

Gentle obstinacy or How systems change

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In the central Asian fairy tale "The woman and the river," the protagonist places "one basket after another into the water" until the river - the system - changes its course. This story provides the framework for structuring the process of system change into intelligible steps. The national agricultural extension service of Zimbabwe (Agritex) serves as an example for testing these steps in the context of development cooperation. Agritex is reaching out of its entrenched boundaries and is attempting to institutionalise participative extension approaches.

1. The woman and the river: A story about system change

The aspiration

A woman stands on the bank of the Amu Darya, a vast river in the sultanate of Khwarezm in central Asia. The river winds its way sluggishly over the plain. At a shallow spot she takes the cattle that she is tending down to drink. The woman glances to her left, where the river, after a short stretch, is blocked by an old dune and takes a sharp bend to the left. In the bend of the river is the melon garden which the woman has wrested from the reeds on the bank. The fertile soil of the banks yields a fine harvest of the sweetest fruit. If only she could get the river to break through this one loop in its countless meanderings, then she could plant many more melons in the newly-gained land. But on the other side the flat dune hinders the river from following a straight course... The midday heat

shimmers over the dune, the flies buzz and the cattle slowly move under the trees to rest.

The idea

Then the woman has an idea! She collects several stalks of reed, sits in the shade of the large willow tree and weaves a simple basket. She fills it with sand and mud. Then she puts it into the water close to the bank. The cattle begin to move off and the woman follows them.

The river flows sluggishly and ponderously towards the bend to the left. It is dozing.

The next day, when the woman again comes to the river with her cattle, she sees her basket still lying in the water next to the shore. The river, however, has washed away a little of the mud. Again the woman weaves a basket, fills it with mud, places it next to the first one and then moves on with her cattle.

The river flows sluggishly and ponderously towards the bend to the left. It is dozing.

Every midday from then on the woman weaves another basket and places it filled with mud next to or over the others. In the course of a few weeks a bank which is enmeshed with baskets has developed. At its point the water begins to turn in a slow whirl behind which a small, still bay begins to form.

The river flows sluggishly and ponderously towards the bend to the left.

Yet on the left, something has changed. The river seems to have been disturbed in its dozing. This makes it just a tiny bit annoyed and it sends small eddies to deal with the troublesome new bank. But

it can't manage to tear away the woven baskets. Well, so what? What's the point? The baskets are just a slight itch. The river once again reverts to dozing and sluggishly flows along the old course, as it has done for hundreds of years.

The woman continues to add another basket of mud every day. Even though half the mud is washed away, the baskets partially sink into the riverbed and remain in the water. And every day another basket is added. The river bank widens and becomes longer....

The river continues to flow sluggishly and ponderously towards the bend to the left.

But something must happen on the left. The river is angered because its bed is now noticeably narrower. It sends forth swirls, and tears at the bank. And indeed the river does succeed in tearing and washing away a few baskets. In the meantime some reeds have established themselves in the sandbank and their roots infiltrate the baskets. Now the water pressure on the right shore of the river has also increased and the swirls are able to loosen and wash away an old sandbank. Very slightly the riverbed changes its course. The river is satisfied and returns reassured to its dozing. Sluggishly it flows towards the bend on the left.

Unwaveringly the woman places a basket into the water every day. She is happy about the emerging reeds on her bank. One day she has the idea of planting a few willow branches into the raised parts of the bank. And look! two of them take root and grow.

First changes

In the spring, when it rains in the distant mountains, and the glacier ice begins to melt, the river rises and gushes brown and wide over the plain. It has flooded and long forgotten the small bank on the left. Branches, uprooted trees and bushes are washed down. The woman's sandbank is affected badly. More than half of it is carried away. Yet as the water level begins to sink, a few large and small branches remain behind on the bank. In the end even a large tree with its crown becomes caught. Behind the tree the bank begins to extend anew. On the opposite shore, however, the old sandbank is washed away a bit, leaving a small,

steep embankment. The river has undoubtedly moved slightly to the right.

Every day during the dry season the woman continues to place a basket full of mud into the water behind and next to the tree which had been washed up. She also plants more willow branches. By the beginning of the next rainy season, the sandbank is twice as large as it was the year before.

This time the flooded river can no longer pretend that the sandbank does not exist. It actively has to do something, take steps so that it can continue in a proper way. The obstruction on the left bank induces it to eat away at the steep embankment on the right. Suddenly it pushes through the clay to the sand of the dune. All at once it can dig there as much as it wants to and clear some space. By the end of the rainy season, half the dune has been washed away.

The woman continues to add a basket every day.

Even in the dry season the river continues to hollow out the sandy shore. It clears enough room so that it can flow more easily. It is now practically indifferent to the bank on the left; in fact, it almost has feelings of gratitude. Without it the river would hardly have found the sandy spot on the right bank, enabling it to secure a wider riverbed.

Doggedly the woman continues to weave a basket every day and to place it into the water.

The opening

During the next flood there is suddenly a breach. The dune on the right shore can no longer resist the pressure and breaks. The river gushes over its new bed and abandons the old bend to the left. It has pushed its way through the tongue of land in the meander and now flows with new delight more rapidly and more directly towards the sea.

During the next dry season the woman continues to weave baskets and in this way stabilises the newly-emerged left bank of the river. The river is no longer angry with her. It allows what must happen to happen. All that now remains in the old river course is a small stream full of fish. The woman extends her garden. Her melons are particularly sweet.

The insight of the sultan

One day while the woman is selling her melons in the bazaar, a palace servant bids her to an audience with the sultan. "Your melons are famous for their sweetness", the sultan praises her. "I have heard that you have made your garden in the old riverbed. The people of your village say that you have diverted the river, so as to extend your garden. How have you done that? Last year I sent 30 men for a hundred days to dig a new river course further upstream. I wanted to force the river to change its course. I was not successful. How is it then that you were able to force it?"

"No, Sultan-Sahib", the woman answered. "The river dug its own new bed". "Then why is it that your neighbours say you diverted it?" "That is a misunderstanding. I have done nothing else but caused the river to seek new possibilities, to make itself and me feel better". Then she explains to the sultan what she did with the baskets.

At the end of her story the sultan pensively strokes his beard. The woman has given him a sample of a type of power which he has not known before. He helps himself to another piece of melon and consolidates this new insight with the wonderful sweetness in his mouth. As a reward for this new understanding, he bestows the newly-gained land from the old riverbed to the woman and her village taxfree.

Hints for interpreting the metaphor

- ≡ River = the existing, entrenched system with all its mechanisms
- ≡ Bank = limitations in the existing system
- ≡ Woman = wants to bring about a change in the system
- ≡ Baskets in the water = concrete changes or innovations which are made
- ≡ Sultan = someone who attempts to force his way on a system

2. Steps in system change

Based on the above tale, we believe that system change can best be achieved through the following steps:

1. **Small beginnings:** If you want to change the functioning of a system, you should begin with very small, almost imperceptible concrete changes in behaviour. The approach should be peripheral, on the edge, so as to avoid a destructive defensive reaction by the system.
2. **Apply gentle obstinacy:** Do not implement small changes only a few times, but again, and again, and again... The art of gentle and persuasive obstinacy leads to success.
3. **Tolerate defensive reactions:** If possible every system will first ignore innovations. Later it will defend itself against these innovations. Some troublesome defensive reaction is unavoidable. It has nothing to do with the actual people who are reacting, but with the system itself. Every person reacts "on behalf of" a system.
4. **Survive resistance:** Resistance means that innovation is no longer being ignored by the system, but is recognised as such. The system begins to concern itself with innovation. Despite resistance and set-backs, the system changer must continue to persistently uphold the new behaviour.
5. **Build on concrete examples from experience:** Resistance is positive. A system needs convincing reasons why it should change. If it were to blindly adapt to every suggestion of change, its existence would be endangered. A system is convinced particularly by concrete experiences, and not only by the intellectual insight into the necessity for innovation.
6. **Utilise the forces of the system:** Resistance can be used as a supporting force for change. For this the mechanisms of the system must be explored and then those should be applied which would aid in supporting and consolidating the changes.
7. **Break the limits:** The moment will come when the system has to change its functioning and its defining structures, so as to come to terms with the innovation. This is the opening or

breakthrough when the system develops its own strength to implement the innovation on a large scale.

8. **Consolidate changes:** The best, most sustainable and most effective system changes are brought about by the system itself with its own means and approaches. In this way the system acknowledges changes as its "own" and takes the necessary measures to consolidate them.

3. From a fairy tale to reality

In the next paragraph we risk the transition from a charming fairy tale to stark reality. Using a case example from the context of agricultural extension, we will try and test whether we can recognise the steps of system change.

The example deals with Agritex, the large national agricultural extension organisation in Zimbabwe. Agritex is organised in a strictly hierarchical way according to colonial pattern. It follows a somewhat modified, directive extension approach of "Training and Visit". In some provinces Agritex is at present in a process aiming at introducing participative extension approaches. We shall examine these attempts in the Masvingo province in the south of Zimbabwe more closely. The starting point for this process was the coming together and conscious cooperation of a number of agricultural development projects in the Masvingo province. A small agricultural project, the Chivi Food Security Project¹ of the NGO Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG), Zimbabwe, developed a model of participative agricultural extension outside the large organisation Agritex. The Chivi Project consistently involves the local community in all its activities. It strictly refuses to provide the farming families with any financial or material support. The project works with a coordinator on site whose roles are restricted to those of mediator and moderator. The ratio of agricultural extension officers to farming families corresponds exactly to the employee density of Agritex. Concurrent to these Chivi Project activities, two projects within Agritex which are supported by GTZ (the German

organisation for technical cooperation) began to trigger changes. The so-called Contill project developed a procedure in which technical innovations are found and tested together with the farmers (participatory technology development). In addition, the integrated rural project IRDEP, with considerable financial backing, initiated a new, participative planning procedure on community level. The coordinated interplay of these and other players has resulted in Agritex Masvingo finding itself in a process of organisation development. The process aims at a more partnership-like relationship between the agricultural extension officers and their clients. In this way it is hoped to increase the effectiveness of the extension activities.

Hints for interpreting the case example

- ≡ The existing, entrenched system with all its mechanisms = Agritex, Masvingo province
- ≡ Limitations in the existing system = "Rules and Regulations" such as job descriptions and official procedures
- ≡ Want to bring about a change in the system = Chivi Food Security Project, Contill, IRDEP
- ≡ Concrete changes or innovations which are made = in the Chivi project the farmers plan and implement all project activities together with officers; in the Contill project researchers, agricultural extensionists and farmers together develop technical innovations; in IRDEP the community is actively involved in planning
- ≡ Someone who attempts to force his way on a system = Agritex headquarters

Can the steps in system change as listed above also be observed in the case of Agritex? In the following examination the small Chivi project is taken as the focus. In the closing analysis the

¹ the Chivi Project

interplay amongst the different players is once again taken into account:

1. **Small beginnings:** In 1991 the Chivi project begins on a very small scale and with little expense in only two villages of one ward (approximately 1300 households). Agritex is informed and consulted.
2. **Apply gentle obstinacy:** After a comprehensive needs' assessment the Chivi project begins to locate sources of new know-how in the area of soil protection and water resource development. Selected farmers are brought into contact with these information sources. Next, the project organises the exchange of know-how and skills amongst the farming families. Local representatives are sent to leadership training courses. The Chivi Project forms an alliance with like-minded players of the development scene, especially with Contill and IRDEP, and begins to doggedly inform about its own project. This includes publications, workshops, project visits, evaluations and discreet lobbying. Agritex observes the process with increasing interest.
3. **Tolerate defensive reactions:** Resistance emerges in Agritex. Some high officials feel themselves forced into a direction which does not please them. The Chivi project is criticised as being too expensive and not replicable. Some of the agricultural extension workers at Agritex who are involved in the new extension approach of the Chivi project complain about an increased workload.
4. **Survive resistance:** The Chivi project continues with its approach and can register some successes in its area. The Chivi project and its allies publish more, send invitations to new workshops, organise more project visits by decision-makers, involve Agritex headquarters in project evaluations...
5. **Build on concrete examples from experience:** On the one hand those in charge at Agritex slowly come to realise that the usual instructive extension methods are not very effective. More importantly, however, the Chivi project has at the same time provided a concrete example of how extension work can be approached

differently, that is, in a participative way. Apart from this external case example, Contill (participative technology development) and IRDEP (joint planning at community level) have provided tangible experiences which occurred in Agritex itself.

6. **Utilise the forces of the system:** In 1994 Agritex commissioned a "potential and problem" analysis of its own activities. The case examples of the Chivi Project, Contill and IRDEP fall on this ground. From the point of view of the Chivi Project, the interplay with Contill and IRDEP signifies a skilful utilisation of the internal forces of change within the system. Only in this way can the necessary critical mass be reached. In addition, some of the field officers who could observe and experience the extension approach of the Chivi project are enthusiastic about it. To their colleagues they express the view that the effectiveness of their work has increased manifold and they therefore experience a greater degree of satisfaction in carrying out their duties. These extension workers are skilfully used as advocates for a participative approach with farmers.
1. **Break the limits:** A new, brilliant official takes over the leadership of Agritex in the Masvingo province. With the support from an advisor of IRDEP, he risks a process of organisation development for his institution. Agritex Masvingo is declared a pilot province and is closely observed by Agritex headquarters. Using the potential and problem analysis as a starting point, the actual organisation development process is begun. A core element in this process is the stepwise training of 23 selected agricultural extensionists in participatory extension approaches. Besides, a psychologist runs a management supervision training course for high officials. At the same time the job descriptions of all the employees (several hundred!) are revised and the official procedures simplified. That which has been on paper for so long will be put into action as from 1997: The agricultural extension officers will plan their work programmes together with their clients. By the end of 1998 all the agricultural extension officers of Agritex Masvingo and

their superior will be trained in participative agricultural extension.

2. **Lasting change:** The organisation development process aims at an organisation which is transparent, able to learn and imbued with trust, as a prerequisite for the participative cooperation between the agricultural extension officers and the farming families. The adaptation of the official rules and procedures represent the start of anchoring such a communication culture in Agritex Masvingo.

In completing the metaphor "The woman and the river", the importance of the interplay of several change players can be gleaned from the case example of Agritex in Zimbabwe. By forming an alliance, the Chivi Project, Contill and IRDEP could attain the critical mass to trigger the organisation development process in Agritex. In this they skilfully used the forces within the system, by referring to the results of the potential and problem analysis and by pointing to case examples which originated in Agritex itself. In the end it is always the river itself which makes its own bed!