

A short introduction to Civic Driven Change

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1. Background

Civic Driven Change (CDC) has evolved over the last five years as an alternative framework for traditional development practice. It is based on the understanding that fundamental change can be achieved by people themselves, as individuals or groups without emphasis on the divisions between states, corporations and civil society. CDC reaches beyond the classical poverty reduction agenda and beyond the scope of the development sector.

Citizenship and *civic agency* for achieving societal change occupy an important place in CDC. Theory on CDC has been addressed in the Think Tank Initiative hosted by ISS (2007 – 2009).¹ During this process, ten practitioners, academics and activists from around the world identified the need for thinking through and discussing new approaches to social change generated by civic action.

‘..[I]t appeared increasingly necessary to redefine the function of civic agents, including the role of private aid agencies and their partner organisations.’²

Initiatives to investigate the theme on a practical level have been conducted, such as an Action Research programme by Context and a public workshop to test the concept against the practices of Dutch development NGOs.³ These and other activities have shown that interest in the concept is abundant but that implications for policy, research, practice and social business need to be addressed and further thought through.

2. The concept of Civic Driven Change

CDC is a set of ideas, thinking and debate about citizen-led change processes in society. It is not an established theory; rather it is an emerging approach and concept. CDC means different things in different places: context and history matter. It is built upon the practice, engagement and experience in concrete situations. Rather than pretending to be a brand new concept, main elements of CDC thinking come from existing debates and practices in different contexts. However, looking at change through a CDC lens brings in some innovative ideas and intends to trigger thinking and a renewed focus for those working on social change processes.

CDC throws a new light on citizenship, the right to have rights and democracy, focusing on civic action (action by people to change how society works) rather than seeing citizens only as rights’ holders. This requires civic agency (people’s capacities, skills and imagination to change society). Promoting social change in this light means stimulating agency of individuals, groups and organisations. CDC happens everywhere, not just in the development sector – people are citizens and can have agency regardless of the sector in which they work. Thus, CDC is about co-creation and action across (sectoral) boundaries. It is about ‘organising’ rather than ‘mobilising’ people.

¹ See <http://www.iss.nl/Portals/Civic-Driven-Change-Initiative> for more information on this process.

² Fowler, A and K. Biekart (eds) (2008) *Civic Driven Change: Citizen’s Imagination in Action*. The Hague: ISS.

³ See www.civicedrivenchange.org for more information on Context’s action research programme on CDC. See <http://www.thebrokeronline.eu/en/articles/Civic-Driven-Change> for a report of the workshop ‘The Practice of Civic Driven Change’ on June 22, 2009 at the ISS, the Hague.

The three elements of CDC convey the meaning of the concept:

- Civic (emphasis on citizens, normative, attention for values of actors)
- Driven (energies of people, agency)
- Change (multi-sectoral and beyond 'aid/development', transformational, political, structural)

The concept of CDC is furthermore based on the realisation that change is a non-linear, complex and messy process, meaning that change will not occur in a neat cause-effect manner. Hence, CDC thinking introduces the *complexity approach* as a way of looking at societies and how they change. Societies are highly connected systems that have many interacting agents creating self-generated and self-adapting patterns of behaviour which cannot be predicted. In other words, you cannot plan change, but you *can* influence it.

New ways of working need to be found to create a conducive environment for the types of initiatives and forms of cooperation that encourage CDC. CDC entails a number of values and points of departure, as well as a renewed attention to dilemmas and risks of change initiatives. Examples of values underlying the CDC approach are:

- The recognition that anyone can initiate change and that change initiatives start with the desire for change;
- Searching for an appropriate role for the development sector or 'aided-change';
- Understanding that CDC is political and addresses power relations;
- Acknowledging that change can be achieved through cross-sectoral and cross-boundary initiatives by people and groups in different roles;
- Cooperation for CDC requires trust and a mutual relationship between the collaborating parties;
- Sensitivity to risk, dividing the risks of an initiative for change, equally and consciously.