

Between the Lines podcast episode 10:

How Change Happens – Duncan Green

JO HOWARD: Hi Duncan. Today I'm talking to Duncan Green, who is Senior Strategic Advisor at Oxfam GB. He's also Professor in Practice in International Development at LSE and he's previously worked for DFID and for CAFOD and has been Head of Research at Oxfam. And we're going to talk today about his book, *How Change Happens*, which I found really inspiring and encouraging, as well as being quite critically analytic.

DUNCAN GREEN: Well that's a good start!

JO HOWARD: Helps you to . . . you come out feeling very optimistic. And this book draws on Duncan's experience over the last few decades in multiple countries, having multiple conversations, and it's a call for action really, for a complexity-aware perspective on development and social change. And it has many layers and talks to many audiences I think. So Duncan, could you just start off by telling us a bit about why you wrote this book?

DUNCAN GREEN: Yes, you tend to write books and then realise afterwards why you wrote them. And I think what I realised towards the end of writing this particular book was that it was the . . . it was a kind of a process of becoming more analytical and more thoughtful about power and politics. And partly because I had rejected some of the other things that NGOs, in particular, were doing, when I first came into Oxfam. So I'd seen examples of well-meaning middle class Vietnamese staff trying to stop change happening in rural villages, because they didn't want them contaminated by the modern world. I saw a campaign called Make Poverty History which I thought massively over— . . . massively exaggerated the importance of Western activists and underestimated the importance of national politics and national change. So all of these things got me thinking much more about the role of power and politics in social change and the fairly tangential role of outsiders, and the more central role of activists broadly defined. So I don't mean just people on the streets, I mean anybody who's trying to change the context, the situation in which they're in. I think there's some very similar lessons that I've drawn from watching lots of different examples, which apply equally to whether you're working in a corporate, or an NGO, or a grassroots organisation.

JO HOWARD: Hmm. So tell us a bit more about how you see change as systemic and not linear.

DUNCAN GREEN: Well many, many years ago I studied physics and I think it must have got under my skin a bit, because I sort of went all physicist at some points during the book, because what I realised was that we had a . . . we'd somehow acquired a terribly linear view of change: that if I do *this*, I will achieve *this*. And if I get results, I'll be able to attribute it to my action. And the more I thought about that, the more absurd that seemed as a model for most kinds of change. So if you

think about your own life, how you grew up, trying to raise your kids, trying to ride a bicycle across London – none of those are linear activities. All of them involve unpredictability, responding to unexpected events, thinking on your feet, being flexible, agile – everything that's not in a classic project plan. So I suppose I started to realise that we had ended up somewhere very artificial and not terribly useful. And so, by rethinking and saying, 'Okay, suppose we are in these complex and unpredictable systems, what does that mean for activism? It doesn't mean you give up, but it means you do activism differently.' And that's the kind of . . . that's where I ended up, I think with the book.

JO HOWARD: Something that is very central to the work that we do, that me and my colleagues are working on at IDS is power. And so it's exciting to see it so central in a book about development and social change. Could you tell us a bit about how you're thinking about power and why it's important to understand, because systemic approaches don't necessarily engage with power, but you do?

DUNCAN GREEN: So power takes me back to my physicist days a bit, because I see it as the sort of underlying force field of social change and the role, or the most relevant skill, for an activist is to make power visible in some sense. So, there's power in every room, in every community. There's power in this room right now, in terms of I'm doing the talking, you're asking questions, Sarah's making sure that it actually gets recorded. There's a power relation there, which we could examine if we wanted to, but we're not going to. But that's true everywhere. So there's a whole bunch of tools you can use to make power visible, starting with – Robert Chambers is great: who is the upper and who is the lower in this interaction, because that will tell you what is said, what is left unsaid, the language that's used and all the rest of it. Then there's the sort of power *within*, contrasting power, within that sense of rights and agency, power *with*, forming associations, taking steps as organisations, power to achieve change in the world around you. There's lots of different ways, but any of them work to make power visible, so that you can then act upon it consciously and design and think about change processes. So it's the thing that I think the LSE students find most useful in the course is this, 'Here are some steps to make power visible,' and then you go away and think about what you want to do about it. And I think that that's probably one of the more practical lessons of the book.

JO HOWARD: So what you have and I think is, the way you summarise your thinking is in this power and systems approach. Is that a kind of a model that we could be using? Can you describe it as that? Or can you just briefly explain it?

DUNCAN GREEN: Well, I had a terrible dilemma, because I showed the draft book to my son, who's a real activist. He was working for an organisation called Citizens UK at the time. And he said, 'Well, look, it's great, but unless you can get it down into two slides, no activist is going to remember it.' And I said, 'But I don't want to do another toolkit. The whole book is saying that you can't have these blueprint, cookie cutter, toolkit-y approaches to change.' So, the compromise was to talk about an approach, which is: the way of being, the kind of nature that you need to try and develop to be an effective activist and the kind of questions you need to ask. And that's as far . . . and I am certainly not going to suggest what the answers

should be. And the kind of ways of being are things like: being curious, actually being really interested in what's changing in the world around you. Many activists are just too tired to be curious. They do ridiculous hours and they've stopped being curious. And I think that that is a real problem. Humility, you know, that ability to actually see the limitations on your own knowledge and still function. And then the readiness to work with people you disagree with, you know, NGOs and civil society organisations, sometimes it looks like they're creating a monoculture of people who think just like them, have the same views, the same politics. And that's very bad news if you're working in these complex systems, because diversity produces strength and resilience. So you've got to work with the faith organisations, even if you're not a believer. I'm an atheist, I worked with the Catholics at CAFOD for seven years – fascinating and hugely enjoyable. You've got to work with people you disagree with, people you don't understand, and that's when the interesting stuff happens. I'm a great believer in multi-stakeholder initiatives, where the corporates sit down with the trade unions and the NGOs on a specific problem. I'm much less excited where everybody's the same kind of person, talking about something terribly vague. So it's how do you work in diversity and how do you keep your mind open to possibilities, which I think is really crucial.

JO HOWARD: And there's an approach for activist, but for activists who could be sitting in all sorts of different organisations, institutions, so on. So you could have this kind of activist approach to working . . . sitting within DFID, or sitting within Oxfam, or sitting in IDS, or sitting in London Citizens, is that right?

DUNCAN GREEN: Absolutely. I mean I learnt this at my cost. Most of the things I learnt, I learnt through personal humiliation. And there was one particular moment when I was trying to recruit a large department store to an ethical trading initiative project, to try and improve labour standards in supply chains. And I put on a suit, and I thought, 'Right, I'm in the presence of a capitalist robber baron, I'll use the capitalist robber baron language,' and I was talking about, you know, recruitment and staff retention and reputational risk. And he just looked to me in a sort of baffled way and said, 'But Duncan, I just want to make the world better for my grandchildren.' And I felt so stupid, because I just hadn't seen the person. I just thought, 'I'm in the presence of, you know, of this . . . other, and therefore I was being an absolute rubbish activist. And once we twigged that he actually was morally driven to do something, it was easy. But I just hadn't seen him.'

JO HOWARD: And that's the big message as well: to see the person. And the more we participate and engage with others and try to understand their perspectives and what drives them within the systems that we're looking at, then the more we're going to be able to work together.

DUNCAN GREEN: Yes, but not going too Kumbaya on this, so the person is the person, but the person also has a certain kind of power and represents a certain kind of institution, so it's both . . . it's, again, structure and agency. It's seeing how both interact and understanding it's not just about 'everybody is lovely people' – people do things because of where they come from, but they're not completely determined

by it. And that's where the wiggle room is and that's where you can make things happen.

JO HOWARD: And how is it . . . it seems to me very important today to be having this conversation, what's your reflection on that and what this book says to the current challenges and crises we're living through at this precise moment?

DUNCAN GREEN: Yeah, I mean, the book was terrible timing, because it came out just before Donald Trump was elected and it had gone to press before Brexit. So I'd, you know, I joked afterwards that I should probably have written a book called *How Terrible Things Happen* or *How Shit Happens* or something, because suddenly we were confronted with a lot of changes which didn't look terribly positive. But I think they're same . . . similar processes. So things that strike you about processes, whether they're progressive or regressive, in my view, are things like the importance of underlying social norms, how these deep, deep-seated attitudes and beliefs have changed over time and people who consider themselves activists have often ignored those too much, focused too much on policies, on specifics, on things you can point to and say, 'I did that,' you know, little, little wins in Westminster, for example, in the case of the UK. So, I think too much of a focus on policy, not enough on the underlying tides which have led to the rise of populism, for example. People not realising the crucial role of events – 'critical junctures' political scientists call them – these sudden events that shake the status quo, throw all the power relations in the air and mean that you can actually achieve things, for good or bad, which weren't possible before. So, the 2008 financial crisis, the global crisis, is still playing out in the shape of Brexit, in the shape of a massive political upheaval. And unless you understand the importance of events like that, you're going to get into a sort of misleading, steady state understanding of change which is going to leave you completely baffled by the world.

JO HOWARD: And so there's a role to be played, a way of thinking about the actors in this system as activists, as citizen activists maybe, but also the role of institutions, governments and so on. Do you feel you have . . . they're all part of the story, is that how we need to understand it?

DUNCAN GREEN: Yeah, I mean, I work for Oxfam and I've been very involved in advocacy, both in Oxfam and elsewhere. And the heart of advocacy is that there's both agency and structure, in IDS terms, and that activists have agency, but if they just believe in the power of good intentions and they don't understand the structures that they are trying to influence, then they're unlikely to be successful. So, it's that interaction between agency and structure, which I think is so exciting and, you know, I've got lots of examples of seeing it happen around the world and that's what inspires you, I think. But what I don't . . . what I worry about is when activism just becomes . . . it flies off on its own and becomes a kind of . . . a technique without any sort of roots in real power and structures.

JO HOWARD: Hmm. You quote quite a few examples from your travels, is there a particular example, or initiative, or anecdote that you could share with us that illustrates how things . . . how change happens, in your experience?

DUNCAN GREEN: Well, I'll give you one which is at the top of my mind at the moment, because next week I'm off to Bolivia and I'm going back to a quite remote corner of Bolivia, which I visited in 2006, which had a big impact. It's an indigenous group called the Chiquitanos, who went from being feudal serfs, essentially, having to ask for permission to leave their land, to winning the rights to a million hectares of land, two and a half million acres of land, over about 20 years. And I went and spent some days with them, interviewing them and reconstructing the timeline of how they did it. And it made me understand how things come together to produce change. Some of them intentional, some of them unintentional. I mean, if there's time I can give you a little bit about the story? So, they started off being allowed to leave their farms to play football, because the landowners wanted them to stay healthy. On the margins of the football games, they started discussing and building a sense of shared grievance over how bad the food was, or how bad the wages were, how bad the treatment was. They started to acquire a sense of cultural identity, they had previously thought of themselves as peasant farmers, and they started to self-identify as indigenous, which is a massive change in your deep identity, you know, very deep stuff. And then they started to get into politics. They got into local politics, and they always engaged, they didn't just indulge in sort of protest movements, they always tried to get candidates into local office. At a time when Chiquitanos were beaten up if they went into the town square, they were standing candidates for local councillors. And they went from that and accumulated forces, teamed up with indigenous groups elsewhere in Bolivia, became part of the Evo Morales phenomenon, which led to Bolivia's first ever indigenous president in 2006 – and this is a majority indigenous country. And they got a million hectares of land. And it was fascinating and it made me realise how things come together, that confluence of big tides, like the rise of indigenous consciousness across Latin America. Chance events, like the government in the 80s shut down the mines and the mining trade unionists scattered around the country and started setting up social movements and taught the indigenous people in Chiquitania how to organise. So just random events all came together and created this extraordinary social change. So that was 2006, and I'm going back next week to see whether it's still a good news story or whether something's gone horribly wrong, which does happen.

JO HOWARD: So another kind of chapter of the retrospective, from now back to 2006, what's happened?

DUNCAN GREEN: Yeah, I mean, one of the hardest things for activists is winning. So, normally, when you win a campaign, everybody starts fighting, because, you know, it wasn't enough. The reformers pick fights with the revolutionaries . . . and so I don't know whether that's what's happened in Chiquitania or . . . you know, I'll find out.

JO HOWARD: Hmm. So I'm interested in that there's this approach, or this way of looking at change: you can understand change by looking back and looking at all the different things that happen, the different actors, like you say, those mining union members going off and spreading their way of thinking, that you couldn't have anticipated, but you can look back and see it. What do we do in order to look forward?

DUNCAN GREEN: That is the hardest question. So, I mean, with my LSE students – I teach a course on activism at the LSE – and they have two assignments: they have a backward-looking analysis and then they have to come up with a proposal for an influencing strategy for something they feel strongly about, and they get marked on both. And they are slightly different questions. And I think the point about throwing all that forward is you still need to be able to analyse and understand power as the kind of force field of social change. So yeah, you can see many processes of change as a process of power shifting from one group to another, being renegotiated and all the rest of it. So I teach a bunch of tools to the students about how to understand and look at power. And that's both formal power, in terms of who controls Congress, or government, or the military, and informal power, in terms of social norms, what is considered natural, how women are treated, or whatever aspect of norms you're talking about. And then you have to go from that to thinking, 'Okay, so what kind of strategies will I look for? What kind of allies might I be able to build alliances with? Who are the enemies that I need to either ignore or try and weaken?' And it's quite a deliberate process, but it's not easy chucking it forward. And then, finally, what you have to realise is: however much you think about it and however smart you are, it's very likely that the plan you come up with won't work. And then the key question is: how good are you at spotting what is and isn't working and adapting your plan? So it's all this kind of adaptive management language, which is very current in the aid sector at the moment, applied to influencing.

JO HOWARD: Hmm. So you're speaking about, you're thinking about, and teaching activists, trainee advocates, perhaps. What about [00:17:35] your regular development programme manager or your academic researcher? How could we be working differently to take on board this way of thinking?

DUNCAN GREEN: Well, the development programme manager question is very much about how you deal with uncertainty and ambiguity in a world which has previously required you to pretend to absolute certainty. So this is the work that Ros Eyben did at IDS, saying that, you know, aid people often lead a double life, where they know that real life is uncertain, that they're improvising, making things up. But then, when they report back to Head Office, they rewrite it into nice, neat project descriptions to keep their bosses happy. So there's a certain . . . you know, surely we can do better than live that lie. So I think there's . . . and there's lots of thinking going on in the aid sector around . . . there's all these acronyms and phrases, 'doing development differently', 'thinking and working politically', 'adaptive management'. And the most obscure, but one of the most interesting, is 'problem-driven iterative adaptation', which some smart person at Harvard came up with. So all of that's happening in the development sector. In academia, I think one of the most interesting conversations I get into regularly is that academics are now being required to think about impact, which they find very traumatic. And impact is not just about getting something in a journal, which they find even more traumatic. So there's actually quite . . . that's opened the door to a conversation about: how do you design research in order to have impact, but without contaminating the independence and objectivity of the research? And things like involving your targets as interviewees, or to ask them to comment on . . . if you're trying to influence a particular department, a particular set of decision makers, get them involved early so

they feel some sense of ownership. The last thing you should do is get the paper published in a peer-reviewed journal and then send it to someone, because they won't read it. So how do you do better than that? How do you . . . you know, I teach a course on blogging for impact, because, increasingly, if you want anyone to read your paper, you have to blog it. And how do you write a blog that people actually want to read? There's a lot of blogs in the world, a lot of competition. So, you know, all these kind of questions are now causing a lot of unhappiness in academia, and I think that's great, because it needs to be shaken up. I'm quite appalled that there's still colleagues at the LSE who sort of say, 'I don't have a Twitter' you know, and you just think, 'Oh no,' this is . . . they still live in that world of peer-reviewed journal and self-referencing world, which means that they have less impact than they should have.

JO HOWARD: Hmm. You're just reminding me of something that really struck me reading your book, is your call for humility, to recognise that you don't know everything and you probably know much less than you think you do and that, you know, the need for humility, which is kind of . . . not the first thing that, perhaps, in our worlds we're encouraged to think – and how do we encourage people to think more, in a more humble way and also a more collaborative way, working together rather than the gains that I can get from my own advancement, I suppose?

DUNCAN GREEN: I mean, I think you put your finger on it and, for me, humility is the hardest thing. And, I mean, it's the hardest thing for various reasons. One is: if you're an activist, you're passionate, you want to change the world and it's very easy to flip from that to thinking you have to demonstrate complete certainty, so that people will believe you and follow you. And it's very hard to ride that horse and at the same time think, 'I probably don't know what I'm talking about,' which I think causes a lot of existential angst amongst activists. If you're an academic applying for research funding and you say, 'I've really no idea, but I'm going to have look at this to see if it's interesting,' you're not going to get the research grants. So there's a whole bunch of structural and psychological issues which work against humility. But reality works *for* humility. The trouble is, humility as a word has got a bad press. So being humble is like being some very, sort of holy, saint-like individual. That's not the humility I'm interested in. I'm interested in evidence-based humility, which is: in a situation where you genuinely don't have the ability to predict and the ability to know what's going to happen, it's crucial that you're humble enough to keep feedback in place, so you spot what works and what doesn't and then react to it. That's how you become an effective activist. So humility is a tool, if you like. It's not some lovely, holy quality – it's actually what you need to be a good activist. But it works against the grain of a lot of other elements, I think. So it's very hard.

JO HOWARD: Fascinating. So I'm interested in: what next in terms of activism, what message for development. But I also think that the messages from this book don't just speak to international development in terms of the Global South, but also the Global North, and these kind of universal agendas and universal challenges that we're facing, climate change for instance, how do you see the ideas in this book helping us to step up to those challenges?

DUNCAN GREEN: Well, I don't think there's a magic answer here, I am actually personally very, very distressed and depressed about the ability to confront climate change. It seems it's just a bigger-scale problem with . . . and more difficult than nuclear weapons, more difficult than chemical warfare, more difficult than almost any problem you care to mention. But, I think there are some aspects of thinking about power and systems which are helpful. One is, one of the lessons I'm constantly trying to drum home with my students is: never see monoliths, always look at an institution, be it a formal institution or an informal institution, and think, 'Let's get under the skin of it, let's disaggregate, let's see who are our potential allies.' If it's the fossil fuel industry, in terms of climate change, if it's the finance sector, you will always find allies. You know, we had arms companies campaigning with us for a global arms trade treaty, because you found people whose interests aligned. So that's why you need to study the system, because you can find unexpected allies that can really shift the prospects. So, on climate change, for example, I'm struck by how little there's been a linkup between faith organisations and climate change activists. Faith organisations with a concern for stewardship, with a concern for future generations. Faith organisations think long-term, more than any other institution. You look at the Vatican – they understand long-term change and long-term resistance and the importance of thinking in those sort of generational terms. Natural allies. And yet it's not obvious that . . . you know, many activists find that difficult, because they can't bridge the normative abyss between a rationalist, environmentalist agenda and a faith-based agenda. So trying to get those people to talk to each other, I think, and find common ground, really important. Then I think the other issue that's come up for me since Donald Trump's election, since Brexit, is this question of: okay, if we are going to think about norms and underlying social values, underlying what in IDS they call 'othering' – othering of migrants, othering of women, othering of gays and lesbians, whatever it is, how do we work on that? I mean, okay, you recognise it, how do you shift it? And I think there's some really interesting work going on in unexpected places, you know? Cristina Bicchieri's written a book about how to shift norms, looking at things like the history of . . . on breastfeeding and hand-washing. Lots of really interesting work on FGM, on foot-binding. We need to get literate in norm change and how we bring it about. And I think that's a really big challenge.

JO HOWARD: So, on climate change it seems like this intractable problem that we can't get . . . we can't get all the right players together. There are issues on too many levels, or there are simplistic solutions that ignore this kind of black box in the middle. And it reminds me of that lovely cartoon that you have, 'And then a miracle occurs', in your book. Can you tell us a little bit about that and reflect on how that might help us think about addressing climate change?

DUNCAN GREEN: Yeah, for people who don't know the cartoon, it's my favourite cartoon of all time. It's two scientists in front of a blackboard, And there's a big equation and then another big equation and joining it is just a little, 'Then a miracle occurs', written on the board. And for me that's every project plan I look at in Oxfam, because . . . but instead of, 'Then a miracle occurs', people just draw an arrow. So you say, 'We will disseminate information about how bad the education system is,' – arrow – 'People will demand changes in government policy.' And

whenever I get one of these theories of change diagrams, I ignore the words and just ask, 'What's behind the arrow?' So I think it's a very . . . it's a great cartoon. In terms of the black box on climate change, it is a . . . it is the wickedest of wicked problems. Everything has to change to prevent runaway climate crisis. And that leads people to work . . . to respond in some not-always-helpful ways. One way people respond is say, 'I have an answer.' So you've got this . . . I have a little acronym, 'IIRTW' – 'If I ruled the world, then it would be like this – why can't you just do it like I say?' And there are so many books on climate change which are, 'If I Ruled the World' books, which are occasionally very interesting in terms of challenging, creating a big vision, you know, I initially was quite critical of Kate Raworth's *Doughnut Economics*, because it gave no sense of how what she was saying might actually happen. But it's had such an impact in terms of a big normative shift, that I think that's actually creating the space where these more considered, more power-conscious solutions could come in. But somebody's got to do the hard working and get in the black box and say, 'Okay, so what needs to happen?' It's no good to say, 'We're against growth,' if, actually, the entire structure of capitalist society relies on growth. You have to come up with something which works, which replaces it. And people aren't doing that. For me, there's far too much of this broad-brush, 'everything must change' stuff and not enough of getting inside the black box and seeing how change could really happen. And it's a phenomenally difficult problem. I mean, if you think about the current generation has to make massive sacrifices, material sacrifices for future generations. And we were trying to think of when has this happened in history? And the only time we could think of was medieval cathedrals, which take hundreds of years to build, but that's just a small elite making the sacrifices. But it gives you a sense of . . . and they're being promised a place in heaven, so you can . . . that's the kind of thinking we need to get the kind of shifts that are required to combat a climate catastrophe. And I don't see enough of it.

JO HOWARD: Do you have another inspiring story, or NGO, or community based organisation that you've talked to, that can leave us with a word of encouragement and hope for change?

DUNCAN GREEN: I think I'd actually go general on this, because, you know, any NGO person could come up with some cheesy anecdotes about feel good stuff and many of those are genuine and fantastic. But, I mean, the thing that we don't do enough of is stand back and say, 'Wow, look where we've come from. Look at the world in 1945 and look at the world in 2019, and isn't it amazing how many more people have fulfilled, rich lives than had in 1945, in terms of literacy, in terms of rights, in terms of not being beaten, in terms of staying alive, not dying young, not seeing your children die.' You know, huge progress. And we, because we always concentrate on the threats and what still needs to change, I think we probably need a sort of daily deep breath, where we just say, 'Isn't this extraordinary and can we keep this going.' The challenge now is to keep it going, rather than let it slide back. And that's the great fear we all have.

JO HOWARD: Thank you. It's nice to end with an encouraging note and also a call to action, which is what your book's for, so let's carry on and look for ways that we can work in a more power-aware and systems-aware way of working, studying, relating

in our work. Thank you and everyone look out for Duncan's book which is open access, so you don't need to go out and buy it, it's out there on the Internet for you to download and read. Thank you very much Duncan.