



# Book Review

## Big Bets: How Large-Scale Change Really Happens

Lyndsey Hand

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Shah, R. (2023) [Big Bets: How Large-Scale Change Really Happens](#), Simon & Schuster.

*Can Rajiv Shah, President of The Rockefeller Foundation, coax people out of their 'aspiration trap'?*

Rajiv, who, before heading the Rockefeller Foundation, was USAID Administrator and also served at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is a leader in social change working to tackle some of the world's most entrenched challenges and crises. With initiatives to address childhood vaccination, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, hunger in East Africa, energy poverty, Ebola, and more recently COVID-19 and racial division in America, Shah has a lived experience of what it takes to activate and drive change.

In his newly published book, "Big Bets: How Large-Scale Change Really Happens" Shah takes us on a journey through his career and the lessons he's learned about taking what he coins as the "Big Bets" which are necessary to generate large-scale change. "What is a 'Big Bet'?" I hear you ask. Well, whilst I sometimes found myself discretely turning back to page five to confirm my understanding... according to Shah, "a big bet is a concerted effort to fundamentally solve a single, pressing [social] problem"... that... "require[s] setting profound, seemingly unachievable goals and believing they are achievable". A big bet appears to be a mindset that manifests in certain ways of working to bring about change. He juxtaposes this big-bet mindset with that of an "aspiration trap"; a mindset that has been weighed down by complexity, cynicism, and apathy. He explains that this aspiration trap keeps those engaged in social change focused on small improvements and what might be "good enough", rather than the big problems, the big thinking, and the big moves necessary to generate large-scale change. Through the book, Shah aims to provide some of the tools to help you identify a big bet, define a pathway forward, and maintain the momentum and confidence to keep moving.

Against this framing, Shah unpacks and explains the lessons he's learned through the change initiatives he's been part of, applying a retrospective lens to compile them into the "Big Bets" ethos. Chapter one brings home the lesson of keeping it simple; identifying the issue you want to solve as a simple question, understanding the barriers and the root cause of what's stopping its resolution, and developing a solution unimpeded by the complexities that surround it. By keeping a clear view of the solution and monitoring progress towards the change you desire, you're able to maintain a big-bet mindset. Some of this may sound counter-intuitive from a TWP perspective, with its focus on understanding complexity and

identifying what may be politically feasible — which often does mean more gradual, “good enough” change.

Shah goes on to pitch the need to be bold, take risks, and view potential partners’ concerns as insights on where your assumptions need to be strengthened, which is closer to TWP. As with TWP, what becomes a cross-cutting theme throughout the book is the need to build broad-based alliances around points of common ground, adding that the key to maintaining these is openness, humility, trust, and recognising that a well-placed interlocutor may be more effective in bringing partners on board than the message alone. Using the rather extreme example of DRC's former President, Joseph Kabila, Shah makes the case for getting to know your partners’ motivations and incentives, developing contingency plans for threats to the bet, being ready and able to recognise when something is failing, and having the tenacity to move on to the next big bet. Coupled with this, he advocates for the reader to keep experimenting, iterating, monitoring, adapting and being ready to give up control of the bet or pivot, if it’s in the best interest of the desired change, all of which, again, is aligned with TWP.

Each chapter closes with an easily digestible set of tactics that can guide action on big bets. Shah concludes with a call to action, through exercising your vote or market choices towards big bet thinkers, or more directly through “launching and making good on your own big bets”.

A few pages into the introduction, I realised I was a ready audience for this book. Recently off the back of eight years overseas managing programmes for social change in some pretty challenging contexts, I confess to being, slightly and temporarily, in Shah’s shameful “aspiration trap”. Whilst I maintain my ethos of “big-stuff optimism, paired with everyday realism”, and hold a tenacity that tends to keep me trying, I am at present looking for the match to reignite the slightly smouldering tinders of the big-bet mindset that I know is still in my belly. So, by page 14, I felt ready for Shah to be that match, to coax, or perhaps shame me out of the temporary state of optimism fatigue I have found myself in.

So, did Shah bring me out of my aspiration trap? Almost, but not quite. With a few years working on social change, did this book teach me something new? Not really. But if you ask me, did Shah articulate engagingly the principles that will *help* me to reignite my big bet mindset and offer a set of concrete tactics that can be drawn on more strategically than I have in the past? The answer is, YES. *Big Bets: How large-scale change really happens* is an engaging read and speaks to many, if not all, of what we consider key principles of thinking

and working politically. The clarity of thinking that Shah provides is what gives the book its strength, and it is a great addition to the literature on how change happens.

Yet, perhaps this same strength also comes at the expense of digging a little deeper into the more gritty dynamics of how change happens, and for the more seasoned reader, this downplaying of complexity does undermine the message slightly. As does the arguably Western-centric, new public management, cultural perspective it's written from. But for those relatively early in their social change careers, or those who want to have some principles to help explain how change could be brought about, or even those trying to find their way out of their aspiration trap – it's worth the read.

(Although, in a slightly Cach-22 manner, I can't help but think that suggesting anything else would have condemned me to the aspiration trap in perpetuity...)

**About the author:** Lyndsey Hand is the TWP CoP Programme Manager. Lyndsey has a wealth of experience in the development and humanitarian sectors, having led and managed large FCDO-funded governance and security sector reform programmes in Pakistan, Nepal, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Zambia. She is also Deputy Director of Operations and Programme Manager of the [Serious Organised Crime and Anti-Corruption Evidence](#) (SOC ACE) research programme at the University of Birmingham.

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