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*How change happens.*

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## How Change Happens by Duncan Green: A Critical Review

### Introduction

Duncan Green's *How Change Happens* (Green, 2016) stands as a refreshingly candid meditation on the complexities of social transformation. Green, Oxfam's senior strategic adviser, bridges the gap between academic theory and on-the-ground activism (Chambers, 1997; Eyben, 2014), drawing on decades of experience in advocacy and development programming to rethink how organizations, activists, and policymakers should approach social change.

The book's central contribution lies in its systematic deconstruction of linear, technocratic approaches that have dominated development thinking (Li, 2007; Mosse, 2005). Green challenges the "best practice" paradigm, the notion that effective interventions can be identified, codified, and replicated across contexts with predictable results (Green, 2016, pp. 12-18). Instead, he advocates for "adaptive programming" or "thinking and working politically," approaches that embrace complexity and recognise that meaningful change emerges from the dynamic interplay of systems, institutions, power relations, and human agency (Andrews et al., 2017; Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

### Theoretical Foundations

Green structures his analysis around interconnected theoretical frameworks drawn from complexity theory, systems thinking, political economy analysis, and social movement studies. This theoretical pluralism reflects his conviction that no single lens can adequately capture the multifaceted nature of social change.

## **Embracing Complexity**

The opening chapters critique what Green characterises as the “engineering” approach to development, the belief that social change can be managed through careful planning, logical frameworks, and replicable interventions (Green, 2016, pp. 19-24). Drawing on complexity theory, Green emphasises that societies are adaptive systems characterised by feedback loops, emergence, non-linearity, and sensitivity to initial conditions (Green, 2016, pp. 25-42; Ramalingam, 2013). Change processes are path-dependent; what works in one setting may fail in another due to differing conditions, power dynamics, and institutional configurations (Pierson, 2000).

This leads Green to advocate for approaches emphasising learning, adaptation, and political savvy over rigid planning, with profound implications for organisational culture, donor relations, and monitoring practices (Valters, 2015).

## **Power and Politics**

One of the book’s most significant contributions is its engagement with power. Green draws on Steven Lukes’ three-dimensional framework (Lukes, 2005) and the empowerment literature’s distinctions between “power over,” “power with,” “power to,” and “power within” (Rowlands, 1997; VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002). This helps explain why technically sound policies often fail and why formal rights don’t automatically translate into substantive change.

Green distinguishes between visible power (formal rules and decision-making), hidden power (agenda-setting), and invisible power (internalised norms) (Gaventa, 2006; Green, 2016, pp. 68-73). Effective change strategies must operate across all three dimensions. His treatment of political economy analysis emphasises understanding the underlying incentives, interests, and power relations sustaining existing arrangements (Green, 2016, pp. 88-95; Hudson & Leftwich, 2014). He stresses “finding and fitting,” identifying spaces where political will, public legitimacy, and technical feasibility align (Kingdon, 1984).

## **Structure and Agency**

Throughout, Green grapples with the relationship between structure and agency (Giddens, 1984), arguing that effective change strategies require simultaneous attention to both. His treatment of social norms illustrates this well. While norms are deeply embedded and resistant to change, they can shift with remarkable speed (Bicchieri, 2016; Green, 2016, pp. 120-135). Green explores how norm entrepreneurs (Sunstein, 1996), tipping points (Gladwell, 2000), and interactions between changing behaviour and attitudes can catalyse rapid shifts.

## **Agents of Change**

Green examines various actors through which change occurs, avoiding ideological tendencies to privilege any single set of actors.

## **The State**

Green devotes considerable attention to the state, rejecting both market fundamentalism of the 1980s-1990s (Williamson, 1990) and uncritical statism (Green, 2016, pp. 145-168). He recognises states as complex, internally differentiated institutions where progressive and regressive forces coexist (Mann, 1984; Migdal, 2001). Drawing on political science, Green identifies factors making states effective: capacity, political will, accountability mechanisms, and appropriate institutional designs (Evans, 1995; Fukuyama, 2004). However, these factors interact in complex ways and cannot be simply imported; state-building is deeply political and historically contingent (Scott, 1998; Tilly, 1990).

## **Civil Society and Social Movements**

Civil society occupies an ambiguous position, simultaneously celebrated and criticised (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Lewis, 2002). Green distinguishes between civil society's different roles: service delivery, advocacy, monitoring, and representing marginalized voices (Green, 2016, pp. 169-192).

The book's discussion of social movements is particularly strong (Green, 2016, pp. 181-192). Drawing on social movement theory, Green explores how movements emerge, sustain themselves, and achieve impact (Tarrow, 1998; Tilly & Wood, 2012). He emphasises political opportunity structures (McAdam, 1982), framing and narrative (Snow & Benford, 1988), and challenges in translating protest into institutional change. Successful change efforts often combine disruptive protest and insider advocacy (Pettinicchio, 2012), suggesting the importance of ecologies of change rather than single actors.

## **Cross-Cutting Themes**

### **Rights and Empowerment**

Green engages with whether rights-based approaches represent a distinctive paradigm or rhetorical framing (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Green, 2016, pp. 211-228). He acknowledges rights language's mobilising power while noting the gap between formal rights and their realization, which requires addressing underlying power relations and resource constraints (O'Neill & Domingo, 2016). His discussion of empowerment distinguishes between individual empowerment (building consciousness and agency) and collective empowerment (organising for structural change), arguing both are necessary but insufficient alone (Kabeer, 1999).

### **Gender Equality**

Green examines gender inequality as simultaneously involving discriminatory laws, unequal economic opportunities, harmful social norms, and internalised beliefs (Green, 2016, pp. 229-246). Effective gender justice strategies must operate across multiple levels: changing laws, shifting norms, transforming institutions, and supporting women's agency (Cornwall et al., 2007; Kabeer, 2005). His discussion of how gender norms change is insightful, exploring rapid

shifts (women's political participation in post-genocide Rwanda) and incremental change (women's education) (Green, 2016, pp. 238-242), emphasising context-specific mechanisms over generic templates (Htun & Weldon, 2010).

### **Implications for Practice**

Green translates theoretical insights into practical implications (Green, 2016, pp. 265-310), acknowledging constraints facing practitioners while arguing for significant changes. Central to his prescriptions is the need for genuine learning organizations, requiring cultural shifts towards embracing uncertainty, rewarding intelligent failure, and being willing to change course (Pritchett et al., 2013). He advocates incorporating political economy analysis into programme design (Green, 2016, pp. 286-295).

Green's discussion of scaling challenges conventional wisdom (Green, 2016, pp. 296-310). Rather than viewing scaling as doing more of the same, he emphasises horizontal scaling (spreading ideas), organisational scaling (building capacity), and systems scaling (changing rules, norms, and power relations) (Hartmann & Linn, 2008).

### **Limitations**

Despite its strengths, the book has limitations. While Green embraces complexity, some may find his framework diffuse and difficult to operationalise. The book excels at explaining why simplistic approaches fail but is less definitive about replacements. Second, it reflects its author's background in middle-income countries where civil society has significant operating space. Applicability to fragile states (Department for International Development [DFID], 2010), authoritarian contexts (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014), or Global North democracies remains unclear. Third, readers from radical traditions may find his analysis insufficiently critical of global capitalism and inequality (Amin, 1974; Harvey, 2005). Green works within a reformist paradigm, focused on making existing systems more equitable rather than fundamental transformation. Finally, while providing numerous examples, the book would benefit from more sustained engagement with failed efforts (Khanna et al., 2005).

### **Conclusion**

*'How Change Happens'* succeeds by treating readers as intelligent professionals capable of handling ambiguity. Green refuses false certainty, instead providing frameworks for thinking rigorously about the messy, politically charged work of social transformation. His writing combines academic credibility with practitioner accessibility, theoretical sophistication with concrete examples.

The book makes several enduring contributions. It provides one of the most comprehensive syntheses of diverse theoretical traditions relevant to understanding social change. It demonstrates convincingly why linear, technocratic approaches systematically fail and what alternatives might look like. It offers practical frameworks while remaining appropriately humble about what can be known or predicted.

Most importantly, Green models a way of thinking that is simultaneously rigorous and realistic, ambitious and humble. He takes ideas seriously while recognising implementation involves messy compromise (Krause, 2014). He acknowledges genuine dilemmas between institution building and service delivery, working with states and supporting movements, focused strategies and opportunistic adaptation without pretending clever frameworks can resolve them.

The book's central message, that change happens through the interaction of systems, power, and agency in inherently unpredictable yet potentially shapeable ways, may seem unsatisfying to those seeking definitive answers. But this honest engagement with complexity represents exactly the intellectual maturity the development field needs (Ramalingam, 2013). In an era of climate change, democratic backsliding, rising inequality, and forced migration, effective approaches to social change become ever more urgent. *How Change Happens* offers a way of thinking sophisticated enough to match problem complexity while remaining grounded enough to guide action.

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