

**TWP**  
COMMUNITY  
OF PRACTICE

# REFLECTIVE PIECE

## DUNCAN GREEN

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## A reflective piece by Duncan Green

I recently left Oxfam GB after 20 great years, first as head of research, then as strategic adviser. Alina Rocha Menocal from the TWP CoP has now given me the impossible task of summing up those years in the traditional '600-1200 words'. Cheers Alina.

First, my own trajectory. My first 8 years in INGOs were spent on breathless advocacy on trade, globalization and structural adjustment, first at CAFOD, then at Oxfam. The targets for that advocacy were [the WTO](#), the financial markets and the Bretton Woods Institutions.

My wheels came off in 2005 (anyone remember [Make Poverty History?](#)), as events and some great books and papers made me start to question the hubris of a lot of the global advocacy circus. More on that [here](#). That bout of soul-searching about the nature of development culminated in a large, and little read tome called [From Poverty to Power](#) (Practical Action, 2008), whose central argument was that the real drivers of development were not the INGOs, but the complex interactions between 'active citizens and effective states'. Around publication day, I thought I'd start a little blog of the same name to help with the promo. Sixteen years and 4 million words later, the blog is still going strong (though we're still trying to sort my role in it, post Dexit)

The blog kept me engaged in reading, thinking about and tracking developments within the 'development sector'. The result was [How Change Happens](#) (OUP, 2016; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition June 2024), a rather more successful book (at least in terms of readership).

HCH led me into teaching and training on influencing/ advocacy/ campaigns, based at LSE – the main reason why I brought the years at Oxfam to a close (along with age and spending more time with my lovely granddaughter). A lot of the dev sector seem to have concluded that influencing is something they have to engage with: as one of our interviewees from the [Global Executive Leadership Initiative \(GELI\) training programme on influencing for senior leaders](#) said, 'being promoted on the basis of being good at tents and blankets is not much help if you then have to try and stop the Saudis from bombing Yemen'. As a result, we are having a burgeoning number of fascinating conversations with a range of UN, INGO, Red Cross/Crescent and CSO leaders and activists on how they can maximize their chances of changing ideas, policies or practices through 'intentional influencing'.

Which brings us to Thinking and Working Politically. Looking at that timeline, I realize just how closely my own work has tracked some of the broader evolution of the sector, in particular, 'discovering' the central role of power and politics in bringing about social and economic

change and looking for practical ways to incorporate that into daily practice. That shift was turbocharged by broader intellectual currents such as the need to shift the power within the sector via localization.

The path of those years is littered with 'lightbulb moments', prompted by books, conversations, my own research and case studies, field trips and yes, even meetings (looking at you [Doing Development Differently, Harvard 2014](#)). I'll pick out a few.

**Shoulders of Giants:** pioneering work by thinkers such as [Adrian Leftwich](#), [Sue Unsworth](#), [David Booth](#), [Matt Andrews](#), [Mushtaq Khan](#) and some path-breaking pioneering practitioners, such as [Jaime Faustino](#), or the folk in [Pyoe Pin](#) (Myanmar) and [SAVI](#) (Nigeria). The list is a bit too male and northern, but once you go beyond what look like the increasingly parochial concerns of the aid sector, you have any number of brilliant thinkers from the Global South, such as [Yuen Yuen Ang](#) (on China and Corruption), [Naomi Hossein](#) (on Bangladesh and violent protest), [Srilatha Batliwala](#) (on feminist leadership) and many many more (hit the book reviews tab in FP2P for a much more comprehensive list).

**Research and Case Studies:** writing a series of '[adaptive management](#)' case studies on Coalitions for Change in the Philippines, Pyoe Pin in Myanmar, or the Institutions for Inclusive Development (I4ID) Programme in Tanzania fleshed out the ideas with epic examples of local staff 'navigating by judgement' (in the title of [Dan Honig's book](#)).

We need a lot more of these, along with clearer thoughts on how you design and measure the impact of politically-informed approaches, before we have anything approaching a body of evidence that might persuade the sceptics. But it's starting to build and I hope to add to the body of research at the LSE over the next few years.

If I had to characterize the theory of change of the TWP crew, I would probably use [Matt Andrew's characterization of paradigm shifts](#) in the aid sector:

- Deinstitutionalization: encourage the growing discussion on the problems of the current model
- Preinstitutionalization: groups begin innovating in search of alternative logics, involving 'distributive agents' (e.g. low ranking civil servants) to demonstrate feasibility
- Theorization: proposed new institutions are explained to the broader community, needing a 'compelling message about change.'
- Diffusion: as more 'distributive agents' pick it up, a new consensus emerges

- Reinstitutionalization: legitimacy (hegemony) is achieved. We all go off to the pub.

Alas, what then usually follows is the dumbing down of the new orthodoxy into the latest exercise in mindless box-ticking (think of how logframes evolved). We'll need to be on our guard on that one.

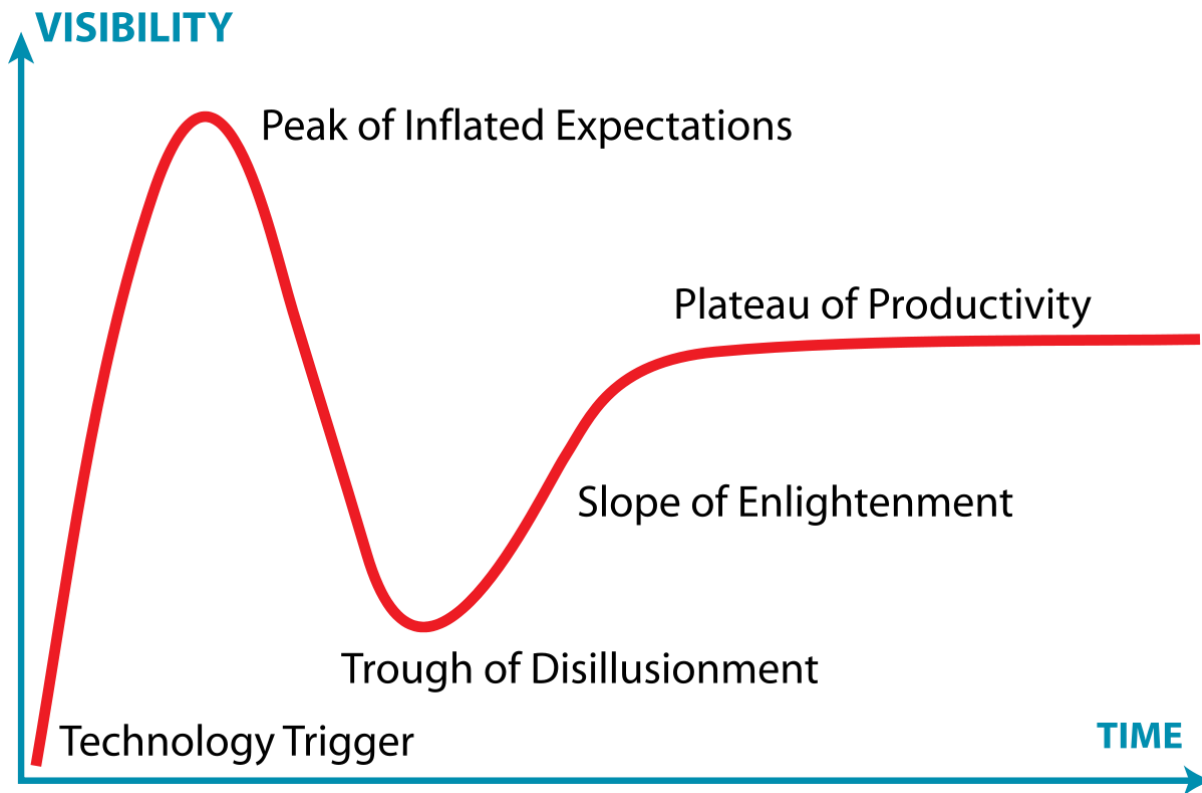
One last point on the importance and slipperiness of language. Calling this stuff 'Thinking and Working Politically' has been an important and quite brave decision in a sector that often prefers to pretend it is neutral/impartial. But I fear that is partly why TWP approaches have been slow to spread outside its original test bed of governance and institutional reform.

The contrast with the much less threatening 'adaptive management' (AM) is striking. Lots of donors now say they want the projects they fund to be adaptive, and good AM covers much of the same ground as TWP. The [risk](#) there is an outbreak of 'adaptive washing', where proposals and projects say they are going to be adaptive, but in practice merely change the language, not the substance, of old fashioned and ineffective models of aid. As ever, be careful what you wish for.

Standing back, this quick reflection suggests a couple of challenges for the sector (whatever that is) over the next few years:

**Escaping from aid:** I just do not believe that power can be separated from money for more than a short period. Only if we can cut/greatly reduce the ties with funding can we decentralize power and have a respectful conversation among equals about how to bring about progressive change in all our countries.

**Get serious about the evidence base:** TWP/Adaptive Management are in vogue, but remember the hype cycle (see below). If we want them to become a permanent and significant part of the intellectual landscape, we need to seize the moment to generate evidence that persuades sceptics and agnostics, not just the converted.



**About the author:** Dr Duncan Green is Professor in Practice in International Development at LSE, and former Senior Strategic Adviser at Oxfam GB. He is also a member of the TWP CoP Steering Committee. The second edition of his book *How Change Happens* was published in June 2024.

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this reflection are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice.

## About the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice

The Thinking and working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) is a global network of practitioners, researchers and policymakers in development and global affairs committed to promoting more effective policy and practice. The TWP CoP works to foster more politically aware approaches to understand how change happens and why, translate findings and implications emerging from political economy analysis into operationally relevant guidance, encourage more flexible and adaptable ways of working, and provide evidence-based insights that can stimulate innovation, sharing and learning in international development and global affairs.

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