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THE BROKER

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Civic Driven Change

Willemijn Verkoren | July 22, 2009

The Civic Driven Change (CDC) initiative recently organized a workshop on the practice of CDC, which aims to develop a new, citizen-driven approach to development and social change. This [overview](#) of the event also links to reports from each of the [eleven workgroups](#).

Report from The Civic Driven Change workshop of 22 June 2009

CDC happens!

In previous issues The Broker has given ample attention to the CDC initiative, which aims to develop a new, citizen-driven approach to development and social change. CDC draws attention to broader change processes of which development interventions are a small part, and emphasizes how social change is brought about by citizens themselves. Development organizations may play a role in supporting such processes, but they are not – and cannot be – the primary driving force.

Recently, the initiative moved from a conceptual stage to one of testing the idea against the practices of Dutch NGOs. In the workshop The Practice of Civic Driven Change organized by the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), the Netherlands and Context, international cooperation, on 22 June, staff members of NGOs presented cases from their practice which have clear civic-driven elements and discussed implications and dilemmas from this practice. The workshop attracted a lot of attention. Approximately 150 people participated, representing 45 different organizations. A key question was: how citizens' initiatives be supported without making them aid-driven?

The vocabulary of CDC

One of the initiators of the CDC process, Alan Fowler, spoke of a new vocabulary for CDC, which shows how it is different from

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'old-style' development. Terms that should be avoided include participation, partnerships, needs, governance and mobilization. Instead, terms we should use are collaboration, rights, freedom and organization. CDC focuses on processes, not on projects. Relationships are the starting point, not actors. Instead of civil society, we talk about civic agency and citizenship. Instead of separating the world into sectors – civil society, economy, state – we work cross-sector.

CDC happens!

Although in some working groups there was discussion about the extent to which the cases presented were really civic-driven (as opposed to donor-driven), the practical experiences presented during the workshop also showed that Dutch NGOs are already in the business of supporting CDC. Although CDC is usually not the term used to describe these activities, in practice they have clear civic-driven elements: change agents associations in Uganda, international networks of social movements, interactive online newspapers, child assemblies in Nepal, an environmental leadership programme, democracy schools in Indonesia, open source houses in the Netherlands and a social contracts campaign in Zambia, to name a few. A common feature of these cases is that they revolve around 'co-creating processes' rather than 'implementing programmes'.

To interfere or not to interfere

CDC can be interpreted as a call for less external interference in local processes. However, the participants maintained that in dire situations there is a need for external help. 'Aided change' is not necessarily bad; in fact, it can be very much needed. It is important to distinguish 'aided change', which can be necessary, from 'donor-driven change', which we do not want. That NGOs should not be the primary driving force does not imply that they should strive for neutrality: each intervention alters a given situation, changing power relations. In supporting CDC, NGOs are change agents themselves.

Support roles for CDC

The challenge then becomes finding the appropriate roles for external NGOs to play in supporting civic-driven initiatives. Three major roles for external supporters arose from the cases. To support CDC, NGOs can:

- create space for communication, dialogue and discussion about aims and activities (depending on the context, technology and media can play a role in this)
- provide the 'munition' for civic action in the form of information (laws, market prices, options for action) and skills (lobbying and other ways of civic action) and
- help to connect groups to one another, both horizontally (bringing groups with similar aims in contact with one another) and vertically (providing access to lobbying channels and to donors).

Context

The extent of external involvement is context-specific. In some cases, it is important not to change the dynamics of civic action, while in others it can be desirable to intervene more strongly. The currently oft-heard argument that local initiatives are spoiled by donors who force them to institutionalize and thereby become further removed from their base does not always apply. In fragile states, for example, there is a dire lack of institutions, and institutionalization may be quite a good thing. In such contexts civic initiatives can come to replace the functions of (non-functioning) state institutions. However, in the longer run, getting the state to carry out these functions should be a goal. This means that authorities need to be involved in activities, rather than running parallel to them. One participant remarked that we 'should be trying to bring out the "civicness" in existing power structures so that they can start doing what they are supposed to be doing'. Another noted that often authorities are much more willing to cooperate and learn than it is assumed.

Civic and uncivic

CDC is not only a descriptive, but also a normative concept that is guided by 'civic values' such as inclusion, tolerance of differences and a concern for society as a whole. But what happens when in order to achieve positive change, 'uncivic' tactics are needed? In oppressive contexts, confrontation may be required and activities may in some cases run counter to the laws of the land. This presents NGOs supporting civic action with dilemmas: do they want to be associated with confrontational or even

illegal tactics in a given country? What if the law is 'unlawful'? In such cases, participants said, a balance may be needed between harmonious and confrontational tactics. Tactics should be chosen with great care, also because of path-dependency: once confrontational tactics are adopted, they are likely to continue.

Power and CDC

Experiences of civic initiatives being closed down by uncooperative authorities made some participants skeptical of how much CDC can really achieve in the face of the powers that be. Others, however, emphasised that civic action can be very powerful itself. In CDC, it was said, power can be derived from various sources:

- numbers ('critical mass')
- social legitimacy (by including people from different groups)
- knowledge; and
- involving authorities in activities.

We're in it together

In several workshops, participants argued that CDC requires taking a global systems perspective. We should not separate 'us' (Northerners, donors, NGO workers) from 'them' (Southerners, recipients, civic activists), but see us all as a 'we'. We belong to a worldwide community and we are all responsible for achieving change. Being engaged in the same system, the global North is also accountable to the global South. Replacing the donor-recipient model with a systems perspective means engaging with Southern actors instead of controlling their activities. In reality, however, this 'we' perspective is yet to be internalized. Discussions continue to distinguish between the professional NGOs on the one hand and civic initiative on the other. In the working group on CDC in the Netherlands, participants explained that they had been civic activists once, but that ended when they started working for a professional NGO.

Close to home

The perspective of an interconnected global system can also lead us to take a look at our own role in global politics and development – for example, at our consumer behaviour and our ecological footprint. Civic action close to home may help to achieve a fairer global trade structure. In addition, we may look at the demand side of 'conflict resources' such as Colombian cocaine, much of which, as local women's group told a Dutch donor, is consumed in the Netherlands.

Local to global

There are many inspiring cases of national- as well as global-level campaigns and networks that help to connect localised civic initiatives to one another and to gain access to global political forums. As mentioned, an added value of NGOs or donors can be to facilitate such networks or to otherwise establish 'horizontal and vertical' connections. Compared to the local, national and global levels, little activity takes place at the regional level, which lead one presenter to call it the 'missing link' between local and global.

Politics

A distinguishing facet of CDC is it has a political element. The 'civic' in CDC is decidedly political. We are doing much more than trying to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), said one participant: we are trying to change power structures. This also distinguishes CDC from the more de-politicised World Bank concept of 'community-driven development'.

Core values

In this context, the need to revisit NGOs' core values came up a lot. Often, these are about solidarity with the weakest and support for socio-political change towards more equitable divisions of resources – quite political objectives, indeed. It was suggested that such core values can help guide decisions about what civic initiatives to support and in what way. In addition, some felt we should look back to earlier times of NGO work, when support was based more on solidarity for emancipation movements rather than technical, professionalised poverty reduction. As one participant maintained, 'we used to do much more CDC'.

Accounting for CDC

The results of promoting and facilitating CDC are not easy to identify. These are long-term and open-ended processes, which require trust and flexibility. It is difficult if not impossible to attribute change to a particular intervention. It may not be possible to predict and plan for specific outcomes. One may say, however, that the process itself is also part of the result. All these features make accounting for CDC very difficult. Donors ask for specific performance results, to be compared with previously predicted outcomes. Many participants are concerned about the extent to which the currently dominant system for planning and accountability can be used for CDC at all. In addition, there is the question of whose criteria to use for determining the success of (supporting) CDC: those decided by the NGO, or those set by local people?

CDC and the aid system

Participants saw three options for dealing with the constraints posed by the aid system. First, they may try to circumvent it, or in other words, to creatively make space for CDC within the system (for example by devising new kinds of indicators for success). Second, they can enter into dialogue with donors about changing the aid system. Third, if all else fails, they can refuse to be part of the system.

Co-financing policy

It was noted that CDC entails a more political approach to development. Isn't that precisely what the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation has been arguing for? Yes, say various participants, but unfortunately this argument is not reflected in the new Dutch co-financing policy framework, which has not integrated CDC insights to any significant extent. This means that so far, the option of engaging with the donor to change the system has not been successful. Ministry representatives were involved in early stages of the CDC initiative, but withdrew along the way.

The way forward

In the words of Alan Fowler, CDC has 'wheels' and is 'rolling'. Many people in several countries have expressed interest in the concept, hoping that it will lend inspiration for a changed approach to development. This is also underlined by the broad participation of the Dutch NGO sector in the workshop. Not only is CDC attracting interest, but a common understanding of the concept appears to be emerging, roughly along the lines sketched in this report. Now, the time may have come to start making some real changes in the practice of development.

Working group reports

- [Workshop 1: Promoting responsible citizenship](#)
- [Workshop 2: Civic actions and markets](#)
- [Workshop 3: Children and civic action](#)
- [Workshop 4: Creating new civic spaces at the global level](#)
- [Workshop 5: CDC in fragile states](#)
- [Workshop 6: Learning from civic driven change in The Netherlands](#)
- [Workshop 7: Civic agency and \(party\) politics](#)
- [Workshop 8: Aided and non-aided change](#)
- [Workshop 9: Civic driven change at different levels](#)
- [Workshop 10: Media and civic driven change](#)
- [Workshop 11: Civil disobedience or uncivic action?](#)

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