

Commentary from the Field

Questions as a Lighthouse:

How This Journal Can Contribute to New Ways Forward in the Development Field

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Purpose & Ideas

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When I received an invitation to be part of the Editorial Board of this journal, I celebrated its promising and much-needed birth. I have worked for the past 20 years in the field that promotes a better interaction between evidence and policy, including work with think tanks, national and international NGOs, universities and government agencies, particularly in Latin America, but also in Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia.

As a result of these experiences, I arrived at the conclusion that development initiatives that have prioritized rational approaches to change have failed to solve complex problems. It is true that we have made advances in development: on average, we live longer, have higher salaries, are better educated, and have more political stability than ever before. However, we have failed to build the leadership and institutions that can address wicked problems under pressure and at scale. The investment in infrastructure so far is relevant but not sufficient to develop and build systems of high capacity (Andrews et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, we see that many countries are still not able to perform some of their basic functions for the benefit of their citizens. Once a country is stuck, to continue doing what has been done in the past won't work. Or as Einstein so

clearly stated: “We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them”. The need to revisit our theories and practices to enable change is evident, even when funders continue to support projects that deliver the same type of results due to the same type of approaches. One of the main challenges is that projects focus solely on the symptoms (poverty, inequality, environmental disasters, etc.) and do not go deeper to explore the causes of those symptoms, which are what this journal calls “the deeper structures of the social systems—the source conditions—in order to see, sense and shift them.”

So, how can we go deeper and generate a new operational system? This is not at all easy. It implies taking risks and embracing uncertainty. My organization, P&I, was born in 2012 as *Politics & Ideas*: a joint initiative of researchers and practitioners to co-produce and share innovative knowledge and support evidence-informed public policies for the wellbeing of all. By the end of 2019, based on what we learned by working with diverse stakeholders in the evidence and policy ecosystem, we decided to expand our focus and complement our existing research and knowledge creation with other ways to generate ideas that can inspire new actions for the good of all, including awareness-based approaches. Thus, in 2020 we re-founded ourselves as *Purpose & Ideas*. We are convinced it is time to further explore approaches that integrate the body and heart and mind to collectively frame problems and co-create solutions towards sustainable wellbeing for our communities. However, to tell others stakeholders why and how we plan to work differently—from our inner source—is a highly challenging task. We believe the path would be smoother if we were able to support, with more evidence of its effectiveness, the type of work and approaches we are trying to promote.

During the last two decades of work, members of P&I have encountered several wicked problems while supporting think tanks and government agencies in their efforts to transform their organizations in order to contribute to better public policies through the use of research-based evidence. However, most of the strategic, monitoring, and evaluation plans that we co-developed fell short of their original intentions—despite being based in thoughtful and elaborate approaches and emerging from real group work and consensus. Further, as contractors, we found it challenging to engage in honest discussion with funders about failure, which is critical for experimentation, as funders typically reward only success stories and withdraw funding from ‘failures’ (Woolcock and Bridges, 2019).

Why was that happening? We decided to try and understand this a bit better. To that end, in 2016, we partnered with INASP, an international development organization based in the UK, to co-create a systemic framework called “Context Matters”, which is a participatory tool to help detect and understand the best entry points for improving the use of knowledge in public agencies. This framework builds on the experience of 50+ policymakers and practitioners and has been piloted with government agencies in Peru and Ghana and international non-governmental organizations such as UNICEF. With this

tool, we aimed to look both at the organization itself (internal factors) and the broader political economy (external factors) that can affect the use of knowledge in policy decisions. It addresses visible changes, such as new processes, policies and behaviours, and invisible changes, such as shifts in motivation, attitudes, and overall culture around knowledge use.

However, when trying to apply the tool with teams across the world, we find that the preferred solutions and approaches to deal with change focus primarily on the use of the mind and rational and linear approaches. Delving into personal and cultural change that taps into how an organization, a team, or a person perceive themselves and their values is regarded as a long-range effort that usually falls outside the scope of concrete short-term funded projects. Thus, the change plans that resulted from these processes were centered in visible activities and processes that coordinators and managers could develop and measure. Or as put by Wilber and Watkins (2015), the chosen way is to focus on “it” solutions: those that can be objectively seen and measured. But the challenges faced are not so easy to identify, they are invisible and mostly belong to our individual and collective internal dimensions. Hence, outer transformation should be underpinned by inner transformation. To become aware of and change *the inner place* from which we operate, we need to integrate mind, body and heart. In Scharmer’s (2016) words, “it’s not only *what* leaders do and *how* they do it, but their ‘interior condition,’ that is, the inner place from which they operate—the source and quality of their attention.”

Thus, we are eager to co-produce, receive, and apply research-based evidence, and to foster global discussions on how cultivating the interior condition through awareness-based systems change approaches, such as Theory U under the Presencing Institute, Reinventing organizations by Frederic Laloux, and The Conscious Business approach by Peter Matthies, can contribute to innovative ways of addressing challenges in development projects. In that sense, we believe that this journal has significant potential to systematize and make more visible and accessible the knowledge needed to promote systemic change in a conscious way.

We have a couple of key questions that could guide our inquiry going forward:

- How can the potential of mind be expanded by also including the heart and body to define development problems and co-create collective solutions?
- How are leaders of development projects currently using awareness-based systems change approaches to tackle development challenges?
- How have these approaches tangibly contributed to positive results in development projects? Can this be better and further monitored and evaluated?

- Could development players revisit current theories of change (and theories on how monitoring and evaluation is applied) by incorporating these types of approaches?

Even though awareness-based systems change approaches are increasingly generating interest and respect among think tanks, government agencies, and funders, there is more work to do to make a stronger case for how they can contribute to a radically new way of thinking so that we do not end up with the same results. To inspire the development community to try out awareness-based approaches, I believe we need to generate promising and solid changes at the level of knowledge, awareness, interest, and behaviours in our field. Some of these changes could be:

- Generation of novel evidence demonstrating how integrating mind, body, and heart can lead to valuable and sustainable outcomes in development projects.
- Increased awareness of why we need to expand the potential of the mind in the way we define problems and collectively produce potential solutions.
- Informed debates on the current challenges and limitations of traditional approaches to development projects and the potential contribution of awareness-based systems change methods and theories.
- New relationships among key stakeholders who seek to try these approaches, that go beyond rational and technical solutions, on recurrent challenges.
- An emergent community of development stakeholders interested in supporting awareness-based approaches for development projects.
- New beliefs and attitudes among a new generation of leaders who want to think and act differently in development.

In 2020, the level of uncertainty and not knowing brought by COVID have paved the way to the emergence of new voices and approaches that have been underestimated or neglected for a long time. 2021 is just starting and holds the promise of using what we have learned and what we still need to learn as a lighthouse to guide us forward. A new world may emerge from these critical and tumultuous times. This journal has the potential to shed light onto this promise and make new ways forward more accessible to those who have been waiting for them.

References

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