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People's power

Debating civic driven change

Willemijn Verkoren | December 02, 2008

In 'Deep democracy' (*The Broker* 10), a new approach to development – civic driven change (CDC) – was presented. *The Broker* asked people all over the world to participate in a debate on CDC. This article summarizes their responses.

With his momentous victory in the US elections, president-elect Barack Obama, once a Chicago community organizer, concluded what he himself called the best campaign in history. According to Harry Boyte, a member of the campaign team, it centred on local organizing, using the principles of what has recently been called civic driven change (CDC). Boyte is also a member of the group that launched the CDC initiative, which was the subject of the special report 'Deep democracy' in issue 10 of *The Broker*.

Spurred by the need among Dutch aid organizations for new ideas to guide their practice, the CDC initiative brought together thinkers and practitioners to begin developing a new, bottom-up, citizen- and society-based approach to social change. The thinking was that development cooperation, or in a CDC-inspired term, 'aided change', needed an alternative to the practice of planned, linear and top-down interventions. Instead of introducing programmes from the outside and then trying to *mobilize* local people into these frameworks, how can we help people as they *organize* in order to achieve their own change? How can we better conceptualize the realm of society, as distinct from the state and the market, in order for society to realize its potential? Aiming to construct a new body of thinking, the CDC initiative has gathered ideas from a wide field of social movements and social change.

The outputs so far include a book of eight essays written by the members of the core CDC group, and a seminar at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague on 15 October 2008, where the group discussed their ideas with around 180 participants, most

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of them Dutch development practitioners. Not surprisingly, these participants repeatedly asked how CDC can be put into practice. However, the CDC group emphasized that was that it is too early for operationalization. First, the thinking needs to be further developed together with NGOs. In order to contribute to this process, *The Broker* asked people all over the world to participate in a debate on CDC. This article summarizes their contributions and attempts to identify some of the themes that have emerged so far.

Overall, the contributors are positive about CDC, welcoming it as a much needed new perspective. Many point to the credit crisis as evidence of the failure of market- and state-centred approaches – a failure that had been notable for a long time, most obviously in poor and fragile states. A new approach is needed, and CDC may be it, or at least provide inspiration, particularly in the field of aided change. In the words of Lia van Broekhoven of the Dutch NGO Cordaid, the initiative can help to challenge widely held ideas about aid such as ‘the rich North helps the poor people in the South’, and ‘civil society groups in the global South should be modelled in our own image’. Thus CDC provides entry points for a less technocratic and more human and realistic approach.

Many contributors make similar observations, although some take issue with the statement in *The Broker* special report generalizing all NGOs as being ‘cut off from real life’. In fact, many development NGOs are quite concerned about power issues and are striving to become more civic-driven. However, they are constrained by the funding system of which they are a part. As Jim Woodhill of Wageningen International suggests, we need further discussion about state financing of NGOs and the extent to which this complicates their efforts to become civic-driven. In the view of Wenny Ho, of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we need to make an effort to identify organizations that have managed to steer clear of the technocratic trap and have not been ‘co-opted’.

Having noted these issues about current NGO practice, the respondents raise questions, doubts and suggestions about how to further elaborate and apply CDC. A number of themes seem to be emerging, which can be grouped into theoretical contributions to the elaboration of CDC, and practical questions about how to apply it to aided change.

The end of ideology and the state of society: theoretical reflections

At the theoretical level, the discussion revolved around five issues in particular. First, is CDC a real alternative, and do we want it to be? Second, do we need to concentrate on developing the theory before thinking about application? Third, what is the position of civic agency *vis-à-vis* the state? Fourth, how can local-level CDC be translated into global-level change? Finally, context is important for whether, and in what way, CDC can succeed.

An alternative approach?

As with every new paradigm, the question ‘how new is it really?’ is raised. Clearly, CDC contains elements of many earlier approaches. Wenny Ho refers to a *faena*, a long-standing Andean practice of communal work without government involvement, while consultant David Sogge compares CDC with the ‘public action approach’ of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Jan Gruiters of IKV Pax Christi reminds us of slogans like ‘*détente* from below’ and ‘democratization of security’ that were popular in the 1970s and 1980s and cites the transformation of central and eastern European states as examples of CDC. Ben Schennink, of Radboud University Nijmegen describes how eastern European dissidents and change agents from the global South jointly articulated ‘liberation from exclusion’, with a strong role for civil society, as their common framework during a series of meetings in 1990.

These are just some of the roots of CDC. However, bringing all these ideas together under a new heading may draw renewed attention to them, relate them to one another in a new way, and inspire new thinking and action. The contributors agree that now is the time to do that. More than ever before we are witnessing complex, transnational and interlinked problems, and the limits of currently dominant approaches are becoming clear. CDC may have a long history, but so far it has not successfully challenged the hegemony of neoliberal discourse (or that of technocratic aid practice). In the words of Roger Henke of ICCO, ‘the current there-is-no-alternative hegemony itself indicates the lack of a strong competitor. We need such a competitor’. At the same time, we need to be cautious in labelling CDC as the alternative. It should not become a new all-encompassing ideology. ‘CDC is not about bashing government or markets or enshrining civil society’, says Cordaid’s Francois Lenfant. Rather, ‘it should mark the end of ideology’.

Theory development or application?

Does this mean that we should stop theorizing and start using the ideas of CDC? Not necessarily. Several contributors call for

more theory development. Various bodies of literature – from Gramscian analysis to studies of participatory, dialogical and deliberative democracy – could help shed more light on CDC. One contributor cautions that ‘operationalizing’ CDC could lead to ‘instrumentalizing’ it, i.e. making it subordinate to the agendas of states, donors or others. CDC is not a ‘blueprint for engagement’, says Lenfant, it simply *calls for* engagement. More than anything else, it is a value statement, reflecting a belief in the ability of citizens to change unequal power relations. Are we to infer that we should postpone applying CDC in practice until it is better developed? Perhaps we can do both at the same time, and develop the theory in the context of application (see box ‘Action learning case studies’)?

Society and the state

Although CDC aspires to shape not only the sphere of society but also those of states and markets, many contributors link it to civil society. Robin Cohen of the University of Oxford, for example, writes that society has become fragmented and has ground to states and markets. To Cohen, CDC lends inspiration for organized society to regain its strength by revitalizing institutions of mutual assistance, having social movements develop common programmes, and creating online communities that exert power through consumer choice and political action. (see box ‘Restoring organized society’)

Some contributors criticize CDC’s supposedly limited civil society approach. Richard Holloway of the Aga Khan Development Network, for example, writes that ‘CDC is overloading the arena of civil society with too much responsibility’. Governments and businesses can also contribute to CDC, he adds, as long as they work according to norms of integrity and democracy. Rajwant Sandhu of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, India, feels that social services should remain the responsibility of the state. State actors are also needed to support CDC, adds Victor Adefemi Isumonah of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. To remove structural obstacles to change, elites may have to be involved, if only because of their ability to obstruct change.

How do these comments relate to CDC’s claim to transcend the boundaries between society and the state, as embodied in the concept of ‘deep democracy’? It appears that people have difficulty imagining what this role for CDC beyond the realm of civil society entails. How can CDC develop, in the words of Roger Henke of ICCO, ‘an understanding that informs the institutional redesign of states and markets from the inside’? In the view of Ira Harkavy of the University of Pennsylvania, the answer is to develop civic agency in schools and universities, making them catalysts for local democracy and the emergence of new public–private partnerships. Ultimately, government would no longer deliver services but limit itself to supporting and financing these partnerships. Another role of government *vis-à-vis* CDC, suggested by Jim Woodhill, could be in mediating between different localities and between the local and the global.

Local to global

The Broker special report asked whether CDC could provide guidance for change at the global as well as the local level. If the global system is unequal and unfair, then change at this level is needed for locally induced change to be sustainable. How can local-level CDC translate into global-level change? Only one contributor, Woodhill, addresses this question. ‘Much of the failure of development’, he writes, has been that it ‘has focused too much at the local level on the assumption that local people can empower themselves’. However, ‘higher-level institutional factors lock in marginalization and inequitable power relations’. This ‘paradox’ in CDC needs more exploration. This resonates with other comments, mentioned above, about the role of states and elites in supporting CDC. For inspiration about what CDC could entail at the global level, and how it may link back to the local, Ben Schennink of Radboud University Nijmegen refers to successful global social movements that could be drawn upon, such as the human rights movement (and its many local-level offspring), and the campaigns to ban landmines and cluster bombs.

Context, context, context

The shape CDC can take is highly dependent on the context in at least two ways. First, the type and capacity of the state matters. Are we operating within the borders of an authoritarian, democratic or failed state? Sogge asks whether the idea of civic groups co-producing public goods and political processes is possible in fragile states such as the DR Congo or Haiti, where the main tasks are to establish security and a minimally functional state apparatus. Woodhill wonders about authoritarian societies that lack free speech and political accountability to citizens, elements that seem essential to CDC. Second, it may be necessary to distinguish between rich and poor societies. Fantahun Wakie, of SNV Ethiopia, feels that it is relatively easy for people in developed countries, who are not in survival mode, to take an active stance *vis-à-vis* the state. But poor people depend on public services and can not afford the luxury of critical engagement: ‘first bread, then rights’.

Values mapping and benevolent elites: practical implications for aid agencies

In the category of practical reflections, three themes emerge. First, is there a tension between supporting open-ended change

and ensuring that this change fits with core 'civic' values? Second, how can outsiders support CDC? Finally, the most practical question of all: what can we do on Monday?

The tension between civic morals and bottom-up change

Some contributors wonder to what extent CDC can help us decide what *kind* of change we want. For Holloway, much of the CDC discourse is 'utopian and romantic' in assuming that citizens always have the best ideas about their own future. As Nilda Bullain recognized in her essay in the CDC book, often they do not. Since we are, like Holloway, 'not interested in helping the kind of change desired by suicide bombers, genital mutilators, or racial or caste supremacists, however authentic an expression of the people this may be', we need some kind of guideline. Perhaps, in addition to the power mapping called for by CDC, 'values mapping' is required. This could help us determine what values CDC should be based on for it to enlist our support.

Or is the value content of CDC actually quite clear? CDC authors other than Bullain are rather explicit about the moral content of 'civicness'. According to the CDC book, civic agency should be based on 'respect for difference between people and a concern for society and its environment as a whole'. This certainly provides handles for 'value mapping'. But it raises another difficult question. Jeroen Rijniers of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs asks how we can have predetermined values guiding our support for CDC, while at the same time treating it as a process of people who organize themselves – rather than being mobilized – around whatever issue they choose? How can we refrain from imposing goals on supposedly bottom-up, innovative and open-ended movements? Perhaps the 'mapping' of civic values should guide only the selection of which initiative to support. But once we have chosen to support a group, then we have to start trusting it to chart its own path.

Some groups may need help in getting organized in the first place. In addition to downright 'un-civic' values, there may also be some values that obstruct civic action by downplaying people's belief in their agency for change. According to Erick Roth, Bolivian farmers' beliefs and attitudes foster dependency and prevent them taking matters into their own hands. Isumonah makes a similar observation about African fatalism. Sandhu refers to community institutions in India that lack vision and a capacity to think for themselves. In such situations, outsiders or local elites are needed to create the conditions for CDC, for example by developing the necessary capacities and attitudes.

Donor support for CDC

So outsiders or elites may sometimes be necessary to help CDC along. But how should they go about this? After all, outside support for CDC is difficult, if not inherently contradictory. Often, the wrong approach is taken, as illustrated by the Kettering Foundation in its research into public work by citizens in communities in the US and elsewhere. As David Mathews reports, public institutions 'colonised' local 'organic politics' through well intended mechanisms like empowerment projects, participation, accountability standards and campaigns. (see box 'Public work by citizens')

It is not just government institutions that have difficulty finding the right approach to civic agency. NGOs, too, exhibit practices in which the civic dimension is weak. Udan Fernando of Context explains that while many NGOs started as activist groups, soon the 'NGO-ness' became dominant and pushed the civic dimension to the margins. He calls for NGOs to use CDC as inspiration to go back to where they came from. Similarly, for Gruiters, CDC confirms the importance of civil society organizations' value orientation, social legitimacy and critical attitude toward political power – as opposed to NGOs acting purely as donors and public service subcontractors. For Lenfant, CDC could mean offering support to social movements 'without corrupting them by overfunding them or saddling them with burdensome monitoring frameworks'. Unfortunately, he adds, this is easier said than done. Doing away with linear planning and monitoring frameworks would be quite a revolution in the aided change community. No matter how much they clash with bottom-up change, spontaneity, learning and unpredictability, these frameworks make sense from the perspective of those who want to know how their money is being spent.

What can we do on Monday?

Although this question was raised in *The Broker* special report, few contributors answer it. This may reflect the need identified by some for more theory development before we can start applying CDC. Still, perhaps we can start, small and close to home. James Taylor of CDRA suggests that we begin mustering up the courage to challenge practices that are contrary to CDC, start experimenting inside our organizations to find ways of working that are driven more equally by all within them, and 'continue to collaborate in developing a practice that amplifies the voices and influence of those previously excluded'.

To sum up, the contributors agree that alternative approaches are badly needed, and CDC could be a good start. However, its implications for aided change as it is done today are potentially revolutionary. Not just NGOs, but the entire development sector

would need to change the way they work. Donors and NGOs would need to base much more of their support on trust rather than the overemphasis on planning and accountability that has come to replace it. Trust-based, open-ended support of civic agency, then – but still guided by values. These are implications that we can already draw upon for inspiration when attempting to change practice. For that, we do not need to wait for CDC to become a fully developed body of theory. However, continued theory development is also called for, perhaps specifically around two pressing questions: how can we connect local- and global-level CDC? And what does it mean for CDC to be more than civil society, but also a force that shapes states and markets? More work is needed to help increase our understanding of, and give meaning to this interesting idea of 'deep democracy'. With the increasing number of fragile states, the failure of financial markets, and the victory of community organizer Obama, it seems that there has never been a better time.

Photo credit main picture: Alamy / Jim West

Footnotes

- 1. The 'public action approach' was proposed by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (1989) *Hunger and Public Action*, Oxford: Clarendon, and later elaborated by Marc Wuyts *et al.* (eds) (1992) *Development and Public Action*. Oxford University Press.
- 2. Jan Gruiters notes that 'neither state nor market acted as catalysts in the transformation of states in central and eastern Europe. Dissidents and popular movements like Charta and Solidarnosc were the motors of the revolution from below in Eastern Europe'.
- 3. Alan Fowler and Kees Biekart (eds) (2008) *Civic Driven Change: Citizen's Imagination in Action*, The Hague: [Institute of Social Studies](#), p.7.
- 4. In IKV Pax Christi's peace work, for example, a CDC perspective means using human security, rather than state security, as a guiding principle.