



## EDITORIAL

### **Citizen Initiatives for Global Solidarity: The New Face of European Solidarity**

#### **The central role of citizens in/for development**

The tens of thousands of refugees entering Europe since mid-2015 have led to heated debates not only in political circles within the European Union but also on the streets. For fear of home, security and work, citizens all over the EU express their concern with the unprecedented influx of refugees and asylum seekers. At the same time, others put up banners welcoming refugees and many are doing substantially more. In many countries, citizens spontaneously set up initiatives in response to the refugee crisis. Tourists on the Greek islands close to Turkey take care of refugees by driving them to the nearest port from which they can catch a boat to mainland Greece. Others start collecting goods to hand over to refugees or ship it to Calais for the hundreds of refugees whose main goal is to travel across the Channel. Welcome Shops are opened to act as collecting points for the goods that citizens want to donate for refugees and others again use social media to set up meetings with residents or to find rooms and houses for refugees.

Under the heading of ‘amateur aid: the limits of good intentions’, Wall (2015) analyses these ‘spontaneous citizen and civil society-led initiatives in response to the refugee crisis’. Many initiatives, she states, ‘started with one person and an idea and have snowballed’. These initiatives are then characterised as ‘small, unofficial, unstructured’ without ‘legal status’ set up by people who ‘have never done anything like this before’. Still, many ‘have come together within hours’. Naturally, not all goes well. Apart from receiving ‘stained suits, high heels and erotic lingerie’ and the emergence of secondary markets where refugees resell donated goods, some of these citizen initiatives (CIs) raise ‘more money than they can spend or handle’ and many simply lack the experience and expertise in handling the work they have set out to do.

For the authors in this volume, these characteristics and challenges are very recognisable as they are central to what are called CIs for global solidarity, private (development) initiatives, MONGOs (My Own NGO) or personalised aid. Notwithstanding the different names or abbreviations, all of these essentially refer to small-scale development organisations set up by private persons in the global North and aimed at improving the living standards of people in the global South. As such, this ‘vertical solidarity’ (Wilkinson-Maposa et al., 2005) refers to an actor in development that is still very much under the radar but deserves a much more central place in the discussion about development aid.

For decades, working on development in the South was – in policy as well as in research circles – regarded as the prerogative of governments in the North, intergovernmental organisations such as the World Bank and the UN system, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Oxfam International and World Vision. It took us up to the 2000s to realise that development and development cooperation were no longer the privilege of these usual suspects of bilateral, multilateral and civilateral actors. Confronted with the ‘emergence’ of new actors, the field of development was almost out of the blue broadened with a wide diversity of actors bringing in new money, other ways of working and an often different vocabulary and thinking.

Not surprisingly then, the latest development cooperation report of the OECD-DAC (2015) focuses not only on the work of its own members states (i.e. the usual suspects) but also includes a special section on more unusual suspects or what they call ‘providers of development co-operation beyond the DAC’. For the DAC, the latter – with the exception of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (the only foundation reporting directly to the DAC) – all are countries (ranging from China to India and from Brazil to South Africa). Undoubtedly, the DAC realises that development cooperation is not only a matter for countries, that non-state actors have mushroomed and that in effect the world of development has become extremely complex over the years.

Particularly over the last 10 years, a growing literature has come out that looks at these other, new or unusual suspects in the aid world. Apart from NGOs and CSOs (Civil Society Organisations) which have been around for decades already, we now also take a different look at the for-profit private sector. Although they have been around for an even longer period, they are now being regarded as active development actors with a responsibility to contribute to poverty reduction, good governance and environmental sustainability beyond their day-to-day operation as a commercial enterprise. With the sharp rise and influence of vertical funds in the health sector, supported by foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, but also through the activities of thousands of smaller foundations, the philanthropical world is increasingly acknowledged as an important player in development. The same holds for governments in developing countries themselves. For long, these Southern governments have been regarded mainly as recipients of development aid and quite often as an obstacle to development at the same time. Overall, there was little recognition that these local governments in fact were and are the major financial contributor to development (Development Initiatives 2013; Greenhill and Ali 2013).

Many have tried to get a better understanding of this broadening field of development actors and most have done so in terms of cross-border flows. Greenhill et al. (2013), for instance, distinguish between so-called traditional (e.g. bilateral and multi-lateral donors) and non-traditional development assistance (e.g. philanthropic and institutional giving, social impact investment, global vertical funds, climate finance). They conclude that ‘[t]he volume of development assistance has grown dramatically since 2000, and the composition has changed significantly, with a much larger share being accounted for by non-traditional providers’ (Greenhill et al. 2013, 8). Kharas et al.

(2011) in turn recognise bilateral and multilateral donors while adding vertical funds and rich individuals. In a later study, Kharas et al (2015) refer to these ‘rich individuals’ as individual philanthropists and expand the development arena with foundations, corporations, universities, Diaspora groups and religious congregations.

Of particular interest to policy-makers and academics alike is the growing South–South cooperation (SSC) with special attention being paid to the BRICS countries. A small library can be filled by now with books and articles trying to get a clearer understanding of the what, why and how of this SSC. Of specific interest then is the difference between the way these Southern donors provide their aid and the way this is done by the traditional (DAC) donors.

Although all this contributes to a greater understanding of the expanding field of development actors (and the increasing complexity of trying to coordinate between all of them – Severino and Ray 2009, 2010), there is one actor that is often (but not always: see, for instance, Develtere and Stessens 2007) forgotten in development thinking and policy: individual citizens. Of course, there is implicit acknowledgement that these citizens are important but essentially only when talking about beneficiaries (*citizens as recipients*), about public support (*citizens as supporters*) or about (financial) support for the work of development agencies (*citizens as donor*). From such viewpoints, the central issues then are what citizens know of, and how they feel about, the policy, budget and actions of traditional donors (and principally bilateral donors) or how these same citizens can be stimulated to provide their money and/or time to these traditional development actors’ activities.

This rather passive view of citizens as recipients, supporters and/or donors is old fashioned, however. Old fashioned because it does not recognise the important (if not central) role that citizens (can) play in development. This holds, first of all, for citizens in the global South who as taxpayers, consumers and financiers of a large part of development investments are crucial. At the same time, it also holds for citizens in the global North. Their consuming behaviour has the power to nudge international companies into an environmental- and people-friendly production manner and their energy consumption impacts on environmental public goods. At the same time, it is their taxpaying that provide the funds for providing aid in the first place and it is their voting behaviour that co-determines the way politicians and policy-makers deal with development issues.

And yes, citizens are important as donors and not only because of the taxes they pay. They are also the major contributor to good causes either in cash or in terms of time (volunteering). Such contributions can take many forms; some prefer to give their small change to every canvasser they meet in the streets, others play a charity lottery such as the Swedish Postcode Lottery, and others again invest in one particular entrepreneur in Zambia through KIVA. Important is to note that there are huge differences between countries and that such ‘time and money’ contributions are certainly not restricted to the global North. The World Giving Index (CAF 2014), for instance, looks at the percentage of people in a country over a specific time period donating money to a

charity, volunteering their time to an organisation or helping a stranger who needed help. In this Index, the US shares first place with Myanmar.

Still, citizens do more than that. Many look for more active ways of engagement with development issues and some of them turn this desire for engagements into aid initiatives and organisations. These come under different names (ranging from MONGOs [My Own NGO] to Private Initiatives and from small organisations to micro projects), but in essence, they refer to small-scale initiatives or projects not part of the traditional sector set up by private persons in the global North and aimed at improving the living standards of people in the Global South. Here, we refer to this group as CIs for Global Solidarity.

In initial explorative studies by Schulpen (2007) and Develtere and Stessens (2007), CIs are identified as an emerging category of development actors, which share some characteristics with small NGOs and with volunteers who participate in activities of traditional donors, but are at the same clearly distinct from them in several ways. First of all, CIs are distinct from volunteers who participate in campaigns or support fundraising activities for NGOs because their solidarity actions are most often set up and implemented outside the traditional aid scene. They tend to originate from encounters and experiences in the personal sphere, and are not necessarily a response to calls for action by traditional donors. Those characteristics also form the demarcation line between CIs and small NGOs, as CIs tend to be initiated by citizens with no background in development and are almost never set up with the ambition of becoming a real development NGO with specialised and paid staff. Interestingly, a good number of CIs are critical of the practices of traditional donors and believe that people-to-people aid is more effective and efficient (Develtere and Stessens, 2007; Schulpen, 2007).

Overall, such CIs are considered as stemming from a process of socialisation (De Bruyn and Huyse, 2009; Develtere, 2009; Develtere and Stessens, 2007; Schulpen, 2007). In this context, socialisation should be understood as mainstreaming (Develtere, 2012), as the process in which, not always capable, groups within society become active in a field (e.g. development cooperation) seen formerly as the exclusive domain of more or less professional groups. Although such groups or people can, of course, acquire training in development aid, the fact that they are not always professional from the start is an important reason to distinguish them from the traditional actors in bilateral, multilateral and civilateral channels (Kinsbergen and Schulpen, 2010).

### **Citizens initiatives: a topic worth studying**

It is no longer acceptable to approach citizens mainly or only as a passive subject in development cooperation. Recognising that citizens are not only recipients, donors or supporters but also active 'development workers' themselves makes it a topic worth studying. The fact that the decade-long focus on the usual suspects in international cooperation is extremely slow in being broadened only adds to this. The same holds for the continuing discussion about global citizenship which, according

to Pollet et al. (2014), should essentially be about the extent to which ordinary citizens themselves are willing to act in order to contribute to development or to global justice.

At the outset, one should be careful not to homogenise CIs. They come in many forms and shapes, are driven by different ideas and logics and use different instruments. The diversity of CIs remains little understood (but see the contribution by Kinsbergen et al., in this volume) and needs further inquiry. The contribution by Eugene Guribye and Sarvendra Tharmalingam (*this volume*) provides a nice example of this diversity by focusing on Tamil Diaspora-driven development aid. In doing so, they add the Diaspora-angle to the relatively new field of CI research and show how such a CI is challenged by the interplay between state actors and established NGOs, on the one hand, and political reality in Sri Lanka, on the other.

Active citizens and thus CIs are no small game. The contribution by Ignace Pollet and Rik Habraken (*this volume*, also see: Pollet et al., 2014) is the first documented effort to map and describe the phenomenon of CIs for global solidarity at the European level. The authors convincingly argue that these initiatives are on the rise in Europe, driven by processes of globalisation, and facilitated by advances in communication and information technology. Research teams in the Netherlands, Belgium and increasingly Norway now have longitudinal data that strongly point in the direction of a sharp rise in less than two decades in their respective countries. While it is difficult to map and add up the aid they bring to the table, estimates on the number of CIs in the study by Pollet et al. (2014) are that there are at least 100,000 active CIs in 17 European countries. Plaisier and Schulp (2013) in the meantime conclude that 4 per cent of Dutch citizens are actively involved in a CI (as either founder, board member or volunteer). Extrapolating this to Europe leaves us with hundred thousands of European citizens who are actively engaged in bettering the lives of people on the other side of the world. And they are doing that ‘under the radar’.

Perhaps for many, operating under the radar is a blessing in disguise. Although they do depend on the goodwill of the general public (and, at least in the Netherlands and Flanders, on that of more traditional development actors) and thus need some openness to attract the necessary funding for their activities, they are generally hesitant to outside interference. This hesitance is partly giving in by their idea that they are doing a good job and such interference is thus not only unwanted but also unnecessary. An early study into Dutch CIs by Brok and Bouzoubaa (2005) found that 65 per cent of them expected to contribute to poverty reduction and that 36 per cent was convinced that they were able to tackle the underlying causes of poverty. Partly, however, their hesitance will also be the result of the fact that it concerns their ‘baby’. Working in (or setting up) a CI is for many a very personal issue and one in which they have the lead and they decide what will happen when and how.

It is thus no coincidence that Hanne Haaland and Hege Wallevik (*this volume*) talk about personalised aid workers. Under the title ‘playing and being played with in Africa’, they follow one of these aid agents (Jan) in a visit to ‘his’ projects. Their story is a perfect example of the potential challenges CIs experience in their work as

aid agents and development workers. Challenges, for instance, in terms of dealing with local power relations impacting on ‘his’ projects but also in terms of finding a way out of the personalised aid worker’s own ideas about what is needed and required and the ideas of the people for whom the interventions are meant. As such, the story of Jan ‘represents a possible return to the past in terms of power asymmetry in development aid’.

It also provides an example of ignoring insights from decades of ‘doing development’ – in Jan’s case, mainly ‘the need for local participation and the application of local knowledge’. This need for local participation is an important part of the contribution of Sara Kinsbergen, Lau Schulpen and Ruerd Ruben (*this volume*) in their study on the sustainability of what they call Private Development Initiatives. Based on extensive field work in three countries covering a total of 38 Dutch CIs and their local partners and projects, the authors ask themselves how their development interventions can be classified in terms of their potential sustainability. Their study shows the wide diversity of not only CI interventions but also of their potential sustainability.

Both the Norwegian and Dutch case studies essentially delve into the question about the effectiveness of CIs – one of the most crucial questions in development cooperation in general and thus also with regard to CIs. It naturally raises the question, considering the fact that CIs are part of the field of international development but are also different from the traditional actors in this field, what is the best way of researching the ‘effectiveness’ of CIs. Although an important question, it is not one that we can tackle here. The articles in this volume should then be seen as some outcomes of research into the subject of CIs. We do hope that, by bringing these four studies together, we manage to instil a bit of our own enthusiasm about CIs into you as a reader and to convince you that it is worthwhile to add these CIs to the field of development research.

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