Sustainable Social Change and Philanthropy
by Awakin Call Editors

As a professional grantmaker and manager with some of the world's leading foundations, David Bonbright sought innovative approaches to strengthening citizen self-organization in place of prevailing bureaucratic, top-down models. While with the Ford Foundation, David was declared persona non grata by the apartheid government in South Africa for helping fund the liberation struggle. In 1990, in the final years of that struggle, he entrepreneured the development of some key building block organizations for civil society in the new South Africa. He then founded and now runs an international nonprofit dedicated to bringing constituent feedback to social change practice. He had an unexpected invitation to speak with Nelson Mandela, who reinforced that development aid and philanthropy run aground because those on the receiving end have no say in it, and that "in social change, as in our personal and social lives, it is relationships that determine outcomes. What follows are selected wisdom nuggets from an Awakin Call with David Bonbright

Centrality of relationships for meaningful social change efforts: "Relationships and the quality of relationships are at the heart of any meaningful change process for the general good. I've spent my life working for social change and social justice, and as I try to reflect on that craft and try to improve on our practice, I've just come deeper and deeper into this central idea that relationships are the key." "We need transactions; we need exchanges of things; that's very much the web and woof of what we do, but they should be subordinate to the relationships that we have. And if we have better relationships, the transactions just get much better – what we give and take from each other just becomes better and better and better."

Lessons from South Africa about "doing with" rather than "doing to": "I think the main thing [I learned] is one of my catchphrases, “all voices” – when it comes to doing social change. One of the practices of the struggle was to really have careful internal inclusive deliberation until everyone felt heard and could reach a view about how to proceed. It slowed things down quite a lot, and people often felt frustrated about how long it took to take decisions, but the famous African proverb was very much part of the story: “if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” I saw that in action and practice there. I noted as time went by that we don’t really go together in social change practice or grant-making. It’s highly siloed into different places, and the tendency of philanthropy is to do things to people rather than with people. So I’ve tried, over the years as I’ve become more conscious of this, to come up with new ways of working that are much more about doing with, rather than doing to."

Learning from the customer satisfaction industry to get a continuous signal of beneficiaries' wants in social change work and philanthropy: "I thought what if we could actually get a continuous signal from people as to what they want by listening to them systematically in a real way, leaning into our relationships with them, and not just
doing consultation (which is the kind of dominant mode that was out there) ... but these kind of snapshots don't result in a continuing information flow, a continuing signal. ... A friend at the Stanford Business School pointed me toward the customer satisfaction industry, which I had never even considered before, coming from a background as a human rights lawyer, and working in social justice struggles and development ... I discovered that the techniques and practices there were actually really extremely acute and very powerful. I learned that major multi-billion corporations were making significant decisions about how to develop and market their products on the basis of single-question surveys to customers. I contrasted that with this incredibly heavy research social science model that's used in development and social change to evaluate after the fact."

Measuring good relationships: "In social change, we would ask different questions maybe than what they're asking in customer satisfaction – we actually see some overlapping questions that work - but basically what we're finding is that if you can hone in on things like trust or responsiveness, voice – whether people feel safe and empowered in the context – then they're way more likely to work with you in ways that lead to the outcomes that you want. So what we're saying is, very simply, given the complexity of establishing causation, the best available proxy measure that we have is -- the measure of something that we all know is at the heart of effective social change, which is good relationships. And so that's what we do."

The key aim of improving together continually: "What we really want from measurement and from any social change intervention is a way to improve together continually. So the good thing is about measuring relationship quality is that it also brings us into a context which optimizes learning together, in terms of how we all can make better decisions to achieve the thing we're trying to achieve. So measurement is useful both as leading indicator, as a predictor of outcomes; but by working on relationships, we also create the right framework for learning and improving together. So instead of an evaluation coming in after the fact and telling you whether or not something happened because of something you did, you're actually looking at signals in real time and figuring out how to move forward together, in better and better ways."

The need to ignite and animate the agency of grant-making beneficiaries: "We all know that you can’t buy social change. It’s not sustainable. It requires this igniting of agency in others. Money is not the best way to do that. So you have to figure out a way to work with money – money is powerful, it's key, we need it – but you have to find a way to do it that actually takes out its displacement effect, of local initiative and agency."

Changing mindsets in philanthropy to "not knowing" and to embracing mutuality: "The natural thing to do is to know. We are knowers, and we go out there and we know. And this model that I'm preferring is one that says actually “they're the ones to know“ – our job is to be the stewards of their development and of their knowing. And that's a different kind of role and a different set of skills and a different mindset. So I think it's hard for people to get over that. And if you think about it, these skills and the things that people know are really important sometimes (techniques to prevent the spread of a pandemic; the way in which the roads need to be constructed, or the dam needs to be constructed). All these things are critically important. I like to say that we need top-down and we need bottom-up, and that's the wrong framing. What we need is both in mutuality, but it's the mutuality that’s missing. I think getting over where you're coming from is the key part to getting to the mutuality."

On new emerging models of philanthropy bridging big, top-down, "vertical" money to horizontal, peer-group models: "There's a world-wide movement in what's
sometimes called community philanthropy, and it's really thinking about philanthropy less as vertical - from the wealthy being given down to the poor - but rather horizontal, from people to people. It involves bridging the big vertical money to the horizontal money. So one way of thinking about the future of philanthropy is -- having organized grant-making from the big, endowed or family foundations to always be working in some kind of partnership with [horizontal] philanthropy, with self-help, if you will, to use that old wonderful term. So I think that's a direction that we can go.

His "constituent voice" methodology: "There's kind of three big take-aways from our years of work that can be simplified as ... "turning feedback into data, voice and co-created solutions." And each step is key. So there's four steps. First you got to get the feedback. We do that through micro-surveys, so you never ask more than 3 or 4 questions, because then it becomes a burden to people. The point is not to do research; it's the first step in an engagement process. Step 2 is turning that feedback into [visual] data and to organize it, analyze it in a way that everyone can understand. ... Now you come to the voice step. This is where you take this [visual data] and you go back to the community that provided the feedback in the survey, and everybody sits around and they discuss it. ... So you co-create solutions based on their own feedback, which is now being represented in a really clear, powerful, and simple way. You co-create solutions and then you come to the last step, which is that you change things. And then you do a micro-survey again in 3 months, or whatever the short time later is, and the question now becomes, "Did it work? Is it better? Are we making progress?" So you're asking the same question, but you're asking it in a context of having made a course-correction together. And once you get this wheel turning, this cycle of ask-analyze-co-create and change, once you get that cycle moving, now all of a sudden you have an inclusive, cross-constituent way to learn forward together on the basis of people's experience of the program.

His lifelong growing in compassion and commitment to justice: "For whatever reason, I really don't fully know when I began to understand that there was a world outside of me as a young person (as a kid growing up), and starting to see how I affected other people, for good or ill -- I realized that I'm not actually a very nice or generous person. I certainly wasn't as a kid. And I didn't like that; that's not the person I wanted to be. So I set myself tasks and goals to be a better person and I think that just led me into this work. I guess that's how I would say it. I'm the oldest of 3, and I thought I was a bit of a tyrant to my brother and sister, and when I figured that out, I started to work on not being that person. And I kept just doing that at a larger and larger level." After his time in South Africa, "I just think that I kind of went all in; I kind of realized that I ... it's funny, the word that's crawling up in me is, "I love these people." What was happening in South Africa in the 80s was truly extraordinary. And the most amazing human beings were doing the most inspiring things. I just don't think how anyone could walk in from outside and not melt and flow in and want to support that kind of struggle and practice. I actually ended up marrying one of my grantees [laughing], so I literally fell in love. All these years later we're still together working on what it means to be an exponent of loving service in this world. I think it was just how it hit me personally.

For more inspiration, please join an upcoming Awakin Talk with Archana and Amit Chandra on Giving Money, Time and Self. RSVP details here