessing and learning that strengthens social change. For all those involved – activists, intermediaries, evaluators, donors – generating practical ideas and sharing inspiring examples are essential. This means investing in: efforts to systematise and review the respective benefits and limitations of experiences; training efforts for social change organisations; peer support opportunities for those in social change organisations; and seeding experimentation.

“ External assessment processes are often too rigid to understand the dynamics and processes that lead to mature and sustained social change. ”

Development is described by Sheela Patel of SPARC as ‘the golden goose’. Assessing and learning about development as a process of social change means charting the ‘golden eggs’, in the form of processes that multiply and serve increasing numbers, building capacities and provoking shifts of thinking in government as well as among the poor. However, by valuing only the eggs, the goose is in danger of serious neglect and can die. External assessment processes are often too rigid to understand the dynamics and processes that lead to mature and sustained social change. New visions of assessment and learning that builds on the reflections in this document would be more effective at strengthening social change that tackles the persisting injustices about which development should care.

“If assessment and learning processes are to strengthen the change trajectories, then they must be embedded in social transformation and be coherent with guiding values.”

Social change knows many forms. For SPARC and its allies working with slum dwellers in dozens of cities around India, change must occur through the actions of the slum dwellers themselves. Their potential and priorities dictate the pace and focus of discussions and surveys about their pavement and railroad-side dwellings. They conceive options for action, they reflect, they evaluate (Patel 2007). On the Kenyan coast, thousands of women meet regularly to exchange experiences and strategise how best to tackle the endemic forms of domestic violence they face. By sharing stories of pain and experiences of transformation, the women involved in this growing movement dare to take on ever more taboo-challenging initiatives (Samba 2007). Nearby on the coast, small-scale miners undertake a participatory action research process to assess their struggles for control of minerals in their ancestral lands and to identify ways to enhance those struggles in a ‘new political era’ (Mwasaru 2007). Meanwhile, in Washington DC, education activists are seeking assessment methods that promote accountability to their constituents and build stronger movements by deepening collective understanding of what change is and how it is sparked (Reilly 2007).

Social change initiatives such as these seek the structural transformation of inequality that keeps marginalised voices mute and the poor embedded in poverty traps not of their own making. They are consciously and slowly building movements among specific groups – coastal women, urban slum dwellers, small-scale miners, education activists – in pursuit of a vision of social change that redresses power inequalities by putting understandings of power at the centre. This requires intense and judicious use of information as a catalyst for change; information about the scale and nature of the change, about options, about which strategies work best and when, about visions for the future. Critically important is that such information processes are in the hands of many and do not perpetuate power inequalities.

The main question being considered in this paper is what is needed for assessment and learning to enhance the social change processes in which and for which they take place. If assessment and learning processes are to strengthen the change trajectories, then they must be embedded in social transformation and be coherent with guiding values. It is this interaction that is the focus of this paper:

This paper summarises discussions in 2005 and 2006 held by a group of development professionals on the challenges and options for assessment and learning. The voices of the ‘Assessing Social Change’ group (see Boxes 1 and 2) are reflected in the text through quotes and examples they provided. I also draw on other outputs from the ASC initiative: a literature review and four case studies by participants. Much reference is made to these case studies written by group members Mwambi Mwasaru, Sheela Patel, Molly Reilly and Evelyn Samba (see Box 3).

This paper is aimed broadly at development professionals who are interested in social change processes and in issues dealing with assessment and learning. This encompasses a diverse group – those working on the ground, those within funding agencies and academia, and those in supporting and facilitating roles. All these groups are important to make the shifts outlined in this document, hence section 6 articulates an agenda for action for each one.

Four central themes guided discussions and provide the structure of the paper.

1. Understanding 'social change' and how this affects learning and assessment;
2. Frameworks, concepts and methods to ensure critical reflection;
3. Understanding and dealing with different actors in assessment and learning;
4. Issues of scale and interconnectedness.

The paper ends with recommendations for three key players: social change activists and their organisations, facilitators of assessment and learning, and donors.

Box 1. Background to the 'Assessing Social Change' group

Between May 2005 and November 2006, a small group of development professionals discussed the opportunities and challenges for assessing and learning about social change in ways that, in turn, provide valuable insights and strengthen the change process. This group was composed of individuals whose position in relation to the topic represented important voices to be heard: activists, researchers, evaluators, facilitators, international and local NGO staff. This group called itself the 'assessing social change' or ASC group.

Central to the group's discussions was a common concern with the chasm between the need for reflective social change practice and the existing understanding and repertoire of approaches for assessment and learning. The group debated and shared through a series of facilitated e-discussions, case studies and two workshops.

The ASC group was part of an initiative by the Power, Participation and Social Change team at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK. This initiative had emerged from earlier discussions in Canada between US-based activists and evaluators and Southern development professionals around the same topic, seeking to construct exchanges that could help strengthen social change work. Both phases of the work were supported by the Ford Foundation. The North American discussions have continued in parallel as the 'Learning Group on Organizational Learning and Organizational Development' under the guidance of Vicki Creed, with Andy Mott and Francois Pierre-Louis.

The ASC project has led to several outputs: four case studies (Mwasaru 2007, Patel 2007, Reilly 2007, Samba 2007); a literature review (Guijt 2007a); and this synthesis paper (Guijt 2007d). All outputs and details of the ASC initiative can be found at:

<http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/Part/proj/socialchange.html>

Box 2. The ASC group participants (in alphabetical order, also see Annex 1)

- **Cindy Clark, Valerie Miller, Molly Reilly, Lisa VeneKlasen**
(in alphabetical order) - Just Associates, USA
- **Marta Foresti** – Overseas Development Institute, United Kingdom
- **John Gaventa** – Institute of Development Studies, United Kingdom (overall guidance)
- **Irene Guijt** – Learning by Design, the Netherlands (coordinator)
- **Sammy Musyoki** – Institute of Development Studies, United Kingdom (joint facilitator)
- **Mwambi Mwasaru** – Coast Rights Forum, Kenya
- **Natalia Ortiz** – As Raiz, Colombia
- **Sheela Patel** – SPARC, India
- **Roger Ricafort** – Oxfam Hong Kong, China
- **Evelyn Samba** – ActionAid Kenya, Kenya
- **Ashish Shah** – ActionAid International, Kenya
- **Ritu Shroff** – Oxfam Great Britain, Cambodia

Box 3. Summary of four case ASC studies

Mwasaru, M. 2007. Assessing Social Change Through Participatory Action Research: The Case of Kasighau Small-Scale Miners.

This is an account of a participatory action research (PAR) process in Kenya that helped a coalition of activist groups dealing with rights to mining resources look at its struggles and gain new insights that helped them re-strategise and 'empower' themselves. The author describes the context in which PAR emerged as a strategic choice and the players involved in the process. He details the process and the impacts at different levels – individually, strategically, and organisationally. He discusses the key challenges and dilemmas faced when undertaking PAR from a resistance paradigm perspective.

Patel, S. 2007. Reflections on Innovation, Assessment and Social Change. A SPARC case study.

The author describes two decades of work by the Alliance (SPARC, NSDF and Mahila Milan) to overcome urban poverty in Mumbai. The unplanned, evolving, multi-actor activities that – with hindsight – can be summarised succinctly confound mainstream evaluation approaches by their non-linearity and unpredictability. The case study of the Mumbai Urban Transport Project emphasises how a superficial look at assessment could allow them to claim it as a success but that the truly important insights and 'assessment' require a look at the values, principles, processes and relationships that were built over years and made it possible to 'grasp the moment' and clinch 'victory' at a critical time. Furthermore, the total entwinement of implementation, strategising and assessment defies the standard assumption that isolates evaluation as a process and methodology. This highlights the mismatch between donor perspectives on assessment and the clash with their own approach to 'social change'/development.

Reilly, M. 2007. An Agenda for Change in the USA: Insights from a Conversation about Assessing Social Change in Washington, DC.

This paper is a conversation with activists that throws light on the need to understand the political struggles and history of a context and within that understand the role of assessment as part of a process of social change. It discusses the origins of resistance to appreciating the value of assessment as a support to organising work. In particular, the conversation focused on the disconnect between the need for such embeddedness and the technocratic paradigm underpinning imposed and dominant evaluation approaches. The author outlines an agenda for action for funders, activists, and external supporters in the USA.

Samba, E. 2007. Sauti Ya Wanawake. The Role of Reflection in Women's Social Change Work.

This case study recounts how an emerging social (women's) movement in Kenya evolved in its approach to learning at a range of different levels and through local processes. It discusses the slow changes from humble beginnings to tackle the deep-rooted violence against women that required action at individual, community, institutional and political levels. In parallel, the women's capacities had to be built through a largely self-fuelled process. Particularly important were the regular sharing meetings in which personal accounts and evidence-based strategising occurred. As the movement grew, more systemic processes and structures emerged to ensure ongoing sharing and critical reflection about priorities, strategies and impacts.

2

Social Change and the Implications for Assessment and Learning

2.1 Understanding Social Change

Social change, as discussed in this document, is a collective process of conscious efforts to reduce poverty and oppression by changing underlying unequal power relationships. Understanding the visions of social change that guide such efforts is an essential starting point for assessing it and learning what to do better. Such efforts have several characteristics that hinder the application of mainstream approaches to assessment. This section discusses these issues.

The term 'social change' is generic and neutral, hence opening it up for co-option and the subject of confusion. Unless qualified with terms like 'developmental' or 'pro-poor' or 'people-centred', the term 'social change' can be either positive or negative. In this document, the term does not refer to chance historical processes that emerge over time but rather to the result of conscious efforts that seek specific societal transformations. During the Gray Rocks conference, which was a precursor to the ASC initiative, social change-oriented development was defined as focusing on 'fundamental social, economic and/or political reform that helps poor people and others who face discrimination, marginalization and exclusion'. This was the starting point for defining the ASC group's use of the term (see Box 4).

Box 4. Why not just 'development'?

What does the term 'social change' add? Why not just stick to 'development'? Using the term 'social change' forces recognition of transformation that is societal and implies a long time horizon. Much of development is delivered through projects with short time horizons of three to four years. Such efforts are often essential for the larger scale and more fundamental changes that occur over a longer time period. But they are not sufficient for the type and nature of social change on which the ASC dialogue focused.

Poor people, power and process are central to understanding social change, which essentially, and immutably, concerns transformational processes related to the (re)distribution of power. Poor people's structural battle with institutionalised injustice-triggered poverty is the ultimate goal of developmental social change. Social change processes require facilitating changes in vulnerable constituencies, as well as with those who decide and manage resource flows. Challenging and redressing power inequities and dominant discriminatory norms in favour of the marginalised is the focus of social change work. This means emphasising the structural change of society, its institutions and norms, as part of a more equitable sharing of resources and opportunities. It requires ongoing efforts and seeing social change as a process that challenges power relations at all levels. Therefore, it is not about building latrines so much as how the latrines are built, the power and equity issues that lie underneath the lack of access to latrines, and thus the process and what it can generate in terms of collective insight and action, rather than the product. A process perspective becomes logical, and with it a focus on milestones.

Change, in general, is a given but pro-poor social change efforts require conscious actions. For pro-poor social change, this means analysing how change is perceived by those involved and together deciding on a focus and strategy that is appropriate for the

Challenging and redressing power inequities and dominant discriminatory norms in favour of the marginalised is the focus of social change work.

existing ongoing shifts. Efforts can be proactively seeking a specific improvement, such as legislation that recognises marital rape as a criminal offence (Samba 2007) or small-miners' rights to traditional land (Mwasaru 2007), or can be a reaction to adverse societal shifts, such as reduced funding for public schools, parks and libraries as part of market liberalization (Reilly 2007). Non-government organisations (NGOs) engage in both ways – seeking specific pro-poor changes and managing other unwanted changes. Such conscious efforts focus on counterbalancing the impact on the vulnerable, marginalised and poor; and dealing with the tensions of imbalanced access to resources, goods and/or services.

However, even in the context of pro-poor social change, there will be competing versions of and trajectories for social change. Differences exist within pro-poor social change organisations but most clearly between civil society alternatives and mainstream development organisations. Hence dealing with differing perspectives on 'pro-poor social change' will always be needed. These are often not articulated but shape personal ideas of strategic priorities and sense of progress (see Box 5). Each person needs to locate her/himself within these versions and be aware of the potential dominance of some versions in certain interactions. For example, one of SPARC's insights about these differences came when the women pavement dwellers did not want to use confrontational strategies with the police – they did not have the luxury of dealing with the adverse consequences. Their vision of change differed from SPARC: *'We would readily have embraced a strategy of resistance, but for our commitment to explore solutions jointly. And the women had clearly indicated their preferred strategy of negotiating rather than fighting'* (Patel 2007).

Box 5. Articulating our explanations of change (excerpt from Eyben et al forthcoming, 2007)

'Making explicit our explanations of change and sharing these with our colleagues can reveal that we may be using different theories, or mixing and matching them in different ways. When we argue over strategic choices, much of our disagreement may be due to different but possibly buried ways of understanding how change happens. Explicitness can encourage asking why we favour certain explanations over others. Is it because a certain theoretical lens – for example rational choice theory – appears to help us best understand all and any kind of societal process? Or is our choice of theory more subjective and influenced by our identity? Do we think that drivers of change depend on the context? How much is our thinking about how the world works learnt from how we have been educated? And to what extent are our theories influenced by those we work with? Thinking explicitly about the origins and uses of our personal and collective theories of social change may also help us appreciate that those in whose interests we claim to be acting may have very different ways of understanding how change does or does not happen.'

“Affecting power inequalities requires societal-level interventions alongside personal transformation efforts”

Multiple dimensions of action and systemic impact characterise pro-poor social change efforts. Affecting power inequalities requires societal-level interventions alongside personal transformation efforts (see Table 1). Positive change at a local level or large scale will not necessarily lead to more structural changes at national or international level. Although one might focus on a more local level, social change is simultaneously subject to macro-level influences that cannot be ignored. It touches the political, cultural, and economic spheres of people's lives – anywhere where injustices due to power abuses and inequities are present. Hence strategic alliances for a multi-pronged strategy become critical. Such strategies will engage with:

- **citizens and their groups** by building rights awareness and capacities, mobilising their collective action and leadership development;
- **the state** to influence policy at different levels, to ensure accountability and transparency of government funding, and contracted or collaborative programme/service delivery;
- **the business sector** by monitoring corporate behaviour; accessing markets, and economic policy influencing;
- **donors** of all kinds by influencing their policies, strategies and procedures to make possible development innovations that sustainably improve the lives of the poor.

Table 1. Seeing power and working to reduce forms of inequality (based on Just Associates 2007)

Forms of power	Mechanisms through which exclusion and privilege occurs	Examples of efforts to overcome mechanisms of exclusion by people's organisations and intermediaries (see Box 3 for sources)
Visible power (formal decision-making mechanisms)	Making and enforcing rules, structures and policies that serve certain people over others, decision-making processes in which certain groups are excluded	<p>Sauti ya Wanawake, Kenya:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying parliamentarians to ensure passing of the Sexual Offences Bill • Producing databases of violence cases and using these to open community discussions and action <p>SPARC, India and the Alliance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • precedent setting of alternative housing construction models based on women's needs • collaboration between Indian Railways, Govt. of Maharashtra and the Alliance for voluntary relocations • publishing community-led surveys of slum dwellers <p>Kasighau Small-scale Miners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First time participation at Annual Agricultural show with stalls to display precious stones and open up discussion on lucrative local industry shrouded in secrecy that was only benefiting the rich • helped form and joined a district-wide Small-Scale Miners Cooperative Society • participation in national conference to discuss a new mining act that would consider interests of small-scale miners and local communities
Hidden (setting the agenda behind the scene; forms of exclusion)	Setting the agenda and being heard, with the explicit inclusion or exclusion of certain groups and voices	<p>Sauti ya Wanawake, Kenya:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creating strategic networks and linkages with organisations and partners to provide women with technical support in various fields <p>SPARC, India and the Alliance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organising women pavement dwellers into savings and credit groups that created social linkages and sharing opportunities • undertaking surveys to make visible those with no formal residence and therefore without a formal identity
Invisible forms of power (social conditioning, ideology, bias)	Shaping meaning, sense of self and what is normal	<p>Sauti ya Wanawake, Kenya:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • training for women on their rights, children's rights, paralegalism, counselling, and transformatory leadership • meetings with women who shared personal stories of challenges and transformation • educating wider community, especially fixed community social structures (local chief, village elders) and institutions (religious institutions, police) • campaign on violence against girls is being carried out in schools <p>SPARC, India and the Alliance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exchange visits (nationally, internationally) with women slum dwellers <p>Kasighau Small-scale Miners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertaking participatory action research on core issues and effectiveness of strategies to deal with small-miners' rights

A clear understanding of what individual development professionals and the groups with whom they work mean by social change is of utmost importance. As Sheela Patel says: *‘It is the ‘meta-framework for one’s activism and partnerships for change ... in project design and formulation and at M&E of what we set out to achieve’.* It is not about establishing a single valid theory of change but about developing a common understanding, that is context – and issue-specific and will be dynamic (also see section 3.2.3). Articulating an understanding of social change means answering questions such as:

- Who should benefit from the change?
- Which injustices are being/to be addressed?
- What power forces impede progress? Including the motives/agendas of NGOs?
- What is the timeframe and ingredients of that process that are within and outside one’s control?
- Why is and how is capacity to drive processes built in a constituency?
- How do the individuals and groups involved think this particular type of change occurs (evolution, shock, incremental change, transformation)?
- Who owns/drives/initiates/carries the process – and what legitimacy does it have?
- Who is perhaps adversely affected by the change trajectory? Which (implicit) exclusions occur when making choices of what to include?

Social change interventions can be viewed as projects but also as evolutionary transitions.

Reeler (2007) argues that it is essential to recognise three fundamentally different types of change: emergent, transformative and projectable change – each of which has significant implications for assessment and learning. Emergent change, perhaps the most prevalent and enduring type, describes the daily *‘unfolding of life, adaptive and uneven processes of unconscious and conscious learning from experience and the change that results from that.’* Transformative change emerges in situations of crisis or entrenched thinking. Different from emergent change, which involves a learning process, *‘transformative change is more about unlearning, of freeing the social being from those relationships and identities, inner and outer, which underpin the crisis and hold back resolution and further healthy development.’* Finally, Reeler turns to ‘projectable’ change that is most effective under relatively stable conditions and relationships and addresses more tangible needs. He stresses that these forms of change intermingle but under certain conditions some forms may dominate, support or induce another kind of change and dictate the terms of development.

Whatever vision about change exists, it is critical to create a collective critical social consciousness if efforts for social change are to be sustained. Charismatic individuals are not enough to carry the scale of change required – those affected by inequalities and oppression need their own critical awareness. Other critical components for effective pro-poor social change relate to information, communication and organisation/leadership (see Box 6).

“ Whatever vision about change exists, it is critical to create a collective critical social consciousness if efforts for social change are to be sustained. ”

Box 6. Critical components for effective pro-poor social change (ASC, 2005)

- Analysis of power injustices and the institutions in society that perpetuate these.
- Building and galvanising power for action, individually but also through alliance building.
- Building relationships and clarifying individual positions, as insiders or outsiders to the process, but also in terms of whose side is being taken and the perspectives on social change that shape actions.
- Accessing, sharing and analysing information about the issues at stake.
- Enhancing citizen capacities to engage – building confidence and the ability to aspire for changes that they consider valuable, a capacity to seek a space in the design and decision-making, a capability to have agency, voice and change when changes occur locally or globally, all of which require working on attitudes, skills, knowledge, and strategies.
- Creating spaces to negotiate and initiate change but also widening access to existing political/democratic spaces to those most marginalised groups whose voices are not heard in policy processes or in civil society organisations.
- Understanding the inherent risks against powerful political and economic forces but also seeing who is implicitly excluded in the process
- And, of course, time.

2.2 Implications for Assessment and Learning

2.2.1 Understanding the Challenge

Assessment and learning are the processes of ongoing reflection about visions, strategies and actions that enable continual readjustment. Strategic adjustment and operational improvements are ideally not driven by crisis but by deliberate, information and experience-based reflections. The terms 'monitoring' and 'evaluation' are more commonly used to refer to such reflection. However they are often associated with specific, donor-defined obligatory systems to prove and be accountable for funding. To emphasise the focus on internal usefulness for improvement, the ASC discussions used the alternative terms 'assessment' and 'learning'. They have the added advantage of being less automatically associated with specific methodological processes. However, caution is needed with the term assessment, which some define as a survey process (see Box 7).

Assessment serves multiple complementary functions that require explicit attention to ensure that learning occurs.² The most commonly accepted function that shapes many assessment procedures is that of accountability, i.e. demonstrating to diverse audiences that expenditure, actions and results are as agreed or can reasonably be expected. Assessment also supports operational management by providing basic information for coordinating the human, financial and physical resources needed for achieving objectives. A third function is to support strategic management, to facilitate the processes needed to set, question and adjust goals and strategies. A fourth function is to generate new insights to development, in this case the understanding of how social change occurs and why. Finally, and often forgotten, is its potential to build the capacity, self reliance and confidence of those involved to undertake development initiatives. Learning is assumed to result from M&E processes that are designed with accountability as the underlying purpose. However, it often fails to do so, with a disconnection between learning and assessment in many organisations. Hence learning processes need to be explicitly designed for in assessment processes.

² This paragraph is based on Woodhill, forthcoming 2007.

Box 7. When assessment does – and does not – trigger organisational reflection and learning

There is the potential for confusion about how assessment enhances social change processes. For some, assessment is not a reflective exercise but is a monitoring process that is subsequently used to lobby for change. Take the case of Amnesty International, which collects data on human rights abuses and uses at the local level and then uses this data for pushing for social change at a higher level in government or internationally. This approach to 'assessing social change' is commonly found in the human rights tradition. It is the other perspective that has so far been more central in the ASC discussions – which views assessment of social change as integral to the actual process of inducing change. This means collecting information and different perspectives on the quality of the change process and its impact, critically looking at this and then re-focusing and re-strategising.

No one would dispute the need to create assessment and learning processes that can help see if change has happened. This can fulfil many purposes as described above. But why not just use the mainstream M&E approaches based on logic models that have dominated for over two decades? Doug Reeler (2007) summarises the M&E mainstream as follows:

'Created to help control the flow of resources, these frameworks have, by default, come to help control almost every aspect of development practice across the globe, subordinating all social processes to the logistics of resource control, infusing a default paradigm of practice closely aligned with conventional business thinking. As such, Project approaches to change bring their own inbuilt or implicit theory of social change to the development sector, premised on an orientation of simple cause and effect thinking. It goes something like this: In a situation that needs changing we can gather enough data about a community and its problems, analyse it and discover an underlying set of related problems and their cause, decide which problems are the most important, redefine these as needs, devise a set of solutions and purposes or outcomes, plan a series of logically connected activities for addressing the needs and achieving the desired future results, as defined up front, cost the activities into a convincing budget, raise the funding and then implement the activities, monitor progress as we work to keep them on track, hopefully achieve the planned results and at the end evaluate the Project for accountability, impact and sometimes even for learning.'

By and large, the reality is that mainstream monitoring and evaluation (M&E) does not serve the types of change processes discussed in this paper. Standard M&E systems and processes have evolved from an image of development as infrastructural. As social change occupies an increasing proportion of development agencies' budgets and priorities, the tensions with the expectations of standard M&E are growing. Batliwala (undated) argues that the core motivation is fraught, leading to problems in practice. Many M&E efforts occur, she says, because donors require them, enabling organisations to sustain or obtain funding that is used to expand and consolidate organisational structures rather than innovate or invest directly. Result assessment data is rarely shared with primary stakeholders, target groups are rarely involved in setting goals or shaping evaluation frameworks or in assessment processes themselves. Furthermore, such processes are rarely accompanied by or lead to critical reflection on or re-casting of the theories of change that guide the work.

There is growing recognition of the limitations of mainstream M&E approaches to do justice to developmental social change. Dlamini (2006) refers to the dominance of an instrumentalist managerialist approach to M&E that interferes with organisational intentions

'to stand back from their 'doing' and genuinely try and see how things are going' and inhibits the creation of the relationships on which change is based. The Institute for Development Research Canada (IDRC) has developed an alternative approach, outcome mapping (Earl *et al* 2001), that recognises the diffuse nature of development while Guijt (2007b) advocates a dialogic and sense-making focus to make learning possible. Organisations like Oxfam International and ActionAid International have revised their M&E processes to build reflection in at all levels, based on the recognition that learning can then occur through the conversations that are made possible.

Moving to assessment and learning that strengthens social change means recognising the specific features of such developmental processes and then accommodating these methodologically. Although fundamentally, it remains about gathering evidence and analysing it in the context of intended effects, by prioritising the local relevance of assessment and learning, question marks emerge about the merits of information needs and modalities that have been developed to serve donors. Differences occur in what evidence is considered important and credible, how evidence is gathered and particularly processed, the rhythm (frequency and speed) with which this takes place, and so forth.

The methodological challenges will depend on the nature of the change process. If it is an externally-driven pro-poor change process, then the challenges will lie in the interface between the external vision/procedures and the dynamics and information needs of the local change process. Alternatively, if it is an internally driven change process, then the challenges lie with the people, relationships and capacities within the system. In many cases, the challenges lie on both fronts.

Assessment and learning about social change offers different opportunities depending on whose perspective is taken. For insiders to the social change process, it is about creating the capacity for reflection so that innovative breakthroughs can be sustained. For donors, it is about using assessment and learning to question their policies and procedures, while for academics, it is about creating better insights about social change work. Thus far, the last two groups have had a poor track record of using assessment and learning.

Progress towards social justice and transforming power relations does not follow a linear or predictable trajectory, with uncertainty beforehand about the impact and the most effective route.

2.2.2 Features of Social Change that Affect Assessment and Learning

Five interlinked features of social change have particularly significant implications for how assessment and learning takes place. These are:

- non-linear and unpredictable;
- multiple efforts on multiple fronts;
- the fuzzy boundaries of social change;
- the difficulty of recognising 'valid' results;
- the long term nature of social change.

Progress towards social justice and transforming power relations does not follow a linear or predictable trajectory, with uncertainty beforehand about the impact and the most effective route. They are complex change processes, multi-dimensional and resulting from multiple actions and circumstances, involving a mix of intentional and opportunistic actions. Furthermore, the shifting nature of challenges faced, with some obstacles fading while others surface, make a rigid plan of action or accountability on specific results a potential hindrance to strategic efforts. There must be space for seizing the moment and unanticipated innovations. Sheela Patel gives a poignant example of SPARC which reserves 50% of its funding for such precedent setting initiatives, yet struggles to make donors understand the importance of this strategy. Objectives change during the process as a result of contextual changes but also through compromises resulting from working in

alliances, thus making the use of pre-set indicators and strict adherence to predetermined objectives a problem.

The system-wide change that is being strived for requires efforts by and depends on multiple groups on diverse fronts; hence the merit of attributing impact is highly questionable. The process and multidimensional nature of pro-poor social change means that efforts intertwine in changing contexts, goalposts inevitably shift, and impact is perhaps best described in terms of 'emergent' phenomena of change³. This makes it irrelevant to talk in terms of attribution to specific individuals, efforts or organisations and trying to disentangle which efforts have made what difference. Recognising the broad system interactions needed for pro-poor social change means letting go of an attribution obsession. Standard M&E approaches based on fixed, time-bound achievements and segmented realities fail to do justice to intertwined efforts over a long time period. A focus on attribution diverts attention from the efforts themselves to who can claim which part.

Drawing the lines in a process of social change with fuzzy and moving boundaries means valuing incremental shifts. A key problem occurs if social change is viewed not as a process with progress markers, but rather as an end point and product. This leads to a focus on concrete outcomes rather than progress markers and ignoring the value of small, incremental changes. Sheela Patel states the challenge as follows: *'How can early initiatives and breakthroughs be articulated and learnings that are institutionalised for sustained impact and scalability be seen as potential outcomes of the process?'* Being accountable to a process rather than a product to which groups are committed means that *'the down stream long term results become the lighthouse that guide the action and not the rod with which impact is measured'*, as ASC group member Natalia Ortiz describes. There is a need to capture the little moments of truth, the value of the accumulated small steps, rather than just the big bang at the end (see Box 8). The interdependence of efforts makes discerning progress difficult, with effects only evident if various causes are simultaneously (or subsequently) addressed. The mindsets of many in the development sector stand in the way: Ashish Shah, ASC group member, evokes a powerful image: *'I think the difficulty is in the fact that we've all become so result-oriented and target-driven to the extent that the product has become more important than the process. Imagine if a donor was trying to assess Gandhi's work – how many years would we have waited if we were waiting to assess his end dream, yet there are so many lessons we have to learn and so many changes that happened during the Gandhi driven change process.'*

³ An emergent property becomes apparent when several simple entities or processes operate in an environment but form more complex behaviours as a collective. Certain properties emerge that the entities/processes do not have themselves.

“The down stream long term results become the lighthouse that guide the action and not the rod with which impact is measured...”

Natalia Ortiz, ASC group member

Box 8. Seeing success only in terms of the big bang (excerpt from Patel 2007)

This [relocation] project was clearly successful. There were tangible, quantifiable outcomes, partnerships involved, good governance, gender equity, and civil society participation. And yet this kind of assessment is unsatisfactory and even misleading without the full examination of the depth of the relationships of trust that evolved over years, the risk taking and creativity that produced workable innovations, the 'toolkit' processes that were refined and systematized over time, the story is a thin one. If the years of working and waiting, of two steps forward and one back, are not valued and not given their due, then the final resulting success is not properly understood. This not only fails to recognise the difficulties, tensions, triumphs and very essence of development, it then fails to help us change our understanding of development – perpetuating strategies and policies that have stood in the way of change that has benefited the poor. We need to see the full complexity and non-linear nature of such social change processes if we are to learn how to 'do development' differently.

Recognising a valid result requires valuing efforts along the way. Defining success and failure in a complex process is fraught with interpretation difficulties. Part of the problem is the difficulty of striving towards results that may not be measurable, as it is not always about an improvement or a tangible change. The impact of social change work can take the form of something not occurring or sustaining a past gain. A seeming success can suddenly shift from an upward change trend to stagnation or deterioration – or the reverse. Years of struggle can unexpectedly yield results. Such struggles often entail activities such as organising dialogues, lobbying governments and advocacy work, of which the intermediate results are not always evident. Although focused campaigns have led to quick results, focusing entirely on a tangible change as evidence of impact ignores what is often slow shifts in norms, institutions, and political reform over the longer term.

Acknowledging the timeframe of change and clarifying expectations of change is essential. In externally driven initiatives, a timeframe mismatch often occurs between the long term impacts and expectations of short-term externally funded initiatives. Many intermediary organisations, such as NGOs, contribute to this by romanticising and 'commoditising' their social change work, in the process creating unrealistic expectations of the timeframe for goal achievement. Whereas mainstream M&E processes are based on defining change within the given time period, the time needed to effect that change is often much longer and requires negotiating which aspect of change is being expected and will be valued (see Box 9).

Box 9. Social change is like a supermarket (Shah, personal communication)

It's like trying to define 'social change' as a supermarket. For the supermarket to be a supermarket, you need to have several different products, of different shapes and types – from vegetables, to soaps, to juices, etc. In the same way, all of us who intend to be part of a process need to recognize that some of us are juices, some of us are apples, some of us are soaps, but all of us are part of the same process, except with different strengths and weaknesses, ideas, concepts, resources, etc. From the start, all those involved need to be clear first and foremost about what change we are fighting for and at what levels. Some may be comfortable to see change to a certain point, others to a different point. If most of the vegetables in the supermarket actually want to be sold and cooked and eaten then that's the right reason to be in the supermarket. If one doesn't want to be eaten then it shouldn't be in the supermarket. For us, the key lesson with SUCAM⁴ was to be very sure from the start why all of us were engaged and what we were fighting for – though interests may have been different (interest of farmers were different from those of some NGOs). Once you are sure of what you intend to fight for; and you are sure of all the people involved and what each player brings, then you can go into an honest discussion on what social change is in terms of the process and what it means for everyone and recognize that everything we do matters – the small changes probably matter more than the big visible ones.

⁴ See <http://www.kenyalink.org/sucam/>

2.3 Creating a Basis for Rethinking Assessment and Learning

Building recognition of these challenges into social change processes is neither an easy task nor one that is undertaken particularly well. Allowing these features to shape practice is not undertaken systematically or often enough. Those involved in the ASC discussions described current practice as 'ad hoc'.

The challenge of balancing predictability and flexibility is one of the main issues for organisations involved in delivering interventions. Some say that social change cannot be predicted (cf Reeler 2007) and may be counter-developmental. Others predict too much and request clear lines of cause and effect, asking for a perfectly linear, logical, cause and

effect description of predicted social change. Ritu Shroff suggests that what appears to work best is facilitating communities themselves to articulate desired changes and anticipate the drivers and inhibitors of such changes. The most effective individuals engaged in social change efforts are those with in-depth contextual understanding and are highly skilled and motivated to facilitate and listen. She stresses, effective interventions always demonstrate much nimbleness and flexibility.

Stereotypical and simplistic assumptions can hinder the emergence of a more appropriate and integrated use of assessment and learning in social change contexts.

On the one hand are activists keen to act and do, who consider stopping to reflect a relative waste of time (Reilly 2007). On the other hand, are those who may appreciate the merits of reflection but are embedded in conventional development and M&E thinking and do not understand how to (or want to) create reflective processes within a social change paradigm. Both groups stereotype assessment as either a vague, non-threatening, learning jaunt or as an excessively scientific, objective, numbers-driven process. Marta Foresti, ASC group member, urges a return to a basic understanding: *'What about viewing assessment as 'formulating a responsible judgement' or even a 'plausible explanation' of why what happens actually happens... why it does not happen in any other way?'*. Another myth that scares organisations into resorting to stereotypes and going overboard in terms of rejecting or uncritically accepting donor-driven M&E is a perception of donors sitting somewhere waiting for 'the verdict' so that they can take money away. The reality is that money is usually not (re)allocated based on genuine efforts to assess social change but for other reasons. Hence there may well be more room for manoeuvre and proposing an alternative assessment framework than many might think.

What about viewing assessment as 'formulating a responsible judgement' or even a 'plausible explanation' of why what happens actually happens... why it does not happen in any other way?

Marta Foresti, ASC group member

Rethinking how assessment and learning should happen does not have to be complex.

Batliwala (undated) suggests four questions to help transform existing approaches. First, is the process involving and empowering the desired constituencies? How is it changing personal frameworks about development and practice? What is the new learning about change that it produces? And finally, how is learning being transformed into new theory/knowledge?

Notwithstanding the simplicity of such guiding questions, many factors will affect the value that assessment efforts can bring to change processes. The quality of planning that has gone into the effort being assessed and not reducing complex processes to a series of activities will either facilitate or hinder subsequent reflections on implementation. The quality of critical thinking, group leadership and facilitation that guides the learning process is, of course, paramount. The overall organisational or group context and dynamics determines whether reflection, learning, and transparency are fostered. Is there personal commitment and passion for learning, and what about the necessary skills and preparation of those facilitating the process and using assessment methods? The cultural appropriateness and accessibility of methods and concepts will also determine how engaged local people can be. The question of who is asking for the evaluation must be considered. Is it the government, overseas donors, grassroots groups themselves? This influences the purpose, process and methods that can and will be used. These factors are critical for effective assessment of social change efforts and must be considered in designing an appropriate process (see next section).

When confronted with the limitations of existing mainstream M&E approaches, many in the development sector seek solace in methodological alternatives. They hope that somewhere there is an approach that will overcome the paradigmatic tensions, enable clarity of analysis, prove effectiveness, and strengthen people's organisations. While there are some relatively innovative approaches emerging, assessment and learning requires more than a method. To be effective, frameworks, values and skills need to merge with a method to construct an appropriate assessment process. This section discusses the elements needed to create a purpose-built assessment and learning process.

3.1 The Emergence of Alternative M&E Practice⁵

⁵ This section is largely based on a note written by C. Clark, V. Miller, S. Musyoki and L. VeneKlasen. 'Theme 2 Part One: Methods, Tools and Processes for Assessing Social Change' to kick start the second thematic discussion of the ASC group.

⁶ http://www.iied.org/NR/agbioliv/pla_notes/index.html

⁷ <http://www.actionaid.org.uk/323/reflect.html>

The spread and evolution of participatory approaches in development such as Participatory Rural Appraisal,⁶ participatory education, political theatre and REFLECT,⁷ have contributed to the interest and desire to move beyond appraisal and planning to use participatory methods for monitoring and evaluation. The generic term used for these methods is Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E). The term and processes of PM&E became very popular in the mid-1990s and are still in use, although similar but lesser known processes have been used for years. Compared to mainstream M&E thinking, more participatory forms of M&E aim to engage multiple stakeholders on many sides of the development process (donors, communities, governments, etc.) in participating in and implementing M&E processes, separately and collaboratively (Estrella et al 2000, Burke 1998, Byrne 2005).

Increased attention to and experience by some large and influential development organisations with more participatory forms of assessment and learning have helped to draw attention from a purely upward accountability orientation to a more two-way process. It is a significant shift and challenge for large development organisations to consider their own accountability to less powerful stakeholders, such as marginalised people. However, in practice, few have yet taken far-reaching examples, with ActionAid International (AAI) still being almost the only international NGO cited as implementing the practice. Nevertheless, discussions about the importance of downward accountability are contributing to the methodological opening up of the M&E field, including in Oxfam Great Britain, which has now designed a new learning and assessment approach. This has stimulated changes, such as greater emphasis on assessment that fosters learning and capacity building so as to equip stakeholders and help them function better.

As social change groups, particularly those involved in rights-based initiatives, begin to grapple with issues of power more directly as part of a repoliticisation trend in development thinking, they are also looking beyond conventional tools and techniques to the experiences of social movements over the years. For example, an often lesser known source for implementing and assessing social change is popular education, which has influenced much participatory education work. This methodology for promoting critical and collective consciousness and thus, a link between new understanding and action, was first developed in the 60s and 70s, and has been adapted over the years to deal with identity and private dimensions of power. As part of the renewed interest in more effective ways

of understanding and measuring social change, a rediscovery of popular education in recent years is evident as a way of unpacking the change process and thus defining how to assess it.

The recent interest and engagement of many development organisations in rights and social justice work has at least advanced the demand for innovations. There has been an increased request to monitor and evaluate more fundamental, abstract development concepts such as 'empowerment' (Mosedale 2005), 'voice and accountability' (Foresti *et al* 2006), 'power' (Gaventa 2005), and 'realization of rights', among others. But while the development field has tried and tested methods for the M&E of mainstream development, none seem fully adequate or appropriate for assessing social change in terms of such concepts. This has created much frustration by those using existing methodological options that were developed primarily for tangible, countable development changes.

Despite the growing demand for alternatives and increasing attempts to develop new methods or approaches, innovations are needed to meet three specific needs. The ASC discussions indicated that three types of methods are critical: those that help to embed assessment within the social change process; those that assess social change and citizen participation as a rights-based process, and those that encourage critical reflection. Central to the latter category are ways to help clarify the often tacit theories of social change that guide efforts. Progress in these three areas will help meet the needs and challenges set out in section 2.2.

3.2 The Potential of Methods and Key Considerations

3.2.1 Methodological Building Blocks

In practice, creating an appropriate assessment and learning process requires mixing and adapting a combination of frameworks, concepts and methods to ensure they address the information and reflection needs and match existing capacities. Inspiration for an overall approach can be drawn from a range of existing perspectives on evaluation. These can be complemented by specific concepts, such as 'power' or 'gender' to focus the assessment process. These then need to be grounded by considering certain methodological considerations and need to be implemented by applying specific methods.

Several perspectives, or 'schools of thought', about evaluation, assessment and/or learning have particular relevance for social change processes (see Box 10). They all seek explicitly to address power inequities and tackle structural causes of injustice, as well as stressing the need for the assessment process to have local value and strengthen ongoing work. This means they are committed to engaging participants in the process, making them fit within the broad domain of participatory development. Each school of thought, or perspective, articulates a set of principles and practices that require adaptation for each context.

Several perspectives, or 'schools of thought', about evaluation, assessment and/or learning have particular relevance for social change processes. They all seek explicitly to address power inequities and tackle structural causes of injustice, as well as stressing the need for the assessment process to have local value and strengthen ongoing work.

Box 10. Seven schools of thought on assessing and learning for social change

- **Action research and appreciative inquiry** pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) simultaneously to change practices and social structures. The cycle process of action and critical reflection is participatory, value-oriented, and democratic in its intentions.
- **Organisational learning** relates to a set of perspectives and procedures that enable learning to be embedded in a programme or organisation. The focus is pragmatic and seeks to reconcile the need for individual learning with the dynamics of organisational contexts.
- **Popular education** is a school of thought and an educational approach seeking to expand people's consciousness about how individual experiences relate to larger societal problems, thus making people better able to change the problems that affect them.
- **Feminist evaluation** has explicit emancipatory intentions, views evaluation as a political activity, and stresses that knowledge should be of and for the people who create it.
- **Participatory and empowerment evaluation** stresses the need for people to assess the merits of their own or externally-driven initiatives that affect them, thus enabling improvement and strengthening people's agency.
- **Democratic evaluation and dialogue** aims at equity and inclusion in programme evaluation, and to promote public accountability and transparency. It seeks to resolve societal problems by creating opportunities that enable the development of mutual understanding and concessions.
- **Utilisation-focused evaluation** has as its central tenet the need for any assessment process to be useful in-situ. Its concern for ensuring that learning ensues from an assessment process among those living with the programme or process being evaluated makes it relevant for social change processes.

A second key building block for developing methodological clarity involves clarifying which concepts will guide question-setting. Each school of thought (see above) can be 'filled' in a range of ways. Notwithstanding their underlying principles, they can all be more or less gender-focused, more or less explicit about power relations, more or less centred around the dynamics of conflict, and so forth. Such choices must be made explicitly about the concepts that will guide the questions and reflective practice. Box 11 lists several concepts or 'lenses' that help focus on a specific aspect of the change process. Each concept can be used within the context of one (or a mix) of the frameworks discussed above.

⁸ 'Complex' is not the same as 'complicated'. A complex system has many elements that can interact with each other and their environment. Complex systems display a level of organisation without any external organising principle being applied. Part of the system may be altered and the system may still be able to function. In complicated systems, parts have to work in unison to accomplish a function. A key defect in a critical part brings the entire system to a halt.

Practitioners are increasingly critical and vocal about the limitations of mainstream M&E practice.

Box 11. Key concepts or 'lenses' of particular relevance to social change

- **Rights-based approaches** are central to much of the discourse in development that seeks to redress injustices although there is considerable diversity of understanding about the concept.
- **Power analysis** is central to strategising for social justice and pro-poor change – and is central in assessing if it has occurred. Many different terms and understandings of 'power' exist, which need clarification prior to use in the context of evaluation.
- **Gender empowerment** offers a powerful lens through which to better understand inequality of relations between women and men, and its redress.
- **Accountability definitions and issues** are increasingly central to development with a surge in deliberate efforts to hold governments to account to citizens, organisational leadership to account to its members, and corporations to society at large.
- **Peace and conflict resolution contexts** offer specific challenges for assessment and learning processes, such as the extreme dynamics and non-linearity of change plus the added urgency.
- Change is increasingly accepted as 'complex'⁸ for which **systems thinking** can provide important insights, as it recognises the non-linear, intertwined nature of change and organisations.
- An interest in **innovation** is inevitable in social change. Many such change processes require innovations of some kind including new types of relationships, unknown partners, precedent setting practical work and experimentation.
- **Capacity-building** as a domain of intervention is central to much social change work. Its complexity and diversity offers unique challenges for assessment processes.
- **Dialogue** that fosters relationships of trust is the basis of coming to a shared understanding enough to move forward together.

The third building block is more practical, requiring choices about how to deal with some of the challenging features of social change identified in section 2.2, and other key concerns. Practitioners are increasingly critical and vocal about the limitations of mainstream M&E practice. They are challenging some until now unquestioned non-negotiables and are adding new issues to the agenda. In so doing, they are opening up the way for the emergence of practical alternatives and greater acceptance of other standards of practice. How to deal with attribution, what to do with the restrictive effect of indicators (without losing the potential value of indicators – see Box 12), where to locate a concern for ethics and standards? These are some critical considerations that need practical attention (see Box 13).

Box 12. How not to work with indicators (excerpt from Batliwala 2006)

'Target groups or service users or communities are rarely involved in setting goals or choosing indicators. Indeed, their involvement is actively discouraged by many donors as compromising the 'objectivity' of the assessment. Yet communities often offer the most sensitive indicators of their own change, and can be far more critical and objective about the distance they have travelled than outside evaluators, who can sometimes completely fail to see the significance of the shift that has occurred. I was present when members of a collective of very poor and oppressed rural women in South India told a group of 'objective' outside evaluators that one of their indicators of success was the failure of the upper castes in the village to break their solidarity as a group, despite repeated attempts to do so through bribes and threats. The evaluators had no way of quantifying this evidence, and were clearly uncomfortable with it. So they ignored it and kept asking the women how many cases of wife beating or dowry harassment they had taken up as a group. Since the answer was none, the group was considered to have failed.'

Box 13. Key concerns for alternative M&E practice that require practical choices

- The importance of *understanding social change and working with assumptions* is hard to over-emphasise. It means articulating the theories of change that shape strategies and policies and surfacing underlying assumptions.
- *Dealing with attribution* is a recurring headache for those engaged in multi-actor, multi-location, multi-level and multi-strategy change work. How to 'prove' causality?
- *Making the most of indicators (and seeing their limits)* means deciding whether or not to use indicators – or opt for questions – and if so, how to construct and use them to tell the story of change.
- *Ensuring the capacity to assess social change processes* means looking at capacity to facilitate critical reflection on power, justice, policy processes, and social change, and at the access and ability of people to design and implement assessment and learning processes.
- *Caring about relationships, ethics and standards* requires a hard and honest look at the often unequal power relations between North and South, donors and grantees, external experts and local people, etc.
- *Building in critical reflection* is the motor that drives high quality assessment and learning, and means stepping out of one's comfort zone and encouraging critical thinking of participants.
- *Generalizing insights and systematizing lessons* is a growing area of work as assessment processes are called upon to help fuel the new generation of knowledge.

The fourth building block involves the actual selection of methods and tools that can be used to pursue the type of assessment and learning process that has been selected.

Many potential methods exist that can be of use in assessment and learning.⁹ Specifically for social change trajectories, this may involve methods that focus on assessing advocacy and policy influencing efforts (Ringsing and Leeuwis forthcoming 2007; Coates and David 2003). It may require using methods to assess partnerships and networks as part of the social change strategy (Wilson-Grau and Nunez 2007; Church et al 2002). Assessing conflict resolution efforts may be relevant, and may prove inspiring even for those not directly involved in peace efforts due to the similarity of challenges with social change processes (Schmelzle 2005).

Two specific methods are increasingly referred to as useful alternatives to logic model-based approaches: Outcome Mapping and narratives. Outcome mapping tackles some of the dilemmas of mainstream M&E that are most tricky for social change initiatives (Earl et al 2001).¹⁰ Demand for outcome mapping is growing rapidly as it provides practical options for tough M&E questions such as: how to understand an individual's contribution to social change within complex and dynamic partnerships; how to bring analytical rigour to monitoring and analysis based on qualitative information; and how to consciously detect and understand surprises for strategic reorientation. Interest in written or video stories is also growing, as the use of narrative allows the richness of the often complex stories of change to be told. In this context, the 'Most Significant Change' method (Davies and Dart 2005) offers a specific approach to using stories that consciously seeks to reveal the extremes, rather than the average.

3.2.2 Rethinking the Idea of 'Method'

Methods need to be neither comprehensive nor complex. No single method will ever be able to cover all the bases; different methods, tools and techniques provide valuable insights into social change. In three of the cases studies written by ASC participants (see Box 3),

⁹ See <http://www.ifad.org/evaluation/guide/annexd/index.htm> for 34 M&E methods.

¹⁰ See <http://www.idrc.ca/evaluation>.

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SWOT_analysis

¹² See <http://www.philodialogue.com/dialogue.htm>.

simple meetings in which stories were shared and voices listened to fulfilled a central function. Such reflection meetings or workshops can incorporate specific methods from the **PLA toolbox**, **SWOT analysis**,¹¹ or **Social Analysis-Integrated Triangle** (based on Training for Transformation, Hope and Timmel 2000). Other methods that might be overlooked include: **supportive supervision** that integrates monitoring, coaching, mentoring, and joint supervisor-supervisee problem-identification and solving; and the **360 degree review**, which involves significant preparation and time to probe and understand the questions and issues in a particular context, followed by reflection with the individuals involved in the intervention. Both have, for example, been introduced within Oxfam Great Britain. One method that is less well known is that of '**Socratic Dialogue**',¹² which allows for in-depth understanding of various issues concerning everyday life. Through group-based rigorous inquiry based on a participant's lived experience, consensus is sought about the underlying issues and participants' perspectives.

Case studies can provide a valuable process that forces reflection, articulation and clarification.

Four participants from the ASC process wrote case studies of their experiences in exploring assessment and learning for social change (see Box 3). Box 14 offers some views of the case study authors about what the writing and receiving of feedback meant to them. Those providing feedback to the case study authors valued the learning opportunity because:

- *'when you're doing a certain kind of work in a certain context, you tend to believe that this is the 'natural' way to work. This reminded me that strategies, methodologies etc. are so contextual.'*
- *'In some contexts, it's not unusual to have people trivialize what you do. It's valuable to be in a place where people don't do that, and to be able to move away from the myth that change is simple.'*
- *'About the pressure to talk about the good things – you have to do both. The representation to a different party makes it understood in a different way. It's not appreciated when you explain that there's good and bad.'*
- *'The North-South dialogue was interesting – and how much it needs to be encouraged. Listening to [them] talk about their experience of the North was really valuable.'*

Box 14. Learning from case study writing and reviewing

M. Reilly: This process helped me think about what we need to do next. And how the context in the North influences the opportunities and the time frame very negatively. There are challenges that don't exist to the same degree in the South.

E. Samba: It was a chance to ask the questions we have never asked before. There are some things I'll never take it for granted again. For me, they may be normal but how come? Those kinds of questions, I rarely ask.

M. Mwasaru: I tremendously appreciated the group's input. Realizing that there could be two or three stories in this case study, and the need to find a focus. This highlights the challenge of writing – managing to keep clear of too many details and to focus on what's most relevant. The details but also the broader issues.

S. Patel: In our case, we could draw many parallels [with the Washington DC case] although the context was so different. Tracking milestones and seeing what decisions have to be made at each point. What choices are available at a particular time? Which choices do you take? The navigation of choices came out very strongly.

6 A critical contribution that Freireian and popular education can make is recognising the politics of learning and knowledge production and the complexities and levels of consciousness that shape behaviour.

Popular education offers another example of how methods can be reconceived without requiring a new or elaborate methodological invention. To be relevant for assessing social change, it should be constructed as a process of problem posing and mutual inquiry, where people explore deeply felt problems, raise questions and challenge assumptions, seeking deeper understanding of the structural and systemic factors that shape the quality of their lives. This includes looking at the political dynamics at play in the evaluation process itself and not reducing it to a technical set of steps. A critical contribution that Freireian and popular education can make is recognising the politics of learning and knowledge production and the complexities and levels of consciousness that shape behaviour. The Freireian concept of 'conscientization' (awareness-raising) can serve as an important bridge between education and assessment as it helps to generate critical questions and reflections on the nature and causes of problems that people face.

Mainstream methods may also make an interesting contribution, including (aspects of) the much-critiqued logframe or results-based management, or indicators. This approach seems to symbolise the tensions in assessment paradigms. Much has been written on the problems with the logframe approach (Gasper 1997, Reeler 2007) and other similar methods that are derivatives of the same rationale and paradigm. The logframe contains elements that some have found useful. For example, it offers a systematic set of questions that can help define a clear strategy, which can, in turn facilitate the task of developing a meaningful assessment process. If undertaken with clarity about the type of critical reflection that is required and whose capacity is strengthened, then logic models can be of value.

However, much caution is required with the use of any logic model. Such a model assumes, as Natalia Ortiz cautions, 'that it is possible to standardize the description of all kinds of programs in terms of linear relationships of cause and effect, while the institutional, policy and cultural particularities of each context are overlooked'. Reeler (2007, 13) argues that the use of logic models to guide assessment may be most useful 'where problems, needs and possibilities are more visible, under relatively stable conditions and relationships, which are not fraught with crisis or stuckness.' However, he adds, 'emergent change' and 'transformative change' are more common forms of social change that defy logic models.

3.2.3 Making the Most of a 'Theory of Change'

Considerable confusion abounds about what a theory of change is. Many think, for example, that the logframe approach involves articulating a theory of change. However, this constitutes a theory of action, which, in turn, needs to be distinguished from an understanding of change and a vision of change (see Box 15). In facilitating or otherwise engaging in assessing social change, it is important to be clear about these distinctions and their role in the process.

The theory of change that guides personal choices is philosophical, historical, political, psychological and experiential, i.e. ideological. It includes personal standpoints or worldviews based on class, ethnicity, belief systems, personal values, commitment, etc. It also includes the short and long term agenda and interest of those involved (individually and collectively) in the process of social change. Mwambi Mwasaru, ASC group member, stresses that this requires those involved in assessing change to also assess themselves in terms of their worldview, interests and agenda at local, national and global level. This can provide clarity about the methodology and methods used by evaluators '*and the potential and actual manipulation of tools (intentionally and un-intentionally) by the users of those tools influenced by their short term and/or long term agenda, as well as their worldview or standpoint [and their] inherent biases*'.

Box 15. What a 'theory of change' is and isn't (VeneKlasen, cited in ASC 2006)

Theory of change concerns the overarching assumptions and philosophies that influence individual visions and understandings. They shape how each person thinks change occurs in society.

Theory of action is an organisation's specific role with respect to achieving a theory of change, based on an assessment of how it can add the most value to the change process.

Vision of change is an individual's ideal or in some cases, the feasible dream of where she/he wants to go with particular initiatives – the change being aimed for:

Understanding of change has to do with specific methodologies, approaches – like empowerment, popular education, organising, lobbying.

But why is a 'theory of change' so important? Doug Reeler (2007:2) sums it up clearly: *'We need good theories of social change for building the thinking of all involved in processes of development, as individuals, as communities, organisations, social movements and donors. The conventional division in the world today between policy-makers (and their theorising) and practitioners is deeply dysfunctional, leaving the former ungrounded and the latter unthinking. ... Good concepts help us to grasp what is really happening beneath the surface. In the confusing detail of enormously complex social processes, we need to turn down the volume of the overwhelming and diverse foreground and background "noise" of social life, to enable us to distinguish the different instruments, to hear the melodies and rhythms, the deeper pulse, to discover that "simplicity on the other side of complexity". We need help to see what really matters. ... As social development practitioners we need theory to help us to ask good questions, more systematically and rigorously, to guide us to understanding, to discovering the real work we need to be doing, primarily assisting communities and their organisations to understand and shape their own realities.'*

Being clear about personal theories of change helps to strategise and to give a focus to learning and assessment. Taking the example of conflict, which is central in addressing inequality, Lisa VeneKlasen, ASC group member, explains: *'If our "theory of change" is shaped around notions of surfacing, understanding and shaping conflict, then the way we approach social change is different than if we simply rely on a planning framework (that in many cases may embody a theory of change but practitioners may be unaware of it). This changes our sense of how much control we have over the outcomes and how we manage inevitable risks.'* Another example is how the role of and balance between individual and collective change is viewed. Some see change as built on a bedrock of informed and critical individuals and may choose to invest efforts here. Others may value the united front and critical mass that collective action might offer, and choose to strategise around creating unity and cohesive action.

Assessing a pro-poor social change effort effectively requires building a shared, context-specific understanding of how power inequities may be challenged and in which diverse actors and strategies are located. This, in turn, requires articulating underlying assumptions. It is not uncommon for activist strategies to be based on faulty assumptions of how change occurs and, therefore, where efforts should focus. Or for organisations to stick to their familiar strategies, despite limited effectiveness. This is no easy task as Ritu Shroff, ASC group member reminds us: *'The actual process of defining social change and coming to a common understanding of "developmental" social change is perhaps the greatest challenge in assessment and learning.'*

For many, the idea of 'theory' and articulating 'one's theory' is a scary thought – and balancing it with practice is essential. Some feel that theories are of no value to practitioners but that is a dismissive patronising perspective. The value of theory depends

“The actual process of defining social change and coming to a common understanding of “developmental” social change is perhaps the greatest challenge in assessment and learning.”

Ritu Shroff, ASC group member

profoundly on the conversation in which it is used. Sheela Patel both cautions and encourages: *'When theories are thrown around without justification or explanation, it's just off putting. But sometimes my work has been reflected back to me through the explanation of a theory in a way that has broadened my understanding of what I do. There are cases where I have been able to justify my practice through references to theory.'* Within social change work, and indeed as it should be in all of development, it is about balancing theory and practice. Every time someone acts, there is a theoretical basis for action. But as Mwambi Mwasaru stresses: *'If you don't take time to interrogate theory, to allow it to be informed by practice, then it just becomes a dry thing. When critical thinking is part and parcel of acting, it means a better understanding of 'theory'. But how can we have the unity of theory and practice that results in useful knowledge?'* Box 16 offers some ideas that emerged during the ASC discussions on how 'social change' as theory and experience can be discussed.

Box 16. Ways to Discuss 'Social Change' (ASC 2005)

- Broach the topic via personal stories based on grounded, concrete experiences.
- With this personal, experiential basis, use simple frameworks on identifying assumptions about how change occurs and analysing power dynamics in this. You can also develop a storyline yourself to do this. Or ask questions like: 'What changes are you striving for in your respective struggles? Which of these changes would really improve your life and the lives of your children and grandchildren?' Asking the right questions is harder than often assumed!
- Do this at the onset, as it creates a reference point. Dive into the power/change discussions after a positive, affirmative visioning process.
- Be conscious of the power dynamics present in the methods chosen and who is really calling the shots. If discussions of social change occur within an NGO workshop setting, it is already enacting power dynamics based on a certain development paradigm. Other, more socially embedded media may be useful, such as music and art, which can help to symbolise what otherwise would be limited to linear logical, rational explanations. For example, do not insist on written reports if these further marginalise participants. Use metaphors or fables to articulate visions of social change and clarify who relates most to which vision.
- Take time to un-pack terms like 'corporate social responsibility' (which is fundamentally a public relations exercise within existing patron-client relations of power), as the language of rights can evolve into another form of disguised domination by the powerful within the new era and framework of globalisation.
- Be continually aware of the question 'change for whom' that rests behind social change work and behind assessment and learning about it.

Be continually aware of the question 'change for whom' that rests behind social change work and behind assessment and learning about it.

3.2.4 Staying Mindful of Core Principles

Methods will never be the full answer to the challenges of assessment and learning.

A mix is needed of frameworks, methods, support mechanisms, and spaces for reflection – the choices for which remain an issue of perspective and deliberation. The danger of reducing dynamic approaches into 'technologies' and over-simplified how-to's always lurks. Therefore, a focus on and processes for critical reflection remains paramount.

Due to its system-wide nature and, therefore, the need to engage a range of actors, assessment and learning for social change will always require negotiating about information needs and about learning modalities. It involves a diffuse information and deliberation system. This requires addressing the well-known questions of who needs to assess and for what. Clarity about and commitment to questions of purpose, use of results,

and useful for whom is essential for making decisions about how and when assessment will occur:

In these negotiations, awareness of the power dynamics inherent in the use of methods, as well as in the overall development process, is central. A method and its use cannot be disconnected from the users' worldview – 'benevolent' tools can be used towards undesirable ends. Hence the importance of developing an awareness of the elitisms that enter into assessment and learning, including being clear about who each person is in such a process.

One is always dealing with elitisms of various kinds. Elitisms can include grassroots elites within civil society organisations and communities, when local power elites begin to appropriate people's struggles and use them for their own advancement. But it also means dealing with intellectual elitism between professionals or donors and community-based organisations. This requires bridging realities to come to a shared understanding of what can be achieved, while being critical about the dynamics to avoid creating new patron-client relationships. Alliances with academia and other professionals can be assets to the grassroots. However, in assessment and learning, the politics of knowledge need particularly stringent ethical consideration, as the knowledge generated in communities is far too easily appropriated and traded on by researchers and development professionals. Explicit negotiation is needed to filter external ideas so that context-specific essentials are respected and power and knowledge strengthen the positions of the marginalised.

View assessment and learning as a 'way of being' in relationships that matter.

Everything can and should be scrutinised. For those inside the process, a vital aspect is institutionalising all learning, with spaces, capacities and rituals for the necessary reflection. For relationships between those inside the process and those on the outside, Sheela Patel stresses that *'the most valuable process of learning occurs within a process of trust between those who are participants and those who are from the outside asking questions seeking to test various theories and hypothesis that deepen and sharpen nascent articulations.'*

Therefore, assessment and learning that serves social change will hinge on the quality of relationships and establishing a trusting (internal) learning environment. Seeing relationships as extending well before and beyond a specific assessment or learning endeavour can help, says Sammy Musyoki, to *'build trust, confidence and quality interaction that may create opportunities for critical reflections on how we work with each other, what difference our partnership is making in terms of the aspired change.'* Informality is key and basing it on relationships rather than procedures or protocols: *'the more informal you make the environment, the more truth you get in terms of assessment and learning,'* says Ashish Shah. While the most effective learning comes from peers and social equals, this does not mean that we should shirk seeking out hard criticism from our critics and adversaries.

Balance unity and diversity. Interests are continually (re)aligned during a conscious developmental social change process. Reflection on social change requires the capacity to create strategic unity while allowing diversity and complexity of viewpoints and avoiding their dogmatic entrenching. There may also be varying views on the basis of the unity of a social change alliance. This is not dissimilar to a coalition government that must develop a common vision, clarifies Sundar Burra from the NGO SPARC. Everyone agrees to something when signing on, while deviation from this is a practical expression of inevitable diversity. Defining the non-negotiables and core values is essential. The fundamentals must be questioned as a trajectory develops but this requires caution, as they should not be portable or suddenly dispensable, making them little more than fads. An important dilemma is how values of unity and diversity can operate within institutional frameworks,

Interests are continually (re)aligned during a conscious developmental social change process.

as institutional hierarchies usually cannot accommodate them due to their inflexible procedures and lack of space for making changes.

¹³ With thanks to Iñigo Retolaza Eguren for these insights.

Multi-stakeholder and multi-perspective learning can occur under certain conditions.¹³

This happens when those involved are able to suspend judgements and not allow prejudices to immediately and continually interfere in efforts to think and act 'out of the box'. It also requires that asymmetric power relationships are managed more horizontally so as to allow other bodies of knowledge to enter the space.

Clarity about where accountability lies in assessment and learning is critical. Ways are needed to recognise multiple accountabilities in different directions and to devise approaches for each that foster learning. As part of 'downward' accountability to beneficiaries, information needs to be used to improve the work, not just to share with people, or else it risks becoming a new politically correct protocol.

Four short examples provide a flavour of how methodologies and frameworks can be useful for organisations that support and value social change. Mama Cash and ActionAid International use frameworks that allow for great flexibility and yet provide a general direction based on the values they consider important for development. SPARC's story from India and that of CTA-ZM in Brazil provide insights into how local organisations deal with the need for flexibility and rigour in learning and assessment.

3.3 Examples from Practice

3.3.1 The Merits of a Framework – Mama Cash

Mama Cash is a Dutch organisation, a women's fund that finances social change initiatives conceived by women with first-hand experience.¹⁴ Mama Cash focuses on funding strategic work related to women's rights (Zuidberg *et al* 2006). It differs from other grant-making institutions in its small-scale support to groundbreaking women's rights initiatives. Mama Cash defines groundbreaking as 'transformative or change oriented initiatives in women's rights, before these initiatives are mainstreamed.' The average annual grant provided by Mama Cash is between €500 and €15,000. In 2005 Mama Cash funded 284 projects valuing about €2.3 million.

Since 2004, Mama Cash has been developing an approach called 'Making the Case' to measure social change resulting from projects implemented by grantees. It has been extensively tested and is now being introduced more systematically, and now funds some grantees. It has been shown to have a stimulating effect on the users by helping them to:

- provide a theory of change and framework for measuring success
- build the story, the message and the evidence (for learning, for mobilising resources)
- enables aggregation and collective learning about:
 - The dimensions of change on which women's groups work, key inhibitors and accelerators;
 - Collective outcomes per country, region, and globally;
 - Evidence based communications for leveraging more support for women's rights work and women's funds.

Making the Case asks for evidence related to five dimensions of change.

1. Shifts in definitions/reframing – Whether the issue is viewed differently in the community or larger society;

2. Individual and community behaviour – Whether people are behaving differently in the community or larger society;

3. Critical mass and engagement – Whether people are more engaged;

¹⁴ <http://www.mamacash.nl>

4. *Institutional and policy changes* – Whether an institutional policy or practice has been changed;
5. *Maintaining/holding the line* – Whether earlier progress has been maintained in the face of opposition.

The methodology asks grantees to identify relevant dimensions of change, by considering the question 'To what extent is the issue viewed differently because of your work?' They then tell the story of change in terms of baseline information, Goals, Strategies, Evidence (indicators, quantitative and qualitative), External Accelerators, External Inhibitors, Internal Accelerators, Internal Inhibitors and any Unexpected results.

The 'Making the Case' approach is promising but needs further refinement (Zuidberg et al 2006). Some methodological ambiguities persist, such as about time and geographical scales of social change projects, and how to deal with the attribution versus contribution issue. It needs further flexibility for translation to local conditions, in terms of language and cultural, social and economic categories.

¹⁵ Based on Guijt 2004 and Win 2006.

3.3.2 ActionAid International's Global Framework¹⁵

ActionAid International introduced its 'accountability, learning, planning system' (ALPS) in 2000. It has led to sweeping changes in the way learning and accountability are perceived and implemented throughout the organisation. In 2006, further refinements were articulated and implemented following a stock take of initial experiences and an external review (Guijt 2004).

ALPS is a framework that sets out the key accountability requirements, guidelines, and processes in the global organisation. It recognises that principles (see Figure 1), attitudes and behaviours shape the quality of assessment and learning processes and outputs. It sets standards for what to do but critically, also, how to do it. It does this by articulating a set of core considerations that have driven the new approach. For example, it stresses that poor people must define the agenda and own 'indicators' (used in a broad sense) of what change looks like and that rigid frameworks are less important than process and relationships. Central in the process is clarity about the question of who wants to know what – and why it matters.

Figure 1. ALPS Core principles (Win 2006)



ALP applies to the whole of ActionAid and forms the basis for its partnerships

At a global level, the 'Global Monitoring Framework' asks for all levels of the organisation to look at and comment on four key questions and consider four areas of change that focus on power:

1. What did we do?
2. In pursuit of which right(s)?
3. Resulting in what changes? For whom?
 - Critical consciousness, capacity, action of rights holders
 - Tangible changes in people's lives/material conditions
 - Organisation, action and movement building/growth
 - Policies and practices of states & other duty bearers
4. With what impact on power and power relations?

The methods that are encouraged and used to provide the evidence that is then analysed, documented and shared are: storytelling,¹⁶ participatory review and reflection processes,¹⁷ written reports, external reviews and peer reviews.¹⁸

3.3.3 Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres, India¹⁹

SPARC is a registered non-profit society which began work on urban issues in 1984.

SPARC works in 21 cities throughout India via alliances with other organisations. It is based in Mumbai, working with communities to improve their homes, neighbourhoods and employment opportunities. Its founding objective was 'to establish area resource centres that serve the needs and priorities of local inhabitants (especially the poorest)'. SPARC works closely with two other organisations in 'the Alliance': the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan.

The Alliance uses a mix of different methods for assessment and learning – group exchanges, self evaluation, stakeholder feedback, individual professional development, commissioned external perspectives, action learning, and action research. However, such a list does not do justice to the core approach. The essence lies in the simplicity of issues that simply seeks to respect people's ideas and keep donors at arm's length to give people the space to act on these ideas. The poor must be organised, and therefore they are the ones who need to develop skills; hence it becomes essential to create a physical, emotional and social space for people to pool their human resources and facilitate learning.

This basic conviction and focus has led to an 'embeddedness' of assessment and learning so that reflection and evaluation are built into action mechanisms (see Box 17) by creating environments for different types of reflection and learning. For example, in the savings and credit groups to which millions of women belong, they share struggles and triumphs, leading to innovative ideas for action. This is a breeding ground for a continual supply of leaders and self-confidence among members. The surveying/mapping process focuses on learning about strategic planning and offers a baseline for impact assessment, while precedent-setting pilot projects and housing-related training have a more practical focus but also generate new leaders. Assessment and learning cannot be pulled apart and identified as specific stages or learning outcomes.

¹⁶ http://www.actionaid.org/index.asp?page_id=1043

¹⁷ http://www.actionaid.org/assets/pdf%5CALPS2006FINAL_14FEB06.pdf, pg 25-26),

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pages 30-35.

¹⁹ This case draws on texts from the SPARC website (www.sparcindia.org) and reflections by ASC participants during a visit to SPARC, Mumbai in November 2006.

Box 17. The power of learning and scaling up through exchange visits

The Alliance started work with pavement dwellers in one area with five communities and today covers 550,000 households in 9 states and 70 small medium and large cities in India. That scaling has occurred from a process of community exchanges. Learning and mutual support are shared through a process of exchanges – visits to each other's communities so that experiences can be shared. Increasingly such exchanges also include public officials and other professionals, encouraging their exposure to the way in which organisations of the urban poor perceive, analyse and respond to the issues that they prioritise within their local contexts. It is through exchanges that new institutional relationships are frequently created. A conventional strategy of meetings and workshops designed and managed by the NGO were not acceptable to the community leadership. Seeing women on pavements managing complex advocacy negotiations inside and outside their neighbourhoods was more powerful than being told about it. It highlighted a critical issue of who in the process leads the reproduction of strategy in the alliance – women and men took the initial risks to explore change.

Exchanges start by encouraging communities to reflect on their own situation. Together, neighbours identify their problems and explore possible solutions; they then either visit a group close by or invite them to their own settlement. Within the city, these exchanges occur rapidly and informally. The first few visits are facilitated by more experienced core trainers of the local federation, then people organise their own exchanges until spontaneous visits occur. Two types of exchanges occur: with core trainers travelling to assist city level groups and with local community leaders, now confident and capable, visiting nearby settlements. Most exchanges involve groups of four or five women and two men. Members of recently organised communities meet leaders and/or visit established community organisations to share experience and frustrations. The more established groups begin the process of assisting new settlement organisations. The exchange process helps community leaders feel comfortable about participating in change. They gain this through interaction with peers and by understanding the change process in other settlements.

The embedded nature of assessment and learning also instils a shared clarity of understanding at the community level of what the process is about and a commitment to the long term process. People know what they mean by 'social change' even if they use different words to articulate it. As one woman said 'We learned to love each other more.' This is theory embedded in practice. Learning occurs for everyone. For example, SPARC has learned about the merits of different strategies from the people, for instance, that an adversarial approach to authority would not serve their interests.

SPARC has strongly and explicitly resisted 'NGO-ization', keeping structures small and acting as a procedural buffer to donors. Most formal organisations get caught up in the assumed need for procedures and structures to guide assessment and learning, in the process forgetting relationships and principles. For example, SPARC maintains unstructured financial resources to anticipate emerging experimentation. They are constantly surprised with what was needed to be done, how much it would cost, and all attempts to systematise it only forced deeper subversions of allocated funds. Now almost 50% of the budget is for 'precedent setting'.

3.3.4 Centro de Tecnologias Alternativas – Zona da Mata, Brazil²⁰

CTA-ZM is a local NGO that has been active since 1987 in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, working with 20 municipalities. It focuses on developing viable alternatives with

²⁰ All information is from the author's personal knowledge of the organisation. This excerpt is based on a longer piece written for ICCO, Guijt 2007c.

rural workers unions and their smallholder members. Currently, their activities span four programmes of work, in all of which participatory methodologies are embedded – diagnosis, planning, monitoring, evaluation, and systematization. CTA-ZM has changed its focus and role in line with changing needs – from gaining more knowledge of the region and sensitising farmers and their groups to more focused thematic programmes with a long term perspective. More recently, the NGO has taken on a more advocacy and facilitating role, documenting and disseminating its work with the farmers and municipalities to inspire other municipalities and NGOs in Brazil.

Since about 2002, CTA-ZM has given increasing attention to its own learning processes and information flows. This has involved everyone in the wider institutional set-up, including municipal partners, the Executive Committee/Council/General Assembly of CTA-ZM, and the technical team. CTA uses a mix of approaches (see Table 2 below). From a very basic and numbers-focused monitoring system, CTA has developed a wide range of mechanisms and processes that feed its need for insights at all levels. The learning process is continually evolving as the governance structures that drive the work evolve and, therefore, decision-making and information needs shift.

Table 2. Overview of mechanisms for learning within the organisation and its wider network of partners

<i>What</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Who participates</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Outputs</i>
Regular contact between team members and other key actors, esp. farmer leaders	Daily	Farmers and team members	Whatever the issue is at hand	Quality of relationships, updated
Team meetings	Every 2 weeks	Team	Operational snags, decisions, short term planning	Decision, clarity about action points and responsibilities, support with problems
Annual reviews	Annual	Assembly with the team	Actual activities compared to planned	Shared evaluation of the year's achievements and problems
External monitor	Ongoing, new person every 3 years, annual commentary	External person and CTA team	If CTA is maintaining its planned focus and is learning	Reviews quality of organisational learning process to optimise and (re)align with organisational goals
Action research projects	Incidental	Varies	Topics have included: learning/M&E system; agroforestry; participatory municipal development	Insights about the questions being asked
Exchanges with other NGOs	Often but not regular	Team members and often farmers	Depends on topic selected (on technical, management issues or values)	New insights on operational issues, strategies, building of leadership
Systematising of lessons	Periodic, at the end of a programme or a phase	Farmers, CTA staff	Strategy, vision, leadership development	Insights that feed next phase of work or for wider sharing in the region/among NGOs
External evaluations	Every three years	External team with CTA	All operations and impacts	Key strategic challenges for current work
Courses for external groups or staff	One off, as needs emerge	Team members sometimes with specific farmer(s) leaders	Depends on need (e.g. gender, leadership or agroforestry training)	Shared conceptual and practical clarity, skills built, facilitation capacity enhanced

4

Relationships Matter and Relationships that Matter

4.1 Seeing the Web of Relationships

The extensive range of relationships that influence and need to be considered in assessing social change determines what is possible and the quality of the assessment and learning. Central among these are relationship with donors, those active in social change work on the ground, and professional evaluators and facilitators. This section considers the web of relationships around social change and its assessment and bones of contention and tension in these relationships. It discusses how those in an external support role can maintain the integrity of their input into social change during assessment and learning processes. It closes with observations on the attitudes and principles, knowledge and skills needed when working on social change and assessing it in ways that maintain core values.

The relationships between actors in assessing a social change process are enormously diverse (see Box 18). Two relationships were stressed in the ASC discussions as of particular importance for those who are guiding or facilitating assessment and learning – with donors and with local people and their organisations. The relationships with donors is particularly problematic due to the strong views and obligations around assessment and learning, hence this section focuses largely on that relationship. A third crucial relationship is with state institutions – judiciary, legislative, and executive structures at different levels. This was not discussed in depth within the ASC group.

Box 18. Range of relationships that influence and need to be considered in assessing social change

- between local groups and the process facilitator/evaluator (external or internal)
- among the local groups, if multiple groups are working together on whatever is being assessed
- between local group management/leaders and their members or constituents
- between members of the assessment team – whether these are internal/external, local or non-local, etc
- between donors and those responsible for assessment
- between those seeking the assessment and their donors further along the aid chain, e.g. a grant-giving NGO and a bilateral aid agency from which it receives funding
- between the values that drive individuals to work on social change and the practical realities of deadlines, earning an income, fatigue, families, peer/social pressure, etc

A direct relationship between a civil society organisation and a donor is nestled within a more extensive hierarchy of accountability, with different emphases placed on accountability or learning at each level in the hierarchy. Each relationship in this hierarchy – or web – has specific accountability and learning needs, each with their own information requirements, timeframe and cycle, etc. So at any one time, multiple accountability relationships and learning relationships are at play. Understanding this chain of needs, how information is perceived, and what constitutes 'evidence' of social change is important to avoid difficult surprises at a later stage.

Any single relationship is subject to multiple variables – the history of the relationship, contextual issues, interpersonal connections, competence of those involved, perceived importance of the social change process being funded, etc. Thus what emerges in terms of a shared understanding – or not as the case may be – of social change and of its assessment at any given point is the result of this force field of variables. Interpersonal relationships are particularly important. The personal connections offer scope for clarifying theories of change and perspectives on assessment but can also create a fragile dependency and may be conducive to corruption.

Anyone's position in this web of relationships will differ, depending on whether she/he is contracted to assess social change (in an evaluator's role) or if they are assessing social change as part of a funded programme of activities in which they are actively engaged. It is possible that both roles happen concurrently. For example, the international NGOs are increasingly both a partner in action as well as a source of funding for community organisations. This places them in the role of asking for evaluations as part of contractual agreements on accountability, as well as collaborating in reflections on how to strengthen the work. Therefore, it is important to be conscious of the different types of relationships that are simultaneously at play.

Relationships with donors are particularly problematic when it comes to agreeing what constitutes social change and how to assess it. The risk of this proving to be a constraint in implementation and in assessment will be greater if there is strong dependency on one donor or if interpersonal relationships are not fostered. Furthermore, there is often little time or patience to articulate views on social change in these relationships, nor is there the capacity. In these relationship webs, being explicit about the underlying beliefs and assumptions about social change is critical and requires investment in multiple ongoing conversations. But a lack of appreciation of the importance of this discussion and a task orientation means there is usually little to no investment in such dialogue. This leads to the common situation that clashing visions of social change emerge in formal processes of external evaluation, in which the donor's vision tends to dominate.

4.2 Dealing with Donors

“The core issue in the donor-recipient relationship seems to be the different theories of change that guide decisions and actions.”

Stereotyping and simplistic assumptions about where power resides and who has which views on social change are problematic. Simplistic views on donor-recipient relationships are increasingly inaccurate. Many actors are both, receiving from elsewhere and disbursing funding to others – even at a very local level when revolving credit groups disburse to members. Hence, issues surrounding (upward) accountability pervades the entire web. Many actors who do not consider themselves a donor, do disburse funding to others. So they play a 'funding' agency role somewhere in the web and therefore some of the considerations in this section may be relevant to them as well. Development professionals are usually enmeshed in a cascade of relationships, for example, international NGOs head offices, national level offices, CSOs, community members – which requires shifting roles as one looks up or down the cascade and being aware of the related shift in information needs.

The core issue in the donor-recipient relationship seems to be the different theories of change that guide decisions and actions. Donors formally tend to approach change as linear and able to be planned and, therefore, tend strongly towards using standardised assessment procedures. Meanwhile, the understanding of social change as discussed here views change as non-linear and adaptive and, therefore, requiring embedded and dynamic assessment processes. Many individuals within donor agencies will recognise this but formal organisational positions and protocols hinder its translation into different practices.

The differences in theories of change have various consequences.

- **Differing expectations** exist of what 'success' should be able to occur and how that can be seen – donors wishing/demanding evidence of tangible progress following a projected linear trajectory versus social change organisations seeing incremental changes en route (sometimes unanticipated). Or different understandings of what should and can be considered within the boundaries of influence and in turn for what the recipient can be held accountable.
- A strong tendency by those in donor agencies for bureaucratically **rigid application of standardised frameworks** (logframe or its look-alikes) to assess progress, irrespective of the nature of the initiative being funded (for example, requiring a summative evaluation of a certain type), which do not fit the diversity and non-linearity of many social change processes. These frameworks have emerged from a managerial, accountability need rather than the learning or capacity development need that can help to improve social change (see Dlamini 2006; Reeler 2007).
- The **inability of bureaucracies to deal with cross-cutting work, integrated change or intertwined phenomena of progress** sits at odds with their issue-based or thematic nature of reporting, line management, and accountability hierarchies.
- **Social change is not funded in a broad sense** but only as a slice of the pie or one piece of the puzzle. This makes it difficult to achieve the kind of systemic change that is driving the work and certainly does not fit with the timeframe of such change. As a result, the assessment of social change is even more difficult to get funded.

“ Social change is not funded in a broad sense but only as a slice of the pie or one piece of the puzzle. This makes it difficult to achieve the kind of systemic change that is driving the work and certainly does not fit with the timeframe of such change. ”

Such clashes in vision and resulting procedural emphasis are exacerbated by several contextual factors. First, is a dominant evaluation paradigm that stresses results-based measurement in a particular way – for example, measuring, positivism, efficiency as the main reason for funding empowerment work, etc. The focus on this approach to proving effectiveness puts social change work under even more pressure. Natalia Ortiz explains: *‘Trying to fit complex themes and realities to limited frameworks that are not well understood by those involved, does not help to articulate in a coherent way the social change process that projects and programs aim to contribute to, and may convert the assessment processes in a contract requirement, far from the interests of the parties involved and not useful for the purpose to better understanding social change and develop local capacities.’*

Other factors relate to competency and accessibility within organisational hierarchy. Staff incompetence about assessment generally and about in-house M&E frameworks, is common, as is a general inadequate understanding about social change. In those higher up the accountability chain (donors), there is often insufficient competence to adapt assessment frameworks to social change initiatives. Meanwhile, those closer to the ground in CSOs are often insufficiently competent with M&E to be able to negotiate an assessment process on their terms and issues. Furthermore, there is often no access to certain hierarchies of accountability. Therefore, while one’s direct relationship may be with staff on the next ‘layer’ of the organisation, those individuals or layers in turn have other accountability relationships that mean that one is also caught by those (indirect) demands. This constrains the manoeuvring space to expand the understanding of social change and with it, the conditions for assessment. Progress with direct contacts may be thwarted by these individuals feeling the need to meet demands imposed on them from the layer above.

Large international NGOs, such as Oxfam and ActionAid International that espouse social change values, face specific and often tough challenges. Ritu Shroff explains: *‘This diversity of stakeholders and learning needs puts an incredible amount of pressure on finding a system that does not take up too much time and effort, yet allows us to provide information,*

obtain feedback on how we are doing and do some authentic learning. I think other large organisations face similar problems, and either end up insisting on very complex and detailed recording and reporting systems that take up too much time and collect data that may be meaningless at the field level, or keeping recording and reporting systems inconsistent and qualitative, which makes accountability and learning at certain levels impossible'. Balancing standardisation given the dynamics of development is a core challenge, in response to which ActionAid International developed its '**Accountability, Learning and Planning System**' (see section 3.3.3). This system recognises that change is dynamic and value-driven, yet tries to capture specific moments in a standardised system with as little bureaucracy as possible in order to open time for reflection. Even then, self-reflection on the quality of theories of change was difficult. Ashish Shah refers to ActionAid International, his employer: 'I think in AAI we reached a stage where we weren't necessarily doing critical planning or critically thinking through how change happens, making it difficult for us to articulate our understanding of change to others.'

It is useful to be mindful of over-simplification when it comes to donor demands for accountability. Marta Foresti stresses that 'accountability' is important and essential as part of social change processes. It does not need to be tarred with the brush of a 'dirty word, oppressive practice, necessary evil' and made the scapegoat of the methodological challenges. She urges viewing and using it as an ally, for example, through 'downward accountability': 'Ultimately, an assessment demonstrating that a donor X has put money in a project Z that not only did not achieve the expected results, but also that the money was misused and reinforced existing power interests and patronages ... could be a very powerful tool for local communities for demanding a different approach in the future, in other words, social change. So ... be careful not to dismiss the importance and potentially 'radical role of accountability for achieving social change, and the mechanism/processes necessary for making a reality of it, including assessment exercises'. There is not always a huge chasm between funding agencies and social change groups. Perhaps there is a common interest, namely 'social change'.

Managing relationships with donors will rarely be comfortable. Although they are partners, they can also be frustrating to work with and, at times, interfering. Finding the right balance in engaging (with) them is a matter of trial and error; and requires some risk-taking. There are usually individuals within any institution who can become champions, excited and transformed by their engagement. But it takes time and patience to develop these relationships – and given the rapid staff turnover in donor agencies, this may be a wasted investment. Decisions about the energy to invest in donor relations means thinking about one's own organisational mandate. Direct poverty alleviation, leads to one type of focus. But to change the way the development sector, and that particular donor, thinks about development, then donor relationships will require another focus.

The approach taken with donors will depend largely on the donor itself (see Box 19). Cindy Clark, ASC group member says: 'Building common understanding with donors (and others) requires an explicit conversation about our assumptions and beliefs about 'how change happens' and there is not always room for that in the donor/grantee relationship.' By implication, success will vary and be relationship-specific. But in general, working with donors on articulating their understanding of social change success is important. She continues: 'We see shifting how large organisations/agencies think about 'success' in their work as an important ingredient to building more effective social change efforts. However, while we've been successful in some cases, there have been others where the donor is simply not persuaded of the value of certain 'intangible' aspects of social change.'

Building common understanding with donors (and others) requires an explicit conversation about our assumptions and beliefs about 'how change happens' and there is not always room for that in the donor/grantee relationship.

Cindy Clark, ASC group member

Coming to a shared understanding requires trust and accepting that change can happen within the environment as a result of interactions.

Different perspectives are inevitable – accepting them and working with that diversity can be healthy (also see 3.3). Therefore, achieving harmonious consensus all the time is unrealistic, although it is important to do so sufficiently to ensure effective work. Ritu Shroff comments on the case of Oxfam: "It is important in a large organisation like Oxfam to first try to understand and to respect this diversity of perspectives. This comes from a belief that Oxfam is a better organisation and likely to be more effective because of this diversity. A second value is to try and build consensus using our organisational mission and purpose as the 'bottom line'. In my opinion, that is about principled negotiation, rather than each person holding on dearly to their own perspective and opinions and fighting for it, either softly or aggressively." Coming to a shared understanding requires trust and accepting that change can happen within the environment as a result of interactions. So dialogic interaction becomes crucial: suspending judgements, being conscious of language, creating new conversational networks, and transforming dysfunctional human and institutional relationships (Retolosa, personal communication).

Box 19. Engaging with Donors

- The initial choice of donors/partners is important. Identify and then live by the non-negotiables in terms of this choice. For example, AAI will not accept money from the WB or USAID.
- Engage the donor, in particular 'educating' them on interim results and aiming to shift those that have limited definitions of 'success' to include an eye for the less tangible.
- Foster interpersonal, informal relationships and invest in it being an ongoing relationship. Just connecting at the moment of formal evaluation will be less effective. Such relationships may well be harder for smaller CSOs to invest time in and may be potentially fragile or corrupting.
- Make the challenges of assessing social change visible to the donor and others and work together on developing appropriate frameworks, processes and procedures. Engage them in analysing why the social change work does not fit standard patterns.
- Try to establish clearly, at the onset, the scope of assessment and key definitions. For example, don't think that just because you both use the term 'effectiveness' or 'empowerment', there will be clarity. This point is also valid for partner organisations and CSOs with whom or in which development professionals work.
- Seek to have the local organisations and groups involved in negotiating the Terms of Reference and suggest possible evaluators/facilitators who have a social change vision of development.

4.3 Maintaining Integrity as an Intermediary

In many locally driven social change processes, sooner or later an intermediary is inserted or invited to support the process. This factor and this actor can lead to compromises on the commitment to social change values, caught by constraining circumstances and demands related to the assessment process. Can those in an external support role maintain the integrity of their input into social change?

The position of the intermediary will vary. Is it a parachuting assessment/learning role or are they embedded within the social change process? The first is not necessarily antithetical to supporting social change. But it means being particularly realistic about what can be contributed. An external assessor is probably wise to have modest expectations, not asserting that they are advancing social change while aware of the power they wield through the recommendations etc. that they make. Ashish Shah cautions: "Don't use your hierarchy to give advice as it will be taken whether it's useful or not because of your power. This is the ideal and what we are trying to work on increasingly; really it depends a lot on building

participatory and facilitative skills of each other.' Box 20 provides further ideas for working with partners and within CSOs.

Box 20. Ideas for intermediaries working on assessment and learning with social change organisations

- Build assessment of social change into the social change work itself. Do not make it a separate activity. This will also form the basis for any outsider engagement, which can build on what exists.
- Approach the social change work with the notion of it being 'participatory action research', rather than a linear implementation plan. By viewing it as an adaptive process, question asking and information seeking/analysis can be fuelled.
- Be patient; it takes time. In some relationships where equality is 'new', you may need several years before you get frank, on-equal-terms feedback and discussion, such as in the case of AAI after initiating its participatory review and reflection processes.
- Facilitate, don't dictate, the identification of assessment needs. Rather than telling them what (type of) assessment should take place, invest in eliciting such needs from them and work with those ideas in facilitating the design of the process. Focus on building local group capacities on evaluative thinking for social change.
- If assessment work is happening 'at a distance', then an effective strategy is to be clear about the contribution of conceptual clarity.
- Foster a questioning approach, rather than recommending and advising – see the AAI framework being developed in which questioning is central.
- Balance a locally driven assessment process with the fresh perspective of an outsider's insights.
- Accept the inevitability of some compromise on quality/depth/time – this is the reality of tight funding conditions.
- Seek to create safe spaces for honest reflection and assessment to avoid hearing what others feel they we want to hear. This may entail starting by being self-critical which creates a sense of being able to challenge/critique without repercussions.
- Seek to stay connected with the real agents of change and marginalised people and groups.

Working on social change and assessing it in ways that maintains core values requires attitudes and principles, knowledge and skills. Credibility and trust are essential to effective assessment processes and can be seen as a by-product of the core competencies and qualities (see Table 3 overleaf). These start at the personal level but are ideally reflected within the organisation around core, non-negotiable values and practices for both social change and assessing social change. Such convergence will be easier to achieve in a small organisation than in a large, diverse organisation such as Oxfam or ActionAid International and its networks.

Table 3. Core competencies and qualities (personal and organisational)

Core elements	Specific competencies and qualities
Communication skills/qualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patience • Diplomacy • Persistence (to build ongoing dialogue) • Listening and probing • Respect • Openness • Facilitation skills that make it possible to approach assessment as an action learning process. • Mobilisation skills
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising non-neutrality of any facilitation/assessment input and approach, and therefore articulating own biases/agendas/assumptions. • Focusing on developing inquisitive, deductive thinking (rather than a specific procedure or model or method). • Honesty • Trying to continually see how assessment can add value locally. • Inclusiveness
Knowledge / competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity about personal own definitions, concepts, and non-negotiables. • Conceptual clarity about personal vision of social change. • Understanding critical concepts: social change, gender dynamics, invisible power. • Understanding dominant debates and their limitations – positivism, results-based management, efficiency focus. • Being able to convey the value of reflection, as much more than navel-gazing • Crosschecking data to incorporate different voices. • Skill at packaging the work within the required formats of donors. • Strong theoretical understanding that can build evaluative capacity.
Attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A critical questioning attitude rather than an advisory stance. • Being a facilitator rather than a solution provider or implementer. • Being a dialogue mediator. • Having a win-win frame of mind, such as seeing how to use donor framework to further the social change work rather than as a necessary evil. • Humility • Enthusiasm for constituency building. • Keen to seek the unfamiliar or 'taboo' insights – get off the beaten track.
Organisational level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-defined principles and attitudes. • Leadership • Identifying where cohesion/convergence is lacking. • Nurturing trustful relationships. • Creating and supporting dialogic open spaces to challenge individual and group assumptions about how social change happens. • Continually re-examine an organisation's role in the social change process in line with changes in context.

5.1 Two Directions of 'Scale' to Bear in Mind – Scales

Working effectively on a small island of social change is not enough to achieve societal transformation of the scale needed to sustain improvements. This requires change at different levels, in which remaining connected – from local levels to larger scales of impact and from higher scales of strategy to local levels of implementation – is important. The challenges of scaling up and scaling or 'translating' down (see Box 21) are different, with a common concern being how to maintain the integrity of the social change values across levels. This section outlines the challenges of scaling social change up and down, as well as some of the implications for assessment and learning.

An often automatic association with the term 'issues of scale' is that of the scaling up of impact. At the local level, it is relatively easier to hear stories of personal transformation and observe changes. The scope of action and actors involved is relatively restricted, hence assessment processes appear more manageable. However, complications of scale quickly arise when seeking to implement social change at a larger geographic or population scale that can lead to dilution of original principles or strategies, exclusion of significant groups, high costs or long time frames due to the desire to ensure participation.

Box 21. The different directions of 'scale'

Scaling up refers to the increase in scope or coverage of activity or impact, or to take up lessons derived from a specific context into another context or level.

Scaling down refers to the process of translating down a generic intent (policy, programme strategy, indicator set, funding stream) and contextualising it and making it locally relevant.

Another set of issues arises in trying to scale up lessons from a specific context. How can lessons be shared meaningfully in other contexts, what are the pitfalls in conveying and taking up lessons from elsewhere? Sheela Patel explains that SPARC decided not to scale up the organisation itself in order to achieve greater impact but to take the experience to others and see what they make of it in their own contexts. This required finding ways to explain their model of working to other NGOs and thus making possible scaling up of their experiences and lessons.

The central challenge in scaling up is how to stay true to the original vision and processes despite the greater numbers involved and larger diversity of experiences. Working at a more aggregate scale than the local one, which means operating in relationships that cross geographic and institutional boundaries, may require adding some 'water to the wine' in terms of intensity of contact, reducing the intensity or nature of citizen participation, and working through representatives rather than directly with people, etc. It also means examining linkages between advocacy efforts, policy change and changes in people's lives, as these lie at the heart of many dilemmas about what change to assess at what level and how to do this. Can integrity of principles and focus be maintained across levels, with social change staying locally relevant? Can assessment and learning stay grounded in local endeavours, despite larger scales of analysis, thus informing and inspiring them?

Assessment and learning will need to take different shapes depending on the level at which it is occurring.

Assessment and learning will need to take different shapes depending on the level at which it is occurring. This leads to other questions, including: What can learning and assessment in which the poor and marginalised remain central look like at different levels; what procedures and mechanisms and learning style are effective? How can gaps between levels be bridged to ensure that learning does not stay captive within its own level? What is needed to create a learning web, not simply a learning organisation?

Interconnectedness also encompasses the challenges of scaling down. Recently debates about development among bilateral aid agencies and the international financial institutions has fuelled an almost obsessive focus on the 'national level'. This includes debates related to the Paris Declaration with its technical, mechanical indicator set and target list (see Box 22) that has left civil society on the sidelines. The Paris Declaration speaks a technical language while dealing with what is essentially political – resource allocation and use. As part of the so-called 'new aid modalities', the trend is one of focusing on national level budgetary, planning and M&E processes. This trend appears echoed by the focus on national level advocacy work of so many (I)NGOs that are striving to achieve change at the national or international level. But what about local governance and local accountability? Who is paying attention to this and to ensure that efforts to assess change at national level have local relevance?

Box 22. Indicators to administer not assess development effectiveness (from Sjöblom 2006)

Brian Pratt, of INTRAC (Oxford, UK) says of the Paris Declaration 12 indicators: "the Paris Agenda is not a theory of development ... it is about how one administers aid ... not whether aid has any effectiveness.... If you look at the indicators, they are not indicators of effectiveness; they are indicators of whether things have been reasonably managed. It does not mean that managing it well means a greater impact and greater effectiveness. One of the possible outcomes of all this is slightly better administered, bad aid as opposed to badly administered, bad aid and that is one of the outcomes we really have to expect might well be a success story. monitoring and evaluation has been downgraded and many of the big donor agencies have pushed this question aside or it has been reduced to these very technical, administrative indicators, rather than real indicators of impact. There is a loss of interest in learning about quality."

A critical factor in scaling down social change efforts concerns ensuring citizen engagement in development processes that originated from higher levels of generality and abstraction (see Box 23). The emphasis on national policies and ownership often implies that only formal or national level civil society groups and organisations are involved in these processes. These are then assumed to represent 'civil society' nationally, which is often not the case. Sometimes intermediary or umbrella organisations are created in urban centres with the sole aim of representing civil society at national levels, and often find it difficult to maintain strong links with their original constituency. In the process, community-based organisations (CBOs) can lose out, asymmetric power relations among CSOs are aggravated, and different knowledges and networks are excluded.

National or international derived processes or policies contain risks for assessment and learning in terms of who participates, who facilitates, and the focus of the learning.

The emphasis on (inter)national processes and policies fails to address local needs and reality. The subsequent danger is that (inter)nationally conceived assessment strategies and protocols fail to appreciate the contextual specificities of social change that could foster deeper learning about development. There is a real risk of generalisations that can create notions of citizens' voice and 'civil society' that do not reflect realities on the ground.

Box 23. Larger level social change processes and the disconnect from people (Mwasaru, pers.comm.)

In Kenya, efforts were undertaken to implement government policy on land distribution, an explosive political issue and one that touches profoundly on 'social change' in a transformative sense. Overseas consultants and the World Bank were involved who were interested in seeing models of land reform. But local groups complained that the process was being described by government officials who were unable to represent their interests well. In some cases, local people were consulted (in one case they invaded the process), but even then the potential for listening was compromised. The distances are too great, the organisational arrangements too difficult, and the time limits too pressing to allow for genuine representation. Delegates ended up representing themselves and the process was not even consultative. The government called it 'participatory' but it was a sham. A slightly more effective example from Kenya involves the ongoing constitution-making process. The secretariats organised consultations across the country to identify concerns that needed discussing. All consultations were documented, with the outcomes considered almost a 'draft' of the constitution, to be discussed by delegates. However, almost half of these delegates were members of parliament. The process was captured by their short term interests and lost sight of local concerns. Eventually a draft was produced by only one faction. Nevertheless, when it was finally put to a referendum, people rejected it. The government was back at square one and are still negotiating. Although the successful consultation was hijacked at higher levels, it had already expanded local awareness sufficiently to stimulate the subsequent rejection. If people had not been involved from the start, they might not have been critical of the draft product.

International donors are tending to support the strengthening of state bureaucracy but do not always sufficiently value and invest in what is needed for citizens to help build effective states. This has led donors funding CSOs to police the state, keeping an eye on donor money, to the detriment of funding work for and with marginalised groups. But is it about a well-functioning government apparatus or about vocal citizens, innovating with local change? Both are, of course needed, and monitoring the state can, if guided by a vision of social change, build important capacities. If citizens do indeed 'build the state' (Eyben and Ladbury 2006), then donors need to see effective states as those with capable and mobilised citizens and 'state building' as constructing relationship between citizens and the state, and to then invest accordingly. Emphasising national processes versus local social change has far-reaching implications of what is considered valid evidence of development and also for the role of citizens in assessing development as a process of social change.

5.2 Risks Both Ways... and the Intermediary in the Middle

Whether one's challenge of interconnectedness lies in scaling down or scaling up, there are risks for both pathways of jumping between levels or scales. When scaling up, a risk exists of becoming overly externally-oriented and losing feelers on the ground. It can lead to insufficient time spent on relationships and processes that matter locally and that drive learning and assessment. The main risks with scaling down concern making inaccurate assumptions about the realities on the ground or the implications of implementing a 'one-size-fits-all' approach when translating general policies and strategies into local initiatives, projects, programmes and M&E procedures.

For many international development organisations, it is hard to find a good balance between investing in internal processes and global objectives, and keeping an ear to the ground and investing there. An example of this is the promotion of the 'rights based approach' to development. On the one hand, this seeks to relate to international and

national debates on the relevance of the international human rights framework and the implications for enforcing political conditionalities to aid. On the other hand, it is concerned with organisational policies and jargon which aims at ensuring mere compliance with rights-based jargon. What can get lost are the experiences and discourses of 'grassroots' organisations that have been working for years with people's rights and entitlements at the local level (Samba 2007, Mwasaru 2007).

In the process of 'jumping across scales' – ensuring the local and higher levels remain connected, the so-called intermediary organisations are often in a particularly tricky position. They can be accused by those at the local level as being out of touch and not knowing the real issues. Yet those higher up, such as national governments, can question their legitimacy and accountability so as to cast doubts about whether they are worthwhile players in the change process. They are being asked to input at the national level – so to contribute to scaling up, and yet are being drawn down to the local level. Furthermore, to scale up work, they often need to make alliances that do not fit the logic of donors or the established development discourse. Patel confirms this for the case of SPARC. In discussions with financial backers of their innovative construction process led by women slum dwellers, they hear "So now you're an entrepreneur?", seeming to throw doubts on SPARC's commitment to the poor. Yet dealing with donors and other sceptics, inevitably raises the question of why this isn't happening on a larger scale, which requires a more entrepreneurial approach. Partners and mechanisms that do not fit the prevailing logic are distrusted by the development system, making it difficult not only to get funding but also presents difficulties in assessing precedent-setting, sometimes opportunistic innovations.

A focus on 'assessing social change' as advocated in this paper can be helpful to bridge the disconnection between levels that lead to confusion and mismatches across scales. It can help challenge assumptions about how local communities operate and how development can be replicated or expanded. A different perspective on assessment when dealing with complex processes of development – such as across scales – can help break the stalemate in development thinking that leads to more of the same with small adjustments. This means that assessment should, above all, be viewed as an action learning process that can systematically and critically evaluate different development strategies.

An 'ASC' perspective can also help in the debates about accountability, an ongoing critical challenge for international and national NGOs. It can provide an interesting window of opportunity to bridge the chasm between what is often global strategising and upward accountability structures versus local implementation and learning processes. The first debates on NGO accountability in the mid 1990s focused on the need for NGOs to demonstrate effective performance and accountability for their actions (Edwards and Hulme 1995). While this need remains undiminished, an ASC perspective on accountability can also be an avenue to improve the work, not just to prove or disprove effectiveness.

Emerging practices such as 'downward accountability' can be the basis for a dialogue between national or global level strategising and local level needs that can reduce the current disconnect between scales. This requires great clarity about questions as seemingly basic as who is accountable, to whom, for what, how and with what outcomes in mind (Jordan and van Tuijl 2006). In practice, this call for greater transparency requires enormous effort and organisational courage (see Box 24). It also requires honesty about the impact of asking local people to comment on issues and concerns raised at other scales. As Patel warns: *'For some local people, the intellectual challenge inherent in this process could be intimidating and might end up diminishing people. SPARC does this by having Jockin [slum dwellers' leader] 'on their shoulders'. Even if that person from the local level is not*

5.3 Considerations for Assessment and Learning

Emerging practices such as 'downward accountability' can be the basis for a dialogue between national or global level strategising and local level needs that can reduce the current disconnect between scales.

physically there, the question is whether your relationship with them is good enough for you to invoke them mentally in your transactions outside.'

Box 24. The value of downward accountability for greater relevance (Shah, pers.comm.)

In 2007, ActionAid International's HIV Aids team will have to account back to the local level about how money has been spent. Nervousness has set in due to the amount of money that has been wasted. The objective of this assessment exercise is to encourage people to think differently about relationships and to challenge assumptions. Local level people to come and evaluate the people at higher levels. This process should provoke AAI out of any sense of complacency on the HIV/AIDS work. This is how accountability can work downward.

Accountability and transparency in the assessment and learning process itself is also crucial. When embarking on assessment around issues of scale, the importance of accountability and transparency becomes very apparent. In every assessment exercise, you can only look at some of what is going on. But there is a need to say who is making these decisions; a need for clarity on the key actors that have to be reached and impressed, the unspoken agenda of influencing that affects what information is sought, who is involved and how. This relates directly to the discussion of elitism in section 3.2.4.

Assessment and learning will only ever show part of the picture, and thus should not be burdened with unrealistic expectations. Losing sight of the simplification and limitations of any assessment process can lead to lack of clarity about what the gathered information can actually tell. This risk can be reduced by building transparency into the systems. Natalia Ortiz suggests that this means clarifying whose information needs and interests are represented in the system designed, who defined the information gathering methods and who participates in information analysis. She also says it means "clarifying what is to be assessed and the scope of the information gathered, therefore enabling a clearer understanding and better use of the information we obtain". It can also be the basis for checking if the appropriate people and issues are involved at appropriate levels (see Box 25).

Box 25. The influence of scale in structuring assessments: the case of SUCAM, Kenya (Shah, pers.comm.)

In Kenya, AAI has been working with sugar cane farmers in what is known as SUCAM. Problem with scale emerged when the international level asked that the concerns of sugar cane farmers be taken to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). However, national level Nairobi-based staff assumed that the government would be the focus and building capacity there to negotiate with WTO. Meanwhile, at local level, the farmers and AA Kenya staff just wanted to focus on support in carrying out national campaigns. Yet it was usually people in the outer-lying rings who came to assess local level action. This meant that local level actors had to have robust arguments and be confident in their analysis about where efforts should occur to keep the critique of external reviewers at bay. Furthermore, it asks that AAI at the global level be open-minded about rethinking assumptions about how and where the focus of development efforts are needed. For assessment and learning processes, the challenge lies in keeping or placing power in hands of local people to be able to help raise such fundamental questions.

Organisations working at larger scales have an opportunity to merge diagnosis and critical reflection to create a change process in which assessment and learning is embedded. This notion lies at the heart of SPARC's participatory census surveys (Patel

2007, see also 3.3.3). Another example comes from Rwanda, where social mapping and a survey of social conditions informed a social policy and became a model for an entire country (Joseph 2005). This type of assessment concerns taking stock of needs, as well as reflecting critically on a (policy) process. Identifying basic needs becomes a way of assessing government performance. This is an evolutionary model of gathering information as part of a change process. It generates case studies on individual journeys, with the assessing done by citizens, and becomes a benchmark for looking at change.

One unresolved issue is how to argue for the intangibles as one progresses along the development chain, up and away from the local level. While surveys serve the need for quantitative methods well, other ways are needed to understand the process and qualitative aspects of social change. For example, SPARC's annual reports contain much quantitative data and photographs of smiling women. But the power of the deeper change being sought, the personal transformations that are central to sustained change of power inequities, is not necessarily conveyed through these means. Each one by itself is insufficient. In assessment, how can intangibles be articulated – the assumptions, values, personal shifts at local levels – in ways that complement the often dominant preoccupation with tangibles at aggregate levels, in the form of strategies, decisions, policies, and results? How do we communicate the full picture of social change in terms of numbers as well as the quality of the process, as stories of change travel up and down the development chain?

In such cases, intermediaries working on social change must understand and invest in their role as mediators between scales, which requires clarity about the discourses that dominate at different levels. Sheela Patel suggests an important role: *'The more knowledge you have about the operating assumptions at the top, the easier it is to change how you articulate what you're doing. We get a lot of theoretical frameworks thrown at us. All the present knowledge base on which development occurs has a theoretical base but it's often invisible. Many of us play bridging roles and need to produce language that plays [that] role.'* Intermediaries must become adept at capturing reality on the ground in ways that are acceptable and recognisable to donors or other actors that it is seeking to influence. Yet even then, there is no guarantee that the often risk-averse decision makers, including donors, will be responsive to new insights that could come from such forms of assessment and learning.

Intermediaries must become adept at capturing reality on the ground in ways that are acceptable and recognisable to donors or other actors that it is seeking to influence.

In 1997, an international group of some 70 development professionals debated issues related to participatory monitoring and evaluation, a significant ancestor of the ‘assessing and learning for social change’ focus

in this paper. Striking at the time was a non-questioning acceptance of an indicator-based approach to M&E that sought to prove whether the objectives of a linear, project-mode of development were being met. Then, the agenda for action focused on the need to experiment with and build capacity in participatory indicator development, impact assessment that listened to local voices, and alternative information management processes (IIIR 1998, 46-59) – and the role of donors, NGOs, CBOs and government agencies to make this possible. Relatively little focus was given to the central concerns of locally-relevant learning and the questioning of development models.

“Ten years on, the ASC discussions refer to a far more politicised understanding of development as social change rather than as projects delivered through the mainstream development system by NGOs and international donors.”

Ten years on, the ASC discussions refer to a far more politicised understanding of development as social change rather than as projects delivered through the mainstream development system by NGOs and international donors. Critical reflection in strategic alliances with unlikely partners, articulating theories of change, and the role of stories to clarify and convey the complexity of transformation are part of a new emerging discourse and practice. Social movements and evaluators are considered part of the agents of change, joining donors and NGOs. The received wisdoms of monitoring and evaluation are being challenged in more fundamental ways based on a different understanding of development itself as complex, emergent, and transformative. However, these shifts in thinking are slow and much is needed to come to assessment and learning processes that strengthen social change rather than hinder it. This final section sets out an agenda for action for key players and on critical issues.

6.1 Donors with Different Principles

Notwithstanding the use of a discourse that refers to ‘critical reflection’ and ‘learning’, donors, by and large, favour a mode of M&E that is rooted in fears of non-compliance of agreements based on a development model that is considered predictable. Assessments are undertaken to meet financial procedures, to legitimise existing or future investments, and to set conditions for compliance. Favours hands-off and objective assessments denies the learning potential of the work that they support.

Yet donors are critical partners and can make all the difference in development processes that recognise the value of local social change. Important lessons from North American non-profit organisations (Box 26) echo emerging insights from the development sector: *‘It requires them to loosen their focus on pre-planned interventions that lay out years ahead of time what is to be achieved, how and by when. It requires them to open their minds to the possibility of change happening in non-linear and unpredictable ways, and that social change occurs perhaps more slowly than they thought. It means allowing trust in the underlying principles of a methodology and a partnership to guide funding arrangements through bumpy patches.’* (Reilly 2007)

Box 26. Eight Lessons from North American Non-profit Organisations (Pankaj 2007)

1. In order for social change to be measured accurately, grantmakers need to provide enough resources to cover not only specific interventions but also operational needs.
2. Community organizations need to be sustainable over a long period of time to have an impact on social change.
3. Funders need to have a realistic perspective on what types of change can occur within a given grant period.
4. Funders need to share lessons learned from their funding experiences to promote general field building.
5. In designing a multi-year funding partnership, flexibility is essential, with an understanding and willingness on both sides to adjust the process en route, rather than waiting to the end to find out what strategies did not work.
6. If a funder is interested in developing common outcomes among multiple grantees, this requires an understanding that consensus building takes time yet is vital to overall buy-in of the initiative and its results.
7. Buy-in is enhanced by including grantees, funders, and other relevant stakeholders in the evaluation design process.
8. Measuring social change requires the long-term commitment of both grantmaker and grantee.

In practical terms, donors need to rethink the principles on which they base their models of evaluation and learning. Important principles would include (based on Patel 2007):

- ***A learning orientation that is rooted in continuity of relationships.*** Those working in funding agencies have to feel excited by the development processes they help make possible. They need to want to be active participants in reflections and learning. This requires continuity in relationships to construct a shared understanding of strategy, results, and opportunities.
- ***Acknowledging the need for risk-taking and related methodological implications.*** Social change as development for empowerment and an emergent process involves taking risks, funding innovations, setting precedents. This mode of development does not come with guarantees – it is not the same as funding polio vaccinations with children with known outcomes. Understanding the role of donors, including in relation to assessment and learning, when development is seen as experiment and as risk requires time and opportunity for frank discussions and clarifying what procedures are useful.
- ***Understanding the real architecture of scale.*** All donors must show impact at scale to their constituencies. Yet is there clarity about how it is produced and sustained and who drives it? More exchanges and debates are needed that build a grounded understanding of impact at scale. Assessment processes are imminent opportunities for such learning to occur.
- ***Understanding the deep politics of development and change.*** The management systems currently propagated by donors cannot produce the types of transformation that social movements and social change processes seek. Building community capacities to undertake these processes and manage them demand different strategies from professional NGO-managed projects. More support is needed for different strategies and for intermediaries to be allowed to take on different roles.
- ***Creating opportunities to hear stories from social movements and the opinions of the poor.*** Reports rarely convey the reality of transformations that are taking place in poor communities. Can donors identify and fund alternative forms of evaluation and learning to hear these realities by inviting direct testimonies and the telling of stories?

“Social change as development for empowerment and an emergent process involves taking risks, funding innovations, setting precedents.”

Amidst what might seem like a daunting agenda, one action point merits special attention, that of consistency – donors must align their espoused values with the systems they use. Donors consider they are pro-poor, think they appreciate that development is complex and context-specific, and certainly see the need to support a diversity of efforts at different levels. Many even recognise the deeply political nature of the work they support. Yet their procedures and protocols do not align with these values. If there is only one task that is taken up by donors, then it lies in the creation of far greater consistency than is currently the case between the formal development goals they uphold and the mechanisms and processes they have created to support the realisation of such goals.

6.2 Intermediaries as Innovators, Challengers and Bridgers

This paper outlines a substantial agenda for action for intermediaries, which can be summarised as ‘innovate, challenge and bridge’ (see section 4), which for many is a continuation of roles they already take seriously. Intermediary organisations need to challenge the decision-makers to listen and learn and reconsider fundamentals (see section 2), but also need to scrutinise themselves. They need to be the ones to offer examples of effective innovative practice in assessment and learning (see section 3) and use them internally. Intermediary organisations need to act as buffers and bridgers between local realities and discourses and that which is dominant among decision-makers (see section 5). Specific challenges will not be repeated here, instead core tasks are highlighted.

One critical task lies in dialogues with donors to rethink the basis of assessment and learning processes. Reilly (2007) warns that it is not realistic to expect most donors to start operating soon from a more politicised understanding of social change assessment. This puts the onus on intermediaries to invest further in dialogues with donors about how to address the internal contradictions between wishing to fund social change and imposing systems of evaluation and assessment that disregard some of the defining features of such social change work. This includes putting on the agenda the skewed power relationships within assessment processes and clarifying ‘*the merit of transparent and open evaluation processes that help people to engage without fear in the sensitive task of assessing their own work and efforts*’ (ibid).

As innovators, intermediaries have to scrutinise how they contribute to perpetuating problems. They need to dare to relinquish their compliance with unrealistic and time-wasting practices and dare to suggest alternatives. As discussed in 2.2, many intermediary organisations romanticise and commoditise social change work, in the process creating unrealistic expectations in the minds of donors of the timeframe and strategies for goal achievement. How can intermediary organisations deal with the tensions of donor-driven frameworks and timelines for assessing social change and the need to respect the often very different realities on the ground?

Many of the considerations for donors (see 6.1) also apply to intermediaries, who often fulfil a funding role in the development chain and are part of hierarchies of power. One such consideration involves the issues that emerge in relationships with community groups, CSOs, and local partners of whatever kind. How can intermediary organisations ensure that questions about change are asked about and with those who are marginalised and not included in what passes as ‘participatory assessment’ but is often superficially consultative? This means clarity about assessment and learning that does not reinforce exclusion and discrimination by an inadvertent focus on those easiest to reach. The repoliticising of development and its assessment means being critical about the power relationships in knowledge production, including re-thinking the criteria by which the effectiveness and value of social change initiatives are judged and the processes that engage participants.

“The repoliticising of development and its assessment means being critical about the power relationships in knowledge production, including re-thinking the criteria by which the effectiveness and value of social change initiatives are judged and the processes that engage participants.”

A particular area of attention that can strengthen the bridging role concerns better understanding the issues of scale. Section 5 only hints at a discussion that merits much more time. Intermediaries need to understand the issues of scale in which they are caught – scaling up, scaling down, both – and the implications for assessment and learning. Which assumptions are made about a potentially 'small' change process and its potential to become 'big', and what is required to make this happen? How can there be meaningful local involvement in assessing and learning about the effectiveness of scaling up strategies? What can be learned about scaling up the quality of social change processes? Perhaps scaling up is a serendipitous, 'fly-by-the-seat-of-one's-pants' process that defies prior strategising. But learning en route remains critical for adjusting and sharing lessons more widely.

Methodologically, intermediaries can make several other significant contributions. More concrete approaches are needed to help with the articulation of theories of change at local levels in ways that strengthen strategic thinking and do not alienate. Effective ways to institutionalise learning needs to be defined with greater precision for diverse organisational configurations (alliances, large NGOs, social movements, membership organisations, formal and informal networks, etc), which is vital to sustain and consolidate innovative breakthroughs. The reflections all advocate seeking a balance between being flexible about reporting and standardising information flows. Nobody could really disagree with this. Is it possible to be more precise about what this could look like? What becomes non-negotiable in terms of the standardisation, what are the limits of flexibility?

Much has been written in this paper that can inspire those facilitating assessment and learning processes and those responsible for formal evaluations. These opportunities for being part of the 'assessing social change' shift that is needed will not be repeated here. Section 4.3, in particular, outlines a set of practices that facilitators and evaluators can take on and build into their practice.

The core shift that must be recognised is that infusing assessment processes with political consciousness will require new skills and capacities. Rather than seeking to fulfil the criteria and standards that currently hamper learning and do not do justice to social change in all its diversity and complexity, the task involves working alongside social change organisations and activists to *'design assessment processes that respect and further the social change values that are embedded in the initiative being assessed'* (Reilly 2007). She sets out an agenda for evaluators in the United States context that has universal value: *'This means enabling engagement and inclusion, ensuring local relevance, respecting knowledge sources, and putting into practice the ethical requirements of participatory research. Evaluation consultants also can play a role in facilitating critical reflection, challenging simplistic conclusions, being open to new insights and introducing appropriate practical and conceptual resources as needed. Ideally, assessment processes should... offer organizers and activists a chance to relax, re-charge creative and spiritual energies, and return to their work with both a refined strategic direction and a sense of invigoration and renewal.'*

6.3 Opportunities for Facilitators and Evaluators

Ideally, assessment processes should... offer organizers and activists a chance to relax, re-charge creative and spiritual energies, and return to their work with both a refined strategic direction and a sense of invigoration and renewal.

Molly Reilly, ASC member

6.4 Assessment and Learning that Values the ‘Golden Goose’

Cutting across these key players are action points in which all have roles to play to carry forward the challenge of assessing and learning that strengthens social change.

Many questions are still on the table calling for more precise insights, nitty-gritty dilemmas remain to be thrashed out, and thus practical hands-on work needs to be undertaken. The principles outlined in this document need to be fleshed out for different organisational set-ups, capacity levels and social change processes. For all those involved – activists, intermediaries, evaluators, donors – generating practical ideas and sharing inspiring examples is essential. This means investing in:

- Concrete efforts to **systematise and review** the respective benefits and limitations of different grounded case studies that have enabled critically reflective learning and assessment.
- **Training efforts** for social change organisations around the idea of how to assess social change, based on existing stock of experiences and approaches plus recognition of core non-negotiable principles and purposes.
- **Peer support opportunities** for those in social change organisations to ask for and receive ideas for addressing dilemmas and challenges on assessment and learning processes.
- **Seeding experimentation** with particular combinations of approaches and methods with detailed documentation of the processes.

A new model of assessment and learning is needed that places developmental social change at the heart, rather than short-sightedly focusing on the interim steps. SPARC refers to development as *‘the golden goose’* (Patel 2007) and urges a model of assessment and learning that places the goose at the centre, rather than its golden eggs. Assessing and learning about development as a process of social change means charting the ‘golden eggs’ that can be discerned, in the form of processes that multiply and serve increasing numbers, building capacities and provoking shifts of thinking in government as well as among the poor. However, by valuing only the eggs, the goose is in danger of serious neglect. Sheela Patel cautions: *‘With few insights about how to understand it and measure its level of maturity and sustainability, external assessment processes are too rigid to understand these dynamics. Sadly, the goose is often killed due to lack of understanding.’* A model of assessment and learning that builds on the reflections in this document would be more effective at strengthening social change that tackles the persisting injustices about which all of and everyone in development should, in theory, be concerned.

Annex I. ASC Participants

(in alphabetical order)

Core Participants

<i>Name</i>	<i>Organisational Affiliation</i>	<i>Link to the ASC initiative</i>
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John Gaventa	Institute of Development Studies, UK	Overall guidance
Irene Guijt	Learning by Design	Participant, overall coordinator, case study editor
Mwambi Mwasaru	Coast Rights Forum, Kenya	Participant, case study author
Valerie Miller	Just Associates, Washington DC	Participant, Theme 1
Sammy Musyoki	Institute of Development Studies, UK	Participant and co-coordinator
Natalia Ortiz	As Raiz, Colombia	Participant
Sheela Patel	SPARC, Mumbai	Participant, case study author
Molly Reilly	Just Associates, Washington DC	Participant, Themes 3 & 4, case study author
Roger Ricafort	Oxfam, Hong Kong	Participant, Theme 1 and Mumbai meeting
Evelyn Samba	Action Aid International Kenya	Participant, case study author
Ashish Shah	Action Aid, Kenya regional office	Participant
Ritu Shroff	Oxfam Great Britain, Cambodia	Participant
Lisa VeneKlasen	Just Associates, Washington DC	Participant, Themes 1 and 2

Additional Participants

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Jockin Arputnam	NSDF, Mumbai	Participant, Mumbai event
Sherry Bartlett	Independent consultant	Documenter, Mumbai event
Sundar Burra	SPARC, Mumbai	Participant, Mumbai event
Celine d'Cruz	SPARC, Mumbai	Participant, Mumbai event
Biki Kangwana	Institute of Development Studies, UK	Documenter, Mombasa event
Kattie Lussier	Institute of Development Studies, UK	Documenter, Mombasa event
Aseena Vaccajee	SPARC, Mumbai	Participant, Mumbai event

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