

Crisis? What crisis?



Frans Bieckmann
Editor in Chief
editor@thebrokeronline.eu

Over the last four months, two events have changed global prospects profoundly. The financial crisis has done more than just shake the seemingly most powerful and inviolable countries, companies and institutions. It has definitely KO'd the present phase of capitalism, commonly known as neoliberalism. This event helped precipitate the other turning point: a seemingly progressive, young, energetic, black man with a Muslim middle name was elected president of the world's hegemon, KO'ing another branch of neo's: the neoconservatives. Both developments point to a global sea change. The financial turmoil means that change is necessary; the euphoria over Barack Obama's election suggests that change is possible. But exactly what kind of change are we – and they, the politicians, the analysts, the activists – talking about? Can we, for example, speak of a prelude to systemic change? In other words, are we currently witnessing a *systems crisis*? Answers to these questions, up to this point, have been merely ideological or products of wishful thinking.

In his column in this issue, Ko Colijn argues that what we are seeing is *not* a systems crisis. Although there is evidence of profound change in the global power balance – such as the G20 taking over from the G8 – it does not yet indicate an alteration of the fundamentals on which our political and economic world order is built. But at the same time, Colijn says a much slower process of systemic change has been occurring for decades. The financial crisis did not come about overnight; it is the consequence of a gradual shift that has been underway for years.

Similarly, Obama's victory might be more an expression of a widely felt *need* for change than a *source* of change. Will Obama deliver what everybody expects of him? Analysis shows that American foreign policy doesn't usually alter when a new president takes office. The appointment of Clinton(ites) to senior government positions suggests the same. George W. Bush was an exception, mainly due to 9/11. Reversing part of the damage done by his predecessor will certainly bring Obama some credit for bringing about change. At the same time, the cynical distrust and despair that has been felt in American society over the past eight years in particular has been countered by the election of an African-American – a result currently being celebrated as nothing less than a revival of the American Dream. But whether this historic election is also a harbinger of worldwide change – that is, change beyond the confines of the US – is a big question. The severe economic crisis in the US and the domestic changes that Obama's constituents want to see – such as health reform, home foreclosure protection, job creation – clash with the fact that a

major cause of global problems is that America and other rich countries take far too big a piece of the pie when it comes to the global economy and political power.

On the other hand, the wave of hope that has spread around the world since Obama's triumph is more than just empty symbolism. Words and new perspectives have real power. 'Irrational' features such as distrust have proven to be crucial factors in the current financial crisis. Consider that the election in 1960 of John F. Kennedy, who was by no means a revolutionary, nevertheless may have been both an expression of and a catalyst for a broader movement that some years later led to profound changes in Western societies and in international relations.

Perhaps we are indeed at, or near, a 'tipping point', a moment at which changes suddenly gain momentum. The enormous financial and economic crisis unfolding now, combined with other urgent issues that can only be solved at a global level – the energy, food and climate crises – is a potential turning point toward an alternative system, perhaps another paradigm. But the actual form this will take is still unknown. Will it be a system based on global justice and sustainable development? Or will we fall back into a struggle of all against all, which is already happening in the fray of global society?

Academics, NGOs and policymakers from the development cooperation field could and should seize the opportunities that the current wave of hope and high expectations offers. It is in this global realm that the big chances lie for real changes for the world's poor, for the millions affected by violent conflict and for the planet at large. There are also great risks.

Unfortunately, however, the silence from development quarters is deafening. When truly alternative policy proposals are put forward about, for example, a new Bretton Woods agreement regulating the world economy and its financial system in a more just way, it is not by the development branch. The aid sector fails to connect its still mainly Southern focus area with the bigger picture. Responses to the civic-driven change (CDC) Initiative (see 'Deep democracy', *The Broker* 10) appear at www.thebrokeronline.eu and are summarized in this issue. Among these interesting comments is a striking lack of answers to the pressing question of how to connect the essentially local dynamics of CDC with global features. The same goes for the interesting overview of five decades of 'systems thinking' by Bob Williams: applying such theories to what is – and should be – happening at the global level is still a new concept. It is a unique opportunity to turn the tide. Grab this chance to make a change ■