

## Civic Driven Change Initiative

# Deep democracy

For many decades, the main driver of progress in developing countries was considered to be either the state or the market. Civil society existed only in relation to, and by the grace of, these forces. But people-centred development requires that individuals take control and address the problems in their communities. People and organizations should acquire a stronger position in relation to both the state and the market. Real change can only be achieved through challenging dominant political and economic interests.

In January and May, a group of eight intellectuals, critical scientists and practitioners – each from a different country and background – examined the main elements of a new approach to development in a brainstorming session. The group members formed the Civic Driven Change (CDC) Initiative at the prompting of Alan Fowler and Kees Biekart. They considered the broad pallet of local political initiatives and change processes that are already taking place around the world, as well as the experiences and dilemmas of the global movement known from the World Social Forums (WSF) and other initiatives. The initial outcome of these sessions is a collection of essays, which are intended to be a starting point for a broad, global debate about how an alternative narrative on change can be realized. This special report highlights some elements from both the essays and the brainstorming sessions.

This is an initiative of some of the largest development and peace organizations in the Netherlands. Aware that the current aid paradigm is heavily under fire, they have facilitated an independent process that could eventually lead to drastic changes in their own policies. Will NGOs continue to 'assist' the poor from the outside with resources and expertise, or will they opt to strengthen the political and normative – the civic – struggles that people face within the market, the state and civil society?



By **Frans Bieckmann**, Editor in Chief of *The Broker*.

# Reinventing citizen action

**T**he biggest failure of civil society organizations is their complete lack of political imagination', says Rakesh Rajani. 'NGOs are cut off from reality, they are not organic'. Rajani is among the eight CDC Initiative members who attended the second brainstorming meeting near the Dutch town of Hilversum in May 2008.

Rajani echoes the thoughts of many others: just like bilateral and multilateral development cooperation, the NGO world is at an impasse. Both Western and local NGOs have lost touch with reality. In the real world, there is a continual political struggle, people organize themselves to address countless local problems and political debates are conducted in the media. Meanwhile, NGOs focus on specialized projects that are conceived and funded by well meaning professionals in the Western and Southern capitals. NGOs exist in a sort of parallel universe, controlled by a governing elite in global networks, with its own system of rules and order. The notion that you can improve conditions in developing countries with 'technical' interventions (organizational assistance, training and advice) still dominates. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were founded on this principle.

Meanwhile, for at least 20 years there has been a discussion about the nature of development – implicitly or explicitly – as a political process with human beings at its centre. It is not a political process in the sense of elections and politicians' decisions, but a question of changing power relations. Feminist researchers made an important contribution to this shift in thinking by exposing power differences – not only in an abstract, general sense, but also between people and their individual qualities.

The theories of economist Amartya Sen and the many publications that build on them – such as the Human Development Report, the 2003 report Human Security Now and the World Development Report 2000 – think of poverty in terms of lack of access. The aim of human development is to create the freedom and the opportunities for people to develop themselves. But the conditions in which they can do it also have to be created, and that requires a very political programme.

These basic principles of human development are widely endorsed and are often referred to in speeches, but in practice mechanical aid reflexes that have the opposite effect – such as financial assistance and service delivery by external experts – continue to dominate. Furthermore, the

## Summary

- NGOs are increasingly working in a specialized parallel universe, cut off from real life and political struggles for change in the state, market and civil society.
- Civic Driven Change (CDC) could be a new narrative for development, alongside the state and the market as driving principles.
- The C in Civic stands for normative behaviour of inclusion and care for the whole.
- The D in Driven stands for the force of what people want for their future.
- The C in Change stands for the natural and political process of changing existing power relations, versus the more linear 'progress' or 'development'.
- CDC is a right and a responsibility of citizens whatever their function in life.
- Instead of the government, NGOs or external experts providing services, citizens must take control of their own lives; they must evolve from voters and consumers into the co-creators of a democratic society.
- Deepening democracy in all areas – the family, civil society, governance and the economy – and at all levels – local, national and global – is a central element of CDC.
- To actually make a difference, power analysis and corresponding local and global strategies are needed.
- There are already thousands of CDC initiatives, all over the world. But the problem lies in linking local and global structures. Real engagement by citizens – in the sense of tangible ties with their surroundings and the problems they face – is by definition local. However, a great deal of power has been wrested away from the local level. The challenge is therefore to link all these thousands of local initiatives, while avoiding undemocratic pitfalls.

state continues to be the focal point: we help developing countries, not the people who live in them. The donor community – not only bilateral donors, but also the multilateral organizations they finance and many NGOs – still thinks in terms of states and governments, of who should supply services to the poor and make markets work to supply jobs for them. Those NGOs and projects that focus on the people themselves often work on the basis of

## What is civic driven change?

The task of the CDC Initiative is to 'promote a CDC that "reclaims" states and markets by and for people, rather than being subordinated to them'. Its core members have debated for a long time what they mean by 'civic driven change'. During their meeting in May 2008 the participants tried to capture the essence of the term in one sentence. Suggestions included 'Telling the citizens' story', 'Citizens reclaiming their future' and 'Bringing citizens back in' (a reference to Theda Skocpol's famous book, *Bringing the State Back In*).

The CDC Initiative is not exclusively an academic undertaking. That would be incompatible with the promotion of CDC that has 'self-organization of citizens around inclusive values' as its core value. Still it is important to carefully define what is meant by the term, because it helps explain why this initiative is innovative. And also because, according to Evelina Dagnino, terms such as 'citizenship', 'civil society' and 'participation' have become severely eroded; they are used by 'neo-liberals, radical democracy supporters and even conservatives' alike, and all of them assign very different meanings to it. You can add to this list of eroded terms 'empowerment', 'ownership' and even 'development' itself, which is often confused with economic growth.

In contrast with 'civil', the term 'civic' bears a moral and political meaning, and treats human beings not only as consumers, voters or citizens, but as wide range of individuals with their own points of view.

The word 'change' is used instead of 'development' or 'progress', which imply a much more technical and linear movement. Change is a completely natural process. It happens always and everywhere, day in and out, at many interdependent levels. Steps forward, backward, aside. Such steps can lead to new conflicts, because they erode existing power relations. In this sense CDC is much more 'political' than development.

Is CDC new? A clear 'no' emerged during the brainstorming sessions. It is refocusing rather than reinventing. It is about new combinations and mergers of what is already being explored in separate debates. It is about 'recapturing the local and the global in a new context'.

Of course, the concept of civil society has been the foundation on which most NGOs have built their activities for several decades. But civil society is generally conceived as a separate realm, apart from government and business. Civil society stands for all kinds of organizations within a society – NGOs, trade unions, community based organizations, churches and so on – that together or individually defend the interests of their constituencies. And especially in Africa, civil society has been narrowed down to NGOs, which in many cases have created their own service-delivering parallel structures. Civil society there was mainly defined in non-political terms; the creation of a strong civil society was an aim in itself.

What is new in CDC is that the 'civic' is normative. There is civic behaviour and there is uncivic, or undemocratic, behaviour – in the state and the market, but also in civil society itself. The aim then becomes the strengthening of civic behaviour and civic organization to bring forth changes in local, national and global societies.



giving the poor something they lack – a school, medical treatment, advice on setting up a business – instead of helping them to find their own way.

According to the Indian grassroots activist Rajesh Tandon, this state-driven development thinking leads to 'externally designed, expert driven, universal policies and programmes that expect passive consumption by ordinary folk. The poor (and other citizens) became "helpless beneficiaries".'

### CDC: What's new?

It was a mixed group that came together for the first time in January at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague. Each of the eight core members of the CDC Initiative comes from a different background, political tradition and school of thought, including history, futurism, democratization, (neo)liberal and critical theory, theology, feminism, complexity thinking and systems theory. It is not easy to get such a varied group to agree. So it was hardly surprising that, after a long day of exchanging ideas, people started frowning and walking impatiently around the room.

This wide variety of backgrounds is a major difference between this and other initiatives – and perhaps also its strength. In addition to their intellectual qualities, all members enjoy considerable support in their own countries or represent a viewpoint that many people share. They are public intellectuals who are operating on the cutting edge of science and activism, with broad international networks. Yet they also have a strong affinity with the reality of everyday problems and challenges facing people throughout the world. They are looking for fundamentally new perspectives on the struggle for social and political change in the world, seeking a coherent and well thought out alternative for the two globally prevalent views on development: one based on the state, the other on the market.

During the discussion and workshops something of a consensus gradually formed within the group, but





significant differences of opinion remained. The eight members concluded that what made the initiative innovative was the way in which existing concepts, ideas and practices were redefined, and more especially linked together in new ways. The members decided they would each write an essay, ideally one that referred to the others in the group. The first drafts were discussed in May, by the core participants as well as a larger group of about 30 experts from around the world. Throughout the summer, the essays were feverishly modified and edited and, after initiators Fowler and Biekart had added an introduction and a concluding chapter, the full collection will be published in October on the ISS website and later in book form.

The collection of essays is only one step, a trigger for a debate that still has to gain momentum. Yet it is already possible to distil a number of concepts from the texts and the long discussions in the core group that could become part of a new narrative, a different view of change in the world, with self-determination by citizens at its core.

### Co-creating democracy

An important aspect of a new CDC narrative, which is referred to literally or implicitly in many of the essays, is *'re-inventing politics'* or *'deepening of democracy'*. In his essay, Harry Boyte quotes Mamphela Ramphele, one of the founders of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, as saying, 'people have to become the agents of their own development'. This implies, according to Boyte, 'a radical shift of meanings from the citizen as a rights-bearing individual whose highest act is voting and demanding government be held accountable to *the citizen as the co-creator of a democratic society* and government as a catalyst.

An important element in such a deepened democracy is *'self direction'*. People and communities act based on their own values and interests – not only to satisfy their material desires but collectively and for the common good. Because of this self-direction, intellectuals and external experts acquire a different role. Instead of advising and helping, they serve local communities, especially by acting as catalysts for CDC processes. And perhaps they promote horizontal exchange between all the local CDC activities that are already taking place.

Another aspect of deepened democracy is the construction of places and processes where differences engage rather than collide. Multi-stakeholder forums and mediated events are examples, as are the WSF and other regional and national social forums that try to advance radical, horizontal democracy. According to Teivo Teivainen, who was closely involved in organizing the WSF, 'as compared to previous transnational alliances seeking radical change of the world system, such as the early trade-union-based movements or communist-party-based

internationals, many of today's globalization protest movements seem to take more seriously the idea that democratic change needs to be generated through democratic forms of action. ... Among today's activists, especially but not only within movements considered autonomist or anarchist, Mahatma Gandhi's claim that "we must be the change we want to see in the world" has gained renewed importance'.

### Building alternatives

*Strengthening civic power in relation to the state and the market* is another important element in the evolving CDC narrative. Having absolute faith in the state as the best and sole supplier of services to the public is naive. The state not only serves the public, but must respond to greater forces as well. It may sometimes be compelled by the global economic system or international power relations to act against the immediate interests of its citizens.

Rajesh Tandon cites the example of the Marxist government of the Indian state of West Bengal, which gave the order to open fire on unarmed demonstrators in the city of Nandigram. The victims were members of a people's committee that was opposed to the compulsory relocation of farmers to allow for the establishment of a Special Economic Zone. The zone offered large tax incentives and a minimum of protection for labour – the archetypal symbol of unbridled capitalism.

Strengthening civic power must however *go further than just countervailing power*, the power to challenge the established order; citizens have a *responsibility to work together to come up with alternatives themselves*, without relieving the state of its own responsibilities. 'We have to go from saying no to saying yes', says Paul Graham, director of IDASA in South Africa and one of the reviewers of the core group's essays together with Kumi Naidoo, Lenka Setkova and Nijala Gopal Jayal. 'We have to move from a culture of resistance to a culture of construction'.

That is also the crucial difference between anti-globalists and alter-globalists. The former owe their existence to a much more powerful opponent: the state, the global market, the elite, the multinationals. Until now, many success stories of civic action have been 'narratives of protest and resistance', writes Tandon. Much CDC takes the form of protest against the fact that 'contemporary neoliberal and statist paradigms are perpetuating the forces of marginalization, exploitation and exclusion'.

By contrast, Tandon proposes that civic agency as such has its own intrinsic value for public good; the 'primacy of civic driven change' means the 'co-creation' of solutions for collective well-being which can't or won't be provided by the state or the market. CDC means believing in one's own strength and building up joint power.



leaving it to the free play of market forces and thereby degrading the individual to an economic animal primarily concerned with material gain. CDC is on the contrary ‘*unashamedly normative*’, in the words of Fowler and Biekart. The central concept in that normative process, to distinguish CDC from all kinds of ‘uncivic and undemocratic agency’, is ‘*inclusion*’. In a sense this term is an extension of the radical democratic thinking that underpins CDC, because struggles for inclusion – for participation, equality, access – are being fought everywhere: in the state, the market, families, businesses, political parties, NGOs and civil society. Inclusion means *respecting those who are different*. It also means a *concern for the ‘whole’ of society* over time and at different scales of knowledge and action, from immediate and physically proximate to inter-generational and ecologically global.

Although there are a number of general criteria for what ‘civic behaviour’ entails, who determines at a more concrete level what is ‘civic’ and what is ‘uncivic’? That question is addressed by Nilda Bullain. In her essay, Bullain writes, ‘Civic action is not good in itself. Very often, civic action is based on values that are unacceptable in a democracy – racism, sexism, chauvinism, segregation, violence’. She has seen this herself in recent Eastern European and Balkan history.

Others in the CDC group may think action based on such values is uncivic, but on the other hand these are very real personal points of view that drive people and communities. Who determines what is right and wrong? Bullain cites a number of examples in which the value of political events is attributed differently by various observers.

Can or should international development set a standard for what is civic and what is uncivic? Bullain thinks so. ‘We all have a moral right to determine what we believe is good or bad for society... we should then, however, do away with the pretence of “respecting the local culture” and “not

### CDC is normative

Civic driven change has been compared to economist William Easterly’s plea for ‘seekers’ instead of ‘planners’. But Easterly scarcely elaborates the notion of ‘seeking’,



**Evelina Dagnino** (Brazil) is a professor of political science at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp), Brazil. She has a PhD in political science from Stanford University, USA. She has been a visiting professor at Yale University, US, and Göteborg, Sweden.



**Shirin Rai** (India) is a professor in the department of Politics and International Studies (PAIS) at the University of Warwick, UK. She studied at the University of Delhi (India) and Cambridge University (UK) and joined PAIS in 1989. She is the author of *Rethinking Empowerment*.



**Rakesh Rajani** (Tanzania) is a fellow of the Harvard Global Equity Initiative, USA. He studied philosophy, English and American literature at Brandeis University. He is the founder and executive director of HakiElimu in Tanzania.



**Harry Boyte** (USA) is founder and co-director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute, USA. He is also co-chair of the Civic Engagement Group of Barack Obama's presidential campaign.



importing foreign models. ... If we agree that people should decide by themselves what they see as an ideal way of development, why make any development interventions at all?' Bullain concludes that 'any development intervention ... will first need to define what it considers an ideal state and then define the exact values and principles that are the key motivators of that ideal state and which make it possible'.

Quite a dilemma, because this directly opposes the idea that people must decide for themselves, which is the essence of CDC. It also raises the question of when someone is considered a citizen. Is someone a citizen if his or her main political identity – instead of being associated with the national political system of his country – is based on ethnicity or religion, as is very often the case? How can such citizens perform 'civic' action? And, again, who determines what civic action is? Is demanding more autonomy for a specific group an expression of 'civicness', or is it exactly the opposite? The line between civic and uncivic is blurred, as many examples from around the world illustrate.

And are supposedly uncivic means, such as, according to Fowler and Biekart, 'civil disobedience, strikes, boycotts or blockades, to attain more civic, equitable and inclusive outcomes' always uncivic? The answer is somewhat unsatisfactory: it depends on the context. The more unjust the situation, the more 'uncivic' behaviour is legitimate. Altering power means conflict and, sometimes, breaking the law.

### Starting from reality

'Begin "where people are"', not where organizers think they should be', write Biekart and Fowler, elaborating on a number of essays in the compilation. Bolivian communication specialist Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, who replaced Rajani halfway through the CDC process, says

that 'definitions of "development" are useless because what is relevant is their translation into practices that affect real lives of people. What we see is what we get'. Instead of allowing outside experts and idealists to determine what is good for people, the determination should be founded on their 'lived reality'.

Individuals usually act on the basis of what concerns them in their personal lives and their immediate surroundings; broader ideals come later. And people's search for solutions to their problems is largely determined by local circumstances, cultures and traditions. Kenyan theologian Philomena Njeri Mwaura points out that in most parts of the world, and certainly in Africa, religion remains a major factor.

Even people who oppose religious institutions have to be aware that individuals *consciously or unconsciously act according to religious norms and values*. Religion (not only modern faiths but also animistic belief systems) is the lens through which many people view the world. It is also how they approach their natural surroundings. Tandon points out that Asiatic and European religious and secular traditions always contain elements of solidarity and include the moral and spiritual motivation to help each other. 'We may have lost sight of it; the rise of individual consumerism and secular-intellectual discourse may have put a thick blanket over it. But it is still there, and with a sensitive touch, can be recovered and reclaimed by all human beings'.

### Power mapping

One recurrent message in the essays is that 'everyday politics' are neglected. How do you get something done in the real world? In Teivianen's words, 'If civic-driven global initiatives shy away from tackling political and strategic questions, the changes they may desire are unlikely to take place. ... Civic-driven democratization movements, like all others, should have a realist analysis of what is possible and



**Philomena Njeri Mwaura** (Kenya) is a senior lecturer in religious studies at Kenyatta University, Kenya. She is the Africa region coordinator of the Theology Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT).



**Nilda Bullain** (Hungary) is executive director of the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL), Hungary. Previously she was executive director of the Civil Society Development Foundation Hungary (CSDF).



**Rajesh Tandon** (India) is the founder and chief executive of the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), a voluntary organization that supports grassroots initiatives in South Asia. Tandon has specialized in social and organizational change.



**Alfonso Gumucio Dagron** (Bolivia) is a writer, journalist, photographer and development communication specialist. He is managing director for programmes at the Communication for Social Change Consortium, USA.



what is not, and then make strategic prioritizations based on that analysis'. Especially because the focus of power is moving to a transnational level, a locally focused narrative such as CDC must provide an answer.

A first step in this endeavour is to *map the powers in play* and how they are being distributed and used. These powers are explained in the essays as more than formal powers in the political arena or parliament and elections. Power struggles are also fought in the fields of culture, family, community, media, knowledge supply and religion. Power expresses itself not only in formal positions but also in language and discourse. Take, for example, the current global conviction that, in the words of Margaret Thatcher, 'there is no alternative' (to neo-liberalism) and the associated narrative of the End of History. This prevailing view is opposed by the much repeated call, 'another world is possible'.

A *systematic power analysis is a condition for determining adequate strategies* for CDC – for example, to detect 'tipping points', moments at which a certain change suddenly takes hold because of a specific constellation of circumstances. But also, emphasizes Shirin Rai, to be able to estimate the risks that certain actions may create for people at the bottom tier of society. Anyone who really wants to change power relations and challenge established interests is running a serious personal risk. These relations need to be researched at various levels: local, national and global.

### Local global

CDC takes place at the local level. And it is also important that the '*local sphere of public discourse and action is reclaimed*' by the people it concerns, according to Tandon. During one of the brainstorming sessions, the concept of 'free spaces' came up. In these spaces the original cultures of a neighbourhood or region and the ethnic or religious identities of the residents must be allowed to develop to

their full potential as 'co-creators' of their own environment and future.

However, these local initiatives have to connect to the national and global levels, because those are the spaces in which political and economic processes increasingly take place and which, accordingly, influence the possibilities for change at the local level. CDC initiatives are not imaginary; they are already being performed, all over the world, by thousands of people. But the micro-level changes they bring about are hardly noticed outside their own communities, according to Tandon, who asks, 'Is it because they do not have a systemic impact?' Tandon and other authors endorse Rajani's statement that 'small is no longer beautiful, or effective, or meaningful'. Decisions are made increasingly at the supranational level. Global capital flows, multinationals and international institutions operate way beyond the reach of normal people. That is why local initiatives have to be linked horizontally in a national and even a global network, so that the great gap between local, national and global can be bridged. Otherwise all these initiatives have little impact.

But, Tandon asks, how can we imagine civic driven change as a global driver of deepening democracy without it necessarily operating at global level? And how can we identify this need for upscaling and power formation with the deepening of democracy? In his essay on the internal discussions and dilemmas in the WSF, Teivainen addresses such questions as how to remain democratic and not become entrapped in hierarchical structures? And especially, how should that be combined with the need to act strategically and become a serious power factor that brings us closer to an alternative world order? The WSF was conceived, Teivainen writes, as something that is not a political party, not an NGO, and not a social movement. 'One of the most important concepts that the initiators of the WSF process have used to describe it is "open space"'.>



**Teivo Teivainen** (Finland) is professor of world politics at the University of Helsinki, and director of the programme on Democracy and Global Transformation, San Marcos University, Peru. He has authored several books on democratization processes.



**Kees Biekart** (the Netherlands) is a senior lecturer in political sociology at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), the Netherlands, and Convenor of the MA specialization Politics of Alternative Development (PAD).



**Alan Fowler** (UK) is a professor at the Centre of Civil Society of the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, and professor of 'civil society' at ISS, the Netherlands. He has been active for over 25 years in international development.



**Fons van der Velden** (the Netherlands) has facilitated the CDC Initiative. He is facilitator of learning processes and organizational change. He is director of Context, international cooperation, Utrecht, the Netherlands.





This was the strength of the WSF, and its weakness. ‘This democratic co-existence in the open spaces created by the movements has been refreshing and empowering. At the same time, its relativistic undertones can become frustrating for the task of devising effective strategies to change the world’.

Difficult dilemmas, but what is clear is that they won’t be solved by copying old concepts of state-centred politics. It is not a matter of creating a ‘world government’ or global political parties. It is learning by doing; it is experimenting. There is an urgent need for alternative concepts. According to Teivianen, the formulation of ‘models of transnational, cosmopolitan or global democratic institutions of the future can provide inspiration for those who might struggle for their realization. Such models are also important for the task of undermining the existing networks of power, because the legitimacy of the latter has been largely based on the there-is-no-alternative discourse’.

Biekart and Fowler describe in their concluding essay as a ‘guiding philosophy for CDC’ one where the ‘co-responsibilities for sustaining the global commons for everyone stand central’. This as an alternative for the current ‘over-reliance on economic growth that emphasizes accumulation over distribution and a moral and practical failure of (market-driven) party politics and democracy on many scales’ which feeds ‘instability and ... disempowers citizens as agents in charge of their own development’.

### Practical implications

Concrete strategies and instruments are needed to put CDC into practice. One important element, according to Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, is communication, which he distinguishes from information. Providing information is a one-way and top-down process. Communication, on the other hand, means that power will be shared. *Communication enables citizens to take part in decision-making processes.*

Communication is also a crucial aspect in the translation of civic involvement into collective action for change. Instead of vertical flows of information, communication is about horizontal exchange and dialogue. *Communication connects people* and the hundreds of small CDC initiatives that take place at the local level, for example through the use of ICT but also through the active involvement of ‘communicators’: one of the roles NGOs can play.

Similarly, Harry Boyte reflects on the roles that NGOs and professionals can play by using the dichotomy between ‘mobilizing’ (top-down) and ‘organizing’ (horizontal). Mobilizing assumes the existence of an ‘enemy’ and a problem defined in advance against which activists try to persuade people to take action. Community organizing on the other hand means building up organizations and developing skills so that people can define their own problems – Boyte presents a lot of examples from the US in the 1930s and from South Africa in more recent times – and learn to analyze the power relations in their own environments.

‘What do we do on Monday morning?’ is the very practical question Fowler and Biekart try to answer in their concluding essay, trying to define some concrete applications of these abstract ideas for private development organizations. Although they do provide some instruments and preliminary answers, it is much too early to draw any far-reaching conclusions from these main aspects that have emerged so far from the CDC Initiative. The essays and debates are intended only as a starting point for the discussion that will now hopefully develop. A first step was taken with the publication of the essays in October. *The Broker* calls on readers to respond. The debate will be followed up in the coming issues and on the website. ■

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