

## Discussion paper for DPRN process on Civic Driven Change and local politics

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### Introduction

This paper is based on the workshop *Civic driven change and local politics* which was held on March 26, 2010 in The Hague. It forms part of the DPRN process 'Civic Driven Change: Implications for policymakers and practitioners' which aims to stimulate dialogue between development experts (practitioners, policy makers, academics and business representatives) around what Civic Driven Change (CDC) implies for policy and practice of international cooperation. This process is organised in 2010 by ISS, Hivos, Cordaid, Social Evaluator, Broederlijk Delen, DGIS and Context, international cooperation and consists of a number of events as well as information collection and dissemination through websites and position papers.

The meeting revolved around the question: What is the political interface between citizens' initiatives and (local) political parties? Four speakers presented their views on Civic Driven Change and local politics. André Krouwel, political analyst and lecturer at the Free University of Amsterdam, presented some insights from the Dutch electoral system and examples of the interface of citizens with national politics. Joop de Wit, senior lecturer Public Policy and Development Management at ISS, presented findings on the workings of local politics in several Indian slums. Fons Zinken, local politician and president of the Association for Local Political Factions (VPPG), revealed some of the less democratic mechanisms of Dutch politics. Finally, Chris Aalberts, independent researcher focussing on the relation between citizens and politics, exhibited when and how Dutch youth engage with politics.

This paper presents a concise introduction to CDC, together with the main insights the presentations and discussions during the meeting generated, which either confirm or question some of the assumptions underlying the concept of Civic Driven Change.

### The concept of Civic Driven Change

Civic Driven Change (CDC) is a set of ideas, thinking and debate about citizen-led change processes in society that has evolved over the last five years as an alternative lens to look at development practice. It is based on the understanding that fundamental change can be achieved by people themselves, as individuals or groups, without being entrenched in the conventional division of society between states, corporations and civil society.

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Theory on CDC has been addressed in the Think Tank Initiative hosted by ISS (2007 – 2009). 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. This process resulted in the publication of the book *Civic Driven Change: Citizen's Imagination in Action*.<sup>2</sup>

CDC is not an established theory; it is an emerging approach and concept. Main elements of CDC thinking come from existing debates and practices in different contexts. It is built upon the practice, engagement and experience in concrete situations. 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. The CDC discourse intends to provide the development sector with a narrative of its own that is more clear and focused on its own pathway of change and priorities.

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.

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

CDC throws a new light on citizenship, the right to have rights, and democracy, focusing on civic action 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.

In June 2009, during a workshop on 'The Practice of CDC'<sup>3</sup> two issues were defined as gaps to be addressed: first, what is the relation between CDC and local politics? And secondly, which lessons can be learned from the Dutch context? CDC thus focuses less on institutions with fixed boundaries and more on the important role individuals can play as change agents within and beyond these institutions. What does this look like on the ground? How do citizens influence local politics? And how do policies define citizenship and the available instruments for people to engage? These questions formed the rationale for focusing a first event in the DPRN process on CDC and local politics.

## Some observations on local politics in the Netherlands

Using the Dutch, and therefore familiar, context for reflection on CDC offers an opportunity for sobering rosy assumptions with regard to civic potential in the developing world. The following observations were shared during the workshop presentations and discussions.

### **Not in my backyard**

The 'civic' in Civic Driven Change refers to the moral or ethical grounding of the intended change. Actors in development cooperation strive to promote change that reflects a concern for the whole. The assumption is that people act, based on an imagined 'better' future for the next generation. It is recognised that such imagined futures may differ and contradict, causing tension between different sections of society. Civic agents may also organise themselves in order to achieve non-civic change, but who defines the boundaries? When is CDC truly civic?

Looking at the Dutch context in relation to the CDC assumptions on citizen action for the whole, Krouwel concludes, we might underestimate the level of 'NIMBY'-driven citizen action: not in my backyard. This refers to the tendency that people may be in favour of certain policies, which are seen as improving society as a whole at national scale, but are less welcoming when these policies are implemented in their own community. For example, when a cultural centre was built in an Amsterdam neighbourhood, the residents, who may have been in favour of cultural centres existing in general, mobilised against it for fear of noise, traffic and other hindrance.

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

Aalberts is even more sceptic about youth participation, stating that Dutch youth will, in majority, act only on issues that impact their personal lives, and only if they are handed the means to act in piecemeal manner. Both are of the opinion that Dutch citizens generally are not activated to change their society, particularly not for altruistic motives.

Contrary to this observation, Zinken advocates for allocating responsibility to citizens at the lowest level possible, for example by allowing neighbourhoods to spend a certain budget on the improvement of their own surroundings. In this view, a 'not in my backyard' mentality can also be positive, as people take responsibility for policy implementation, such as investments, in their close environments. The feasibility of this happening with a concern for the wider society was however questioned.

### **A century old democracy... but perhaps not that democratic?**

Dutch development actors portray a picture of the Dutch electoral system as an example of a democracy as it should be, which can be transferred to other situations effortlessly. However, the meeting showed that this system is in fact a direct result of Dutch history and tradition, its origins going centuries back.

Several characteristics of this Dutch democratic tradition can be discerned that have implications for the degree of influence citizens have on (local) politics. First of all, the Netherlands has a clear culture of appointment (as opposed to election). Many political and administrative representatives are appointed, not chosen. For example, mayors are appointed by the queen, rather than elected democratically. This has implications for the democratic degree and the accountability of governance. The democratic degree of appointed functions is questioned by Zinken, as many functions, such as the judiciary, are performed by individuals with an outspoken preference for a certain national political party but who were not chosen to perform their function on that basis. Accountability is endangered, as Krouwel underlines, because when a representative fails, he or she may be reprimanded or even discharged, but this often results in an appointment in another function.

This situation is related to a second characteristic of the Dutch democratic tradition, pointed out by Krouwel, that the political establishment is dominated by a relatively limited set of families. The family lines of the political administrative leaders can to a large extent be traced centuries back. In other words, the Netherlands has an elitist political culture, with institutional set-up going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century which has undergone very few changes to adapt to modern times. A related feature of the current Dutch democracy is that there is a clear link between income and level of education – what could be defined as 'class' – on one hand and the level of participation in politics, as well as voting preferences, on the other. Less educated and well to do citizens are less likely to vote, and if they do, more likely to vote for the more 'populist' or radical parties, both at the left and right end of the spectrum. At the same time, at local level, 'rich people sometimes find other means to achieve desired changes than through voting' as Krouwel analyses.

Another characteristic of the Dutch system is the division of roles between representatives and administrators. It is not a full-time (professional) job to be a local representative; and many decisions are in fact taken by administrative experts, or 'professional bureaucrats' – people who are not politicians but managers. An example Zinken offers is construction, a topic that is largely defined by town-planning experts rather than democratically elected representatives. This has direct implications for the accountability for policy implementation at local level.

In other words, it seems that what we see as a 'pure' example of democracy, involves quite some wheeling and dealing in reality. How does this shape our ideas of CDC?

### **The scope for local politics as driver of change**

Several features of the current political situation in the Netherlands undermine the ability of (local) politics to act as driver of changes desired by citizens. A first that needs mention is the political crisis the Dutch democracy seems to be in. Trust in the main political institutions is currently extremely low. Turnout has been steadily dropping at national elections and is significantly lower at local elections. The principle of representation has lost its strength along with the disappearance of the traditional divisions in Dutch society – the so-called pillars of Catholics, Protestants, socialists and liberals that provided people clear guidance on who to vote for. Many people lose their interest to engage, as can also be seen in the decreasing membership of trade unions and newspapers... or is it that the old institutions have been unable to adjust to modern means of engagement through mass media, such as internet 2.0 and television?

Likewise, political parties themselves have seen their membership decrease over the past decades: only 2,5 % of the Dutch population is a member of a political party. Within this limited membership, only about 10% are active for their political parties. Yet candidates for political positions are still recruited from the membership. This underlines the lack of representation of a large part of the population. It also explains that it is possible to 'hijack' a local department of a political party relatively easily. Indeed it has occurred that a specific group mobilises sufficient numbers of likeminded members to push a certain issue at local level.

This lead Krouwel to conclude that there is room for patronage in political parties in the Netherlands, particularly in local labour parties, where groups of people organise along ethnic lines. The threshold has been lowered: one now needs merely a few hundred votes to be elected to local government. This sounds empowering but, in reality, is a mechanism mostly used by groups of people who act on behalf of their own interests. Meanwhile the marginalised groups do not mobilise at all. This is an important parallel with the situation in Indian slums (see section 3a).

### **Youth and (local) politics in the Netherlands**

Though political participation is dwindling in the Netherlands, it is especially low among youth. For many young people, voting and reading the headlines in the newspapers are the only political activities. Aalberts discerns four types of political action, by distinguishing the

actions as either spontaneous or formalized, and as either concerning daily topics or political issues. Positioned in a matrix, four broad types of political action that can be discerned are civil servant action (everyday-spontaneous), citizen questions (everyday-formalized), citizen protest (political-spontaneous) and citizens' initiative (political-formalized).<sup>4</sup>

An important conclusion of the analysis of these four types of action, is that the knowledge and perspective on action by Dutch youth differs between the youth themselves, and politicians or civil servants. For example, when youth engage in everyday activities in the field of culture, sports or recreation, they do not regard this as political action; while politicians and civil servants do identify such initiatives as opportunities for societal change initiatives. However, they in turn do not manage to adjust their language and processes to the youth's needs and preferences in order to mobilize this potential force. There is a clear disconnect between the direction and mode of change as defined by the bureaucracy, and by youth. It is obvious that one of the starting points of CDC, 'beginning where people are' and supporting them in the change they want to make, is yet to be learned in Dutch (local) politics.

## Some observations on local politics in Indian slums

De Wit presented research done into the interface between local politics and slum dwellers in Asian cities, particularly Mumbai, India. His observations, as presented both at the meeting as well as in his paper<sup>5</sup>, demonstrate some striking similarities with the Dutch reality.

### **Progressive patronage**

The emphasis of official policies, of the Indian government as well as of development NGOs, is often on the formation of community based organisations (CBOs) as the preferred way for slum dwellers to organise themselves and to initiate change and influence policies. In reality, 'poor and marginalised' do not organise themselves that way. Rather than organising themselves in broad, horizontal groups, they rely on a system De Wit calls 'vertical patronage' for their survival strategies.

This entails that they establish links with powerful or influential individuals to whom they can turn for support in times of trouble, in return for political backing. 'This *logic of patronage* is based on the experience that investing in collective action is problematic, time-consuming and fraught with free rider problems. In contrast, using an intermediary or broker is perceived to increase the chance of obtaining a service or gaining protection against a threat.'<sup>6</sup> Besides private and immediate needs, such relationships are even preferred by the poor to organise collective services, rather than demanding these through concerted action.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Youth driven change in the Netherlands?' article written by Chris Aalberts for this event.

<sup>5</sup> Joop de Wit and Erhard Berner, 'Progressive Patronage? Municipalities, NGOs, CBOs and the Limits to Slum Dwellers' Empowerment' in *Development and Change* 40 (5): 927-947 (2009).

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p. 928-929.

Based on examples from practice in several large Indian cities, a trend can be discerned where CBOs, set up or supported by NGOs and municipalities, reproduce similar vertical relations rather than countering them, thereby often unable to reach the most deprived and marginalised slum dwellers. De Wit and Berner call this 'progressive patronage'.

### **Homogeneity or diversity more conducive to change initiatives?**

Like in the Netherlands, De Wit stated that in Indian slums, the idea of change towards a future based on a concern for the whole is contradicted by the fact that the most effective change initiatives are led by homogeneous groups, acting on their own behalf or that of their specific constituency. Sometimes more diverse groups do converge, usually in the face of a 'common enemy' or a specific issue and on an ad hoc basis. But more often, the existing vertical divisions based on people's multiple identities, such as 'income, caste, religion, gender, political affiliation and home owners versus tenants'<sup>7</sup> are reinforced when local communities organise themselves in terms of representation, mediation and politics.

### **A concern for the whole vs. NIMBY**

Meanwhile, those that do organise themselves officially and successfully are middle class citizens in Indian cities. They get together in so-called Resident Welfare Organisations and are able to demand services, safety and welfare for their neighbourhoods. But, as was likewise analysed concerning local politics in the Netherlands, these organisations often mobilise around issues that concern their own stakes, rather than a concern for the whole. These concerns, which can include active support of eviction of nearby slums, can be directly opposed to the stakes of their poor and marginalised neighbours. It is questionable whether such clear citizen driven change, aimed at changes in their direct and local surroundings to move towards a better future for their descendants, is in fact *civic* driven change.

## **Lessons for Civic Driven Change**

Based on the various observations of the interface between citizens and local politics, some additional lessons can be drawn that may imply adaptation or refinement of the concept of Civic Driven Change.

### **Desire for stability or an imagined future as basis for change**

The inputs made at the workshop convey a strong message that people prefer stability to change although the latter would incrementally make their lives supposedly better. In other words, the static less-better status quo is preferred to an uncertain, dynamic better situation. This reflects the psyche of people both at the levels of individual and group behaviour, and is an area that CDC thinking should explore further. What makes people cling on to the status quo, even though that is not the ideal? How can a break-through be made to ignite a spark within individuals and groups to be convinced of a change? How can that 'spark' be translated into a common action which paves the way for change? These are some of the questions that can be explored when studying civic processes in different contexts. Such an exploration would help CDC thinkers and practitioners design useful strategies and

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<sup>7</sup> Idem, p. 935.

methodologies of organising civic action as well as sustaining them towards an imagined future which is desired by groups themselves in the long run.

### **Focus on trust or rule of law**

What is clear from the inputs and ensuing deliberations of the workshop is the important role played by institutions of law as an overarching prerequisite for common good of a society. The new insight that came up from the workshop is the primacy of these institutions of law and order, particularly the concept of Rule of Law. The strong argument in this regard was that Rule of Law (which includes existence of statutes, enforcement of the same and efficient functioning of enforcing institutions) would guarantee common good, fair play and justice for citizens. The controversial extension of this argument in relation to CDC was that if an effective and efficient Rule of Law exists, would there be a need for an additional role played by citizens? This position needs further investigation in CDC thinking: can a legal framework look after the needs of citizens adequately? How 'civic' are these legal institutions? For instance, what are the limits on the responsibility we accept for citizens not under our jurisdiction? What role do citizens play in shaping the standards and enforcement of these legal institutions? What are the limitations of these legal institutions? How can informal, trust-based civic dynamics and action take care of civic needs at micro and local levels of communities and society?

### **Incremental or rather radical change**

CDC literature hints of a change which is substantial. Sometimes terms such as transformational, structural or even radical change are used. A common message which emerged from the inputs and small workshops is that 'change' often happens in small doses, in a gradual manner and often covering a small scope. This is an important insight on reality concerning change processes that are initiated and sustained by civic groups. The 'localness', groundedness of relatively small groups of citizens emerged as hallmarks of civic action. This does not rule out national or global-level and large scale citizens' action. But civic action à la CDC seems often to be a sum of small civic actions. Such small civic action would not necessarily be aiming at radical change covering a large scope of interests. Rather, small incremental changes might coalesce to a larger stream of change process that would entail a larger scope in terms of geographical coverage and representation of interests as well as a change that would address structural and political aspects of society. Such a coalesced change process could contribute to a transformational change.

### **Economic, political and social background of civic actors**

The case studies cited in the inputs, both from The Netherlands and India, gave way for discussion on the economic, political and social background of citizens who have engaged (or not) on civic action. The common message heard in the workshop is the 'middle-class' character of civic action. Some Dutch stories on civic action stressed the dominance of particular families in citizens' action. Though not explicitly expressed in these cases, they are potentially elite. The Indian case suggested that the so-called poor and marginalised show less interest to organise themselves in horizontal civic action. Though not very strongly established, we see here some co-relations between class-background and propensity to get engaged in civic action. It should be noted that the 'class' here goes beyond mere economic

power and hence political and social power. This is an area which has received relatively little attention in CDC thinking. Is CDC an exclusive preserve of the middle class, enlightened, sophisticated citizens? What prevents the poor to act and strive for CDC? What role does class (plus political and social background) play in citizens' action? An attempt to answer these questions would make CDC thinking class-sensitive. Generally, although it underlines the importance of attention for power issues, CDC literature is rather silent on the issue of who acts, and by implication it suggests that CDC can be done by anyone irrespective of the relative strength of their economic, political and social background.

### **Role of bureaucracy and bureaucrats in terms of shaping civic space**

The Dutch cases connoted a strong sense of the bureaucracy that defines the role of citizens. The bureaucracies, particularly at the level of municipalities (that enjoy a great deal of power that is devolved from the State), define policies and frameworks of public works. The bureaucracies and bureaucrats therefore play a determining role in shaping the form and means of civic action. In other words, the boundaries and forms of civic spaces are also shaped by bureaucracies. The question that was not addressed was the role that citizens play in such processes of policy formulations. Should citizens be just 'consulted' by the bureaucracy and be acting in the 'spaces' that are created for them or should the citizens themselves imagine their own actions and create spaces for themselves? How should civic action deal with the bureaucracy? Should the bureaucracy be ignored completely (as is largely seen in the CDC discourse in the U.S.) and bank entirely on citizens? These are some pertinent questions that beg for elaborate answers in CDC thinking.

The other area of attention which emerged is the civic-ness of bureaucrats. The blurring of sectors of state, businesses and civil society means that individuals wear different hats. A bureaucrat is not merely a bureaucrat; she/he could also be a parent, a member of the neighbourhood welfare society, a member of a trade union or a shareholder of a company. How can these multiple roles and interests of bureaucrats be used creatively to pursue CDC interests? Such a question also applies to other citizens whose roles are identified with businesses and civil society.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the workshop and related literature scrutinised the concept of Civic Driven Change, particularly concerning some of the underlying assumptions around the (political) initiatives of citizens to change society at local level. The meeting revolved around the question: What is the political interface between citizens' initiatives and (local) political parties/structures? Other related questions underlying the meeting were:

- What does CDC look like on the ground?
- How do citizens influence local politics?
- And how do policies define citizenship and the available instruments for people to engage?

Without wanting to be overly pessimistic, the speakers underlined the experiences from practice which show that citizen action in different parts of the world is still often lead by a

limited group of people, more often driven by their own interests than a concern for the whole. Rather than upsetting the status quo, most citizens will cling to stability. This is reflected in the desire for rule of law or, where this is absent or inadequate in providing basic needs, revert to relations of patronage. In these situations, mode and direction of civic action is still defined by bureaucracies instead of vice versa, and changes are small and incremental.

Applying the lens of an emerging CDC framework on Dutch society and citizen-focused research in India, validates its potential for enticing new questions and observations on already well research contexts.<sup>8</sup> The workshop offered a unique opportunity to recognise the parallel struggles of Civic Driven Change in what is still seen as a divide between developing countries and those that are economically more advanced yet face similar challenges when it comes to supporting effective citizen action toward societal improvements. In addition, taking this emerging framework to the Dutch context enabled the generation of new questions that are useful for the further development of the framework. It seems logical therefore to further build the emerging CDC framework upon reflections of the Dutch context.

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<sup>8</sup> Recently for example, Hivos was interviewed by the WRR in the context of their research on citizen action. The WRR was very interested in cdc and suggested that it might contain missing links to their research.

Process organisers:



*This process is organised within the framework of the Development Policy Review Network.*

*DPRN ([www.dprn.nl](http://www.dprn.nl)) is a network of Dutch and Flemish development experts whose aim is to stimulate informed debate on development policies and enhance cooperation and synergy between scientists, policymakers, practitioners and entrepreneurs in the field of international cooperation. DPRN has a web portal which provides searchable access to development expertise in the Netherlands and Belgium ([www.global-connections.nl](http://www.global-connections.nl)) and a repository for publications of Dutch development organisations ([www.Search4Dev.nl](http://www.Search4Dev.nl)).*