

TO CHANGE THE SYSTEM, SEE YOURSELF IN THE SYSTEM

How Prosper Rogers learned to see the unexpected connections and listen for the unmentioned problems.



Legal aid worker Prosper Rogers was interviewing a woman we will call Eve about how she felt isolated from her family, when he realized that the root of the problems wasn't what she was saying: it was what she wasn't saying. "The part she left out was actually the more important," he says.

IN ANSWER TO ROGERS' most direct questions, Eve told Rogers about offenses committed by first one family member after another, and even her own self-destructive behavior, but never mentioned her mother. When Rogers finally noticed and asked for more detail about her mother, Eve revealed that her mother was shunning the rest of the family over a disagreement with Eve's father. Eve had taken her mother's side, which explained why the rest of the family was treating Eve the way they were.

It took listening for silence, not just sound, to understand her problems and be able to offer solutions through the [Center for Community Development and Peaceful Co-Existence](#) (CCDPC) in Kitgum, Uganda.

"It's now more important to me to put every sense into play to better appreciate what the person is saying," Rogers says. It's a lesson Rogers learned at a recent workshop of the [Transforming Change program](#). There, Rogers heard about deep listening and asking about the nemesis lurking behind people's problems.

KNOW THYSELF—AND THY ALLIES

Rogers has also learned to listen toward the inside. "I understand better myself in relation to the work I've been doing," he says. For example, mapping out the so-called [adaptive cycle](#) at a Transforming Change workshop has helped him realize that there are change

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makers who focus on generating new ideas and others who specialize in implementing those ideas.

“I AM BETTER WORKING on what ideas other people have come up with,” Rogers says. Reflecting on the different stages of the adaptive cycle helped him realize that he didn’t have to be the one to do it all. If Rogers finds partners with who have already developed ideas for helping families, then he and CCDPC can focus on implementing the ideas.

They can also expand their network of allies through [stretch collaborations](#), Rogers says, abandoning rigid definitions of best practices and acceptable partners and instead embracing solutions from unexpected corners. It hasn’t been easy to embrace the idea of working with suspects of domestic violence. “If you are thinking of taking the perpetrator to the police, looking at it from some victim’s point of view you actually realize, no, they may want the person given a non-custodial sentence so that they keep with him but at least have taught him a lesson.”

Looking at the problem from another person’s perspective can also be the key to unlocking progress, Rogers says. In the case of Eve’s family conflict, he challenged her to consider her own attitude and actions toward her family members and what she could do about the conflict, rather than to react to the actions of others. “People always think that they are just beneficiaries of what happens around them and not contributors to what happens around them,” Rogers says. “Many times, we are

perpetrators of the very system that we try to fight.”

People live in ecosystems

Rogers has also begun thinking about how problems he always considered social can have ecological dimensions. A [growing body of evidence](#) suggests that climate change, for example, has [a disproportionate impact on women](#).

“I REALLY JUST COULDN’T see the ecological factors,” Rogers says. Yet, when droughts cause crop failures, it is often [women who sacrifice their meals first](#). In some cultures, men migrate away when conditions deteriorate, while women stay behind and must deal with the immediate consequences until the men can send remittances or bring the women after them.

With more reading, Rogers has begun to see the link. One example, close to home, helped to clarify it for him.

“We work in areas where you have women responsible to do the tilling or cultivating the land,” he explains. When climate change makes that more difficult, through out-of-season rains or drought or extreme temperatures, that can make it harder to grow those household crops.

“[Women] can hardly have food to provide or put to the table, and this, in a way, renders them vulnerable to the men who are expecting food...they are more likely to be subjected to different form of violence,” Rogers says, or to be sold into domestic servitude by their families in exchange for a so-called bride price.

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“I now see very vividly the connection, especially between the social and ecological systems in relation to gender-based violence,” Rogers says. “In our workplan for next year, we will empower people to try and see the context about the ecology and how it will affect people in the years to come.”

SEEING THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS of the problems CCDCP is trying to address, seeing himself differently, and looking for new potential allies are all first steps for Rogers. This more interconnected vision, like Eve’s, and like those of so many people, will require a different problem-solving approach.

“Usually it’s been the practice for us to address one or two problems,” Rogers says, “But the more we realize that the one or two problems are caused by maybe five other problems and each of those five problems has a link to another, then we recognize the need to address all these problems as much as possible.”

While he couldn’t advise Eve on how to handle all her warring family members or what to do about climate change, Rogers could start with the most immediate solution, something she could do for herself: “The issue for me was actually to help her deal with herself, to help her loving herself.”

Prosper Rogers holds degrees in law and legal practice, and works as a researcher for the [Centre for Community Development and Peaceful Co-Existence](#) on issues of justice administration, gender-based violence, children’s rights, and alternative justice systems.

[Transforming Change](#) is an Africa-based programme that strengthens participants’ capacities in social-ecological resilience, systems and complexity thinking, and systems entrepreneurship—seeking to transform the very way we approach change. The programme is funded by the Swedish Institute and delivered through a partnership with the [Stockholm Resilience Centre](#), the [Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship](#), and the [Centre for Complex Systems in Transition](#).