Organizational capacity strengthening for meaningful social change in complex environments: Methodological implications of a systemic action research approach

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My personal interest in this theme

In my original research outline (RO) I explained how my upbringing heavily contributed to me seeing myself as a mission-driven person, and how that influenced me to enter the field of international development. I have worked in development for the last thirteen years in various roles, including 9 years with a US development NGO focused on capacity building of other NGOs. Although I have always believed in the importance of capacity building being about helping organizations think more critically about their work, in much of my earlier work I was guided by a managerialist, power-neutral, “strategic efficiency” mindset, the type of which is commonly found in CB thinking and practice (Baser and Morgan, 2008: 71, Clarke and Oswald, 2010: 2). My PhD process has been part of a deeper exploration of my own purposefulness as a development and capacity building “change” facilitator. By purposefulness I mean the development of a more intentional agenda for my own participation in social change processes.

It has been on my PhD journey that I have realized that uncritical capacity building which ignores the complexities and difficulties of social change is meaningless to me, due what I perceive to be its fundamentally un-transformative nature. In this process I have come to see myself as needing to be more overt in taking my own stands on things and I started to question myself why the CB I design and facilitate shouldn’t also be thought of in that light. My work with one of my case organizations, PDTG, has influenced me in this as well as I observed how their work with social movements is very purposeful in the challenges it makes to underlying power structures. My work with the Fundación Sirua, another case organization, also influenced me as I observed how the important Afro-Ecuadorian park guards eke by on meager wages in a difficult environment. My activist co-facilitator in Peru has also influenced my thinking on this, as has my participation on the IDS-led “Capacity Collective”, where we have explored methodological characteristics of capacity strengthening processes intended to contribute to emancipatory social change. These experiences call attention to the messy and political nature of capacity development and ‘demand a critical development practice based on concerted and permanent attention to power and values’ (Clarke and Oswald, 2010: 4).

Through my research I hope to bring more critical thinking and reflection to capacity building design and facilitation, and learn more about how capacity building can play an important role in improving real people’s lives in difficult environments.
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1. Introduction

Are NGOs and other development intereners in the “business” of change? If so, what are we trying to change and do the ways we go about it actually support change in a meaningful way? For those that are uncomfortable with the word change, do terms like performance, results, and outcomes offer better ways of describing what it is we’re trying to achieve as development intereners? Are they synonymous with change or do they improve upon the concept by helping us take the messiness and imprecision out of change and package development interventions in a more professional and achievable way? What about capacity building (CB), that broad set of activities to which the international development aid “system” allocates annually over a quarter of its finances—25 billion a year through formal technical assistance alone? (OECD, 2006: 13, Ubels et al., 2010: 1). Are capacity builders in the business of change—are we social change agents?

“Capacity, Change and Performance” (Baser and Morgan, 2008), considered to be the largest study to date on capacity development (Fowler and Ubels, 2010: 24), tells us that indeed there is some relationship between capacity and change. Increases in organizational capacity of an NGO, for example, should contribute to its “performance”, i.e. to more effective implementation of its work. This performance could also be thought of as the “result” of the application and use of capacity (Baser and Morgan, 2008: 4). Interventions intended to strengthen the capacities of NGOs, therefore, if effective, might contribute to increased performance of these organizations. Indeed, this has been a core assumption of all work I have engaged in over the last 12 years as a CB practitioner. If CB did not help NGOs increase their development learning and impact, as well as their own readiness (Ortiz and Taylor, 2009: 21), or response-ability (Fowler, 2000: 8), it would be a waste of time and resources.

But systems and complexity writers tell us that to think linearly about how interventions of any kind cause outcomes is problematic in complex environments (Burns, 2007, Checkland, 1981, 1993, Flood, 1988, Flood, 1999, Jackson, 2000, Midgley, 2000, Mowles et al., 2008, Snowden and Boone, 2007, Stacey, 2007). A linear view of change assumes that if I carry out activities X and Y, outcome Z will be generated. For example, if I train local community members on the importance of environmental protection, they will cut down fewer trees. Or, if I provide condoms to sex workers I can reduce incidence of disease from unprotected sex. The problem with these cause and effect statements is that they ignore the complex elements of broader contexts that come to bear on whether these changes actually occur. In complex environments change emerges from an unknowable combination of influences from multiple actors and factors which are in constant flux (Flood, 1999), making it ‘impossible to predict with any confidence the relation between cause and effect’ (Eyben et al., 2008:203-4). This has implications for intentional efforts to affect change which must ‘confront the impossibility of our ever having a total understanding of all the sets of societal relationships that generate change’ (ibid). Taking the first example, local community members may harvest trees for ancestral reasons, for survival, or because there is a lucrative market for local wood, facilitated by opportunistic local government officials and driven by consumption of high quality furniture in markets far away. If wood cutting actually goes down, it will be due to a mix of factors that is not predictable in a linear, cause and effect manner. In complex environments just as development interventions cannot be thought of to linearly “cause” development outcomes, capacity building cannot be thought of to linearly cause improved capacities, nor can these capacities be assumed to contribute linearly to social change (Ortiz Aragón, 2010b: 43). What then are the relationships between capacity and change, and can capacity building processes purposefully contribute to “good change”(Chambers, 2005: 186) in complex environments?

My research takes the perspective that capacity building is about change and therefore needs to be thought of as part of the broader debate on how change comes about, particularly in complex, contested social change situations. This brings about three related themes which are particularly problematic when taken together

- Capacity building as purposeful intervention that supports social change
- The non linear nature of social change and capacity development in complex environments
- The subjective (interpretive) and contested nature of “good” social change

My research is designed as a search for organizational capacity building methodology for social change that is relevant and meaningful in complex environments. It poses the core question “What systemic methodologies are helpful in strengthening the capacities of organizations working for social change in complex environments”? It is my hope that we will discover purposeful capacity building that contains
within its sociology some thinking and methodology that is able to better explain and grapple with change (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), yet in a critical, non-linear and meaningful manner.

In the next section (2) I share the area of concern for the research and the research framework, including relevant literature. In sections (3) and (4) I present abbreviated sets of findings from my research with two of my three case organizations, particularly as they relate to my first two specific research questions (presented in section 2.2). In section (5) I offer further analysis as it relates to my last two research questions. I conclude with a presentation of my proposed thesis structure and questions for the audience (6).

2. Area of concern and research framework

I have chosen Checkland & Holwell’s F, A, M framework (1998: 13) to structure my research (see figure 1). This framework makes explicit an area of concern for the action research (A), a methodology (M) for intervening in the area of concern, and a framework of ideas (F) on which the methodology is based and which justifies its use in the area of concern. The framework of ideas (F) represents conceptual / theoretical knowledge, but also practical local knowledge from the area of concern that would inform whether the use of a certain methodology would make sense or not. Checkland and Holwell note that the application of an (M) in an (A) through action research will always produce knowledge regarding all three—F, M and A (ibid). Depending on the focus of a particular piece of action research the researcher has to make choices on the relative emphasis of F, M or A knowledge that is being sought. The focus of my research is very clearly on generating methodological knowledge (M), which is a theme in which an important gap currently exists.

2.1. Area of concern—methodology to support purposeful capacity building in complex, contested social change environments

The area of concern I am researching is, broadly speaking, capacity building methodology that is relevant and meaningful in supporting organizations working for social change in complex environments. Specifically I wish to help generate knowledge through action to support organizations and organizational change facilitators who are seeking improved strategic and methodological clarity on how they can purposefully develop capacities to contribute to emergent, social change in complex realities. As mentioned in the introduction, this brings together three themes that are problematic when taken together:

2.1.1. Capacity building as a set of purposeful interventions that support social change

Definitions of capacity and capacity development

A commonly cited definition of capacity and capacity development comes from the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development’s (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the working group charged with coordinating implementation of the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness:

“Capacity” is understood as the ability of people, organisations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully.

“Capacity development” is understood as the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time. (OECD, 2006: 13)

According to the DAC, this definition is deliberately simple in order to ‘avoid any judgement on the objectives that people choose to pursue, or what should count as success in the management of their collective efforts’ (ibid). A more recent compendium of practitioner perspectives on capacity development defines capacity as ‘the ability of a human system to perform, sustain itself and self-renew’, and capacity development as ‘changes in capacity over time’ (Ubels et al., 2010: 4). This definition also avoids judgements on specific objectives or values. ‘Capacity-development support’ (ibid) and ‘promotion of capacity development’ (OECD, 2006: 13) are the terms these sources use to describe deliberate attempts to
make capacities grow beyond their existing condition. This is preferred over the more commonly used “capacity building” because the “building” metaphor suggests attempts to strengthen capacities starting from a blank slate and a preconceived design (ibid: 12), as if constructing a building. This is problematic because any capacity building that “is not part of an endogenous process of change, getting its main impulse from within,” is unlikely to be effective (ibid: 15). “Capacity strengthening” is another term I and fellow practitioners have frequently used to describe our attempts to increase capacities.

Narrow definitions also exist, e.g. ‘Capacity is the ability to carry out stated objectives’ (LaFond and Brown, 2003: 7, quoting Goodman, 1998), as do definitions which contain value judgments about its proper use, e.g. ‘Capacity represents the potential for using resources effectively and maintaining gains in performance with gradually reduced levels of external support’ (LaFond and Brown, 2003: 7). Capacity has been defined with minimalist simplicity, e.g. ‘Capacity is [the] potential to perform’ (Horton et al., 2003: 18). It has been divided into “hard” capacities such as “infrastructure, technology, [and] finances (ibid: 23), and “soft” capacities, such as “…human and organisational capacities, or social capital of the organisation, including such things as management knowledge and skills, …organisational systems and procedures, …and procedures for planning and evaluation’ (ibid: 163).

**Purposeful capacity development**

The definitions presented thus far offer understandings of capacity development which are so potentially expansive that CD runs the risk of becoming synonymous with “development” itself (Morgan, 1997: 2). To narrow a bit there is an area of general agreement in much of the literature that capacity exists and is strengthened for a reason—i.e. it is for something (Fowler and Ubels, 2010: 18), either as a means or an end in itself. Baser and Morgan state that capacity is meant to be put to use, to ‘enable a human system to create value’ (2008: 3). The oft posed question ‘capacity for what?’ (Baser and Morgan, 2008: 31, Lopes and Theisohn, 2003: 25, OECD, 2006: 19) is generally met with the response: “performance”, ultimately in support of positive change. Morgan elaborates on the concept of capacities for performance:

> Capacity has to do with collective ability, i.e. that combination of attributes that enables a system to perform, deliver value, establish relationships and to renew itself. Or put another way, the abilities that allow systems—individuals, groups, organisations, groups of organisations—to be able to do something with some sort of intention and with some sort of effectiveness and at some sort of scale over time. (Morgan, 2006b: 7)

And Baser and Morgan put forth a more purposeful or intentional definition of capacity development, as ‘the process of enhancing, improving and unleashing capacity; it is a form of change which focuses on improvements’ (Baser and Morgan, 2008: 4). Therefore, organizational capacity building is meant to help organizations improve upon their capacities to do their work effectively.

### 2.1.2. The non linear nature of capacity development and social change in complex environments

Many authors have noted how dominant linear thinking and practice in development—although perhaps convenient for simplifying the world in planning processes—tend to see the world from the perspective of their own instruments (Bakewell and Garbutt, 2005, Earle, 2002, Kaplan, 1999, Reeler, 2007), and do not adequately take into account the inherent complexity of most social change processes (Ortiz Aragón, 2010b: 36). Complexity theory sheds light on the futility of assuming the development interventions (including, but not limited to capacity building) of any...
particular organization have more control over their intended ends than they actually do. One of the basic premises of complexity theory for development is that the directions in which development is going are often ‘random and unplanned’ (Morgan, 1997: 6) and have little to do with where pre-set goals and well-planned development interventions intend for it to go. Cause and effect cannot be predicted with any confidence because change emerges from multiple factors, many of which are unknowable (Flood, 1999). Action rarely generates impact in a linear way; positive or negative outcomes ‘will often have more to do with the interrelationship between interacting interventions than the effect of any individual action’ (Burns, 2007: 21).

The complexity of social change has implications for development practice. There is a body of work arguing for the need to learn how “to do” development differently by understanding the full complexity and non-linear nature of social change processes (Guijt, 2007: 20, Baser and Morgan, 2008: 125) and ‘the complex, emergent realities of the lives and livelihoods of poor people’ (Chambers, 2010: 36). Complexity renders causality inherently unknowable, and therefore planning and control in complex situations has limited utility (Baser and Morgan, 2008, Earl et al., 2001, Earle, 2002, Ramalingam and Jones, 2008). Conventional approaches to development, which are often project-focused, are based on linear, cause-effect models of change which do not adequately take into account emergence, flexibility, adaptability and innovation required to deal with complexity (Britton, 2005, Reeler, 2007).

Some capacity development literature carries a similar message of complexity, arguing that capacity development is an inherently political and complex process that is unstable and changeable (Watson, 2006: 2). Capacity development interventions are not linear but occur in a distinctly more ‘messy fashion’ (Lusthaus et al., 1999: 15), which, therefore, ‘require different ways of managing and measuring’ (Morgan, 1997: 6). Land et al emphasize the need to act differently, on the basis of what the concept of emergent capacity permits:

By changing the way we look at cause-and-effect relationships, emphasising possibilities and probabilities rather than predictable results, it also challenges many assumptions about the need for planning, detailed design and control. In the process, it questions the way external partners set about influencing local change processes. Specific capacity development outcomes cannot simply be engineered by the delivery of external inputs. Interventions need to be flexible and able to adapt to future, usually unforeseeable, system behaviour. (Land et al., 2009: 3)

The ECDPM capacity development study made an important effort to better understand capacity development in complex environments (Baser and Morgan, 2008, Land et al., 2009). This empirical study built on earlier normative capacity development literature which had also highlighted the complex nature of capacity for development (James, 2001, Kaplan, 1999, Lusthaus et al., 1999, Morgan, 1997). Some of the “soft” capacities noted earlier were further classified as “intangible”, highlighting the importance of an organisation’s ‘ability to function as a resilient, strategic and autonomous entity’ (Kaplan, 1999: 20), as well as having the capabilities to commit and engage, adapt and self renew, relate and attract, and balance diversity and coherence (Baser and Morgan, 2008, Morgan, 2006b). As better understanding of these relational, adaptive capacities emerges, capacity development is shifting ‘from a focus on implementing discrete projects aimed at skills enhancement or organisational strengthening, to addressing much broader societal and systemic challenges… in sometimes highly contested environments, characterised by uncertainty and insecurity’ (ECDPM, 2008: 2).

Yet, in spite of the non linear nature of how capacities emerge, many authors have noted a continued prevalence of linear tendencies in capacity development. Baser and Morgan note that current thinking about capacity issues has improved, in that it ‘gives more attention to context, i.e. relating any interventions, internal or external, to the history, structure and pattern of the context’ (2008: 49). But they find it is important to ‘emphasise the complexity and the paradoxes of many context-actor relationships that do not conform to a linear pattern of cause and effect’ (ibid). And they note the ‘system blindness’ of people everywhere, ‘who see only parts of these systems at work and then make judgments about the whole;…see the present, but not the evolution or history of events that got things to the present;…misunderstand the nature of the relationships that shape system behaviour’ (ibid: 17). Baser and Morgan note that much of the more rational, linear, quasi-mechanical approaches to capacity development lose relevance because of these blind spots (ibid). And Morgan, referring to the design of capacity development indicators, notes that the oversimplification caused by ‘mechanical and linear notions [of capacity development] so attractive to
engineers, auditors and economists produce[s] little insight into the human behavioural aspects to do with learning, attitudes and values or organisational change’ (1997: 12).

Many of these capacity building approaches are implicitly based on the ‘organization as a machine’ metaphor (Morgan, 2006a)—rooted in classical management theory and scientific management—which focuses on ‘the idea that management is a process of planning, organization, command, coordination and control’, and ‘that organizations can or should be rational systems that operate in as an efficient manner as possible’ (ibid: 18, 22). But an understanding of organizations as a rational, technical process tends to obscure the human, cultural and political aspects of organization, and overlooks the reality ‘that the tasks facing organizations are often much more complex, uncertain, and difficult than those that can be performed by most machines’ (ibid: 27).

### 2.1.3. The subjective and contested nature of “good” social change

#### Capacity and social change

Clarke and Oswald (2010: 3) in critically analyzing the origins and value of the term ‘capacity development’ note that most literature looks at CD from either a technical, discourse or an emancipatory lens. The technical lens asks the question: ‘how can policy and practice contribute more effectively to development goals?’ (ibid). This is asked within the policy debates on aid effectiveness and also at the practitioner level, where individuals and organizations that may or may not be aware of policy debates, are grappling with finding better technical means of approaching their work. The core assumption is that capacity building is a value-free technical solution to a technical problem. The discourse lens focuses on how capacity development, like other development ‘buzzwords and fuzzwords’ (Cornwall and Eade, 2010, Eade, 2010), potentially masks a hidden agenda to impose external power interests and legitimize a new practice that simply recasts failed, traditional development in a new “capacity” light. Through this lens one might look at the recent “Capacity is Development” campaign, for example, as ‘a discourse concealing an agenda of power’ (Clarke and Oswald, 2010: 3). And the emancipatory lens sees the legitimization of capacity building through ideas such as capacities in support of social justice and capacity as critical consciousness for action—an end in itself that is closely related to concepts of participation and empowerment (ibid). This includes a more structural view of capacity, including the ‘capacitation (sic) of donors, governments, and many development agencies to realign their own values, structures, and agendas to counteract asymmetries of power that exacerbate systemic poverty and powerlessness’ (Black, 2003: 118). The emancipation lens is supported by Eade’s contention that ‘the intellectual and political roots of capacity building lie partly in the rights-centred capacitación of Liberation Theology and the conscientización work of Paulo Freire’ as well as the idea that capacity building seeks to address the exclusion and unfreedoms that Sen’s work on entitlements and capacities highlights (Eade, 2010: 205).

According to Clarke and Oswald these views are not necessarily mutually exclusive, with each perspective having something important to contribute to a critical development practice. But the predominant capacity development policy literature frames it as a value-free technical problem, thus obscuring issues of values and power (Clarke and Oswald, 2010: 4). This literature is well represented by the intentionally value-free DAC position discussed earlier: ‘Capacity is understood as the ability of people, organisations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully’ (OECD, 2006: 13). The problem with this, however, is that the “affairs management” is a contested endeavor that favors the status quo (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), powerful over the weak, wealth over poverty, standardized over diverse (Chambers, 1993: 8), and things over people (Chambers, 2010: 11). As such, if capacity building is to contribute to social change, it must be approached taking into account not only the non-linear, complex nature of that change, but also problematize the contested, uneven and socially unjust nature of that change. Consider the following definition of social change put forth by the ‘facilitating learning in action for social change’ (‘FLASC’) initiative:

> [Social change is] a process of dialogue, debate and action resulting in major shifts in social norms, and is generally characterised by the highlighting and legitimisation of discordant voices, particularly of those marginalised in society, and leading to improvements in their rights, entitlements and living conditions. (Quoted in Taylor and Clarke, 2008: 13)

The idea of capacities for social change as presented in this definition encourages a very different worldview on capacity building than the mainstream technical worldview. It implies the need for capacity building to not only be thought of in relation to social change for purposes of “development effectiveness” or “performance”, but as a process with an explicit agenda for social change which helps organizations think
more critically about how they take their stand against unjust power structures and deal with problematic issues of culture and power relations in general. It implies helping organizations problematize the relationships between the complex social change they are trying to affect outside their organizations (i.e. external conditions), and their internal complexity, structures, processes, programs, projects, power relations, culture, capacities, etc. (what I call internal change conditions). This brings in the discourse and emancipatory lenses discussed by Clarke and Oswald which highlight ‘the messy and political nature of capacity development’ (ibid), and the value-full intention behind the idea of purposeful capacity building for social change.

Then, if we think about how to strengthen these capacities in complex environments we are left with very little documented theory or practice to draw from. How does one go about asking what a situation calls for and then purposefully try to act in a way that supports emerging opportunities, challenges and “change” in the most thoughtful and intentional way possible? How can we act differently and develop the capacity for changing the way we look at cause-and-effect relationships, predictable results, and detailed planning and control? (Land et al., 2009). And in contested complex social change realities how can we help organizations think more critically about how they take their stand against unjust power structures and how they deal with issues of culture and power relations that affect their ability to affect meaningful change? In other words, how can we show that strengthening organizations in complex environments is not only a technical issue, but a critical capacity building for social change issue? Methodologically, how can we go about doing so?

Underlying worldviews and theories of social change

Linear and uncritical understandings of social change are not simply technical problems, but ‘influence and express conditions, ideologies, perceptions, practices and priorities’ (Chambers, 2005: 186). Taylor and Clarke note that ‘different actors engaged in capacity development processes tend not to articulate their own theoretical understandings of how change happens’ (2008: 16). But even if individuals and organizations are not aware or do not make them explicit, development practice is informed by theories of change (Eyben et al., 2008: 201). Underlying these practices and theories of change are even deeper ways of seeing the world, including linear, heroic, managerialist, uncritical, status quo (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), and other worldviews that may or may not be relevant in the best case, but may reproduce unhealthy elements of culture, power relations and hegemonic thought and practice in other cases. Indeed, Baser and Morgan note that a main reason for failure of many CB interventions is the assumption that technical and organizational processes can be addressed without examining governing mental models (2008: 95). As such, any process intended to find helpful relationships between capacity interventions and social change in complex environments needs to give special attention to how worldviews and theories of change condition our ideas and practices for intervening in different development contexts.

2.2. Research questions

Overarching question

What systemic methodologies are helpful in purposefully strengthening the capacities of organizations working for social change in complex environments?

Specific questions

1) Methodologically, how can we strengthen specific organizational capacities, processes or systems in relation to broader social change purposes and emergent, complex realities?

The crux of this question is on the need to look at each internal capacity issue in relation to organizational programmatic purposes (with a focus on downward accountability) and in relation to “external” conditions for change—i.e. how social change emerges in complex environments (see figure 2). A more technical way of framing this question is: Methodologically, how can we explore the existing and desired systemic relationships between

Figure 2—Purposeful capacity building
“external” conditions for social change and “internal” change conditions (i.e. organizational programs, processes, systems and capacities) that are necessary for effectively supporting social change?

2) Methodologically, how can we enable development of worldviews and theories of change that are relevant and meaningful in contested complex social change realities?

The previous question was focused on how to go about reflecting upon and establishing actual and ideal, theoretical and practical relationships between internal and external change conditions—i.e. understanding theories and practices of change. This question, then, is about asking, methodologically: what is underneath these theories and practices of change? Are they purposeful and systemic? What assumptions and underlying worldviews inform these TOCs, and are they relevant in the complex situations that each organization works? How do organizational culture and power relationships support or inhibit systemic theories and practices of change? Methodologically this implies looking for methods and techniques that are particularly effective in provoking deep reflection on organizational assumptions and theories of change.

3) How do critical, systemic action research principles unfold in each case and what are the methodological challenges and benefits of carrying out action research as capacity building?

Although capacity building may “need” action research if it is to contribute to transformational change processes, there are reasons why it is currently so absent from CB processes. This question is meant to: a) examine the challenges faced and the benefits incurred in this particular research process; b) critically examine the practical and ethical implications of where the boundaries were set for participation in the action research (and by whom); and c) share our best understanding of the AR/CB processes and “results” that were found to be meaningful to participants in each case organization.

4) What are the motivations of the participants in the action research (specifically, facilitators and organizational representatives) and how do the researchers’ world views and intentional change agenda reconcile with the identified needs of each organization?

As an action research process addressing contested social change realities it is important to analyze how mine and my co-researcher’s ideas of purposeful capacity building and change support or conflict with those of members of the case organizations.

2.3. Framework of ideas

The methodology that a researcher selects to inquire into an area of concern is supported by a framework of ideas, which then becomes embodied in the methodology (Checkland and Holwell, 1998: 13). The literature presented in section 2.1 was meant to help demonstrate the rich layers of the area of concern (i.e. purposeful CB, complexity and contested social change) that my research methodology must take into account; it is not the framework of ideas in the FAM framework, which I now present. My research methodology primarily draws on soft and systemic systems theory, systemic action research, and capacity development literature as my framework of ideas. These traditions combine interpretive and critical strands of thinking about relationships, perspectives and boundaries which can help us make sense of the problematic and promising linkages between capacity building and social change.

2.3.1. Soft systemic and critical systemic thinking

Soft systemic thinking

Checkland states that “human activity systems” often have ill-defined “soft” problems which cannot be defined in simple means-ends language, because defining the ends, goals, purposes is in itself problematic (1993: 316). With soft problems any given stakeholder might have a different interpretation of the same problem. Soft problems are typical in the complexity of “messy” human development, and require interventions, processes and systems that match the uncertainty and complexity of social change—i.e. that do not attempt to force predetermined, simplistic, causal solutions on complex realities. Soft systems thinking (Checkland, 1993, Checkland, 2000, Checkland and Poulter, 2006) introduces the idea of systems and processes that are meant to be flexible, emergent, iterative, and learning-based, in order to offer more relevant responses to complex social change. They are not assumed to be “real” objective systems or “wholes” that can be engineered; but rather expressions of ways of seeing the world. As such they are not to be thought of as end products in optimal design processes of a system, for example, but learning devices which surface worldviews that can help us ask better questions of complex situations which have no
objective, optimal answer. This can help us grapple with external and internal complexity by bringing more perspectives to bear on a situation and help negotiate iterative accommodations on what to change or not.

Critical systemic thinking—boundaries and power relationships

Critical systems thinking reminds us to make efforts to “sweep in” perspectives from key stakeholders (Churchman, 1979, Flood, 1999, Midgley et al., 1998, Ulrich and Reynolds, 2010), taking into account that organizational programs and systems are designed explicitly or implicitly to satisfy particular worldviews and interests, and if the worldviews and interests of primary and other key stakeholders are not present in our theories of change, the systems they spawn—including development projects—are unlikely to generate results that are meaningful to those actors. Critical systemic thinking can be helpful in problematizing the boundaries that organisations draw for their capacity development and related systems.

Critical capacity building also needs to intentionally examine how power relationships influence the choices of sense-making or learning processes available to social actors to build their understandings and abilities within specific capacity development processes, as well the capacity of individuals and organizations to engage as actors in processes of development and change (Taylor and Clarke, 2008: 12). Bringing power analysis into CB is not such a straightforward endeavor, because although there is growing amount of theory relevant to CB, it is rare to find literature that problematizes power relations in CB in an applied way, or that presents empirical evidence of how they affect CB interventions (ibid). Rowlands notes that concepts such as ‘capacity building’, ‘empowerment’, ‘participation’, ‘sustainability’, ‘institutional development’, and many others concepts used by development practitioners and planners have in common ‘a worrying temptation to use them in a way that takes the troublesome notions of power, and the distribution of power, out of the picture’ (1995: 106). This is echoed by others as well, who note that capacity building is frequently portrayed as a value neutral, apolitical process in which participants willingly learn skills and techniques that allow them to better carry out their work (Baser and Morgan, 2008: 71, Tandon, 2010: 97, Clarke and Oswald, 2010: 2). But, as Clegg states, power and organization are inseparable—we cannot think about power without analyzing how it is organized, nor can we make serious inquiry into organizations without looking into power—‘power is to organization as oxygen is to breathing’ (Clegg et al., 2006: 2-3). In CB power must be taken into account, because increased capacities of many actors do not necessarily lead to the ability to put those capacities to use. In other words, it is not enough to strengthen capacities at a “power to” level (i.e. latent knowledge, abilities and resources) without at least trying to take into account how those capacities might be applied towards some developmental change, and whether enabling conditions are in place that allow this to be possible, i.e. whether key actors have the power to put their capacities to use (Ortiz Aragón, 2010a: 7).

2.3.2. Systemic action research

Systemic action research is an approach that focuses on understanding the complexity of human action and interaction by examining it in relation to its broader context. A holistic approach is needed because ‘complex issues cannot be adequately comprehended in isolation from the wider system of which they are a part’ (Burns, 2007: 1). I draw on systemic action research because it is inherently an emergent learning process that can help us purposefully grapple with complexity (Burns, 2007, Checkland and Holwell, 1998, Flood, 2001, Ison, 2008, Reason, 2006) by allowing us to look at the dynamics of change within their context, which can help find ways of making visible some of the systemic connections that affect them (Burns, 2007: 39). Also, some strands of action research have a rich history of connecting issues of political action, social change, multiple ways of seeing and knowing the world, and engagement with wider social norms and theories of change (Burns, 2007: 15). Action research promotes learning in action, which is key for understanding capacity building interventions and the methodologies and philosophies upon which they are based. Lastly, action research can help organizations mired in unreflective action cultures learn as they act and vice versa (Britton, 2005, Checkland and Poulter, 2006, Reeler, 2007, Smil, 2007, Soal, 2001). This might help overcome the dichotomy that exists in much development practice, which Reeler frames in terms of ‘the ungrounded academic versus the unthinking practitioner’ (Reeler, 2007).

2.3.3. Capacity development and organizational development

Lastly I draw on capacity development literature in order to situate the knowledge that is generated through my research as a contribution to the ongoing debate on the purposes and means of developing capacities in development—specifically, the idea that capacity building methodology should join the family of radical epistemologies for social change. I will heavily draw on the ECDPM study, cases and capabilities
framework referenced earlier because it is one of the only sources of capacity development literature that takes into account complexity, power relations, culture and contested social change in general. Capacity development has been heavily influenced by the broader field of organization development (Richter, 2010: 101), and the subjects of complexity, theories of change, action research, and critical, systemic thinking for social change organizations, naturally lead to, and build on organization development and learning theory. Therefore, I will draw upon organizational learning literature (see Argyris, 2003, Britton, 2005, Hawkins, 2004, Kelleher, 2002, Pastew, 2006, Power et al., 2002, Roper and Pettit, 2002, Schön, 1983, Senge et al., 2004), as well as broader organizational development literature (Bolman and Deal, 2008, Burrell and Morgan, 1979, Etzioni, 1964, Gallos, 2006, Kaplan, 1999, Morgan, 2006a, Schein, 1988, Schein, 2004).

2.4. **Methodology**

My methodology consists of the action areas shown in figure 3, which I now briefly describe. The numbers have been added in the diagram for purposes of explanation, not because of linear flow.

2.4.1. **1 – Agree upon a specific area of concern with particular organizations**

I designed four criteria to generate alignment between the research area of concern and the particular needs of a potential case organization. I then identified the specific focus area for the action research with each organization. The process objectives of each organization can be found in annex 7.1. Although we “pre-identify” the specific area of concern (with organizational leadership) we do not assume that these objectives are meaningful to the other process participants, or that they were perfectly understood by the leaders and facilitators when they were developed. We therefore make an effort to clarify, enrich or redefine the focus of the action research process in the first major workshop. By sweeping in additional key perspectives before “diving in” we believe we increase the chances that the process will be meaningful.

2.4.2. **2 – Design the initial process with each organization, leaving flexibility for ongoing, emergent design**

Once we have a basic mandate for action with specific process objectives we design the process in consultation with each organization. In two of the three cases we, as facilitators, have been given the main responsibility for design, but in the case of PDTG organizational leaders have participated more actively in the design process. In all three cases we planned key workshops, but left open much of the design for unknown future moments in which particular subthemes would emerge. In all cases, we made an effort to name research products as soon as we had enough information to know the final boundaries of the research. The funding situation also imposed some boundaries, but overall we tried to emerge along with key developments.

2.4.3. **3 – Carry out action research activities to address the specific area of concern.**

We used participatory, systemic action research (but not PAR), primarily via interviews, workshops, accompaniment /field visits, focus groups, document reviews, systematization of experiences, report writing, and presentations.

2.4.4. **3a – Use systemic theories of change (STOC) principles as a loose set of guidelines for maintaining a critical, systemic capacity building focus**

I have developed, with the support of a co-researcher, Juan Carlos Giles, some initial methodological principles I am calling “systemic theories of change” (see Ortiz Aragón and Giles Macedo, 2010, for a detailed explanation). These principles provide basic reminders of the key concepts I presented in section 2.1 of this document on purposeful capacity building (again, see figure 2). They allow me to keep key elements of my framework of ideas present, to be consulted as we carry out each customized, “client” focused action research process. For a more detailed explanation of STOC please see Annex 7.2.
2.4.5. 4 – Process data for feedback to each organization and adjust process accordingly, until arriving at an agreed-upon end-point.

The activities described in item 3 above produces facilitator workshop design documents; notes, digital recordings and transcripts of key interviews and workshops; and other types of codable research data. Action area 4 refers to how the facilitators process data primarily for purposes of feedback to organizations in relation to their specific areas of concern. In other words, at this point we are not so much focused on processing data in relation to the research questions, but in relation to each organization’s specific process. We produce workshop memories (like minutes) that contain literally the things that came out of each workshop, as well as reports that include some level of facilitator analysis. In some cases we receive feedback from members of each organization.

2.4.6. 5 – Methodologically process data using “key factors framework” and write case studies

As mentioned in action area 4 we do some processing throughout but mostly in response to the demands of each specific process in a given moment. For thesis purposes I designed what I call a “key factors framework” (see figure 4). Through this framework we first try to document knowledge that is relevant to each organization’s area of concern. We do so by asking the question, “What have we learned about the relationships between necessary external and internal conditions for social change in each case?” We are calling these relationships “theories and practices of change” (#1 in the diagram), assuming that consciously or unconsciously change practices are influenced by worldviews and theories of change (organizational, societal, individual, etc.) and vice-versa.

We then document how certain key influencing factors (#2 in the diagram), such as the assumptions that underlie thinking and actions, organizational culture and power relationships affect or condition the quality of the relationship between internal and external change conditions. We do so by asking the question “What have we learned about how these key factors affect or condition an organization’s theories and practices of change?”

But our main focus is on testing methodological ways (#3) that allow us to find out how these key factors affect organizational theories and practices of change and either support or present obstacles to an organization that is trying to contribute purposefully (but not linearly) to social change. To do so we ask the question “methodologically, what have we learned about how we can find out about these key factors & strengthen these theories & practices of change?”

3. Preliminary findings: PDTG—A look at systemic relationships between militant identities and organizational capacities

3.1. Background

PDTG is a militant, activist think tank of sorts that initially began as a program within the University of San Marcos in Lima, Perú. PTDG is now an independent NGO working for social justice, but with a very strong political agenda focused on changing uncritical, hegemonic ways of seeing the world and development intervention in the world. Strong within its members’ identities is the need to challenge the inequitable status quo and propose alternatives to what they perceive to be neoliberal Western capitalist, paternalistic, sexist, structurally unjust, power systems and cultures. They approach their work through the concept of “weaving knowledges”, which means finding ways to connect critical sociological and anthropological
theory from academia, with local knowledges, practices and worldviews of actors engaged in social movements in ongoing challenges in Peru and Latin America. They do this through editing and publishing academic pieces that critically analyze current development conflicts (for example, see: de Echave et al., 2009, Escobar, 2010, Hoetmer, 2009, de Sousa Santos, 2006, Vargas Valente, 2008, Zibechi, 2007), as well as by accompanying and strengthening the capacities of key organizations within social movements—for example women’s and indigenous groups. A core assumption is that social movements offer an important alternative to hegemonic development thinking and practice, and by accompanying and strengthening key organizations in social movements, much can be understood about the active struggles of oppressed people in their dynamic local realities. This can provide evidence of development alternatives, whereas critical theory can enable transformational praxis within social movements.

In this mini-case I share the initial challenging situation that we identified in PDTG through interviews, workshops and researcher analysis and feedback sessions. While this is only a small part of the overall research, it provides a unique example of how the methodologies we are using help generate critical, systemic analysis of an area of concern, including how worldviews, power relations, identity and culture affect organizational change processes, and go far beyond instrumental understandings of capacity. I briefly present the categories of challenges below (as shown in figure 5), including commentary on some of the unique relationships between them.

3.2. Description of the initial challenging situation of PDTG

A) Divergent and complementary hypotheses exist within the organization with regards to the ontological nature of social change and epistemological approaches to social change

When we began working with PDTG in June of 2009 several members of the organization felt that PDTG needed to affirm basic understandings and agreements with regards to different ways of seeing the ends and means of social change. This would help clarify organizational identity and also help resolve the following types of tensions:
- Legitimate diverse ways of understanding change—ontologically and epistemologically—and the implications of these understandings on organizational identity and action themes
- Power struggles that were disguised in debates about change
- The parceling out of themes and stakeholders to members of PDTG who championed their causes of individual interest (discussed in challenge area C)

Legitimate and diverse understandings of change, and PDTG organizational identity

When we began the action research two people were in the process of leaving the organization and several others had left in the previous year. Some left due to key differences on the purposes and processes of social change (also see category D on power relations), which we loosely categorized as two “families” of assumptions that were being contested within the organization.

Family A is characterized by a belief in an objective truth, a focus on material and economic life conditions, strong belief that the purpose of radical social change is to capture the state in order to reorder society in specific political territories, and a strong focus on addressing “systemic” structural factors that generate oppressive conditions. Family B is characterized by a belief in diverse understandings of truth, which is subjective and situational rather than absolute (truth as differentiated from ethics as principles), a focus on cultural and...
socio-psychological factors and power relations that perpetuate inequitable life conditions, problematizing the replacement of one hegemonic power over another in the same state, and searching for agency-centered alternatives to social change and governance—particularly favoring social movements as hopeful alternatives for promoting change. Family B favors multiple “knowledges” and ways of learning about and acting in the world, relevant to specific struggles and cultures. This includes using creative, subjective approaches to facilitation of change processes that engage more of a person in problematizing situations and proposing response strategies. Family A favors traditional political party organizing, mobilization and agenda setting processes that creates unity through clarity of a political platform. This includes using traditional party hierarchies, meetings and assemblies to move platforms forward.

These “families” are not pure or completely mutually exclusive; rather, they are meant to characterize to divergent ways of seeing the world that were very present in PDTG when the action research began. Each member of PDTG sat at different points along this continuum; some at the extremes and some with more hybrid appreciations of the purposes and mechanisms of social change. But at the time we began the AR process there was speculation and indication that the organization was moving clearly in the direction of family B, including PDTG’s leaders.

**Power struggles that were disguised in debates about change (also see Challenge area D)**

Different participants felt that those on the extreme end of family A assumptions left the organization as part of a bigger power struggle for organizational leadership and identity. Participant A’s position below was widely shared:

*So, there has been since the beginning a dispute for control in orienting the organization. Although many of these disputes were characterized by disputes over political worldviews, many times these debates were hidden beneath the table and instead played out as problems with power relationships, lack of horizontality or overly hierarchical structures. P-A*

This view assumes that the underlying struggle was for political identity of the organization, masked in debates about internal power relationships and hierarchy. Other members felt that the underlying struggle was about problematic internal power relationships and hierarchy, masked in debates about political views. Both potential reasons gave heed to the need to address core organizational identity issues.

**B) PDTG has a militant culture, which generates internal tensions in its most activist (i.e. busybody) expressions**

When we first began the process we (organizational participants and facilitators) spoke separately of the organization’s militant identity, which was something generally perceived as positive, and its activist / busybody habits, which were largely regarded as negative because they were unreflective and unlearning in many ways. One participant defines the positive side of militancy:

*You first have to give the word some genuine meaning because on its own it sounds neo-militaristic. But the processes that have adopted this adjective have permeated the concept with a more mystical feeling of commitment to the things one does, but which goes beyond simple commitment. The drawing together of your dreams and practices; to me that is militancy. This has much more meaning and takes on mystical characteristics when dreams and practices have a direct relationship with transformational processes; of searches for equality, with relations of solidarity, of seeing the world differently. When these dreams and practices unite and become constant in transformational processes, to me, that is militancy. P-B*

PDTG accompanies organizations that are seen as leaders within broader social movements addressing themes such as mining and development (particularly indigenous groups), campesina and indigenous women and development, gay, transsexual and bisexual (LGBT) struggles, as well as the struggles of other marginalized social groups. Besides accompanying specific movements PDTG exists in solidarity to “movimientos hermanos”—i.e. brother and sister movements that are seen as part of a broader championing of diverse ways of seeing and acting in the

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I would just add that it is a complex issue; when you recognize that one of the mentalities within social movements is to be active, to exist, mobilize, and mobilization which isn’t just a simple protest march—it’s constant activity. And then we say that we strengthen and accompany these movements, and we aspire to be part of the movement, but at the same time we as PDTG have a responsibility to promote learning, through systematization. We (referring to Reflect Action practitioners) call this interplay between doing and thinking, between doing and reflecting “praxis”. So we saw a lack of balance within an organization that is militantly committed to “doing”, and which struggles with linking doing with systematic reflection about what it is doing. **Juan Carlos**
world and carrying out protests of perceived hegemonic development practices. At any given moment crises ensue, protests erupt, and PDTG members feel compelled to participate, both out of personal motivation but also out of an expectation amongst movements that one’s “movimientos hermanos” will support each other in solidarity.

Being a part of these protests on a moment’s notice is one sign of a good militant organization. P-B elaborates further on the characteristics of a good militant:

*A militant that conjugates dreams with practices is like an all terrain vehicle—someone that is ready to diversify her or his practices to achieve the dream. He might convene actors one moment, work on small details another, or take sophisticated action another. He might be a presenter or a pamphlet designer, a master of ceremony or a sign painter. But he is a person that is ready to help with whatever is necessary so that the dream may become reality. A militant is a person that is ready to give his all to whatever is needed to make sure that things get done and turn out well.* P-B

But these “all terrain” elements of militant identity and practice have repercussions on PDTGs ability to reflect and learn, and its ability to effectively participate in transformational processes, or even consolidate basic priority programmatic areas, as noted by a PDTG board member.

*Look, at the level of PDTG’s contributions I have no problems, I like very much what they do; but at the same time I think it is a lot, and that there needs to be some prioritization that doesn’t cut out the essential things, but reduces the interventions somewhat… because they’re always working, doing, going from one place to another—which is interesting for gaining new experience, but not for consolidating basic programmatic areas.* P- C

P- C then speculates on some underlying causes:

*I think there are two things; one definitely has to do with overall conducting of the organization, because there is clarity on the need to prioritize, and there is some basic planning because clearly time is prioritized for more programmatic activities. But there is another factor behind the activism, which I can tell you from experience, and that is that activism provides instant gratification. It’s not the easiest route; you really have to have grand capacity to mobilize, interact, etc. But in spite of it all, without trying to minimize it, the effort [i.e. the activism] is the easiest part in the sense that you’re always acting, but you don’t spend any time reflecting. There is a complicated mechanism there that needs to be broken… How do you maintain the capacity to respond to the important circumstances that emerge in the moment, without this becoming your only way of working?*

This activism also has implications on PDTGs ability to structure itself and manage work life balances of people who have different understandings of what militancy means, as I will expand on in my analysis of challenge area D further below.

**C) PDTG lacks organizational structure, processes (work method) and culture to implement basic organizational management cycles**

Many PDTG members perceived their organization to be a loose collection of individual causes that had been parceled out to different “champions” who led PDTGs response to that cause, but which did not add up to more than the sum of their parts at an organizational level. This was due, in part, to a lack of internal processes and systems for agenda setting, accompaniment, follow through, accountability, learning, evaluation, etc. Most PDTG members held the ideal of the importance of constructing an organization that operated as a militant collective (i.e. “el colectivo”), but the lack of basic processes and structure did not lend themselves to the generation of a collective. Also, at this time organizational leadership has prioritized structure as an important area needing strengthening because of problems with quality and completion of work, lack of synergies between initiatives, and an overall internal pressure for PDTG to carry out transformational processes that would add up to something more at an organizational level. Accountability concerns to external funders also figured into this move towards more attention to internal processes and structures.

*The Program has developed impressively really and I think we are unaware of how much we have achieved, which is no small thing. We have developed strong relationships with local social organizations; the level of confidence they have in us… three years ago we would have never imagined that we would be able to enter into CONACAMI [national confederation of Peruvian communities affected by mining], speak with their leaders, be seen as a key ally. The publications*
have been important, as well as other activities. There are a ton of indicators that reflect the amount of work that has been done, but it has been built on a narrow and precarious base... This is what I have tried to show here in my drawing: the activism continues, there are flowers, buildings, indicators of progress, but it’s all built on a precarious base. P-D

Key limitations to addressing this issue, however, can be found in challenges A and B. Part of PDTG’s founding “DNA” was that of an anti-structure, horizontal, militant-activist organization. The director shared that he was the first in rejecting the idea of formal, traditional organizational form because, in principal, this was one of the things they were trying to challenge. But as the organization’s programs grew the lack of structure began to impede PDTG’s ability to “do”, which is a mortal sin in PDTGs view of activist militancy. Complicating matters further, PDTG’s excessive activism (challenge area B) also makes it difficult to generate the work culture for implementing basic organizational management processes and systems. Lastly, the lack of effective structure meant that problems with power relationships presented in challenge area D could not be resolved through formal organizational processes, and instead had to be dealt with outside formal processes. I expand on this in challenge area E.

D) There is a generalized perception of problematic power relationships and leadership practices

When the action research began many participants mentioned their perception of serious issues with power relationships in PDTG. Some of those relationships had been playing out as political debates masking deeper issues as mentioned earlier, but there was also a concrete record of people leaving the program after entering into sustained conflict with organizational leaders. As organizational identity clearly moved towards family B ontological and epistemological assumptions, PDTG leaders prioritized work areas that expanded further into working with social movements and away from traditional political parties. People clinging closely to orthodox views of politics and change found themselves without an ability to self-justify their interests, and some had prolonged exits in which one-sided power relationships were evident. This was complicated further by the fact that the organizational leaders (P-A & P-D) are husband and wife, and some perceived them to be a self-protecting block, or camp, within the organization.

A more subtle set of power issues, related to challenge area B, had to do with the fact that the two organizational leaders were also the two most busy, active militants, and had set, by example, an implicit standard of what and how much a PDTG militant does. PDTGs activist/militant cultural assumptions were largely maintained by these two individuals’ example. When other individuals did not share the same understanding of what a good militant does—either due to lax work habits or lack of political commitment (and related increased time dedication)—these individuals entered into conflict with organizational leaders. This is expanded upon in the following challenge area (E)

E) Tensions exist between individual life projects and motivations and PDTG purposes to become a collective of militants

Organizational leaders consider it to be a serious problem that certain members are insufficiently committed to PDTG causes, and PDTG itself, as militants. As organizational responsibilities and accountability demands grow, staff that are seen to be either uncommitted or, in some cases, unreliable in completing high workloads, enter into conflict with senior leadership. At the same time, interpersonal relationships have deteriorated to a degree in which basic operational coordination and communication has become difficult. But Program Coordinator P-D notes that due to the original rejection of organizational structure and work methods (as instruments of nefarious, hegemonic societal structures), to look to organizational-level processes to resolve tensions would be impractical because these structures do not exist in an effective form. On many occasions in which organizational leadership would attempt to resolve tensions at an organizational level, insinuations of hierarchy, unfair power relationships and hidden agendas would surface, reinforcing the difficult coordination environment. Instead P-D notes that individual reflective processes that work explicitly and intensely on issues of personal transformation—and its relationship to the construction of a militant collective, with basic organizational structure and work methods—offer the most
desirable means for addressing these individual-collective tensions and open conflicts. And these could be ideally carried out via intentional workshops facilitated by external facilitators who could put these issues on the table without being immediately dismissed as a participating in a power ploy.

Interestingly, as organizational leadership became frustrated with members who shared militant ideals but did not share activist (busybodies) practices, or simply were unreliable in completing their tasks, they looked to non-militant candidates to fill key roles in which technical and reliable project management skills would be prioritized over militant credentials. This eventually did not work either. For example, a new person was hired because of her project management skills. When she failed to adopt an activist, militant identity, however, she was unable to fit into organizational culture. She entered into conflicts with organizational leaders and members and left the organization.

F) PDTG has a growing need to learn and practice radical epistemologies internally and externally
PDTG knowledge of radical epistemology (i.e. action/reflexive, critical, multiple subjective methods, etc.) came from its own dabbling with Reflect Action (RA) beginning in 2008 (see section 5.4 for an explanation of RA). At that time RA was introduced by Juan Carlos Giles, my co-researcher in Peru and an ongoing consultant “friend of PDTG”. Although it was not sufficiently visible at the moment we began the research there were already hints of PDTGs inclination to explore these methodologies more deeply, for three main reasons. First, PDTG needed to solidify its emerging identity as an organization allied with diverse subaltern groups with diverse ways of seeing and acting in the world. This implied embracing methodologies designed to do so, particularly those designed to construct inter-subjective meanings between different “knowledges and worldviews. Second, in order to make sense out of the incredible complexity it faced with its strengthening of social movements, PDTG looked to subjective and systemic approaches to organizational strengthening, including developing significant interest in our emerging action research methodology. And third, some organizational members felt that these types of subjective approaches could help deal with internal tensions and conflicts that PDTGs formal organizational processes and structures could not.

3.3. Discussion
In this case we are able to see how diverse understandings on change and a predominant militant/activist identity directly affected organizational structure, generated internal conflicts, and affected the ability of organizational structure to deal with these conflicts—many of which were generated due to problematic power relationships. These factors also influenced the emerging demand for methodologies based on radical epistemology to deal with the complexity of strengthening organizations involved in social movements, as well as internal conflicts that were thought to be approachable through individual reflective processes (and not through formal organizational channels).

This case shows the confluence of all the so-called “key influencing factors” for critical capacity building (see figure 4 in section 2). We generated these reflections through a mix of exercises which elicited subjective understandings on change as well as more rational constructions of theories of change at program team levels. But even for the more rational constructions we generated them after problematizing change subjectively, with exercises which examined individual identity and motivations for change. For example, in one workshop we carried out an exercise in which each participant was asked to document (through drawing and text) changes in dress, eating preferences, books, music, passions, names and nicknames. On another day we carried out a similar drawing exercise contrasting places of residence before and after major moves in the last five years. We asked what had been easiest and most difficult to leave behind in the previous residence and to accept in the new residence. The first exercise yielded significant reflection on the effects of social conditioning on our personal change processes, while the second exercise highlighted the difficulties people have with change in general, and major moves in particular, including how resistance to change is tied up in identities which are grounded in “place” or geographical location, with its cultural ties and engrained habits. And yet another exercise called “how does coffee affect you” surfaced deep worldviews on change that ranged from coffee as a symbol of resistance of poor families who use coffee to gather their strength to confront their days, to coffee as a symbol of elitist intellectual hierarchies in society and imperialist designs, homogenizing tastes through global markets. This discussion provided another doorway into personal motivations on change.
All of these exercises “prime the pump” for discussions on how these key influencing factors affect organizational theories and practices. For example, clear connections to organizational thinking emerged when we structured a debate on organizational relevance, with each debate team beginning from polar opposite positions. The following excerpt from this debate is in response to a challenge from the other debate team regarding the Program’s relevance:

*We know it’s difficult because we are in the womb of the beast, but we make all possible effort to create counter-hegemonic conditions for knowledge production. That’s why we’re looking for a lesbian researcher, or preferably transsexual given that that theme causes a stir. Because that’s the idea, to question, and it’s very difficult. But I think in the last few years—since we bet on carving out a spot in academia, where we could create spaces for different forms of knowledge creation, and then our decision to accompany social movements—we’ve had the faith and conviction to not only question the hegemonic system on how knowledge is produced, but we’ve also secured many young allies that come from both academia and the social movements.*

But many of these exercises, while surfacing key factors of influence, have less direct connections to organizational theories and practices of change than others. Although they don’t produce “a smoking gun”, however, they do contribute to critical awareness raising, reflective practice and the humanizing of relations between people who often caricature each other in their official organizational roles. These exercises represent a methodological conundrum of sorts, in that their connection to organizational theories and practices of change is sometimes indirect, but extremely important in getting at deeper lying motivations for change. I will explore this further in my thesis.

4. INTSOL—an inductive approach to mapping relevant internal systems in relation to perceived external needs

4.1. Background

Integración y Solidaridad (INTSOL) is a nonprofit social change organisation whose mission is to promote sustainable human development in Ate Vitarte (‘El Ate’), an economically-depressed area on the outskirts of Lima, Peru. INTSOL has been working for more than 15 years to strengthen community and local organisations to develop individual and collective capacities to contribute to local development. Most of its activities fall within the area of community-organisation strengthening, where INTSOL primarily “accompanies” organizations that work with families with children in early learning processes; cultural, educational, recreational and non-formal education organisations; steering committees of neighbourhood groups; and women’s groups such as mothers clubs, popular kitchens and nutrition groups.

The work with INTSOL was initially negotiated as a process of inquiry into understanding “under what conditions can capacity development processes help support INTSOL’s theories of social change?” (letter of agreement, May 2009). Later in the process we developed a new process objective, which was to ‘carry out a contextualised process of action/reflection that helps identify and organise the elements of a systemic process of social change’. This was further meant to clarify how INTSOL’s ongoing, internal action-learning processes could be more effectively oriented towards strengthening its internal relationships and its interaction with the community (paraphrased from Ortiz Aragón and Giles Macedo, 2010). The facilitated process with INSTOL was shorter and less comprehensive than with PDTG and Sirua. As such, it lends itself to understanding more of the methodological process than would be possible in the other two cases. In the remainder of this section I focus on how we generated dialogue on the relationships between external and internal conditions for change, including internal systems that were relevant to the challenges that were identified. We generated this dialogue over two, two-day workshops and a third half-day workshop, over a month and a half period. The overall process included additional activities and workshop sessions but I will focus on the some of the key workshop moments of these three sessions, as shown in figure 6 further below.

4.2. Systemic relationships between internal and external change conditions

I begin by presenting the results of many exercises designed to problematize how INTSOL’s internal processes, systems and capacities were related to the external change conditions it was trying to affect. Then, in section 4.3, I highlight some of the key methods we used to generate these organized reflections.
4.2.1. Examination of assumptions regarding external conditions for change
Through the moments listed in figure 6 we generated 15 assumptions on change that were dominant in INTSOL at that time. We (the facilitators) have summarized these into the following five macro assumptions:

**Social change occurs via sustainable human development within a broader context of organisational and societal change:** This assumption emphasises that the “subject” of development is the autonomous individual, who is able “to control his or her own life”. This strengthening and the “transformation” that comes about, for some, is posed from the perspective of “a good Christian who desires for people in communities to generate their own capable and sustainable development”. The individual cannot be understood in a vacuum but in relation to the broader context of community organisational and societal change.

**Sustainable human development is achieved via strong community organisations over the long-term:** In INTSOL there is a strong belief that community organisations which are strengthened in their overall management (understood broadly) leads to sustainable changes in El Ate. A strengthened organisation has a clear development vision, is highly networked with other actors, is participatory, and incorporates planning into its work.

**Organisations and individuals are strengthened through reflective consciousness, empowerment and critical position-taking in confronting their reality:** This assumption focuses on the belief within INTSOL that as people become more aware of their reality, the need for change becomes internalised, as does one’s recognition of his/her capacities and liberty to influence reality. This includes a challenge to passive community leaders “to take a stand”, and make conscious decisions that take into account the broader context. This reflective awareness is relational and “facilitates the construction of a common vision and objectives” between people who see each other as social beings—not primarily as transactional objects.

**Processes of action / reflection and teaching / learning, as strengthening processes, can generate awareness and empowerment:** Via reflection, INTSOL has become aware of how its own incoherencies and contradictions become more evident when members encounter new or high risk situations. As such, they believe that action/reflection is a fundamental way of empowering people to pursue and support the wellbeing of their organisations and communities. From these reflective capacities “societal, organisational and personal transformation can emerge” to the extent they generate awareness of power relationships that favour processes of equitable change.

**A central role of INTSOL is to facilitate and accompany processes of community reflection:** “One doesn’t change people; people change as they decide what they want for themselves. But it is about facilitating and helping them see the inequitable realities, the injustice…; and then they decide”. Accompaniment—as a capacity strengthening strategy of provocation, stimulus, feedback and support—is the main role that INTSOL sees for itself. Effective accompaniment of local community organisations must be “at their own pace and in their own concrete situations”

4.2.2. Identification of internal, organizational challenges and comparison to external change assumptions
The following internal challenges were identified and compared to the external conditions. Four particular areas—analyzed in relation to the external conditions above—emerged as particularly needing more targeted capacity development. They are 1) organisational identity; 2) accompaniment and learning; 3) systemic awareness and understanding of the broader social change context; and 4) power and relationships.

**Organisational identity**
An interesting assumption that was surfaced was about the concept of personal, organisational and societal transformation (TSOP). In INTSOL, this concept is intertwined with other organisational principles such as the importance of individual identity, Christian spirituality, sustainable human development, gender equity, etc. However, while TSOP offers a comfortable umbrella for many members to stand under, the principles that it contains (e.g. Christian spirituality for some), are not seen as the same by all. One member offers a challenge to more narrow understandings of this concept:
I see INTSOL in a phase of restructuring its identity and organisational objectives. Thinking of the organisational vision which speaks of a Christian organisation that promotes values of human sustainable development [with]... Christian and democratic values, I think Reflect-Action is more open to include distinct identities and cosmovisions... But I feel a bit of tension between the openness implicit in Reflect-Action and INTSOLs’ actual vision (P-1 per. comm., 2009).

Via systemic analysis of these change assumptions, members of INTSOL were enabled to reflect that conceptual clarity has not been worked on at an organisation level, nor has there been adequate critical reflection on the “subjective elements” of organisational beliefs. This is particularly important considering that, for some, there is suspicion of confusion between Reflect-Action (see section 5.4) and organisational purpose—including insinuations, for some, that they are one and the same. This leads to the fear that an exclusionary practice of Reflect-Action could create obstacles in understanding other ways of seeing the world—even if these alternatives made more sense for working with local communities. P-2 expresses some of the challenges with using a singular approach:

*Internally we may be in a change process and consolidating aspects of the Reflect Action approach, but when I go to the communities it’s like “bam”; you have to desert your ideal process from your institution, and that’s when you have collisions. I go to the community from INTSOL and it’s like the community wants to reframe the process: “Look, you had this idea on how to do things, but we have our own idea as a community”*

Additionally, Reflect-Action as an *implicit* focus could operate as an exclusionary practice within the organisation itself. Indeed, knowledge of Reflect-Action has been identified as one of the elements of symbolic power within INTSOL (see Power and relationships below). In response to these issues, INTSOL at the time decided to carry out a process to deepen their own theoretical and epistemological knowledge of Reflect-Action, as well as complementary approaches. This is in addition to a deepening of organisational philosophy, and a more explicit and inclusive construction of organisational identity.

**Accompaniment and learning**
INTSOL currently carries out team- and organisation-level learning sessions (twice monthly) in which programmatic, overall management and organisational capacity and learning themes are discussed. These sessions are meant to help “learn in action” and generate learning criteria for use when working in communities or in the office. When analyzed in relation to the social change the organisation supports it was noted that more team-level learning had been incorporated as a result of the internal learning sessions. At the same time it was noted that—outside of the formal sessions—much more is shared between individuals than teams, and that sharing and learning between teams was not very active. A conclusion drawn was that a strengthening process was needed that would generate more coordination and sharing of experiences, including the incorporation of a more self-reflective perspective that recognises the existence of real conflicts in the communities as well as within the organisation.

INTSOL also questioned its own varying accompaniment approaches and understandings of what accompaniment means or should mean. As s first step it has been suggested that the different teams within INTSOL incorporate feedback into their existing processes. The idea is that feedback can help overcome self-referential behaviour as one is confronted with the perceptions of others, and can help support more equitable and respectful relationships and power balances.

**Systemic awareness and understanding of the broader social change context**
INTSOL has changed over the last few years from an organisation that was very focused on its own offering (and its own offices, from where it offered most of its training and other services), to an organisation that now primarily works directly in the communities that it supports—many of which are a significant distance from its offices. This physical shift has opened up the possibility of understanding the contexts of social change more deeply. However, there is also the possibility that an organisation can change its place of work without significantly shifting its organisational culture and work habits. Different members of INTSOL noted that there is currently insufficient reflection and understanding of context in their organisational processes. In fact, as we were trying to compare how INTSOL was performing in this area, none of the participants were able to come up with examples of intentional contextual analyses. It was suggested that processes be incorporated that help INTSOL make more sense of the complex contexts in which it works. Specifically, it was suggested that this analysis could occur each time INTSOL designs, evaluates or...
systematises activities. Additionally—given that “TSOP” cannot emerge without an active network of allies and collaborators—it was suggested that a more explicit approach for establishing and working through alliances be developed. Lastly, it was suggested that the teams within INTSOL strengthen their capacities to read, act and learn within the complex human contexts in which they work.

**Power and relationships**

INTSOL defines power as “personal or collective capacities to make decisions or influence change which can generate oppressive relationships (i.e. “negative power”), or can affirm responsible and autonomous relationships (i.e. “constructive power”). Throughout the process the issue of organisational power relations has been very present. At the beginning of the process the assumption was raised that ‘although there are promising power relationships open to participation within INTSOL, a more critical analysis might permit a restructur ing of these relationships towards more democratic and horizontal processes and structures’ (taken from draft case study). Subsequently, INTSOL carried out a weeklong analysis on how particular power relationships—as expressed through communications and interperson al relationships, decision making processes, criticisms and conflicts, specific knowledge capacities, and formal hierarchy, positions and roles—were perceived to affect their capacity to support transformational change. Through these discussions elements of symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 101, Bourdieu, 1998: 5) that confer power upon individuals within the organisation have emerged. These include longevity in INTSOL, the level of visibility of one’s, understanding of organisational philosophy, and the closeness of relationship one is perceived to have with the director, among others. Very interestingly, a working understanding of Reflect-Action—the very approach that enables critical reflection towards transformational change, and, we believe, allowed for power to be placed on the agenda and to be made more visible, tangible and susceptible to change—was also identified as an important element in power relationships in INTSOL. This is consistent with INTSOL’s definition of power, which highlights its ‘capacity’ for use in constructive or negative manners.

### 4.3. Key methodological moments and content generated from first three workshops

In this section I share some examples of how different exercises helped generate the analysis presented in the previous section.

#### 4.3.1. My family tree

We began the first workshop with INTSOL with an individual and group reflection exercise called “my family tree”. The purpose of this exercise was to provoke reflection on how family traits, ways of seeing the world and other similarities and differences within families, condition us as people. The purpose was also to recognize each participant as a unique person and to begin to generate synergy in the group (see discussion in section 5.4). In this particular exercise we asked each person to draw a family tree with three levels: the individual in the middle level, our parents or whoever raised us in the upper level, and our children in the bottom level. If participants did not have children they could use siblings as the third level. For each level, participants were asked to document dominant traits in themes such as preferences in music and food, line of work, dreams (aspirations), hobbies, beliefs, fears and other traits. Each person would choose the traits that most resonated with her or him lived experience. We then broke into small groups to share our family trees and to discuss the things that struck us as we developed our trees. Reflections were shared on how family customs sometimes create unity and sometimes conflict, for example with child rearing. Participants noted that understandings on how to bring up children are very dependent on the epoch in which the child rearing occurs, with much more preoccupation with protecting children today than was common twenty or thirty years ago. The notion of parents in each generation wanting better or more for their children than they had was shared as well. Participants shared feelings of curiosity to better understand their families, nostalgia for things past, and tension and even sadness for unresolved issues that became present. Some “learning” from the exercise included more awareness on how certain habits are transferred from parents to children either by nurture or nature, and how parent worldviews strongly influence early worldviews of children. Tendencies to be more like one parent than another were also noted. At the same time, seeing differences or changes in
habits, reaffirmed for some that although we are heavily conditioned by our upbringing, we also have the capacity to choose and form unique identities.

This exercise started placing notions of cultural identity, social conditioning and resistance, and change into our discourse for the action research. We did not attempt to “package” the results of this simple exercise to understand how it influenced the final results, because we did not intend for it to have this sort of linear effect. But we did discuss as facilitators how this exercise had touched on things that we had identified as fundamental for understanding deeper worldviews on change. This exercise influenced us to use these types of exercises more purposefully in the other two processes.

4.3.2. **Identification of significant programmatic changes**

We carried out an exercise to share key changes that have occurred in INTSOL in the past 1-3 years. The purpose was to start delving into organizational thinking via reflection on their actual practice. We divided into groups and asked each group to draw these changes on a flip chart paper, including using metaphors, conceptual drawings and text as needed. We then shared the drawings through an open space exercise, instructing participants to leave post it notes with questions or comments on each drawing for each group to take into account later. The drawings focused on three changes in particular.

- INTSOL’s increased participation in local processes, noting that previously they had carried out their workshops in their own offices and did not venture out into the communities.
  - This had been made possible by an important government program called “Water for All” which had opened up of spaces for discussing water issues at the community level, thereby generating the conditions to insert more reflective processes into discussions on community issues.
  - As community discussions would become more active there would be increased need for effective community organizations and the need for capacity strengthening and accompaniment process to support these organizations. This influenced INTSOL to start working on onsite strengthening and accompaniment processes with local communities.

- Active support of the emergence of community leaders (dirigentes comunitarios). This had increased membership and participation in community groups and had generated personal incentives for leadership.

- Development of training and accompaniment that had supported women to have a more prominent role in community spaces in el Ate. The training encouraged women to see themselves as social change actors and to look at their realities from a broader community perspective. They noted that some women have expressed satisfaction in their new roles as community actors in public spaces.

This exercise provided an opportunity to start discussing within the concept of change the things that INTSOL did programmatically and found meaningful. It helped relate some important internal changes to external contextual factors. Our hope was that it provided a good enough platform to discuss the idea of “good change”, which was the focus of the following exercise.

4.3.3. **Identification of understandings of “good change”**

In this exercise we divided into three groups and asked each to use drawing to respond to the following question: “What does positive social change look like and consist of from INTSOL’s perspective?” The purpose of this exercise was to generate assumptions on change which we could then debate and problematize further. All three drawings included language on the need for personal and societal transformation and all noted the importance of the need for spaces for reflection at the community level.

Some interesting differences between the groups are as follows:

- One group’s focus on quality of life—as defined by each individual as she confronts her ongoing realities—as the ends of development, “because we legitimate our interventions as supporting sustainable human development, in which we assume the individual person to be the most important agent of change”.

- Another group’s vision of good change as an individual transformed citizen, represented as the filament inside a light bulb at the bottom of the drawing—shining light from the bottom up. This citizen’s identity is an amalgam of individual and community needs and the citizen makes “conscious / aware” decisions that take into account this dual identity. This group’s key transformational agent is the community leader (most of whom are male) who catalyzes systemic changes from the ground up, primarily by working with community organizations.
Another’s group’s linear drawing of phased before, during and after good change, with a problematic “zone of complexity” which intervenes before multiple transformations occur in the after phase.

Although there was much rich discussion, particularly around the concept of quality of life and the idea of the community leader as primary change agent, we as facilitators were surprised by the abstract, highly conceptual nature of the drawings and much of the discussion, and were unsure as to whether this was a methodological issue, or an indicator of very conceptual understandings on change at this moment. Also, we were unsure if much of the highly eloquent, quasi spiritual language that was being used to discuss the concept of personal, societal and organizational change (TSOP) was an indicator of a deep understanding of systemic change factors (i.e. between individual, organizational and societal factors), or a powerful concept that was not problematized because it made so much conceptual sense within INTSOL’s Christian-influenced organizational culture.

4.3.4. Analysis of power circles

In the second workshop we carried out two different power analyses. We generated discussion on power in other moments as well, but I share one particular exercise here. We carried out a RA exercise called “power circles” in which we drew three concentric circles on the ground and asked participants—including the facilitators—to position themselves closer or further to the center depending on their perceived relative power in the organization with regards to knowledge of Reflect Action, systemic methodology and power to make decisions (carried out in three separate rounds). Different issues emerged, including one participant with field coordinator hierarchy positioning herself between the senior leaders and other field coordinators. As she did so she was pulled in further by INTSOL's director and another senior staff member, and at the same time shooed in that direction from two other field coordinators.

Reflections lightly touched on the de-facto power this person had *legitimately attained* through her filling of important informal roles. Another interesting configuration emerged when we arranged ourselves in order of knowledge of Reflect Action and one member located himself in the far outer ring. His reflections included feeling distant from the dominant Reflect Action methodology as well as a need to understand what was in place before he could contribute to its development:

> ...The philosophy, the methodology of the [Reflect Action] approach [in INTSOL] is in a process of construction right? But when one arrives at INTSOL there is already a certain level of advance [in R/A], right? So the idea is to understand what is already in place and on that basis contribute to its ongoing development, but on the basis of that which has already progressed, something already experimented, already worked with.

We reflected on the different configurations and produced a couple of assumptions on power to add to the assumptions produced earlier.

4.3.5. Identifying relevant systems needing strengthening

In this half-day session we attempted to ground our analysis from the previous two workshops in relevant organizational processes and systems. We began by reflecting on the relational diagram we had constructed together (see Annex 7.3) in order to reaquaint ourselves with the previous month’s work. We then asked each participant to reexamine the diagram and identify relevant organizational processes or systems that needed strengthening in relation to specific areas of the diagram. In the process 12 different processes or systems were identified. We then carried out a process to narrow down to three priority systems that we would analyze further: 1) INTSOL’s accompaniment process and “model”; 2) construction of organizational identity; and 3) Processes for strategic analysis of context. Reflections generated in the narrowing process included mention of the interrelatedness between systems; notice of the actual relative strength of some systems over others (e.g. accompaniment stronger than analysis of context); existence of different visions about what is meant by concepts such as accompaniment; and the need for better conceptual understandings of organizational areas of focus, principles, and core programs. Without this strengthening of particular systems would be meaningless.

We then carried out an initial Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) modeling of the three priority systems mentioned earlier. Two groups work on organizational identity, two on accompaniment and one on analysis of context. We carried out CATWOE, an SSM systemic analysis tool designed to draw out key systemic
elements and relationships in a complex challenging situation (Checkland, 1993, Checkland, 2000, Checkland and Poulter, 2006). CATWOE is a mnemonic that looks at what types of changes or transformations (T) a given system is expected to produce or contribute to; what (and who’s) worldview (W) or philosophy would inform the system and make the intended transformation meaningful; what stakeholders or “customers” (C) are intended to be affected by T, either as beneficiaries or victims; who are the actors (A) or facilitators who would carry out the system activities to generate the proposed transformation; who are the “owners” (O) with the power to stop or boycott the system; and what are the environmental constraints (E) which must be taken into consideration. From CATWOE we developed system purpose statements (called root definition in SSM) and developed six notional system models—two for each of the three priority processes identified. I briefly share some interesting elements that came out of each analysis, including the system models produced.

**Accompaniment**

Participants identified that the main transformation or outcome should be community organizational leaders with capacity for “propositional reflection” (i.e. reflection that leads to action) that leads to the development of horizontal relationships with constituents. This is based on the worldview that accompaniment processes can and should promote democratic and egalitarian ideals. Important environmental factors to be considered include a pervasive authoritarian culture, individualistic, populist leadership tendencies, and clientelistic relationships. The system model that was designed emphasized accompaniment of organizational leaders “on the job” to promote reflection in action, as well as relevant feedback to INTSOL.

**Organizational identity**

One analysis highlighted the importance of generating institutional coherence that takes into account organizational culture. This was informed by a worldview of seeking alignment between individuals and the organization through processes of co-construction. A second analysis produced a very different outcome: an organization that promotes sustainable human development via processes of personal and societal transformation and Christian spirituality. This position was based on the worldview that organizational identity should be based on the recognition of people in their condition of social subjects in continual processes of empowerment. Systems models included activities that would generate intentional reflection spaces, systematization of experiences for intra-organizational learning, and formal strategic planning. And another emphasized the importance of procedures and the importance of reflecting on tense situations as they occur in practice.

**Strategic analysis of context and organizational positioning**

The main outcome for this system is to develop an organization that interacts with and influences other actors in a reciprocal manner, from its position as intentional change agent. This is based on the worldview that equitable and favorable relationships for shared action can be developed through a deeper understanding of context. Public policies that favor joint action, and inadequate access to information, are two environmental factors that could affect this transformation. The system emphasized that much contextual analysis can be done as part of INTSOL’s accompaniment work with organizations in situ, by asking more intentional questions in an organized effort to better understand the context.

**4.4. Discussion**

In this case we were able to identify shared and differing perspectives on change and critically analyze those perspectives by contrasting them to current organizational practices and challenges. This dialogical contrasting process highlighted areas where assumptions on change were either not supported by practice, as in the case of INTSOLs lack of contextual analysis, or lacking practical understanding of important concepts, as in the case of their need for conceptual clarification related to organizational identity. The researchers believe that the inductive process, starting from organizational practice, then gradually abstracting upwards towards broad change assumptions, and finally returning to real organizational systems, is a promising approach to generating dialogue on the actual and ideal perceived relationships between external conditions for good change, and internal processes, systems and capacities. It also makes a good attempt at contrasting organizational theories with practices of change.

In this process we did surface many worldviews (e.g. Christian concepts of transformation) and examine power relationships and elements of organizational culture (e.g. a dominant methodology for internal and external reflection). When made visible this enriched the dialogue on change and INTSOL’s roles in that
change. The combination of the exercises on identifying significant programmatic changes and understandings of "good change" surfaced diverse, yet somewhat ungrounded understandings on change. However, during the process with INTSOL we did not dig deeper into organizational practices than these particular exercises, as well as the debates comparing current practice to change assumptions. Upon subsequent reflection, I now believe that perhaps the most important source of organizational-level worldviews is organizational practices, including its theories in use (Schön, 1983). As such a future iteration of this methodological process would need to go much deeper into understanding organizational epistemology and dominant motivations for change via deeper reflection on current practice. We did make this adjustment for the other two cases, but not to the extent that I believe is now necessary.

Although the approach was methodologically promising it would have had to go deeper if it is to support more transformational change. In these first three workshops the process did not include exercises or methodological moments which significantly challenged or improved existing concepts on good change, other than internal challenges and debates amongst organizational members (e.g. the debate on quality of life, versus the transformed citizen as ends of development). Lacking were moments to introduce theoretical challenges or challenges from perspectives outside the organization, from primary stakeholders for example. This is critically important given that most of the expressions on change from the different exercises were cast in INTSOL’s own image and current programmatic offerings. I expand on this in section 5.1.

5. Further analysis

The two cases presented mostly focus on the first two research questions. In this section I present some initial analysis related to the last two research questions which are focused on critical systemic action research principles, capacity building as action research, and the reconciliation of researcher and organizational change agendas.

5.1. Boundaries of the action research

Critical systems thinking emphasizes that where we draw the boundaries of organizational systems (i.e. what and who is in and what and who is left out)—including research into these systems—cannot be judged on whether or not the system operates effectively, but rather, whether or not the system’s ends are ethically defensible (Churchman, 1979: 65). And since ethical systems are meant to serve the betterment of humanity (ibid: 111), the discussion on whose points of view are included within the system ‘boundaries’ creates winners and losers, and, therefore must be considered thoughtfully and critically. Relevant perspectives of key system stakeholders (i.e., literally those that have a stake in being ‘winners or losers’) should be ‘swept in’ (Flood, 1999: 63), in order to increase the chances that the system will be ethical after all. But, since it is impractical to sweep in the views of all key stakeholders, a critical boundary ‘critique’ must take place upon setting system boundaries (Midgley et al., 1998: 468). This includes asking questions around the sources of motivation of a system from primary stakeholder perspectives, sources of resources and control, sources of expertise, and sources of legitimation, including identifying what worldviews or visions of ‘underlying meanings of “improvement” ought to be /are considered, and how ought they be /how are they reconciled’ (Reynolds, 2006: 101).

Going into the research I identified the importance of critically analyzing the boundaries of relevant organizational systems and the action research system. We swept-in key perspectives in different ways in the different cases. In the case of Sirua we invited community members, NGO and governmental partners to the workshops to access their perspectives directly. With PDTG we swept-in perspectives methodologically, via role-playing exercises in which organizational members reenacted scenes with primary stakeholders and reflected upon the complex behaviors that were generated. And in all three cases we swept in perspectives by conducting field visits, thus broadening our appreciation as researchers of the existence of different perspectives on change issues. A visit to Sirua’s main field office in San Lorenzo—an extremely poor afro-ecuadorian region 6 hours from the capital Quito—even caused us to shift the center of gravity of the research from Quito to San Lorenz. But we faced very big challenges in including key perspectives and in INTSOL we essentially did not include a serious sweep-in process in the research. In my thesis I will expand upon the challenges we experiences with inclusion of key stakeholders by carrying out a boundary critique of the research in each case (Ulrich and Reynolds, 2010, Williams and Hummelbrunner, 2011).
5.2. Challenges of action research as capacity building

We experienced many challenges with using action research as capacity building. One key challenge is what I refer to ironically as “the cathartic practitioner”, as opposed to the reflective practitioner. We presented a finding to INTSOL regarding what we believed to be their practice of intense “action, action, action” over a period of weeks, and then, periodically, a cathartic day or two set aside for “reflection, reflection”. This became a cycle of action-reflection separated by large amounts of time and space, because the action did not include much intentional reflection on prior learning, frameworks or theory, and the reflective spaces did not concretely emphasize the practical experiences that people were grappling with in the field. This practice was evident in the action-researchers as well, in that we designed most of the time during my trips to Peru and Ecuador to be occupied in workshops or conducting interviews, and very little time for intentional reflection. As practitioners the idea of dedicating a day or more to reflection, systematization and abstraction, to every day spent in a workshop, for example, was far from our minds. Yet I now understand this to be fundamental for enabling the transformational potential of action research. This brings up an important challenge: defining what is praxis and what type of praxis is desirable and feasible in non-critical cultures of action? And how much reflection is desirable when real organizational challenges have figuratively lit “the barn on fire”?

According to Friere, praxis is reflection and action, theory and practice directed at structures that need transformation (1970, 1993: 125-6). Praxis requires a theory of transforming action, as well as action (ibid), accompanied by critical reflection on our roles and practices in upholding or transforming unjust practices and structures. Without action, reflection and theory are simple verbalism, ‘an alienated and alienating “blah”…, an empty denunciation lacking commitment to transform—which is impossible without action (ibid: 87). On the other hand, action without reflection and theory is activism—action for action’s sake—which ‘negates true praxis and makes dialogue impossible’ (ibid: 88). Friere continues that action and reflection occur simultaneously and are not divided into a prior stage of reflection and a subsequent stage of action. He clarifies, however, that critical reflection is also action because ‘a critical analysis of reality may… reveal that a particular form of action is impossible or inappropriate at the present time’ (Friere, 1970, 1993: 128).

After a workshop which brings together key people and puts important, often ignored issues on the table (often after so much overwhelming action ‘in the field”), what happens next? Do cathartic workshops, for example, allow us to change just enough so that when the workshops are finished, things can ”get back to” remaining the same? Do these types of processes help organizations “learn through” the incredible complexity in which they are immersed, or do they offer shot-in-the-arm intense action processes largely devoid of learning and research? I think most processes have a mix of the two, but critical capacity building needs to challenge, not reinforce non-critical action cultures by reflecting upon deeper, structural problematic issues around transformational change and one’s role in that change, including the role and meaning of praxis. I will expand on this in my thesis, particularly around the concept of capacity building action research as process consultation, ‘a philosophy or set of underlying assumptions about the helping process’ (Schein, 1988: 5) that critically examines how processes are able to go deep enough to affect underlying elements of organizational habits and culture, while enabling organizations to develop the skills to see and respond to their challenges. Process consulting rejects the doctor-patient model of strengthening (ibid: 7), which is very similar to Friere’s concept of banking in education. My reflections will include the feasibility or not of long-term accomplishment of organizations by foreign facilitators, some of which is questionable from a process consulting, and praxis standpoint.

5.3. Reconciliation of researcher and organizational change agendas

As noted earlier this research and capacity building approach has an explicit social change agenda. As such, it is inevitable that this agenda may have points of confluence and points of conflict with implicit and explicit agendas held by members of the different organizations in different moments of the action research process. In the case of INTSOL and PDTG we were supported by the idea of facilitator as “problematizer” and were encouraged by senior leaders to take on this role of challenging from the outside. This worked very well in some cases, but in INTSOL we either went too far or simply touched sensitive nerves and ended up with some resistance between our approach and the leader’s expectations for the approach. Part of this started when Juan Carlos heavily pushed for more power analysis (which was already an option amongst two others for a planned reflection workshop) in a key workshop. The workshop unleashed very difficult reflections on power relationships, as well as 2 more power meetings, in which power was problematized.
and linked to specific organizational systems and behaviors. In retrospect we believe Juan Carlos (with my emphatic support via Skype meetings!) may have pushed too hard and damaged his relationship with INTSOLs director. This brings up the question as to how much power is healthy to deal with at one time, considering that relationships are at stake, including amongst people that have to come to work together indefinitely into the future. I will expand upon this theme in my thesis. I will also discuss the processes of negotiating the purposes, methods and facilitation in each case, and how each organization approached this very differently, from almost complete hands off with Sirua, to a more active role with PDTG.

5.4. An important note on an early methodological fusion

Going into the design of the first workshop I had some very basic ideas on how to carry out culture and power analyses through SSM (known as analyses 2 and 3 in SSM). But I did not have a very good idea on how we would get at deeply-seated individual worldviews or put problematical issues of power relationships and organizational culture on the table for discussion and analysis. In early discussions on workshop design my co-facilitator Juan Carlos Giles suggested we incorporate some thinking and techniques from the methodology Reflect Action\(^2\), which he felt could address some of my methodological concerns while lending “transformational potential” for organizational capacity building processes. His argument was that critical, subjective reflection can be transformational at an individual level because it helps examine and reconstruct personal history, traumas, fears, passions, strengths, weaknesses, self-esteem and other areas of individual identity, in relation to others in an organization. This includes a critical examination of the roles we as individuals play in unhealthy power relationships and cultural (understood broadly) practices, including conscientização—i.e. becoming aware—of broader social change issues. For example, in RA there is an emphasis on connecting as humans first and as actors with specific organizational roles second. The assumption is that when we enter into shared spaces for organizational reflection and strengthening reduced to our role as project manager, or accountant, or director or assistant, for example, we potentially obscure the bulk of who we actually are as people. This heavily limits the potential for engaging with the whole person, even though aspects of our other identities are heavily present in the workplace, e.g. in positive and negative behaviors, ways of seeing the world and motivations for change.

To get at these deeper identities and motivations for change R/A uses subjective, multi-cognitive methods intended to generate inter-subjective understandings. These ‘senti-cuerpo-pensante (SCP)’ (emotion / embodiment (touch) / thinking) methods use emotions, sensations and thoughts to better understand identities, motivations and barriers to change at personal, organisational and societal levels (Giles and Abad, 2009: 1-2). This includes using SCP methods to examine how organizational culture and power relations support or inhibit purposeful change. We had always intended to use participatory methods in the action research because both Juan Carlos and I had always used participatory methodologies the many times we had worked together in the previous ten years. But R/A with SCP would go much further because of its ability to access more doorways into people’s identities and motivations than could purely rational methods.

In all three cases we used many subjective techniques to draw out deeper reflections on change. But with Sirua, for example, we were more careful about the techniques we used, primarily because of my fear that they would be less-well received with scientists and biologists who participated in the process. Perhaps this was an irrational fear, but I did note some resistance to some exercises, even if eventually most resistance went away. I can say that the Sirua process was overall a more rationally-dominated process than the other two. I will explore some of the implications of this in my thesis, including exploring the question: “How do you engage methodologically with scientific and other worldviews who tend to prefer certain intelligences over others (Gardner, 1993)?” This will include reflections on the limitations of using one technique (e.g. drawing) over others (e.g. sociodramas).

6. Thesis structure and questions for the audience

6.1. Thesis structure

- Chapter 1: Introduction and summary of main findings
- Chapter 2: Why I'm doing this—Professional and personal reasons I decided to pursue this research and how the research topic emerged
- Chapter 3: Area of concern, framework of ideas and research methodology (FAM)
- Chapters 4-6: Three case studies
- Chapter 7-9: Empirical analysis of cases, focused on a) CB as a strategic systemic process; b) CB as a critical, transformational process; c) CB as systemic action research and learning.
Chapter 10: Methodological principles of a systemic theories of change approach for capacity building of social change agents

6.2. Initial questions for the reader

1) Capacity building draws on much literature; some say it lacks its own theory. In my framework of ideas I have many areas of theory I could use to generate dialogue with my findings. I am seeking to identify literature that can help me establish a normative concept of purposeful capacity building for social change in complex environments. Do the bodies of literature I have referenced help to establish this concept? Which seem most appropriate, and which less so? Are there other bodies of literature that would help me to better establish this concept?

2) Given that this research is a methodological journey, the focus on my analysis is primarily on methodological process. What suggestions do you have for me to balance my presentation of the methodological process (i.e. description of important steps and methods), with the methodological theory that was generated?

3) This methodological theory is also highly dependent on the visual and creative methods that were employed in the process. What are the boundaries I should be aware of in ensuring the thesis is academically acceptable whilst embedding visual creativity and innovation in my writing?

4) This was an action research approach meant to learn from a process that generated meaningful results in action with three organizations facing real challenges, rather than an ethnographic case study of the organizations. What suggestions do you have for maintaining the focus on the action research as the primary object of the investigation?
### 7. Annexes

#### 7.1. Specific action research purposes for each case

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Org.</th>
<th>Action research purposes</th>
<th>Products&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Subtext&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Level of complexity</th>
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| Sirua | The specific process objective is to “carry out a strategic reflection / planning process that strengthens Fundación Sirua’s governance and overall management capacity to conserve the Awacachi Corridor”<sup>1</sup>. The process worldview is to increase a sense of ownership of key actors (board members, personnel and community representatives) in Sirua’s mission and activities. Main starting constraint is the financial and organizational instability that Sirua is facing. | – Strategic plan  
– Workshop reports  
– Case study of the experience | – Internal cultural challenges between main and field office  
– Financial instability  
– Non-existent organizational governance  
– Dependencies and power relationships between UK partner NGO and Sirua | Highly complex externally, complicated to complex internally. Many external challenges are completely outside the control of the organization. |
| PDTG | Develop a shared organizational identity via the identification, recognition and valuing of individual and collective capacities and challenges. The process worldview is to recognize diversity and value and build on complementarities in order to support coherence between external social change and internal personal and organizational change (i.e. pursuing “real change”). Main starting constraint is an activist culture that doesn’t have time for reflection or organizational development. | – “Ideario de cambio”—A document that represents PDTGs current organizational theory, in relation to strategies and structure. This includes strengthening existing strategic plan.  
– Workshop reports  
– Case study  
– Article on organizational epistemology | – Looking for clarity in chaos  
– Problematic internal power relationships  
– Uncertain identity and ownership of individuals in PDTG  
– Needing better methodological approaches for their own work with social movements  
– Needing a hybrid organizational structure | Between complexity & chaos, externally and internally. The social movements and protest themes often “explode” and pull the organization in multiple directions. This has highly shaped the internal organizational personality. |
| INTSOL | Carry out a contextualised process of action/reflection that helps identify and organise the elements of a systemic process of social change. This is in order to clarify how INTSOL’s action-learning processes can be more effectively oriented towards strengthening INTSOL’s internal relationships and INTSOL’s interaction with the community. Did not define process worldview, but the methodological focus was to carry out a critical surfacing and analysis of organizational assumptions (ideal and otherwise) and how these align with current and desired practice. | – Workshop reports  
– Case study  
– Article on internal and external change conditions  
– Article on power relationships | – Internal power relationships  
– Reflective practice and Reflect-Accion guiding ongoing, internal learning processes, and the blurry boundaries between these methodologies with organizational identity.  
– Implicit Christian worldviews at the leadership level | Complex internally and externally, but not chaotic. Externally their work is highly emergent in that it responds to community availability after normal work hours. |

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<sup>1</sup> Only in the case of Sirua did we define the products at the beginning of the process.

<sup>2</sup> By “subtext” I mean the important underlying themes present in each of the cases that are not necessarily captured in the process objective or focus statement. I list the main themes here; but these will be heavily expanded upon in the thesis.
7.2. **Systemic theories of change principles**

Action research is more a set of principles than a robust methodology. There are many robust AR methodologies—e.g. SSM, Cooperative Inquiry, Appreciative Inquiry, etc.—but I am not using any of those as standalone methodologies. Instead I am using a set of methodological principles called “systemic theories of change”, which helps me make sure I take into account key concepts of complexity, worldviews and theories of social change that I have presented in my explanation of my area of concern. The main ideas are visually represented in figure, 4, which I will now explain.

The moments in the diagram are not necessarily chronological; we have included numbers in this diagram only for purposes of demonstrating conceptual flow. For each question there are various methods that can be used, and some methods can be used to answer more than one question. The most important thing to note is that the process tries to make sense out of organisational capacities, internal processes and systems (i.e. ‘internal conditions’, primarily corresponding to items 4 and 5), in relation to the meaningful social change the organisation exists to support (i.e. the ‘external conditions’ for social change; number 1). It does this by using a dialogical space and emerging methodology called systemic theories of change (STOC, number 3), in which multiple perspectives on change (i.e. worldviews, number 6) are identified and debated through systemic complexity lenses. Elements of culture and power (i.e. number 7) are intended to be analyzed throughout.

The central purpose of the process is to contribute to a more synergetic relationship between internal organisational conditions and conditions for social change. The initial or existing relationship between these conditions can be expressed in the contextualised ‘challenging situation’ (item 2), and at the end of the methodological process the ‘new, strengthened’ challenging situation can be reanalyzed, as part of an ongoing learning process—similar to the cycle Checkland proposes with soft systems methodology (SSM) (Checkland and Poulter 2006). The ‘lingua franca’ or ‘common currency’ of the methodology are the conscious or unconscious assumptions—i.e. the beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings (Schein 2004: 26)—that underlie the different affirmations and interpretations that emerge throughout the process, and which are the ultimate source of values and action (ibid).
7.3. Digitized version of INTSOL change diagram
8. References


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9. Notes

1 This is a concept that does not translate into English as far as I am aware. I think of saberes as knowledges rooted in cultural systems of meaning that take into account tacit sensibilities that we use to make sense of our worlds in specific settings. They reflect the whole person (Rodríguez Ibañez, 1997: 113) and as culturally grounded systems that are meaningful as part of one’s being, they are neither “validate-able” nor refutable through scientific knowledge. Saberes are part of our being, not solely a means to an end, and in order to develop capacities for change we need to be able to access these systems of meaning. Rational thinking based methodologies are limited in this sense because they only attempt to reach “mental self” and not other selves and sources of motivation and meaning. I will expand on this significantly in my thesis.

2 Juan Carlos had been a RA practitioner for several years, including as the Coordinator for the Lima Network of Reflect Action practitioners. Juan Carlos had introduced RA to both organizations in the previous year and a half and INTSOL had made it the central methodology for their ongoing organizational reflection and learning processes. INTSOL’s director, Amy, was also a member of the Lima Reflect network. Both INTSOL and PDTG had also begun using RA in their capacity building and accompaniment work with their target organizations.